



*Alliance nationale pour les enfants*

*National Children's Alliance*

## **Education and Middle Childhood Teaching for Deep Understanding**

**Policy Brief prepared for the  
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 **Elementary Teachers'  
Federation of Ontario**  
Fédération des enseignantes et des  
enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario

480 University Avenue, Suite 1000, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 1V2  
Telephone: 416-962-3836 Toll-free: 1-888-838-3836  
Fax: 416-642-2424  
Website: [www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca)

## Education and Middle Childhood Teaching for Deep Understanding

What happens in the early years of school has implications that can last a lifetime. For example, research conducted in Tennessee has revealed that students in **small classes** in grades one to three are more likely to stay in school in later grades, more likely to take advanced courses, more likely to take college entry exams, and are less likely to have behavioural difficulties.<sup>1</sup> If we want older children and adults to be independent, healthy, inquisitive, and contributing citizens, we need to begin in grade one to establish the practices and expectations needed for such development.

**Teaching for deep understanding** ought to be our goal for all students. However, as Carl Bereiter, one of the pre-eminent authorities on cognitive development, has said “Depth should not be confused with advanced study.”<sup>2</sup> Teaching for deep understanding should begin in grade one – as soon as formal schooling begins. “We ... know that one of the strongest motivations for further learning is a sense of success with prior learning. ... [H]aving only opportunities for superficial understanding robs the student of the satisfaction of insight, thereby diminishing commitment to continue learning.”<sup>3</sup>

We know a lot about **how children learn**. Knowledge is constructed out of prior experiences, ideas, and values. “According to constructivists, students acquire fuller understanding if they are personally involved in building their knowledge. It is not enough that teachers go further into a subject, students must go with them; and they will only do so if they are engaged intellectually, emotionally, and in other ways.”<sup>4</sup> This is true for students at all ages, not just older students. Right from the first day in school, children bring many experiences with them. We need to ensure that teachers have the ability to connect with children’s previous experiences and understandings.

Over the past decade or so, education policy in Canada as elsewhere has been characterized by two predominant themes – **accountability** in the form of standardized testing and **funding restraints**. Across Canada, students as

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Finn, J.D., Gerber, S.B., Achilles, C.M., and Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001). The enduring effects of small classes. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 45-83.

<sup>2</sup> Bereiter, C. (2004) “Reflections on Depth.” In Leithwood, Kenneth, McAdie, P., Bascia, N., and Rodrigue, A. (2004). *Teaching for Deep Understanding. Towards the Ontario Curriculum That We Need*. Toronto: ETFO, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Leithwood, Kenneth, McAdie, P., Bascia, N., and Rodrigue, A. (2004). *Teaching for Deep Understanding. Towards the Ontario Curriculum That We Need*. Toronto: ETFO. p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Beck, C. and Kosnik, C. (2004). “The Starting Point: Constructivist Accounts of Learning.” In Leithwood, et al. *ibid*, p.13.

young as eight years old are subjected to **annual provincial tests** mainly on literacy and numeracy. While we must ensure that all children develop the skills needed to learn and become highly functional in all areas, the focus on test scores has had deleterious effects – on individual students, on classrooms, and in some communities as the goal of education has become to get high ranks or scores. At the same time, many provinces have reduced education funding, in some cases quite dramatically.

Both of these factors (reduced funding and a focus on testing) have narrowed the **curriculum**, disadvantaging children's ability to be successful at school and in life. While the curriculum should not be overcrowded with too many expectations, it should include the variety of subject areas from the arts to physical education to science and technology to ensure that all students find their place to learn and develop emotionally and socially. Curriculum areas such as drama are not frills to be added when funding is increased and removed when governments decide not to invest in education. Rather, the arts are key to assisting students in understanding and experiencing the full import of the world and their place in it.

**Assessment** is an extremely important aspect of learning. But assessment does not mean how well a student has done on a standardized test or even what grade they get on their report card. Assessment *for* learning involves developing children's ability to use feedback and information to further their own learning and understanding. It means developing an intrinsic sense of the students' own learning – what they understand and how to build competence and confidence.

**Investing in children** is a smart thing for societies to do. A good education helps children grow to be productive members of our society. We also know that providing preventative programs early in a child's school life are much more effective than trying to provide remedial programs later on. That means spending more on the early years of school, not less.

Classroom instruction should build on students' ideas and experiences. It should connect the content of the curriculum to students' values. It should help connect the content of the curriculum to students' own lives. These are the principles that our schools should be built upon – from the early years of schooling through adolescence. Provincial curricula should be more focussed, allowing teachers to do more with less, and to allow teachers to focus on issues that matter to their students.

From the time children enter school, we must instill a sense of wonder and excitement in learning.

Patricia McAdie, Research Officer  
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
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