

Environmental Scan

K –12 Issues that Resonate in Postsecondary Education

A review of themes in
Educational Leadership
1998 to Summer 2002

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Introduction

It's a big jump from American elementary and middle schools to Canadian postsecondary institutions, yet many of the pedagogical and administrative issues facing BC colleges were first identified south of the 49th by our colleagues in the K – 12 system. Of course, not every issue migrates north or remains unchanged as it touches the postsecondary system, but much can be learned by casting our gaze beyond our normal horizon.

Educational Leadership is a helpful, if occasionally indirect, K – 12 journal to scan because each monthly issue focuses on a single theme. Reviewing the themes addressed over the past five years portrays an educational landscape that has both familiar and novel features for Canadian college educators.

This paper categorizes the themes addressed in *Educational Leadership* since 1998 and describes the flavour of each. Sometimes, as in the case of the educational standards movement or the trend to providing more institutional choice for students, the magazine presents articles by proponents from both sides of a raging debate. In other cases, such as the discussion about supporting teachers during their first year on the job, the focus is on the range of options available.

This paper emphasizes breadth rather than depth, providing an introductory survey of an educational system that is certainly influencing K – 12 education in several Canadian provinces and which, directly or indirectly, affects how Canadians perceive the postsecondary landscape.

Themes

A. Control of Schools

1. Customizing our Schools (April 2002)
Hot button topics such as privatization, vouchers and charter schools. Umbrella concept of “choice”.
2. Whose Schools? (October 1998)
Role and impact of for-profit organizations on schools.
3. The Changing Context of Education (December 2000)
Smorgasbord of thoughts and ideas on the changing context.

B. External Standards

4. What Do We Mean by Results? (February 2000)
Moving beyond counter-productive criticism of standardized tests to making assessment meaningful.
5. Using Standards and Assessments (March 1999)
A variety of thoughts about standardized testing.
6. Making Standards Work (September 2001)
Accepting standards and testing as givens, how can teachers make the best of the situation?

C. Curriculum and Goals of Education

7. What Should We Teach? (October 2001)
General aims of schooling and why certain curriculum might be important.
8. What Is 'Basic'? (March 1998)
Fundamentals might include character development and deep course content.
9. Redefining Literacy (October 1999)
Not just reading, but also numeracy and science literacy.

D. Engaging All Types of Students

10. Helping All Students Achieve (March 2001)
Including the impact of small school size and grading practices.
11. Understanding Youth Culture (December 1999)
Characteristics of today's students.
12. Teaching the Information Generation (October 2000)
Considerations in using computers in the classroom.
13. Race, Class and Gender (April 1999)
Persistent educational inequalities.

E. Physiology of Learning

14. How the Brain Learns (November 1998)
Cautious optimism about increasing our understanding of learning.
15. The Science of Learning (November 2000)
Theory based interventions are replacing trial and error but some theories, such as emotional intelligence, are occasionally implemented superficially.
16. Understanding Learning Differences (November 1999)
Process of learning is better represented by a web than a ladder.
17. The Constructivist Classroom (November 1999)
Learners' mental schema play a central role in cognitive growth.

F. Pedagogy

18. Personalized Learning (September 1999)
Students cannot be taught well if teachers do not know them well.
19. How to Differentiate Instruction (September 2000)
The pay-off is deeper understanding and achievement.
20. Class Size, School Size (February 2002)
Small class size has the greatest effect in the primary grades, but small school size benefits all ages.
21. Integrating Technology in the Classroom (February 1999)
Examples abound of both technological success stories and failures.
22. Beyond Class Time (April 2001)
How can out-of-class activities complement in-class goals?

G. Wellness

23. Realizing a Positive School Climate (September 1998)
A positive climate emerges from a range of activities, not from a few special initiatives.
24. Healthy Bodies, Minds and Buildings (March 2000)
Students learn best in environments that promote physical and psychosocial health.
25. The Spirit of Education (December 1998)
What are the appropriate ways for public schools to address the spiritual dimension in life?

H. Professional Development

26. Strengthening the Teaching Profession (February 1998)
Trends in preservice education as well as in professional development.
27. Who is Teaching Our Children? (May 2001)
Considers both the quality and quantity of teachers in the light of emerging shortages.
28. Keeping Teaching Fresh (May 2000)
Collegial participation in a coherent set of professional development activities is desirable.
29. Evaluating Educators (February 2001)
Rather than something done to teachers, evaluation is evolving to place teachers in more active and professional roles.
30. Redesigning Professional Development (March 2002)
Sustained, critical and supportive conversations among colleagues are increasingly seen as central to effective professional development.

I. Educational Leadership

31. Reshaping School Leadership (April 1998)
Participatory management and shared decision making.
32. Beyond Instructional Leadership (May 2002)
Administrators must also be culture builders and change agents.
33. Sustaining Change (April 2000)
Top-down change from the reform mill tends not to be long lasting.
34. Engaging Parents and the Community in Schools (May 1998)
Community engagement in a society that is becoming more contentious.

J. Miscellaneous

35. Understanding the Law (December 2001)
Civil liberties and human rights as they affect students.

Commentary

A. Control of Schools

Life used to be simple: K – 12 education consisted mainly of public schools and not-for-profit private schools. Other school models may have existed, but they didn't figure very prominently in public consciousness. Today's landscape is much more complex, propelled by the twin forces of greater choice for parents seeking different educational experiences for their children and commercial interests.

Controversies swirl within educational circles and among the public about both the implication and desirability of this changing landscape. Whatever the eventual outcome, the debate gives no-sign of abating in the short run and is undoubtedly colouring the lenses through which post-secondary institutions are viewed.

B. External Standards

The other big and continuing controversy concerns the merits of state-wide standards and assessment testing. Here, however, a dominant view is emerging as more and more testing and standards appear. The skeptics are beginning to accept the inevitable, shifting their emphasis from arguing against tests to making the best of them if they are going to be a fact of educational life.

A common thread in the debates about the control of schools and external standards is a view that however good teachers might be, it is not sufficient to leave everything up to them. Advocates of greater choice and external standards seem to share the notion that people outside the institution or local system should be giving direction as to what is important for schools to achieve.

C. Curriculum and Goals of Education

Given the controversies about control and standards, it is hardly surprising that educators are asking fundamental questions as to what schools are all about. Interestingly, there seems to be greater consensus about “what” the goals should be than about “how” to achieve them. Concepts such as the educated citizen in a democratic society, deep learning, challenging curriculum and broad conceptions of literacy and critical thinking seem to be widely accepted. Views about the best means and structures for achieving those goals are not at all consistent, however.

D. Engaging All Types of Students

The best curriculum in the world is of little value if students don't engage and learn it. In order to connect with today's students, educators need to be aware of youth culture and the information generation. And connections – teacher to student, as well as student to student – are important ways of facilitating learning. Thus small schools and learning communities in large schools that provide “relational accountability” are associated in the research literature with higher student achievement. They are also a means for facilitating inclusive learning environments where all types of student succeed.

E. Physiology of Learning

Neuroscience is validating and explaining what teachers have generally accepted as “best practice”. In particular, constructivist theories of education are being shown to have a physiological basis in

terms of how knowledge is perceived and retained by the brain. Even the impact of seemingly nebulous factors such as the classroom social environment is being shown to have a biological basis as scientists discover how emotion changes the brain's abilities to acquire and recall information.

In the past, it was easier to talk about teaching than about learning because what happens inside humans when they learn was largely a mystery. This imbalance is being rectified, and there is a general enthusiasm about what the life sciences are contributing to our understanding of learning. Although optimistic, several articles cautioned against fads and the uncritical acceptance of every educational implication that supposedly is emerging from brain research.

F. Pedagogy

Although the articles contain plenty of case studies, the sum total is more than just a listing of techniques. One of the themes or principles that emerges is that instruction is more effective when it can be differentiated and personalized according to the characteristics of the learners. Thus it hardly comes as a surprise that computer technology, for all its potential, is not a general panacea and has had its share of failures as well as successes. An example of personalizing instruction is through the thoughtful use of out-of-class activities to initiate and cement learning.

G. Wellness

The relevance of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs is evident in education: students are not going to be particularly focused on self-actualizing through cognitive growth when basic physiological or safety needs remain unmet. Regardless of the extent to which teachers can or should meet basic human needs, teachers should be aware of the needs that have so much influence on the readiness of students to engage in learning.

Physical and emotional health are easier for schools to deal with than another basic human need – the spiritual dimension. Thus educators are considering what might be appropriate ways to address spirituality in diverse school populations and in manners which facilitate learning in a variety of disciplines.

H. Professional Development

One of the articles referred to the vision of the professional teacher as one who learns from teaching rather than as one who has finished learning how to teach. Group processes with colleagues are increasingly seen as vehicles for helping teachers to learn through the same processes as they seek to develop in their students: the ability to self-assess, self-evaluate, and self-regulate.

A number of school districts are developing activities whereby abstract notions such as the scholarship of teaching and reflective practice can help to induct new teachers and to keep the teaching of veterans fresh. These changes are good for teachers, and good for the field of education in general.

Educational Leadership is a magazine about education for practicing educators who care about their profession. These articles on professional development bode well for an exciting and effective profession in the years to come.

I. Educational Leadership

Competent teachers doing good things in their classrooms may be necessary for effective schools, but they are not sufficient. Leadership is needed to make the individual efforts complementary, so that the overall school is more than the sum of the parts.

School improvement comes from leaders who are culture builders and change agents that able to engage and benefit from the expertise of many individual teachers. College administrators can learn a great deal from their colleagues in the school system about what it means to be an educational leader, and not just a manager.

J. Miscellaneous

This issue did not fit the other categories, so here it sits all by its lonesome.

Issue Description

The following notes represent a rather personal and idiosyncratic introduction to each issue of *Educational Leadership*. They were written over a summer by way of professional development, not with the goal of presenting consistent summaries for other readers. So while they do convey the flavour of each issue, think of them as samplers rather than systematic summaries.

Although the sampling is my own, many of the words and concepts are not. I've drawn liberally on the editorial columns of Marge Scherer and have selected sentences from a number of contributors which are often not acknowledged and never properly cited. Whereas citations would have been so numerous as to make these informal notes unbearably pedantic, I hope the borrowing of words and ideas will serve its intended purpose by enticing readers interested in a topic to go to the source material. For those with a bibliographic bent, the first couple of overviews are as good as it gets – it's downhill thereafter.

One of my few consistencies is the usage of "issue". In these notes, it always refers to the publication of a particular month and year, rather than as a synonym for "topic" or "controversial subject".

A. Control of Schools

1. Customizing our Schools (April 2002)

The editor says it all in her introductory column about privatization, vouchers programs and charter schools:

"The animosity between advocates and opponents of choice in schools is intense. When not citing research funded by their own ideologically compatible groups, supporters and opponents quote from the same studies but offer differing conclusions and then call the other side's interpretations disingenuous...

"...educators who seek reform and innovation are not philosophically opposed to efforts that propose to boost achievement, transcend bureaucratic rules, and target the poorest students most in need of a good education. But the details of implementation do matter..."

"Our authors may disagree with one another, but they offer their research, experience and opinions to help readers understand one of the most contentious issues of our time."

To illustrate the scope of the topic, here are the titles of some of the articles in this issue:

Customization and the Common Good
The Case for Diversified Schooling
The Price of Public School Choice
Beyond Self-Interest: A Democratic Core Curriculum
The False Promise of Vouchers
The Truth About Vouchers
Coming Around on School Choice
Customization Through Homeschooling
The Civic Perils of Homeschooling
Must High School Last Four Years?
The Benefits of Theme Schools

2. Whose Schools? (October 1998)

The theme question of *Whose Schools* is complex one, writes the editor “... and the place of commercials is only one angle. A larger consideration is the role of businesses in running schools. Our authors grapple with other questions: Should tax dollars be given to parents through vouchers so that they can pay their children’s tuition at private schools? Will charter school initiatives spur public schools to improve? And how can we best communicate with the multiple publics who own our schools?”

“The big question remains unanswered: Can public schools find the support they need without having to resort to private funding? And, can we accept financial support without succumbing to undue influences?”

Most of the authors accept the notion of the democratic purpose of education, asking the question of who schools are serving and why. Where they differ is in specific examples such as whether charter schools have a democratizing potential through forums for public debate and through collective decision making. One of the ways of basing the conversation on practical realities rather than abstract notions is in considering how and why schools ensure they include students with specialized needs.

3. The Changing Context of Education (December 2000)

This issue was a smorgasbord of thoughts about the changing context of education. School reform remains a high profile topic in the USA, along with the question of externally imposed educational standards. Some authors are concerned as to who will define “the well-educated citizen” in the face of growing student diversity and a move towards standardization.

Diversity, inclusion and the prevention of harassment are topics of general interest in post-secondary education, although the specifics differ from K-12. An article on middle schools in Florida, a bellwether state, raises a number of pertinent topics: interdisciplinary team organization, the debate over a developmentally-appropriate curriculum versus a standards-based curriculum, scheduling and the move towards fewer but longer teaching blocks, educational technology, the corporate presence, succession planning and leadership.

B. External Standards for Student Achievement

4. What Do We Mean by Results (February 2000)

Student assessment through standardized testing is a recurring theme in *Educational Leadership* in recent years. While system-wide testing may not be as relevant in post-secondary education as in K-12, the

underlying call for greater accountability, higher standards, and evidence that learning outcomes are being achieved is a trend facing educators in all sectors. Not only is testing controversial in North America, but no two countries seem to have adopted the same approach. Questions about the tests themselves, about their effect on curriculum and teaching methods, about their impact on student motivation, and about school reform and funding present fundamental conundrums concerning the nature of the educational enterprise.

The tenor of most articles in this issue was that educators must move beyond a counter-productive criticism of standardized tests to making assessment meaningful. How can data best be collected to tell educators whether their work is producing the desired changes in student achievement?

The thoughtful construction of scoring metrics and multiple assessment methods are some of the techniques proposed. Some school districts are training mentors to interpret school assessment results and to share the information with colleagues. Another article attempts to link administrative language (e.g. making goals strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time bound) with pedagogical realities (e.g. setting goals that connect with the classroom and focus on student learning to help educators see, learn from, and communicate their results.) The message seems to be that even if you believe collecting numerical data and benchmarking are essential for improving student performance, these activities alone may not be sufficient without involving educators in meaningful ways that connect to their classroom and collegial practices.

5. Using Standards and Assessments (March 1999)

Statewide testing is almost universal in the USA and the trend is to add more subjects and more grade levels to the tests, to test more often, and to attach higher stakes to the results. Tests are relatively inexpensive compared to other reforms such as reduced class size or better teacher training.

Standardized testing has democratic roots; they were originally an attempt to overcome birth and wealth as determinants of educational opportunity. However, it is not clear whether they continue to favor the advantaged and whether, in the long run, they contribute to a child's education. A growing area of contention is whether they should be used to assess the quality of schools and of individual teaching.

Achievement tests are designed to distinguish groups of students. They do so by eliminating questions, however central they might be to the curriculum, that most students answer correctly. Thus one article argues that using test scores to judge teaching effectiveness reveals a lack of understanding of test design.

Standards-based education does seem to hold some promise, but the benefits are not automatic or risk-free. Grading and reporting systems may have to change. A case study described how revamping the curriculum to be performance-based gave student more control of their learning. Standards are often abstract and need to be translated into practical, day-to-day activities in the classroom.

6. Making Standards Work (September 2001)

The past decade has seen a fair amount of debate about establishing standards and common tests in K-12 education. Whatever their merits, deficiencies or implications, this issue starts from the premise that standards and cross district testing are here to stay. If that is the case, how can the pitfalls be minimized and the benefits maximized?

High and rigorous academic standards are intended as (1) a way to establish what all students need to know and be able to do, and (2) to raise the achievement of all students. The concern is that implementing standards will result in a narrowing and standardization of education, translating into teaching only to high stake tests. The hope is that standards can be developmental and flexible, building on

the California experience of helping low-achieving students by individualizing instruction, identifying new programs, and expanding schedules. From this perspective, the more we expect from children, the more they will achieve and the richer the curriculum can be.

Experience with standards is limited, but one article contends that the majority of standards are too imprecise and all-encompassing to give much guidance to teachers. To the extent standards can be rich and rigorous, so too it argues must be the tests.

C. Curriculum

7. What Should We Teach? (October 2001)

As an antidote to the emphasis on testing and accountability that is shaping content in the K-12 system, this issue includes arrange of articles about the general aims of schooling and why certain curriculum might be important. Some articles focus on specific fields of human endeavor:

Science:

Choosing Content That is Worth Knowing
Why Language Learning Matters

Citizenship:

Fostering Moral Democracy
Teaching for Character and Community

Fine Arts:

A Sound Education
In the Arts Spotlight

Other articles are more general, such as *The Benefits of Exploratory Time* and *What Matters to Students*. Another argues that broad knowledge of selected topics is the best entrée to deep knowledge of many more.

8. What is ‘Basic’? (March 1998)

Learning to read and language development are clearly basic; literacy is not just decoding the written word but is intertwined with knowledge of the world. Beyond this given, what should be fundamental in K-12 education?

One source for addressing this question is international comparisons. Japanese elementary schools, for example, are not the academic pressure cookers of media lore, but are lively, friendly places devoted to connections (developing a strong, positive emotional connection to school), character development, and deep course content (studying a small number of topics in some depth.)

In school-to-work programs, students are often rated not only on technical skills but also on social and personal competence. Linguistic and cross-cultural competence are arguably essential skills for students today. The Council for Basic Education advocates that students master generative, liberal arts subjects.

The question of what is basic can also be approached in terms of how learning occurs, not just in terms of course content. One author asserts that many cherished lessons and units are intellectually weak and fragmented because teachers and students really do not know what students are supposed to learn. A remedy, he proposes, is the guiding question – a fundamental query that directs the search for understanding, around which everything in the curriculum is studied for the purpose of answering it.

9. Redefining Literacy (October 1999)

As might be expected in a K-12 journal, several articles covered methods for teaching children to read, whole language *versus* phonetics, whole language *and* phonetics, brain structures that affect reading, reading disabilities, and gender differences. The lead articles, however, concerned literacy in the information age.

Numeracy is an important literacy in a data-drenched society. “Yet despite widespread evidence that numeracy is more than mathematics and that practical wisdom is not the same as classroom learning, anxious parents and politicians push students into the narrow gorge of algebra and high school calculus is the misguided belief that these courses provide the quantitative skills appropriate for educated citizens.”

The article on science literacy called for an emphasis on depth of knowledge, not breadth. The information age is forcing bridges to be built between visual arts literacy and technological literacy. One topic not addressed in this issue was cultural literacy, perhaps because it is such a big topic that it merits an issue all of its own.

D. Engaging All Types of Students

10. Helping All Students Achieve (March 2001)

In addition to the predictable articles on helping struggling readers or using intriguing problems to improve math skills, three of the articles focused on the theme of smallness as a way to help all students succeed. Size alone does not make a school good, but small size is often a defining characteristic of schools that engage students.

The reality is that many school are large, thus another article looked at techniques such as picture boards and advisories to promote a sense of community at school. While smaller classes are an effective, but expensive, way of facilitating learning, little is known about what makes some teachers more effective than others in small classes.

An article on grading practices that respects student differences argued that typical grading practices are more about charting circumstances of student birth and experience than they are about documenting growth. It sought practices that give students a demanding, yet achievable dream and provides them with road maps and partners for reaching that goal.

11. Understanding Youth Culture (December 1999)

Some comments about today’s youth from the various contributors:

- Immersed in technology; more skilled and more blasé than the older generation. Technology *is* youth culture.
- Savvy consumers but, sometimes, slavish materialists
- Alone a lot, and often lonely
- Want their own identity, but want their teachers to know them and their peers to like them
- Less violent, take better care of themselves, are less self-destructive, and take fewer drugs than in past decades
- Social bonds between adults and children are changing, if not disappearing
- Boys today face overwhelming challenges, including the lack of positive male role models and a denial of their emotions
- Most adolescents are concerned about their futures and believe that obtaining a bachelor’s degree is the necessary first step in moving up the economic and social ladder. They maybe unrealistically ambitious.

- Rise of organized sports
- Lack of positive rites of passage
- Plagiarism is widespread. Free-for-the asking opportunities and the in-your-face attitudes of Internet cheat sites are new.

12. Teaching the Information Generation (October 2000)

This issue was about the need to ensure students not only have access to technology but also the coping skills to negotiate information overload and to assess critically the information they obtain. An addendum included four articles on sexuality education; whether the addendum was simply because space was available in this particular issue or because it was viewed as being especially pertinent to the internet generation was not clear.

Technology is changing education but simply throwing computers into classrooms does not automatically make students learn better. Computers can be harmful as well as beneficial. The lead article concludes that educators need to get their wits about them and take charge of the technology by wresting from industry the impetus for conducting research on the relationships between technology, teaching and learning.

Online privacy and commercialism at school are some of the pragmatic concerns associated with information technology. More fundamental is the need to not only master information and to think critically, but also to become whole and well rounded human beings.

Some of the opportunities explored in this issue were online mentoring and linking classrooms across Canada to debate issues of interest. Increased internet access at home and at school allows students to transcend traditional school space and time constraints, especially if schools consciously seek to expand learning opportunities outside the classroom.

13. Race, Class and Gender (April 1999)

While the articles in this issue have a distinctly American flavor, the basic issue of persistent educational inequities associated with socio-economic status, culture and gender is universal. Educators struggle with the best way to assimilate immigrants into the mainstream while respecting and promoting diversity. Although undeniable progress has been made in ensuring girls and boys receive equal treatment and opportunity, we still have a long way to go.

Many of the articles looked at “best practices”, but a couple focused on controversies. One such controversy is whether the sensitive tracking of students into academic streams actually helps or hinders the cause of equity. Another is whether standards-based tests foster achievement at the cost of learning about the cultural complexities that shape society.

E. Physiology of Learning

14. How the Brain Learns (November 1998)

The authors in this issue treat their subject with cautious optimism. On the one hand, “an explosion of research in neuroscience has the exciting potential to increase our understanding of learning”. On the other hand, “when applying research to classroom practice, educators must sort conclusive evidence from unsupported notion.”

In *Revisiting Effective Teaching*, the author argues that brain research is confirming practices that good teachers have been using for years. For example, good teachers have known that emotion strongly influences learning, e.g. that the emotional system drives the attentional system, which in turn drives learning and memory. Yet as a profession, another argues, “We’ve basically ignored emotion for years. We don’t know how to regulate it, to evaluate it, or to measure it.... The biggest single problem of our profession is that we never learned how to deal with emotion in school.”

A new science curriculum works on the premise that the more avenues through which students receive data, the better they understand science and math. In an article on multiple intelligences, the author claims that letting a student use his or her dominant intelligence results in strengthening other abilities. Another article considers how different teaching strategies can trigger different ways of retrieving information.

Perhaps a key finding of brain research is that there is a biological basis foundation for constructivist pedagogy, that how the student perceives and organizes information is more important than how the teacher transmits it.

“When learners place an image in their mind, they store its components in many different places and construct pathways among the places.... The result is that human knowledge is stored in clusters and organized within ‘the brain’ into systems that people use to interpret familiar situations and to reason about new ones.... Although the individual constructs basic knowledge through experience, the quality of the construction depends on how well the brain organizes and stores the relationships.... Constructions in a student’s brain depends on the interests of the student and the richness of the environment.”

15. The Science of Learning (November 2000)

Neuroscience is making great advances and it has become trendy for educators to attempt to enhance teaching and learning by studying the brain systems through which students receive, process and interpret information. While endorsing this trend, this issue raises several cautions lest a fad develops from simplistic or unbalanced applications of brain research.

One such example lies in the emerging field of emotional intelligence. Emotion, our biological thermostat, is central to cognition and merits the attention of educators. However, some educators have implemented emotional intelligence programs and policies without much sensitivity to the idea that there is more than one emotional intelligence model, or have relied on popularizations that were far ahead of the science on which they were presumably based.

Setting aside some popular bandwagons, brain research is nevertheless both changing and affirming what we know about how children learn. While certain techniques might not be as effective as claimed, the general principle is that how meaningful new information is perceived to be strongly influences how lasting the learning will be. Clearly, reflective efforts to build bridges from research to the classroom are needed.

Educators are well aware that students think and learn differently. Neurological research seems to promise that trial and errors approaches to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties will increasingly be replaced with theory-based interventions.

16. Understanding Learning Differences (November 2001)

The process of learning is better represented by a web than a ladder. Students do not all learn in the same cookie-cutter fashion and even the same student performs and understands differently depending on context, especially when they receive high or low support from their teachers and others. So how do we move beyond one-size-fits-all, conveyor-belt models of instruction?

One strategy is to pay attention to the considerable advances in brain research over the past decade, and to translate that knowledge into educational practice. In terms of educational practice, the articles in this issue tend to concentrate on students at the margin: the stereotypes associated with gifted students, those with nonverbal learning disabilities or attention and behaviour problems, English as a second language students and “interesting kids saddled with alienating labels”. Nevertheless, some articles consider the mainstream learner, such as the article considering why some people have difficulty understanding math despite being born with a sense of numbers.

17. The Constructivist Classroom (November 1999)

Over the past generation or two, the trend in pedagogy and our understanding of how people learn has been a shift away from the transmission of information. Constructivism is a term that captures this trend, but it is a complex concept that has more than one meaning.

One approach to constructivism is to describe it as a theory of learning that focuses on the central role that learners’ mental schemes play in cognitive growth. Learning involves making connections and those connections depend on what the individual brings to learning – prior knowledge and past experience. Individuals are more likely to retain knowledge that they learn through active problem solving. Learning is also a social process, enriched by the insights of others.

The main criticisms of constructivism arise perhaps from the premise that learners, not teachers ultimately control their own learning: it sometimes seen as overly permissive and lacking rigor. “Both these critiques are silly caricatures”, retorted one author, “of what an evolving body of research tells us about learning.” To the contrary, “organizing a constructivist classroom is difficult work for the teacher and requires the rigorous intellectual commitment and perseverance of students.”

F. Pedagogy

18. Personalized Learning (September 1999)

Personalization, individualized learning, differentiated instruction....all these concepts tackle the question of how to make learning meaningful when teachers lives are busy, students are anonymous and the curriculum seems to cover all topics. How do we structure schools so that serious work – not bluffing, not memorizing for the test – happens most of the time?

“Although some critics of student-centered learning find the philosophy too soft in these days of increasing pressure to raise standards, authors in this issue show that personalized learning and challenging learning are often one and the same,” writes the editor. Several examples are provided to show what it takes “to individualize instruction without fuzzifying the curriculum”.

The philosophy of differentiated instruction is that students may learn in many ways, may take different paths, to the same essential skills and content. It argues that students cannot be taught well if teachers do not know them well. It is rooted in student engagement plus student understanding, affecting not only a variety of instructional techniques to suit different learning styles but also personalized testing that gives students choices as to how to best demonstrate what they know.

19. How To Differentiate Instruction (September 2000)

The editor’s column was entitled *Standardized Instruction – Effects May Vary*: “Schools are responding to the struggle between standardization versus diversity in many ways. Some are resorting to tracking, returning to self-contained classes for the highest and lowest achievers. In the quest to boost test

scores, a few pay attention to those learners on the cusp of passing tests, neglecting both average students and those on the outliers. Other schools are becoming more inclusive in grouping students while employing co-teachers, adaptive materials, and smaller classes to address differences.

“Along with a new (but at least as old as the one-room school) strategy called differentiated instruction... Differentiated instruction requires that teachers study student differences in understanding, learning modalities, and interests and plan accordingly to allow for different learning rates and to structure tasks of varying complexity. It also requires that teachers are clear about the essential skills, the concepts, and principles that all students must master.

“Misunderstandings about the practice are common place.... Keeping tack of its complexities is not always easy.... What makes differentiated instruction worth the effort? Kids love it the teachers testify. Students in these classes are engaged in learning. The teacher’s frustration about not reaching all students lessens. And differentiated instruction also pays off in deeper understanding and achievement.”

20. Class Size, School Size (February 2002)

The research conclusions about class size are apparently as clear-cut as any issue in education; small class size has the greatest benefits in the first three years of school and for students with little early preparation for school. Although teachers say small classes enables them to personalize learning for students, some studies show that teachers pursue much the same instructional techniques in their small classes as in their big ones.

As to the effects of school size, another exhaustively researched topic, students in small schools (400-600 students) earn higher grades, come to class more often, participate in more extracurricular activities and are less likely to drop out. Teachers are also more satisfied and collaborate with one another more.

“Why is small size so beneficial? In the case of both small classes and small schools, smallness is associated with ‘relational accountability’. Teachers and students get to know one another, feel less anonymous, and learn to trust each other and work together... the director of education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation named the ‘seven deadly sins of education’. Number one on his list – before imprudent use of standardized tests and complacency – was ‘anonymity of large schools and dehumanizing systems’.”

Some would argue that when cost is measured per graduate rather than per attendee, small schools are more efficient than large schools.

21. Integrating Technology into the Classroom (February 1999)

Views about educational technology range from advocates of the “most powerful technology ever invented” to skeptics who point out that educational technologies that 25 years ago were to be the wave of the future now collect dust in most schools. There are elements of truth in both positions, and thus the question becomes one of balance and appropriate usage. Instructors know they need to keep up with their students in the digital age, but also that the students need guidance.

Examples abound of both technological success stories and failure. The internet is of course prominent in these stories. Other technologies include video and cable, as well as graphing calculators for teaching mathematics.

Concern about equity gaps range from the economic, e.g. some classrooms are much better resourced than others, to the cultural e.g. girls consistently rate themselves lower than boys on computer ability and are less likely to think computers will help them do better in school.

22. Beyond Class Time (April 2001)

After-school programs are sometimes a necessity for working parents, but often they are intended as enriching experiences for all children. While the daycare and babysitting concerns of the K-12 students are not relevant to post-secondary educators, the questions of how extracurricular activities can help students develop academic and life skills is pertinent across the educational spectrum.

The articles in this issue sometimes require translation to the college environment. College educators do not have to consider the role of parents when they assign homework, but it's not a very big leap to college considerations such as study groups and peer tutors. Collaboration between schools and community-based organizations through service-learning takes less translation; figuring out how to raise volunteers to enrich out-of-class learning may take more translation.

Although the specifics vary, the general question raised in this issue – how can out-of-class activities that complement in-class goals best be fostered – is as relevant to college educators as to K-12 educators. It's a difficult question, and one that we perhaps tend to avoid.

G. Wellness

23. Realizing a Positive School Climate (September 1998)

“Although creating a positive school climate is a matter of engaging student’s minds and hearts, it is also about keeping students safe at schools,” writes the editor. “To engage them, we first need to erase their fears.... Our authors remind us that a vital task is to make one-to-one connections with students. Although we must secure buildings and take all manner of precautions, we must take care not to make schools sterile, bureaucratic, and impersonal – places where it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to learn.”

An inviting high school in which to learn is one in which the physical facilities are personalized, academics are strongly emphasized, and students are given choices claims one article. The role of leaders is considered in another article, a role which includes uncovering core values and paying attention to symbolic messages. The article on making cooperative learning equitable asks teachers to consider multiple abilities and to recognize competence to help students of low academic and peer status gain acceptance into classroom groups and attain appreciation of their intellectual contributions.

Judging by the range of articles in this issue, a positive climate emerges from efforts that permeate the entire range of school activities and not from a few special initiatives.

24. Healthy bodies, Minds and Buildings (March 2000)

The premise of this issue was that students learn best in a school that promotes their physical and psychosocial health as a matter of established policy. Not all health topics are the responsibility of schools, but schools can initiate and coordinate collaborations with health providers to promote student health. Other topics, such as keeping schools safe and helping the school community deal with bereavement and tragedy within the institution are more directly the responsibility of educators.

Substance abuse and sexual health are two areas of common concern for high schools and colleges. Elementary educators, on the other hand, may have to attend more clearly to relationships with families, to nutrition and to making cyberspace safe for children.

25. The Spirit of Education (December 1998)

“This issue,” the editor writes, “explores what thoughtful educators consider to be appropriate ways for public schools to address the spiritual dimension in life. . . . Not an advocate for imposing particular beliefs or practices, he [Parker Palmer] is passionate about not violating the deepest needs of the human soul, which, he believes the public school does with regularity.”

As the following excerpts from the table of contents demonstrate, some of the articles address religion:

Averting Culture Wars Over Religion – Charting a middle course, the author pleads that schools neither proselytize particular beliefs nor ignore the significance of religion and spirituality.

Is School the Place for Spirituality? A Conversation with Rabbi Harold Kushner – Although teachers can make classrooms conducive to spiritual growth, the school is not the place to discuss religious differences, the rabbi believes.

Spirituality and the Public Schools: An Evangelical Perspective – The big questions of life can be answered only in a religious context, the authors believe; they advocate release time or vouchers as ways to maintain the public school’s neutrality.

Other articles, such as the following, address broader spiritual and ethical considerations:

Spirituality – Letting it Grow in the Classroom – From aesthetic appreciation of the arts to communing with nature – many spiritual experiences can find natural expressions in the curriculum.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas – A four-part framework can help elucidate complex and wrenching ethical questions.

Nourishing Students in Secular Schools – the spiritual yearnings of adolescents include a search for purpose, a hunger for joy, a creative drive, and a need for silence.

H. Professional Development

Strengthening the Teaching Profession (February 1998)

At its worst, a teaching career begins with a sink or swim initiation (“the profession that eats its young”, to mix metaphors) and concludes with years of stagnation. At its best, teaching is an exciting, intellectually challenging and rewarding profession. This issue of *Educational Leadership* examined intentional strategies for making the latter description the norm.

The new teacher education programs envision the professional teacher as one who learns from teaching rather than as one who has finished learning how to teach. Year-long supervised internships, intensive mentoring, graduate-level school-based courses, and planned collegiality and inquiry are among the emerging strategies for orienting the beginning teacher.

Several articles discussed the Professional Development School as a model for preservice education, a way of addressing “the glaring disjuncture of what is taught in college education course and day-to-day practices in the field.” It essentially consists of a team of university and school officials who work with student teachers in the field, not in the ivory tower.

In terms of ongoing professional development, teacher portfolios are a frequently used tool, one that “enables us to do exactly what we ask our students to do: self-assess, self-evaluate, and self-regulate.” However, it is the power of group processes, not of individual activities that are attracting attention, e.g. peer observation, the sharing and discussion of student work with colleagues, and the group development of performance assessments. The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education has developed criteria for high quality professional development. One of its findings has been that the greatest gains in teacher learning was when whole schools studied their student results and agreed on what they needed to learn collectively.

27. Who is Teaching Our Children? (May 2001)

The articles addressed both the quality and quantity of teachers entering the workforce (plus one article asking where have all the principals gone.) The two issues are related in that a number of teacher shortages are already evident and special initiatives are under way to remove barriers for teacher candidates, to help immigrants become teachers, or to prepare second-career teachers.

Alternative routes to the traditional Bachelor of Education route to entering the profession include a greater use of internships and concurrent study. Views are mixed about the desirability of these alternatives. One author argued that there are no short cuts to preparing good teachers, while another takes a pragmatic approach given the realities of teachers who are required to teach out of their field of expertise.

At the same time as additional certification by the National board for Professional Teaching Standards is gaining attention as a means of upgrading the skills of existing teachers, emerging shortages are resulting in unprecedented numbers of unlicensed teachers.

One author claimed that it takes five to eight years to develop teaching expertise. “If new teachers, regardless of their qualifications upon entry, are to make a profound difference in students’ lives, they will need incentives, decent salaries, and appreciation. Even more, they will need professional support.”

28. Keeping Teaching Fresh (May 2000)

How does a teacher surmount fatigue and regain the joy of teaching? Not surprisingly, a national survey of what motivates high-achieving educators to improve their teaching was their students: their successes, enthusiasm, achievement and development as productive citizens. The focus on people appears in comments such as the claims that effective teaching is a dialogue, not a monologue.

The second most frequently mentioned motivators were intrinsic personal qualities, e.g. pride, intellectual curiosity; a belief in self-worth and the worth of others. A close third was professional growth and working in a positive environment.

Several of the articles considered what approaches to professional development are effective. Workshops or generic teaching techniques that have too much breadth are less effective than longer duration, contextualized initiatives that are related to subject content. Collective participation with colleagues and activities that are a coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and development are desirable.

Video clubs to watch classroom interactions and discuss student thinking, teacher book clubs, achieving national board certification and a professional development school involving veteran teachers, professors and teacher candidates are other examples of ways to keep teaching fresh and growing.

29. Evaluating Educators (February 2001)

The editor proposes that a revolution is afoot in evaluating educators. The shift is from a perfunctory, pro forma activity to one which is much more substantive and meaningful. One impetus is pay-for-performance, where improved student performance leads to monetary rewards for either individuals or groups of teachers. Running parallel with the accountability trend is another movement, an effort to set standards of good teaching for various grade levels and disciplines, and to help teachers meet those standards.

“All this is a far cry from the 15-minute annual observation by the principal. And the movements – pay-for-performance and career ladders – are signs that the education profession has made strides in evaluating its own.... No longer will teaching be seen as a generic activity, but as an art that is discipline-specific, age-specific, and context-specific.”

Traditionally, evaluation was an activity that was done to teachers. The new systems place teachers in more active and professional roles. One contributor wrote, “At the heart of my work on good teaching is the notion of a teacher as an enlightened, passionate intellectual.”

Needless to say, performance-pay is a controversial topic, with some arguing against it in principle and others complaining that it hasn't worked as well as intended where it has been tried. Less controversial are the tools that are being added to the evaluation toolkit, e.g. teaching portfolios, 360-degree feedback, and explicit evaluation criteria.

30. Redesigning Professional Development (March 2002)

“Derisive stories about the worst professional development encountered are easy to come by in education circles.” This issue considered approaches to professional development that:

- Shed light on how students learn in the classroom
- Inspires collegiality
- Improve student achievement

Two themes were that (1) teachers need to learn how to analyze their practice explicitly, both the practice of other teachers' and their own and (2) mechanisms need to be in place to facilitate individual teachers sharing what they are learning about teaching. Some approaches for helping teachers seek out one another for advice and feedback are in the establishment of Critical Friends Groups or the Japanese technique of Lesson Study. In the same vein, the use of mentor internships and study groups are other collaborative techniques for assisting new teachers to develop their professional skills.

“One-time” professional development “events” can be helpful, but sustained, critical, and supportive conversation among colleagues are increasingly seen as central to effective professional development. “Even the best professional development may fail to create meaningful and lasting changes in teaching and learning – unless teachers engage in ongoing professional dialogue to develop a reflective school community.”

I. EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

31. Reshaping School Leadership (April 1998)

The articles accept the notion of participatory management and shared decision making, seeking to identify how they can be implemented effectively. Part of the rationale is that leaders bound by multiple agendas, endless management theories, and overload have to reach out to teachers simply to cope. Also,

one of the lessons has been that school reform often misfires when leaders fail to learn from those who disagree with them.

Personal style can be an important component of effective leadership. Social and emotional learning, a dominant mode of communication that does not consist of advice-giving and playing it straight by telling all sides of the truth are recommended by the author.

Other articles addressed group processes. One suggested that although surveys may seem democratic, a more thoughtful process might yield better results. Another claimed that study groups for principals are most effective when they share accountability and focus on student work.

32. Beyond Instructional Leadership (May 2002)

This issue examined the characteristics of administrators in effective and high-achieving schools, concluding that not only must principals focus on student and teacher learning and on achieving instructional objectives, but so too must they be culture builders and change agents. The most successful principals are not only actively involved in the curriculum and instructional life of their schools, but also engage their staff in decision making and collaboration.

The focus in the 1980's on instructional leaderships was supplemented in the 1990's with a managerial focus on funding, facilities, mandates and politics. Paralleling the managerial focus with a hard headed concern for standards and achievement is a call for principals to lead with humanity and gentleness. "Compassionate leaders can create humane school environments in which students and teachers reach their full potential".

A national survey of principals and superintendents examined the challenges school administrators perceive they face. Bureaucracy and red tape consistently topped the list, especially at the district level. At school levels, the sheer pressure of day to day workloads can be overwhelming. Most leaders expressed frustration at a lack of authority and control over the schools they are expected to manage.

Perhaps partly as a response to the challenges leaders face, several of the articles touched on the need for shared leadership and for promoting teacher learning. "An organization cannot flourish – at least, not for long – on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many levels. Learning in context helps produce such leaders.... To a certain extent, a school leader's effectiveness in creating a culture of sustained change will be determined by the leaders he or she leave behind."

33. Sustaining Change (April 2000)

The editor reflects on a book that makes a distinction between change that comes from the reform mill and change that is more likely to result in the lasting betterment of schools. Usually reforms from the reform mill are generated as top-down innovations, with funding attached and packaged content. By silencing or ignoring those who do not agree, or understand, or are not convinced by the change, the reform fails to gain the necessary community backing and the whole-hearted support of those who need to implement them.

Schools reflect society in general in that they are faddish and respond to pressures from particular constituencies. Yet whether effective or not, changes and reforms are often well-meaning attempts to improve student learning and to benefit all students. How, then, can the improvements teachers and parents want be brought about and sustained?

Different articles in this issue respond to this question in different ways. Generally, though, there doesn't seem to be any quick fixes or mechanistic formulas. The advice from one article seems to resonate with others:

- Focus on deep learning, not just superficial performance results
- Use model schools to reculture, not just to restructure, the system
- Treat the wider policy context as integral to local reform efforts.

34. Engaging Parents and the community in Schools (May 1998)

While parental involvement in homework and at school doesn't translate well from K-12 to the post-secondary environment, the broader questions of community relations persists. The lead article considers why society is becoming more contentious – why we are irritable with, and fearful of, one another. Many articles highlight efforts to make community engagement a grassroots movement with far reaching effects.

In *Moving from Publicity to Engagement*, the author claims public relations campaigns and active participation differ as a canned speech does from conversation. From better safety to more funding, another article describes unexpected benefits – including higher performance – that resulted when schools engaged the community. Yet another article provided a case study of how a town weathered the turbulence that resulted when the community split over learning goals.

J. Miscellaneous

35. Understanding the Law (December 2001)

This issue had a dual focus: (1) helping inform educators so they can ensure schools obey the law regarding such matters as inclusion, harassment and copyright and (2) helping students understand the law, citizenship and democracy. The specifics are American, but the general topics are relevant to the Canadian context. Whatever legislative framework applies to educators, they need to be aware of what it says on such matters as disciplining special education students or the right to search students.

The articles on schools and the law mainly concern civil liberties and human rights as they affect students. Administrative issues, such as personnel procedures or the powers of school boards, are not discussed. The section on students and the law is perhaps of more interest to social studies teachers than the general educator.