

Quest Journal – Volume 7

The Quest Journal, Volume 7 – The Quest for Increased Student Achievement and Well-Being: Re-Imagining Public Education

This year's Quest focuses on the theme of Re-Imagining Public Education and reflects on innovative and high-performing global practice that sustains improvement. It marks the next step in the evolution of our Quest Conferences held in the York Region District School Board. It is an opportunity for us to learn together about what it takes, worldwide, to increase student achievement and wellbeing. The Quest Conference is designed to have us deliberately pause and reflect on our collective journey and to learn from those who are making a positive impact on students and their learning. The insights gleaned and the reflections inspired will be relevant for all students, staff and stakeholders comprising our education system. It is with much pleasure and anticipation that we introduce Volume 7 of The Quest for Improved Student Achievement: A Journal of Educational Inquiry and Practice. This Journal is aimed at capturing examples of current understandings about what it takes, collectively and individually, to improve student achievement and well-being. It provides a forum for sharing articles, images and research carried out within our system and beyond as we focus on our common goal of positively impacting the learning of all our students. From our beginnings in Volume 1, this Journal has been an annual effort tied to the theme of The Quest Conference for each year. All articles are available and accessible online at <http://www.yrdsb.ca/questjournal>.

In this regard, this year's Quest Journal owes much to the persistence and hard work of the Quest Journal Committee members: Jeewan Chanicka, Clelia Della Rovere, Dr. Debbie Donsky, Hanada Kardassopoulos, David Nimmo, Derek Totten, Paul Valle, Kim Walke; Public Affairs and Communications and

Information Technology Services, Dawn Clayden, Lisa Gibson, Steve Rutledge; Graphic Design Learning, Design & Development Team, Stuart Gerskup, Lainie Holmes; and to Priscilla Li Kam Cheung and Catherine Falconer for their help in collecting student art work. I am sincerely grateful for their unwavering commitment to this task. We are grateful to those who have contributed and hope that readers find the articles and videos thought-provoking and interesting. I invite all readers, on their behalf, to engage in the dialogue, share the learning and create the next chapter in their improvement journey.

This year's Quest Journal will be the first to go interactive and truly online. While previous versions have been posted online, they have not been interactive in nature; nor have they afforded opportunity for input and information exchange as this year's Journal will provide. Needless to say, this takes time and effort and commitment to compile – especially when it is being done on a voluntary basis in addition to regular assignments. Like all improvement efforts here in Ontario and beyond – our work in York Region is challenging. Improving the processes of teaching, learning and leadership demands steadfast teamwork, collaboration and willingness to innovate.

I would like to thank our Board of Trustees, Ken Thurston, our Director of Education and our school and system leaders for their unrelenting commitment to our collective work.

Denese Belchetz

November 2013 [FINLAND Report](#)

Authors: Lori Barnes, Dorothy Cammaert, Michelle Cassidy, Kate Diakiw, Janet Hicks, Allan Hoyle

This report is the product of the group that visited the Espoo School Board in Finland during May, 2013. Observations included primary and lower secondary schools, discussions with school psychology and central staff. In addition, our staff

visited the children's hospital and met with Pasi Sahlberg, internationally renowned author and Finnish educator. The schools we visited included mainstream programming, as well as a special education focused elementary school.

Several themes emerged about Finnish education as reflected in this experience in Espoo. Each of these themes is highlighted in this report. Recommendations from this learning for the York Region District School Board follow.

Keywords: children's hospital, elementary and secondary schools, special education [Report of the Jurisdictional Learning Visit Tower Hamlets and Hackney, London, UK](#)

Authors: Denese Belchetz, Kathy Witherow, Chris Sarellas, Clayton LaTouche and Elizabeth Gordon

The York Region District School Board values professional learning opportunities beyond Ontario for the purpose of benchmarking the work of the Board against other high-performing educational jurisdictions. This past July, 2014, a team of teachers, school administrators, and superintendents, from the Board visited Tower Hamlets and Hackney in London, UK to observe high-leverage strategies in school districts that are in challenging circumstances. The learning from this experience and previous visits is highlighted in the 2014 London Jurisdictional Learning Report, and has been impactful on the strategic thinking and collective practice in our district over the years.

Keywords: jurisdictional learning, family, well-being, outdoor learning environments, efficacy, leadership, growth mindset [Finland Reflections](#)

Author: Paulla Bennett

While visiting Finland in May of 2010, I had the unique opportunity to observe and engage in their learning environments through the lens of an Information Technology

professional. I will admit I was curious to explore their systematic approaches to ICT Education and Digital Literacy.

Keywords: student learning, information technology, digital literacy [Teacher Leadership in Professional Learning Communities such as Networks](#)

Author: Clelia Della Rovere

This paper discusses research around the teacher leader's role within professional learning communities such as networked learning communities, which is a recent trend in collaborative teaching cultures.

Keywords: professional learning communities, networks, collaborative teaching cultures [Re-thinking Transitions: Innovation, Improvement, and Inquiry](#)

Author: Dr. Susan E. Elliott-Johns, Nipissing University

This article explores the nature and importance of successful transitions for all learners (K-12 and beyond), and fundamental strategies, aptitudes, pedagogies, and programmes that nurture and support a wide variety of today's student transitions (Tilleczek et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Helling, 2013). Teacher education and ongoing professional learning is discussed as being central to establishing and sustaining innovative approaches to transitions, along with excerpts from the author's own current research and practice in this area. Increased understandings of the highly complex, varied, and cyclical nature of transitions in education, and the effective re-thinking of transitions, will also be enhanced by attending to contemporary voices from the field (Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, 2013).

Keywords: transitions in education, student success, leadership, teacher education, professional learning, inquiry [Stress Less Classrooms: A Contemplation in How to](#)

Stress Less and Learn More

Author: Nicole C. Fisher

Statistics from the Mental Health Commission of Canada demonstrate an urgency in how we understand our life choices and likewise calls our paradigm thinking to the fore, stating that '1 out of 5 Canadians (6.7 million people) experiences a significant mental health problem in any given year.' The question then arises, what are we to do to bring ourselves back into a regenerative state of resilience and improved learning without leading a compromised life half-lived? When it comes to discussing stress, we have to realize that there is more going on than we may have predicted. The knowledge is available to shift our awareness; however, it is the wisdom to take action and live it each moment that awaits us.

Keywords: mental health, resiliency, improved student learning [Identifying a Learning Disability in an ESL Student](#)

Author: Christina Franz

English as Second Language (ESL) learners are often over-identified or under identified as having a learning disability (LD) in our current education system. Cummins (1991) claims ESL students are often over-identified as having a LD because educators often mistake the student's slow progress in acquiring the English language as them having a disability. Educators often overlook the student's prior education, literacy in native language, time in new country, learning style, or motivation as all reasons for the students progressing at a slow learning rate (Cummins, 1991, p.77). On the contrary, at the same time ESL students are often under-identified for having a LD as the teacher mistakes their disability as their natural progressing learning acquisition, as learning a new language exhibits similarities in behaviour as a student with an academic disability (Fielding-Barnsley & Susan, 2002). ESL students are often misdiagnosed and wrongly

labelled because of the inadequate testing techniques that are used by professionals. Current testing systems today tend to be in 'English and there is a lack of personnel qualified to assess the English language learners exacerbates the problem of inappropriate referrals' (Oritz et al, 1985). The issue of disproportionate representation for ESL students has persisted because of the lack of knowledge on the educator's part and the inadequate testing available. In the essay that follows I will use the work of several prominent ESL scholars to discuss how an educator can recognize if an ESL student has a learning disability and what problems can arise from labelling a minority student.

Keywords: English as a second language, English language learners , identification of English language learners, tracking English language learners, testing English language learners [How Ontario spread successful practices across 5,000 schools](#)

Author: Avis Glaze

Before 2003, many would have said that the Ontario school system was in crisis. Today, the province has been recognized as one of the fastest-improving jurisdictions in the world. Ontario is lauded for achieving both excellence and equity, goals that many believe are mutually exclusive. One of the many lessons that Ontario learned is the importance of building capacity among teachers and principals to sustain strategies that work. When this happens, teachers are motivated, and they strive to do what they do best – educate all children, regardless of background or personal circumstances, to the maximum of their capabilities.

During the years of its most intensive improvement work, Ontario educators could rely on support from the highest political levels of the province. Teachers' unions, and superintendents' and principals' associations also played a key role supporting the strategy by developing their members.

I am convinced that systems do better when they take time nurturing trusting professional relationships with the individuals who are expected to do the daily work of implementation. Without the deep commitment of the adults, Ontario would never have been a success story.

Reprinted and distributed with permission of Phi Delta Kappa International, www.pdkintl.org. All rights reserved.

Keywords: capacity building, professional relationships, continuous improvement, public confidence in public education, culture of inquiry, targeted support, equity [Total Quality Management for Continual School Improvement: Guiding principles of success that can be derived from Mauritius](#)

Author: David Hung and Jean Claude Ah-Teck

As a small island country, Mauritius is relying on its human capital and innovative hi-tech industry to ensure future economic viability in the global market. As such, Mauritian education authorities are seeking ways to raise educational standards. One government's reform idea being canvassed is that Total Quality Management (TQM) could provide the framework for Mauritian school leaders to deliver imperatives for change and improvement so as to achieve 'world-class quality education.' However, whilst there is a burgeoning literature on TQM and a quality culture in education, little research attention has been paid to the practical processes of implementing TQM concepts in realizing and sustaining quality in schools, and when this has been done it has tended to be limited to higher education institutions. Moreover, no research has covered this topic in the Mauritian context.

This research focuses on investigating Mauritian principals' perceptions, from an under-researched ethical leadership perspective, about school and systemic improvement and the usefulness of TQM tenets in raising educational standards in schools. Significantly, what emerged from the research is a

conceptual framework including a complementary set of guiding principles of success, informed by a thorough literature review of the field and capturing school principals' pertinent ideas, that might inform future research and possible collective action for continual quality improvement. The research present signposts for challenges and opportunities that would be worthy of debate, from an ethical school leadership perspective, in re-imagining public education in Ontario in the quest for increased student achievement and well-being.

Keywords: educational improvement, leadership, sustaining quality in schools [Exploring Finnish student success](#)

Author: Colleen Ireland

The YRDSB has had a working partnership with the Finland educational authorities for some time but this was the first occasion that plant managers and union representatives were also invited by the Board to travel to Finland to share ideas with our Finnish colleagues. My goal was to look at union and school system structures as well as school environment and curriculum practices that might explain and inform such success on the PISA.

Reprinted and distributed with permission from Education Forum, Winter 2012.
<http://educationforum.dgtpub.com/2013/2013-10-24/home.php> All rights reserved.

Keywords: school system structures, professional organizations, unions, student achievement, Finland [Deconstructing the "At-Risk" of Student Success- A Literature Review Summary](#)

Author: Tara Kumabe

Student Success program was being offered at a specific junior high school in Toronto. Student Success is a government

initiative that provides support for students learning in secondary school. At one particular junior high school, an intervention program to support academic gains was designed for students who were considered academically 'at-risk.' Specifically, this research study tracked grade 8 students during the 2007-2008 school year, and looked at how this program was working for them. An important part of this research explored how students were highlighted as 'at-risk' and the measures taken by teachers to help these students. This research also deconstructed the term 'at-risk' and how this label affected students and teachers.

Keywords: student success, intermediate students, intervention, academic success, at-risk [Professional Learning vs. Professional Practice – Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Mathematics Education: One Teacher's Journey](#)

Author: Tisha Nelson

As lifelong learners teachers are continuously encouraged to participating in on-going professional learning in order to stay current with effective pedagogical practice within the domain of teaching and learning. But what impact in teacher participation do such engagements have on teacher practice? How can teachers remain accountable to new learning that they have acquired? This study seeks to uncover the impact of engaging in professional learning in the content area of mathematics. Through reflective journaling, one teacher will uncover the changes and continuity is in her practice before and after engaging in a mathematics additional qualification course.

Keywords: professional learning, professional development, action research, reflection on action, mathematics [Jurisdictional Learning: Garden Grove Unified School District](#)

Author: Dr. Steven Reid, Dr. Kathy Witherow, and Scott Yake

The YRDSB continues to look beyond its borders to learn from high-performing school districts. Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) in Southern California is a school district that has shown excellent progress based on intentional continuous improvement strategies aimed at closing the opportunity gap for all students. There are 50,000 students in Garden Grove's 46 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 7 secondary schools, 2 special education schools and 2 continuation schools. A majority of the districts' students are Hispanic (54%) and Vietnamese (33%). Garden Grove serves an economically challenged community with a large percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches. GGUSD performance on mathematics state-wide assessments places it above the state average. While performance in both literacy and mathematics has improved, GGUSD has placed a focus on closing the gap between Latino and non-Latino students. A focus on equity was evident in each school visited during the jurisdictional learning experience.

Keywords: equity of access, literacy and mathematics, student achievement, connection to research, professional learning, relationships with unions, students at-risk, student success [An Equity Journey](#)

Author: Cecil Roach

This article summarizes and synthesizes the York Region District School Board's equity journey over the last several years by reviewing structural changes followed by actions taken at the school and system level.

Reprinted and distributed with permission of New Leader November 2013. All rights reserved.

Keywords: equity, diversity, inclusion, improvement plans, cultural proficiency, GSAs, LGBTQ, Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, hiring practices, religious accommodations, demographic data [Plant Services-York Region](#)

[District School Board Finland Study Tour Experience](#)

Author: Margaret Roberts, Robert Selvazzo, Kathryn Powell

Report Summary – In May 2011, a group from the Board's Plant Services participated in an international study tour. While the educators discussed and examined the world of academia, the Plant representatives spent time inspecting rooftops, visiting the bellies of buildings, hiking around school exteriors, and examining mechanical and facilities systems.

Keywords: lifestyle and culture, design, energy management [Can inquiry math resolve math anxiety?](#)

Author: Amy Smith

The present study investigates inquiry-based teaching as a potential solution to reducing math anxiety experienced by teachers and students. A literature review and analysis was conducted using search engines: ERIC, JSTOR, PsychInfo, ProQuest and more. It was found that both parents and teachers have the ability to pass on their math anxiety to their students, students with high levels of math anxiety are less successful in mathematics, females and other marginalized groups are at a higher risk of experiencing math anxiety and the disconnect of curriculum to students' lives contributes to poor math results and increased levels of anxiety. Inquiry Math is suggested as an effective teaching strategy that may help alleviate math anxiety experienced in both teachers and students. Future research into inquiry math as an intervention for math anxiety using a pre-post-comparison model is recommended. Implications for teachers on preparing both themselves and their students for inquiry-based learning are discussed.

Keywords: math instruction, inquiry based learning, math anxiety [Thirst for Learning](#)

Author: Rashmi Swarup

This article is about the VIDYA School, a school in India which offers programs to children and adults. The school was founded by a Rashmi Misra, 28 years ago when she recognized the inequity of education in India given the great disparity due to socioeconomic status. VIDYA has created its own designation as a movement that serves the socially disadvantaged and combines excellence with equity. The school currently has about 500 students from nursery to grade 10. VIDYA serves students from underprivileged homes where the family income is less than INR 10000 (INR = Indian rupees) a month that is equal to \$170 (Canadian). The school enlists the help of a social worker to establish qualifying families based on the income criteria. Home visits are made by school teachers to learn about the parents' commitment and support for their child's education and to understand the social capital of the family. The parents are then invited to the school for an interview and conversation with the Principal as well as Board members. The VIDYA culture is to give, help, empower, build confidence and see the positive in every challenge. Every effort is made to provide a holistic integrated education and to empower students to take back the learning to their families and community to triple its effect.

Keywords: social capital, socioeconomic issues in education, moral education, community responsibility