



Jim Broadway's
Illinois School Policy Updates

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Does cognitive revolution align with standardization?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, State School News Service

October 21, 2010 – Some clarification may be necessary about Wednesday's commentary using the [Asch Experiment](#) suggesting that peer pressure skews cognition in some subjects. A reader believes I was implying such subjects are cognitively impaired.

Neither I nor Solomon Asche meant any such thing. The subjects' cognition was not impaired. Asche's experiment merely showed how cognition is influenced. To suggest peer pressure does not affect voters' perceptions would run counter to these research results.

Yes, the more it can be made to appear that "everybody" agrees with the position of a certain candidate or the message of a certain movie, the more people (I should not have said we are mostly sheep) will be likely to say they agree, too. Facts will not get in the way.

On another point, while I have observed that the stars appear to be aligned to make an unusually strong push for increased standards-based education reforms all but certain in 2011 – and doubted the efficacy of that effort – I did not mean to urge resistance.

As a school superintendent friend wrote, the reforms are coming. They are not all inherently damaging. The implementation stage makes a difference and educational leaders must play a role in that if they are to bring about the best possible results.

I strongly agree, and not because of pressure to conform. Even the worst concept can be implemented in ways that achieve a positive outcome. But it takes the participation of a lot of folks who know what a good outcome looks like. In this case, it takes educators.

All thinking is conditioned. Here's a thread worth considering.

In 1981, the late Dr. [Roger W. Sperry](#), then at California Institute of Technology, was awarded a Nobel Prize for his research and "discoveries concerning functional specialization of the cerebral hemispheres." He conducted brain research with amazing implications.

In [his Nobel Lecture](#), Sperry made a point of noting how different our brains are even at the level of the individual, so different that "fingerprints or facial features appear gross and simple by comparison." Then he added a line that has long impressed me:

"The need for educational tests and policy measures to selectively indentify, accommodate, and maximize the differentially specialized forms of individual intellectual potential becomes increasingly evident." He was almost saying: One size fits one.

Two years later came [A Nation At Risk](#), a half baked attack on America's educators. ANAR was the seed of the standardization movement which now appears to have matured into an irresistible force. We are defying Sperry's advice, but the die has been cast.

Meanwhile, the [cognitive revolution](#) – with mounting implications for educators, implications that seem generally to run counter to the standards movement – continued to run on a non-parallel track that has been somehow hidden from public view.

In 1983, the same year ANAR was published by the U.S. Department of Education, Howard Gardner gave us a fully developed [theory of multiple intelligences](#) in his book *Frames of Mind*. It, too, runs counter to a standardization model, but was ignored by the media.

Rebuttals to ANAR also surfaced. The comprehensively documented [Manufactured Crisis](#) (Bruce Biddle and David Berliner) dismantled its theory that a “rising tide of mediocrity” was making our schools fail, and even dashed the theory that our schools were failing.

The book left ANAR in a smoldering pile of ashes, but with little public attention.

Cogent arguments warned against the effects of a “competitive” school reform model driven by “high-stakes” standardized testing. Alfie Kohn [rhetorically shredded](#) the notion. The late [Gerald Bracey](#), a true statistical wizard, soundly refuted reformist calumnies.

Not every policymaker would be peer-pressured. The late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) delivered a classic [repudiation of test-driven](#) reforms. The irrepressible Susan Ohanian, my pen pal, wrote the [definitive case against the “standardistas”](#) assault on children.

Returning to the cognitive revolution, it has long roots but seems to have picked up steam late in the last quarter of the 20th Century and continues apace today. Its implications reach far beyond education, but it is, after all, just about the mind and how it works.

Patrick Grim of State University of New York, Stony Brook, [synthesizes it exceptionally well](#), in my view.

Disciples of B. F. Skinner need not abandon behaviorism. The Asche Experiment was an example of that type of research, after all. The subjects’ responses were conditioned by their experience. But for deeper insights as to how, cognitive research seems on track.

Ultimately, it seems likely that this revolution will revise our notions about education.

It will not happen soon, of course, not during the career of an active educator. But at some future time I think folks looking back at the early 21st Century will say: “They actually believed every child learns the same things, in the same ways, at the same rate. How quaint!”

But we live in the here and now, and whether or not the education reforms favored by those who hold the levers of power run contrary to the truths of the brain, they do hold those levers. Further reforms of their favored type seem inevitable.

What’s next for education in the Illinois General Assembly?

The Senate has revised its schedule and will return to the Capitol on November 4 (not on November 16, as previously scheduled with the House). It is said the Senate will take up the bill already passed in the House to borrow about \$4 billion to make FY 2011 pension payments.

Bonding bills take a three-fifths majority vote. That threshold eluded the Senate last spring, but with the elections over on November 2 it is likely that a lame duck or two can be wrestled onto the roll call.

Both chambers will return November 16, 17, 18, 29 (House only), 30 and December 1 and 2 (Senate only) to deal with veto messages and probably not much else. To pass any bill before January 1 will require three-fifths majority votes.

After that, pretty much anything is possible. For anything stunning to occur will depend on the election outcomes. If Republican Sen. Bill Brady is elected governor, Democrats in control of the legislature may hustle a few bills through to beat his veto.

If Gov. Pat Quinn is elected, shaping a FY 2012 budget that does not require cutting every state agency “a dime for a dollar” – the Brady plan – could begin early, even in January. If there is going to be a tax increase, there will be no reason to wait until May 30.

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