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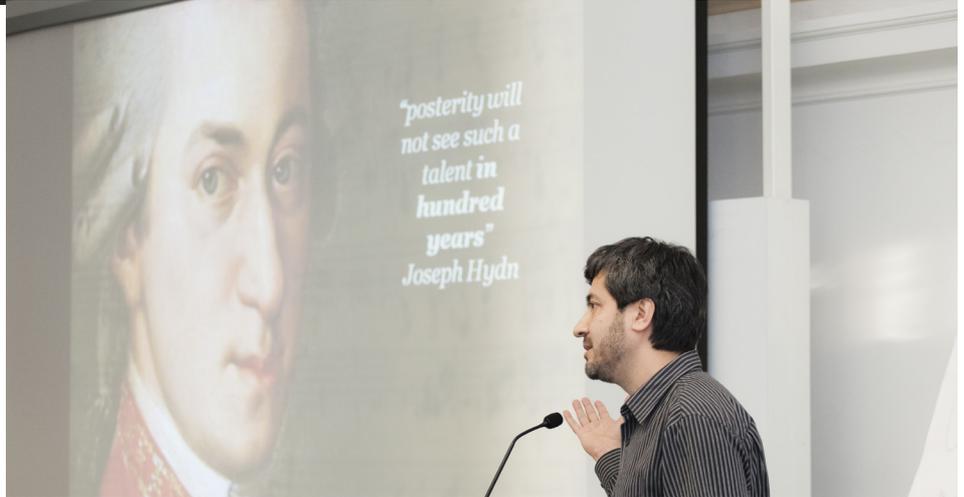
Untapped Talent: Can better testing and data accelerate creativity in learning and societies?

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

Fellow Opinion: Tapping synergistic partners

Susan Levine

Schools are often charged with closing the “achievement gap.” Even with great assessments and classroom instruction this can be a difficult task. Recruiting resources outside of school provides a relatively untapped way to leverage efforts at school, particularly because children spend the majority of their time in the home environment. Parents and communities could be effective partners in working with kids on a broad range of learning goals in traditional domains such as language, math, science and literacy as well as on attitudes toward learning, including growth mindsets and positive learning identities. This will require developing and supporting school-family-community partnerships and using data to assess the success of these kinds of programs. Many promising and exciting efforts of this sort have been discussed during our time together. Data can help us learn what works best in this space in various cultural contexts, informing future efforts to support children’s learning.



What would music or Salzburg be had Mozart’s talent never been tapped?

Evidence-based policy or policy-based evidence?

The Fellows in Salzburg might have spent the last four days talking about “*Untapped Talent*” and forming recommendations on how best teachers, assessors and policymakers can move forward in this area, but do policymakers even care about people’s talent? What do we mean by the word talent? And how can we convince policymakers to care about “talent”?

The OED (not to be confused with the OECD) defines talent as “*Power or ability of mind or body viewed as something divinely entrusted to a person for use and improvement.*” Although some may take umbrage with the word “talent” (it suggests innate ability, rather than a malleable and improvable skill), the talents that much of the session has focused on have been so-called “21st century skills” which the OECD posits can be broadly placed in five categories: interpersonal engagement, relationship enrichment, task completion, intellectual engagement, and emotional regulation.

Data shows that students with both higher cognitive and social and emotional skills are more likely to complete college, earn a higher income and have lower instances of depression, with the social and emotional competencies proving even

more important in this relationship than cognitive skills.

So if the evidence shows these skills are important for tomorrow’s (and today’s!) workforce, do policymakers care about this? Rhetorically at least, it would appear: yes. The Australian Education Act 2013 includes wording such as “confident, creative individuals,” and “active and informed citizens,” and the accompanying curriculum framework includes more than just literacy and numeracy; critical and creative thinking and ethical and intercultural understanding, for example both feature.

Evidence and rhetoric, however, may prove to not be enough. Politicians are notoriously short-term-focused. At best they’re focused on the next election. At worst, they’re just chasing the next 24-hour news cycle. As one Fellow remarked: “Politicians don’t about evidence-based policy – they care about policy-based evidence!”

Evidence-gathering takes time but it can have impact. In Chile, they have been gathering assessment data since 1998; the first stage of education reform passed in 2014. If you start collecting evidence, be prepared to wait years before policy is implement, warned one Fellow: “Be prepared for bureaucracy.”



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Good vs. Bad Assessments

Testing the right skills at the right time for the right reasons

Heather Jaber

If the strategic design of tests is key to learning, poor strategic design is a substantial barrier to the process, Fellows heard on the fourth day of *Untapped Talent*.

Poorly-designed tests not only waste the time of the teachers creating them, but they often do not measure the concepts that are supposedly being tested. Good assessment means balancing curriculum, giving constructive feedback, and ultimately, creating a productive learning experience.

It was suggested that there needs to be a system-level challenge in the UK to enable teachers to teach and test math more effectively. Multiple choice math tests, for example, rely on elimination rather than reasoning and are a much less effective way of testing a student's math skills than actual problem solving. Although we may know how to better design tests and have more effective assessment, there are different kinds of pressures and barriers along the education chain, from the management tensions of superintendents and principals to the lack of support for teachers.

In South Africa, barriers to an effective educational system were met with

demands by students to reform curricula in schools. The apartheid system was entrenched in the South African education system, creating separate development for different nationalities and races. After 1994, students played an important role in higher education, becoming a legitimate governing structure in the education system. They continue to play an active role in pressuring the system to change – as was seen earlier this year with the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement to remove the statue of colonialist Cecil B. Rhodes from the University of Cape Town.

But not all of the 12 million learners in South Africa go to university or further education colleges, leading to high rates of unemployment. To better understand the readiness of students upon exiting school, the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) helps assess the competencies of students who wish to pursue higher education. The project then also assesses the relationship between higher education entry level requirements and school-exit outcomes and assists with curriculum development. With supplemental assistance and a view that there is a responsibility to help students not doing well in school, success rates are increasing.

Tech + content + pedagogy = success?

Media24's Via Afrika Digital Education Project is designed to revolutionize South Africa's 21st century classrooms. Students learn through ebooks, individualized math programs, revision quiz apps, using 21st century tools such as tablets instead of traditional text books. Such tech-based initiatives are disruptive and innovative by nature – but they are not the panacea to all education needs. Technology needs to be combined with two other important elements: content knowledge and pedagogy. Traditionally there was only pedagogy and content knowledge, however this is becoming increasingly outdated. Using only technology and content knowledge is not enough and feels disconnected.

Introducing tech solutions to these two other elements can enable better observation of and response to changes in learners' needs.

Engagement is a key factor: how can you retain children's attention when the outside world is so stimulating? Tech alone won't solve this problem – we need to ensure we maintain students' motivation regardless of the modes of teaching employed.

Session materials now available online

You will find all the session's daily newsletters, interviews, and photos on the session page: www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/558

We will also post all working group presentations and handouts, and the draft of the Salzburg Statement for you to review in the Fellows-only login area of the website early next week.

You can find photos on both our Facebook page www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal and our Flickr stream www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal. (If you require non-watermarked images for your own publication, please let Louise know.)

If you would like to contribute an op-ed article for either our website or the report, please contact Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman via email: lhallman@salzburgglobal.org.

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Ana Alania & Heather Jaber

“A quote from Terry [Terry L. Mazany] resonated with me, when he said that “schools will now become a node in a network of learning opportunities”, so that completely changes the focus... We need to identify what the learners’ needs are – that’s the first step, actually them guiding us through the learning process so it becomes personalized matter more than what it is, just open up your brain and I’ll pour in as much knowledge as I want. There’s a good saying that says “a caterpillar doesn’t become a more effective caterpillar, it becomes a butterfly”, so it needs to completely redefine and completely change and that’s what we need in our education system.”

Heinrich Dirk,

Project Manager, Via Afrika, Media24 Books, South Africa



“Data has no meaning without context and it is the context in fact that gives it the validity and then allows us to think about how it can be applied. So when you think about the context – the context is framing literally the story in which the data is amassed – it gives the data meaning and within that framework the story can, then, be thought of as argument. So what we think about when we assemble data is what that data tells us about the story we think we need to tell. Sometimes the story might change in itself because the data changes the story, but the data still has no meaning without having a narrative space. But the narrative space gains its power through the analysis of the data. So that’s the storytelling in data itself and we all do it, it doesn’t make any difference whether we’re cliometricians, psychometricians or historians or writers of the great novel – we all amass data in order to tell stories. The act is that we simply tell the stories in different ways and those stories serve different purposes. So the big question at the end of the discussion today is a debate on what stories are supposed to be told by this data.”

Maghan Keita

Professor of History, Director of the Institute for Global Interdisciplinary Studies, Chair of the Unit on Critical Language and Cultural Studies, Villanova University, PA, USA

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Hot Topic: “What is the purpose of Big Data – and how do we best use it?”

“Big Data takes the assessment to the next level: students, families, teachers and policymakers can see and track performance and development of the education system to analyze assessments results at the country, district, school, classroom, and student level. This could help us to compare patterns, co-develop solutions and share what works among members of the community. Furthermore, Big Data enables interoperability of different sources of information and makes a data set to convertible into a ready-integrated information system for consistent knowledge that may feedback to the whole system in all its different levels.”

Harvey S. Sanchez

Executive Director, National Institute of Educational Evaluation, Ecuador

“Big Data has the potential to provide a large scale foundation for many lines of further inquiry, the use of which could result in even more powerful, and actionable data. However, in order to prevent big data from simply being an aggregation of high volumes of information, it’s essential to engage stakeholders at all levels in a broad context to ask what else we hope to gain from the data, how we can explore it further and more substantively, and then how can we collaborate to create effective action.”

Amy Luitjens

Head of Admissions, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, USA

If you wish to share your opinion on any of the “Hot Topics” discussed this week, to be included in the upcoming report, you can email them directly to **Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman** via email: lhallman@salzburgglobal.org.

