

## OF NOTE

### 40,000 Questions Can't Be Wrong

*Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn From Others*, by Paul L. Harris

In his new book, *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn From Others*, Harvard Education Professor Paul Harris challenges what many educators hold as a universal truth â€” that the child is a "little scientist," able to learn most when exploring the world through hands-on discovery. Harris acknowledges that self-learning is important, but believes that research points to another vitally important truth: most of what we know, we learned from others. Harris' research demonstrates that very young children have a remarkable capacity for deeply meaningful questioning. A child who spends one hour a day from the age of two with an adult who is talking, listening, interacting and answering, will have asked, by the age of five, 40,000 questions in which they are seeking some kind of explanation. Harris believes current educational practice for young children undervalues this question/answer dialogue that is central to becoming a sophisticated learner. More than an ode to childhood curiosity, Harris' scholarly analysis gives us reason to see in children's questions their urgent need to know what is real and what to trust. Making affordances for this learning in our schools is imperative.

Elizabeth Morley, Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, Canada

Harvard University Press, 2012

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## October, 2012 VOL. 32

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## ARTICLES, BLOGS, AND OTHER MEDIA



### Learning Interventions that Work

*Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic*, by David Scott Yeager and Gregory Mariotti Walton

Teachers and administrators alike would benefit from internalizing the insights in this review of rigorous research studies. Even brief social-psychological interventions in schools can influence the way students think and feel about school. Carefully designed, such interventions focusing on students' beliefs about their potential for growth have the power to generate long-lasting effects on achievement outcomes. If, for example, students attribute poor performance in a subject to ability, they will be unlikely to work hard to change. However, as one study indicated, similarly challenged students altered their mindset about their ability to learn after attending short workshops on study skills intermingled with information about how the brain can get stronger through working on challenging tasks. One reason for such success, the researchers note, is that the message was indirect. Students were not told they were receiving an intervention to improve their performance, and this omission made all the difference. The lasting impact from such incremental changes relies on the environment of the school to provide support and opportunities to learn.

Pearl Rock Kane, Klingenstein Center, NY

Review of Educational Research, April 2011



### The Students Are Watching, So Why Not Ask Them?

*Why Kids Should Grade Teachers*, by Amanda Ripley

An artful mix of compelling stories and emerging evidence, this article tracks the work of Harvard Economist Ronald Ferguson. Supported by the Gates Foundation, Ferguson developed student survey instruments that help assess teacher effectiveness. These surveys assume that students are experts on whether their classes are under control and rigorous, and the resulting data has been highly predictive of student success. What's more, the results have not shifted in dramatic ways based on the race of the student or the income-level of his or her family. Students from all walks of life, after all, know things about schools that "no adult" or "trained ... observer" could ascertain. Ripley argues that as we continue to determine the behaviors that lead to effective teaching, the idea of tapping into student wisdom in a statistically significant way holds great promise in providing feedback for teacher improvement. Or, as one older student in the article responded when asked about the process of providing feedback to her teachers, "they should have done this since I was in eighth grade."

Chris Lauricella, The Park School of Buffalo, NY

The Atlantic, October 2012



### No Easy Answers

*In Plain View, How Child Molesters Get Away With It*, by Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell's recent *New Yorker* essay provides an alternate reading of the Sandusky scandal, which the media has portrayed as a cover-up to protect a powerful football coach. In Gladwell's view, pedophiles are in the business of insinuating themselves into communities by befriending those they would victimize, becoming model citizens, and allying themselves with the adults who should be the protectors of children. Because they often appear to be such exemplary members of the community, child predators can be difficult to recognize; Gladwell gives examples of other cases where even trained professionals doubted their own judgments. As is typical for Gladwell, his work provides a nuanced analysis of a problem; unfortunately, it is one all schools could face at some point. Though the article does not offer easy answers or guidance, Gladwell reminds us how easy it is to blame those we believe should have protected children and how even well trained and ethical adults can be manipulated by those whose primary objective is to avoid discovery.

Stephanie Lipkowitz, Albuquerque Academy

The New Yorker, September 24, 2012



### Testing the Grit Movement's Grit

*What Do Kids Really Learn from Failure?* by Alfie Kohn

Among the many educational buzzwords of the moment, "perseverance" and "grit" are prominent. Articles in the *New York Times* covering the leaders of Riverdale Country School and KIPP have suggested that "the secret to success is failure." Educators across the country have a renewed interest in character traits. Parents, as well, have taken interest as the data suggests that traits such as perseverance are better indicators for academic success than standardized tests. Never one to follow conventional trends, education writer Alfie Kohn offers a counterpoint in his article, "What Do Kids Really Learn From Failure?" In it, he states that "there's reason to doubt the popular claim that kids have too little experience with failure. Or that more such experience would be good for them." For those experienced with Kohn's work, the argument will sound familiar. Too many of our schools, Kohn suggests, focus their environments on achievement, rather than learning. In these competitive settings, failure does little to build "grit." In fact, the very nature of high-stakes grading systems creates a reward/punishment environment that hinders the character and confidence development that all educators want for their students.

Ryan Kimmert, New Canaan Country School, CT

The Huffington Post, October, 2012



### The Power of Focus

*The Writing Revolution*, by Peg Tyre

This inspiring article describes the case of New Dorp, an impoverished public school in Staten Island that partnered effectively with an independent school in an effort to improve its students' dismal performance on the Regents. In 2008, New Dorp made the bold step of focusing on teaching analytic writing in English, history, and science; the faculty soon realized that teaching students how to write meant that they were really teaching them to think critically. As the teachers focused their attention on analytical writing, students' performances in all subjects improved radically. A bonus in the article is Tyre's useful historical perspective on why public schools have moved away from teaching analytic writing, as well as her response to those who believe that the teaching of composition is overly formulaic and stultifying. The article's clear message is that independent schools, which generally have remained committed to teaching persuasive writing, should stay the course. New Dorp's partnership with the Windward school is, additionally, an example of the power of partnerships between public and independent schools.

Stephanie Lipkowitz, Albuquerque Academy, NM

The Atlantic, October, 2012



### Taking Teaching Personally

*Emotional Lives of Teachers*, by Hector Vila

In this personal essay, Middlebury College professor of writing Hector Vila unravels a topic he claims we relegate to the partial taboo: the emotional life of the teacher. In our role as teachers we negotiate multiple spaces. We are not only the caretakers of a classroom, but also the patients in therapy under analysis by the students. We interpret the institution of which we are a part, acting as "guardians of a tower." We try to "convert the narrative," transforming the prevailing view of students as empty vessels, and try to "sound the depths," reinterpreting our own and students' behavior to make a connection. Finally, we risk "diving in," becoming students ourselves in order to transform the whole process. Drawing upon films about teaching such as *Ferris Bueller* and *Dead Poet's Society*, as well as works by Roland Barthes and Mina Shaughnessy, Vila wants us to consider why other professionals (e.g., lawyers and doctors) find the support and solace that teachers lack. Though often underserved by our educational conversations, Vila's topic is deeply relevant. (Find out as well about the Community Works Institute by following the link above.)

Peter Herzberg, The Brearley School, NY

Community Works Journal, September, 2012

## BOOKS



### Assumptions, Attitudes, and Education

*Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, by Lisa Delpit

Lisa Delpit's recent book, which is alternately personal and political, inspiring and provocative, is a must for educational leaders interested in moving beyond the faulty assumptions about students of color that too often go unchecked in schools. An acclaimed educator and public-school activist, Delpit opens by reminding us that there is no achievement gap at birth and continues by attacking some of the most tenacious and damaging myths about children of color. Delpit especially challenges white teachers to re-evaluate their patterns of thinking and to recognize that what we call "basic skills" is actually a part of the cultural capital of the middle class. She also argues forcefully that reform cannot mean "whitening." Many suggest that our schools are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in the education of all children; others argue that our ability to remain relevant in the 21st century will be predicated on such efforts. Regardless, the idea that independent schools must embrace students from diverse backgrounds is a given. Delpit's work, and work like it, will ensure that we remain appropriately self-critical in our attempts to serve the students we attract and enroll.

Stella K. Beale, San Francisco University High School, CA

The New Press, March 20, 2012



### Deconstructing Habit

*The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business*, by Charles Duhigg

Some students find it impossible to plan ahead for assignments, while others keep meticulous planners and manage their time masterfully. Some schools seemingly make the same mistakes over and over, while others find new ways to approach perennial problems. Such behaviors are in part the result of habits instilled and reinforced over time. Understanding how habits are formed and how they can be interrupted and reprogrammed is the province of *The Power of Habit*, a new book by Charles Duhigg of the *New York Times*. In readable, breezy prose Duhigg breaks down the details of how habits work, providing many useful examples. Independent schools should look closely at the section entitled "The Habits of Successful Organizations." Both in terms of developing excellent learning habits for our students and encouraging institutional habits that reinforce our missions and help our schools evolve, those chapters most clearly explain how the principles Duhigg explores might be applied profitably to our daily practice.

Michael Schloat, Deerfield Academy, MA

Random House, 2012

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The Klingenstein Center  
 for Independent School Leadership  
 Teachers College, Columbia University  
 Box 125  
 525 West 120th Street  
 New York, New York 10027  
 212-678-3156

<http://www.klingenstein.org/>

