
LEADING TRENDS

Transcending the Modern Educational Zeitgeist



The modern educational *zeitgeist* tilts in favor of quantity, e.g., utilizing how much one learns in quantifiable units as a proxy for the quality of instruction and learning. As the parent of a 7th grade student at a school in the northeastern United States said during a focus group session last month, "[Students] have to learn so much information these days to get into college." The problem for progressive schools—

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really, any school that uses a more [constructivist](#) pedagogy—is that traditional schools own quantity and therefore own the *zeitgeist*. Any school that values something other than quantity has a problem right from the start: *how much* one learns is more accessible to measurement than *what* one knows to do with that knowledge. That parents crave measurement is not news. Their appetite for objective, quantifiable learning indices becomes voracious as their children age into upper school.

Almost every parent either grew up with or is under the influence of a maxim true for thousands of years: information is scarce and the spoils go to the one who knows the most. This is what made *Encyclopedia Britannica* a go-to source during my years in school. But, today is different in that knowledge is no longer scarce; indeed, it is both free and ubiquitous—or at least no longer requires a trip to the library to consult references as it did during my student days.

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To paraphrase Tony Wagner, what matters more is not what you know, but what you can do with what you know. But, and this part is a crucial qualifier, *what* you know does matter a lot up to a point. A second grader who is not yet reading or a fourth-grader who does not yet know basic math facts will freak-out parents. Assurances that “it all works out in the end” do little to prepare parents for the holiday get-together with siblings that quickly turns into master class in one-upmanship about their children's accomplishments. When a parent confesses at a holiday family gathering that their fifth-grader still struggles with basic math facts, the knowing glances by siblings and furrowed brows of grandparents will be hard to ignore.

A more progressive or child-centered pedagogy need not apologize for situations such as the above—after all, a fourth grader is hardly a finished product—but we do think such educators need to understand and respond to the anxiety-prone world parents inhabit. They still live in

the *zeitgeist* where quantity is paramount.

Can we change the guilt, feeling of failure, or the fear of having made a mistake by choosing the school in the first place that parents feel when their child

doesn't seem to measure up during the holiday family brag-a-thon? Not likely, unless we can change how they understand what is essential at each developmental level and where knowledge of facts segues into and is eventually supplanted by the knowledge of how to find and use facts to solve novel problems. Parents need to know that the *zeitgeist* rests on a now antiquated assumption about information scarcity.

That parents cling tenaciously to the *zeitgeist* is unsurprising. [Clay Shirky](#), an NYU vice provost and writer about the impact of digital media on society, calls the Internet-wrought transformation in who has access to knowledge "epochal" because it upends a paradigm that has been in place, well, forever as far as humans are concerned. To use [Piagetian terms](#), assimilating (taking in the information) and accommodating (changing how parents think and operate on the world) this epochal shift will take time, even as universities themselves shift their admissions algorithms. No wonder that parents are behind the curve in how they measure their children's performance at school. The larger educational and parental *zeitgeist* has yet to accommodate the new paradigm.

Moreover, unpacking and de-fanging the prevailing cultural attitude is, as they say, an "[inside baseball](#)" activity." It requires a level of specialist pedagogical knowledge that causes most people's eyes to glaze over. Until the prevailing philosophy shifts, any nontraditional school will struggle to explain itself to the market. In the meantime, nontraditional schools are not entirely without influence, even if they cannot directly hasten the accommodation process. Start by eschewing the "trust us" approach to dealing with parents. Trust is indeed the scarce commodity in the chronic state of high anxiety that characterizes modern parenthood, where a quest for verifiable evidence predominates. Instead, respond to the concern by acknowledging how difficult it must be to see progressive education through a traditional lens.

Next, reframe measurement that matters away from hours of homework or books in the backpack and toward the concept of cognitive load. Traditional schools create "load" in hours of work outside the classroom. Progressive schools create load by requiring that students engage during class at an intellectual level beyond merely receiving information. The problem is that this work is largely invisible to parents, while a student's work in a traditional school is on full display every evening through measurable hours of homework.

We think the solution is for nontraditional educators to devise (not avoid) measurements that matter to how they define learning. Abstractions like "joy of learning" or being the "happy school" are important in the early years when no parent wants their child to dread going to school. Eventually, though, even the most open-minded parents want evidence that their child is learning "enough," not to mention the many parents we meet who believe that pain and suffering are requisite signs of rigor in the later grades.

Substantially all private, independent school graduates matriculate to another school. This fact allows educators to connect the evidence to next-school placement so that parents see how what their children do at school translates into what comes next. Part of the *zeitgeist* is an almost innate grasp of the GPA, SAT/GCSE/A Level/IB, AP, and resume-building calculus leading to university admission. A calculus different from the above scares people, and parents are already on edge because of the myriad seemingly uncontrollable variables affecting their children's futures.

It is helpful to distinguish between two types of knowledge articulated in years of research in cognitive psychology in this context. "Declarative knowledge" is the encyclopedia information or facts that people know. "Procedural knowledge" is specific information related to how to do something. The focus in traditional schools tends to center around acquiring declarative knowledge that can be easily measured by testing how many facts students know. Procedural knowledge, a type that is more helpful in the world as an adult, is knowing how to translate that information into action or doing things.

Our schools, including our universities, have focused more on acquiring facts throughout history, which often have a short shelf life after learning them. Developing both types of knowledge is critical at the right points in one's educational journey. Procedural knowledge is most likely facilitated by tackling authentic activities or through discovery learning. That is how students learn to figure out the world around them, apply what they know, and learn new things outside the classroom (which should be the goal of all schools).

Assessing how to do or apply knowledge is also much more challenging than just testing students' knowledge of facts. So, measuring procedural knowledge requires "authentic" assessment strategies or having students tackle real tasks and experiment with what they know and how to apply it. That is a more meaningful assessment of what students should know and be able to do and often requires engagement in actual tasks that require problem-solving—and

demands more time than the standard paper-and-pencil examinations found in schools.

Rather than fall back on the old disclaimer that "results may vary"—precisely no one wants to hear this in terms of their own child—we suggest seizing the opportunity to draw jargon-free and evidence-based lines of connection between the way learning happens at your school, why it works the way it does, what measures achievement and progress, and how these build toward future success. None of this is in the prevailing educational *zeitgeist* and, until it is, you will find yourself making the case again and again, sometimes to the same parents.

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