

## BEYOND SUBPRIME EDUCATION

### And the real link between test results and authentic achievement

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As the new stimulus program rolls out to promote education that “works,” an amber warning light is flashing. The reason can be traced to several conceptual misunderstandings which have had, and may continue to have, massive adverse practical consequences. The same argument applies to much of the lobbying by business, investments by philanthropists, and impending stimulus from government. The situation can be framed in terms of the difference between apparent and authentic productivity.

Let us use the lens of the sub-prime crisis to think this through. The profitability of many banks and insurance companies, touted as an indicator of success, turns out to have been largely apparent and unreal. Much of that profit was an illusion because many of the underlying products and processes were flawed. Securities were not secure, and financial advice was misleading or wrong. So an apparently successful and flourishing system lacked authentic productivity. And the results have been calamitous.

The situation in education is somewhat similar. Society focuses on test scores as indicators of success. And Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been rightly emphatic about being data driven. Unfortunately, many assume that a program or investment in education is successful if it simply meets some target increase in test scores and so that becomes the goal. There are at least two major reasons for concern. First, the *real* goal is to graduate students who actually understand what they have been studying and who have some real world competence. What matters is what students actually know and can do and how well they handle themselves in the real world. It cannot just be assumed that test scores are good indicators of the real outcomes that we

want. Second, it is often assumed that the way to raise test scores is to target them directly. The problem is that things are not that simple.

We have two huge conceptual blind spots as a culture, and they permeates the world of education

*One is the belief that test scores, genuine understanding and real world outcomes are directly linked.* They are not. The link is indirect. In essence, when educators teach for real understanding and competence, and for the capacity to see connections and deal with change, then students become better prepared. And they can then perform better on tests. And that is one reason why nations such as Finland can do so much better on international comparisons than the United States.

Putting all our effort into raising scores directly (apparent productivity) is very much like maximizing profitability at the expense of authentic productivity. The result is to actually undermine education, just as the entire banking enterprise has been undermined.

There is now a great deal of research about how people learn naturally to support this claim. The answers emerge when findings from different disciplines and domains are integrated, ranging from cognitive psychology and neuroscience to new developments in our understanding of creativity, the development of expertise and the impact of stress.

This research gels with what great educators know. When students are taught for understanding and competence, the ultimate test is whether they can solve challenging problems, report on their thinking and their processes, and use their knowledge and skill in the real world. When they can, they will, in fact, also start to perform better on most tests. And those increases can be sustained. Examples can be found in many countries, in public education, in charter schools, in home schooling, and at every level from early childhood education to high school.

Getting there is messy and complex and simply cannot be rigidly programmed and standardized. Authentic student questions are just as important as teacher questions; Direct instruction need to mesh with opportunities to engage in projects and learn from experience; individual effort takes place in the context of multiple opportunities to talk and work things through with others; there needs to be a way to assess student progress without triggering the parrot-like obedience that is induced by the fear of making mistakes; the vast body of research into direct instruction needs to be reconciled with research that shows how important experience is in developing expertise; and more.

*The second blind spot is our extraordinary ignorance about the actual impact of the campaign for high test scores on schools and educators.* Strange as it may seem, educators are people too. And when the eye of the world, from presidents to parents, is on nothing but test scores, and when jobs are tied to almost nothing but test scores, teachers and administrators do whatever they currently believe will maximize test scores now. Sometimes there is fraud, such as the well documented strategies that are sometimes used to retain students in grades that are not tested, or to miscount students as graduating when they do not. More often, there is complete, total, unmitigated panic.

The panic shows itself in the pressure to administer tests every few weeks (which is even more constricting than companies having to report earnings every quarter). It shows itself in the time taken from teaching about important stuff in order to have students prep for tests. It shows itself in the mindlessly militaristic methods of many administrators, who prowl corridors to see that teachers of the same grades in the same subjects are on the same page of the text book. (Imagine all little league coaches having to teach all kids of the same age how to pitch the same pitch on the same day every week). It shows itself in the enormous pressure that school boards bring to bear on administrators and teachers, often in the form of programs of standardized instruction which have to be implemented. (Nothing can de-professionalize a profession more than mandating precisely how to stand, speak and perform on a daily basis). And more.

The point is that the community at large simply does not know what is happening in schools, as a direct result of focusing obsessively on test scores. To repeat, high

standards and high test scores are not the same thing. The path is an indirect one. And the high performing nations of the world know this and that is what they consistently focus on in their efforts to improve teaching and schooling generally.

If we are going to develop the type of education that is needed, both for the benefit of kids as well as the economy, we need post-partisan conversations and understanding among all stakeholders about the fundamentals of learning, teaching and education. It does not matter whether we support public education, charter schools, home schooling or anything else. What matters is getting the fundamental goal right. Teach in sophisticated ways for deep understanding. Higher test scores will follow. And the net result will be less angst, more satisfaction for most stakeholders, and a much more productive system of education.