

SEEING SCHOOLS FROM THE INSIDE OUT: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOL SELF-ASSESSMENT

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Schools must become places where children want to be, where they experience respect and engagement with their concerns. If they are to experience some ownership of the school, and develop a sense of commitment and responsibility towards it, then they need opportunities to be involved in the decisions, policies and structures of the school that affect them on a daily basis.¹

Education reform is a worldwide phenomenon which dates back to the 1980s as various “waves of reform” have swept in and out of the education scene. A great deal of the policy talk on education reform is about students, especially student achievement. Yet, it is distressing to note that, for the most part, students remain at the edges of the educational policymaking process.

Education Reform and Student Voice

In Michael Fullan’s latest edition of his classic text on educational change, he states: “Students, even little ones, are people too. Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail.”² Unfortunately, student voice remains conspicuous by its absence in the public debate on education reform. When John Goodlad wrote about *a place called school* more than fifteen years ago, he concluded that “state and local directives are written with adults, not children and youths, in mind.”³ We suspect, if we were writing today, that he would reach a similar conclusion.

A recent study in the U.K. by Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace has made an important contribution to counter this trend. The primary sources of data in this four-year study were student interviews, a significant departure from traditional research in schools. In their words: “[The] traditional exclusion of young people from the consultative processes, this bracketing out of their voice, is founded upon an outdated view of childhood which fails to acknowledge children’s capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives.”⁴ A Canadian study of student engagement reached a similar conclusion about the importance of making students a part of, not merely an object of, education reform:

Students are not “empty vessels” to be filled from the font of knowledge. On the contrary, students bring with them into the classroom a wide assortment of abilities and learning which may be or may not necessarily be to their benefit throughout their schooling experience. Studies have shown, for example, that students whose values, attitudes and interests are congruent with those of the school are more likely to experience success.⁵

School centred reform is creating opportunities to remedy this situation; however, to date, these opportunities are more of a potential than a reality.

Figuring the Course of School-Based Reform

School centred reform usually involves *some form* of decentralization of authority to schools, in recognition of the belief that schools must have a greater say in figuring the course of reform if it is to have any chance of success. This devolution of authority first begs the question: Who, beyond the school administration, participates in the school-based decisions about reform – the staff, parents, students? Second, what degree of involvement do each of these stakeholder groups have – a minimal consultative role (e.g. parent advisory council) or formal decision-making powers (e.g., school governing board)?

The corollary of this devolution of authority is that the school must be more *accountable* for the results it achieves. This in turn means new information needs of those responsible for making decisions – whoever they may be. The use of information to support what has been dubbed the “dialogue of accountability,”⁶ requires timely and relevant information that is shared with, and understood by, all concerned parties. School self-assessment becomes a critical means of meeting these information needs. More importantly, it can be used to involve students as active participants in the evaluation process.

School Self-Assessment and Reform

Traditionally the assessment of schools has been the prerogative of the Minister of Education and local education authorities such as school boards. The *school inspector* exemplifies this image, the external auditor making judgments about what is *good* and *bad* about a school. However, most schools are adept at insulating themselves against external forces. For example, one student in a study in the U.K. described their school as “a Jekyll and Hyde school with two faces. It has one face for visitors and one for us.”⁷

In contrast to this traditional approach, the policy alternative of school self-assessment has gained increasing attention in recent years. School self-assessment is the process that a school goes through in order to measure how well it is doing in relation to those goals and qualities that matter to the school, its stakeholders or other individuals or bodies in the system. As stated in a recent primer on self-assessment, the purpose of school self-assessment is to produce performance data – “bits of information” about how well your school is doing in relation to your its goals. In brief, self-assessment will:

- provide vital information to stakeholders about “where you are” and “where you want to go;”
- show what you are doing well and help celebrate your successes;
- tell you where you may need to improve and help you decide how to set about this task.⁸

The recent reform of education in Québec has created a climate where school self-assessment is not only encouraged, but indeed required.

School Reform in Québec

The Québec education reform has focused on a shift of authority from the school board to the school, the most striking symbol of which is the school governing board:

[Governing boards] were established to bring together parents, school staff, senior secondary students and community members in a collegial decision making body.

Together with the principal, they have an opportunity to revitalize the school system for a common purpose. That purpose, simply stated, is to maximize the “best interest” of the student, which the *Education Act* states must guide every decision of the [governing board].⁹

Among other duties, the governing board must now oversee the implementation and evaluation of the school’s “educational project” – its specific aims and objectives; prepare an annual activity report and transmit a copy of the report to the school board; and inform its community of the services provided by the school and report on the level and quality of such services.

There has been some experimentation with school self-assessment in Québec, notably, *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders*. The project took place between 1995-96 and 1997-98 as a joint venture of five school boards and thirteen schools, the Québec Ministry of Education, and the Office of Research on Educational Policy of McGill University (now continued by Ed-Lex, in the Faculty of Law). Overall, this process constituted a first attempt at providing schools with the basics to get started on a journey of discovery about school self-assessment.¹⁰

Measuring What You Value: A Puzzle Kit for School Self-Assessment,¹¹ which is based in part on this project, provides schools with a step-by-step guide to this process. Underlying the framework which structures the guide is the premise that students are at the *centre* of the education system – not the *bottom* – and that schools are the key to understanding and promoting teaching and learning. This view is consistent with the image of understanding schools from the *inside out* - starting with the student, then considering conditions that are closest to the actual learning processes of individual students, then facilitating conditions at the classroom, the school level and beyond. The Kit is intended to help a school to “tell its own story,” as one of the *critical friends* in the project expressed it, but *whose story* will it tell?

Recognizing the importance of student voice in school self-assessment, the second author of this article decided to tell her school’s story through the words and pictures of students. The first author acted as a critical friend in the conduct of this experimentation, which is described in the remainder of this article.

School Context

The school on which this article focuses is a high school in Montréal with a student population of 415 students from secondary I to V (grades 7 to 11). The building in which it is located also houses an elementary school of approximately 350 students. The school enjoys a strong relationship with the community, and there is significant parental involvement in the school. As reflected in its mission statement, the school offers its students a French Immersion program with a strong math and science focus:

[This] High School is dedicated to preparing today’s youth for tomorrow’s world. Set within a challenging educational atmosphere, our French Immersion Program provides a math and science focus, broadening the student’s choices for post-secondary education. An integrated curriculum and intensive extra-curricular activities give our students

opportunities to assume leadership roles and develop an appreciation for the well-being and individuality of others.

Owing to the rigours of this mandate and the small population of the school, students are streamed and follow a set curriculum with no options at any grade level. However, the school has no authority to screen potential candidates in any way, and as a result, some of its students face great difficulties coping with such a demanding program.

Project Purpose and Student Tasks

The assessment project was conducted by 32 students in a secondary V French class. Their purpose was to evaluate the success or failure of the school’s educational project, specifically the implementation of its mission statement. The mission statement was chosen as the focus of the student evaluation as the administration and staff of the school have often expressed their concerns about its mandate and a desire to see it revised. From the project leader’s perspective, the purpose of the project was to validate and legitimize students’ role as serious contributors to the assessment process: “Taking students seriously as evaluators is the key to the student evaluator model, a process in which students, with the help of an experienced evaluation facilitator, design and carry out evaluations of specific programs in which they are involved.”¹²

Working in small groups, the students were assigned two main tasks: first, to devise and administer a simple questionnaire, analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire, and present a summary of the results; and second, to prepare a visual and oral presentation (“photo essay”) based on photographs taken throughout the school which recorded the students’ impression of the success or failure of the school in its implementation of the mission statement.

How the Project Was Conducted

The following summarizes the steps undertaken by the project leader to perform the assessment.

Planning and Preparation

When the project leader initially broached the idea of undertaking this project with the class, the idea was warmly received. The approval of the school’s principal was then obtained, and all ethical requirements were fulfilled, including a parental consent form. The project leader provided the students with a general introduction to some of the basic principles of assessment, to data collection instruments such as questionnaires, and to the concept of a school educational project and mission statement.

Group Preparation of Questionnaires

The mission statement was broken down into eight key concepts. The thirty-two students worked in groups of four, each group focusing on one aspect of the mission statement. Using a rating scale provided, each group prepared a rough draft of its questionnaire which contained five to ten questions relating to the group’s chosen mission statement concept. The students then produced the questionnaire, using the school’s computer lab.

Administering Questionnaires and Analyzing Data

Each group was responsible for having its questionnaires completed by the other students in the class (students did not complete their own group’s questionnaire). When the questionnaires were completed, the group again made use of the school’s computer lab to enter questionnaire data in a spreadsheet, analyze its data, and produce a printed spreadsheet of the results. The spreadsheets included various calculations such as number of respondents by gender, the mean, frequency, and percentage of responses, as well as a graphic representation of the results.

Photo Essays

Each group also prepared a photo essay comprising between twelve and twenty-four photos of places, objects and people in the school which illustrated aspects of both the success and failure of the school’s implementation of its mission statement. Each photo was accompanied by a short explanatory text describing the subject of the photo, why it was chosen, and how it reflected an aspect of the mission statement. Each group also presented its photo essay to class members, who had an opportunity to ask questions and to provide feedback.

Final Questionnaire

A final questionnaire was administered by the project leader to solicit the students’ opinions and impressions of the process of school assessment and the success and failure of the school’s mission statement. (The questionnaire included students’ reactions to the process of devising and analyzing a questionnaire and of planning, producing, and presenting the photo essay, as well as their overall impression of the entire assessment project.) The questionnaire ended with open-ended questions relating to the successes and failures of the school and suggestions for improving the assessment project. The data collected from this questionnaire were processed and analyzed by the project leader.

Findings and Interpretation

It was impossible in the context of this project to review and analyze all of the quantitative and qualitative data which it generated. Therefore, the findings described below do reflect the wealth of data that could not be *mined* in the time available. The results of the final questionnaire administered by the project leader were examined in slightly greater depth, although time constraints also limited this analysis.

Student Questionnaires

The questionnaires were uneven in both their presentation and quality of expression. The students used samples and guidelines for questionnaire preparation adapted from the *Puzzle Kit* (see note 11), and most questionnaires did reflect an attempt to follow the latter, even if only at a rudimentary level. Students were assisted by the project leader during preparation of the questionnaires, yet some groups experienced difficulty producing clear, precise statements.

Data Analysis

The required data analyzes also produced diverse results. Some of the groups were unable to complete the required functions and graph correctly. In some instances, for example, the calculating functions were performed manually. The students had a limited amount of computer lab time and worked from instructions prepared by the project leader. It was impossible for the

project leader to verify if the tables of data entered in the spreadsheets accurately reflected the questionnaire results. The rating scale provided by the project leader scored a “No Opinion” response as a mid-point score of 3 on a 1-5 scale, which perhaps limited the validity of the data.¹³

The results of the student questionnaires revealed low mean responses to nearly all questions. Most mean responses fell between 2.0 and 2.9, which represented the “disagree” option. Mean responses of 3.04 and 2.79 respectively were observed for questions that related to the school’s preparation of students for the future and implementation of an integrated curriculum - both specific elements of the mission statement. In a school with a math-science orientation, the mean response to the question whether students planned to pursue a career or studies in math and science was only 2.21, again in the “disagree” range.

Photo Essays

The photo essays and accompanying class presentations produced interesting results and discussion. It was apparent from a mere glance at the finished products that the great majority of the students’ observations about their school and its success and failure in implementing its mission statement were made concerning its physical environment. Photos of holes in walls, garbage in hallways, and unsanitary conditions in washrooms abounded.

The students were not always capable of relating their photos to an element of the mission statement. Most often the photos were classified under the “challenging educational atmosphere” rubric which became the *catch-all* for virtually all subjects relating to the school’s physical environment. Indeed, the students were not aware of some of the inherent limitations of photos as indicators.

Arguably, it is difficult to capture abstract notions such as an integrated curriculum in a photo. However, students seemed not to appreciate, for example, that the impact of a photo of a deaf student integrated into the high school would be completely lost on someone who did not personally know the student involved. That the students even decided to choose the deaf student as a photo subject was perhaps in itself more significant as it reflected a positive attitude towards peers who have a physical disability. Another example was a photo of a specific teacher which could not, of course, capture the strengths or weaknesses of the teacher, nor could it reflect specific aspects of the curriculum being taught. The potential of this tool as a viable evaluation instrument was certainly not exploited to the fullest in the context of this project.

Final Questionnaire

The final questionnaire was designed and administered by the project leader with a view to obtaining information on the students’ opinions of the process of school assessment. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale and was divided into several sections.

The questionnaire was first designed to assess the extent to which the students felt that the school was successful or not in implementing the various aspects of its mission statement. The results are reproduced in Figure 1. These results suggest that the students disagreed that the school was successful in implementing its mission statement in all but one aspect – the math and science focus of the school. This one result in particular was deemed interesting given that in the data

analyzed by the students, it was found that the majority of students in this group do not intend to pursue a career or studies in math or sciences.

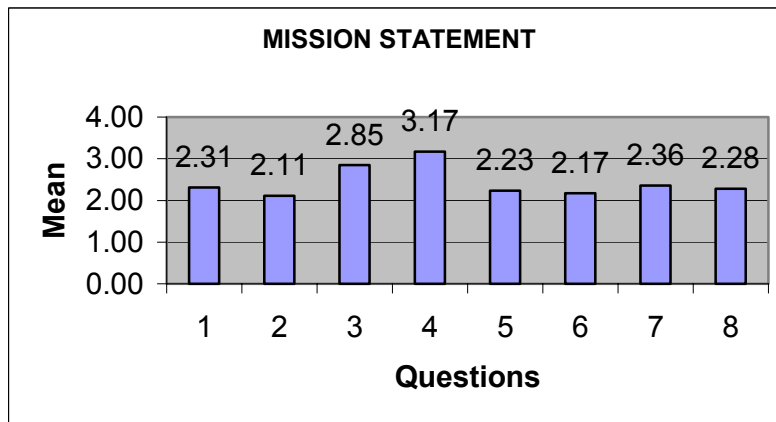


Figure 1
The Mission Statement

The next section was aimed at the students’ experience of producing, administering, and analyzing a questionnaire. Interestingly, students were aware of the difficulties of designing effective questionnaires and analyzing the data, but expressed agreement with the capacity of questionnaires to represent one’s ideas, the effectiveness of group work in producing questionnaires, the ease of completing other groups’ questionnaires, and the effectiveness of a questionnaire as an assessment tool. (See Figure 2 below)

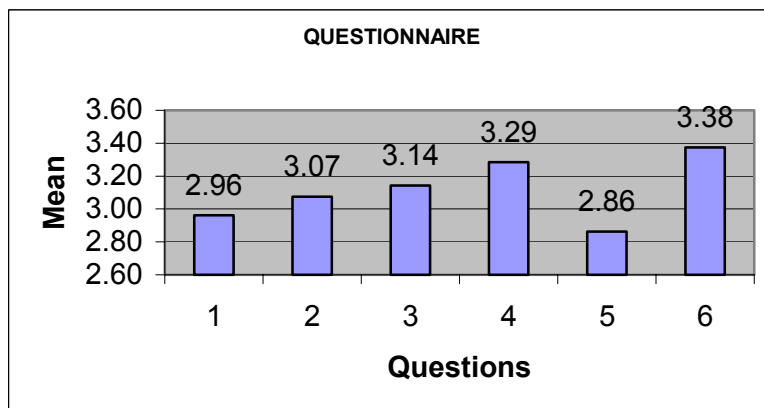


Figure 2
The Questionnaire

The following section examined the students’ impressions of the photo essays and their relevance as assessment tools. Interestingly, the mean response to question 7 in Figure 3 was exactly the same (3.38) as that of question 6 in Figure 2. In other words, the students expressed the same level of agreement with the statements that questionnaires and photo essays are effective assessment tools. The mean response (3.21) for the effectiveness of group work for preparing a photo essay (Question 4) was slightly higher than the mean response of 3.14 for

group work in preparing questionnaires (Question 3, Figure 2). It was also apparent that the students found the photo essays more difficult to prepare as evidenced by the responses to Questions 2, 3 and 4 which referred to, respectively, writing explanatory texts for the photos, the effectiveness of photos to represent one’s ideas, and the ease with which one could draw conclusions based on a photo essay. Perhaps the students were not so unaware of the limitations of photos as indicators as was first believed!

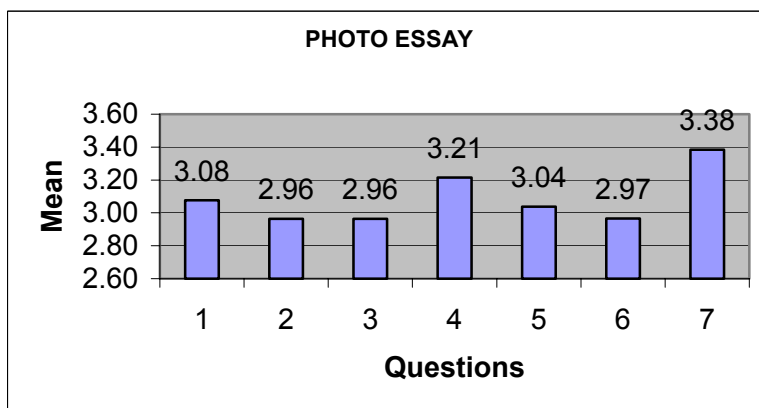


Figure 3
The Photo Essay

The next section addressed the students’ overall appreciation of the assessment project. It was apparent that the students better understood the school’s mission statement after completing the project (3.26) and enjoyed their assessment work (3.29), as shown in questions 1 and 3. However, the results of Question 2, with a mean response of 3.04, were somewhat incomprehensible. It was contradictory that the students indicated that the project helped them understand the school’s mission statement (3.26), yet to a relatively lower degree (3.04) they believed that the project helped them understand *how well* the school was implementing that very mission statement. During the administering of the questionnaire, one student had asked of Question 3 if agreeing with the statement that *the project helped him understand* to what extent the school was successful in implementing the mission statement meant that *he agreed that the school was successful*. Perhaps other students were confused by this question.

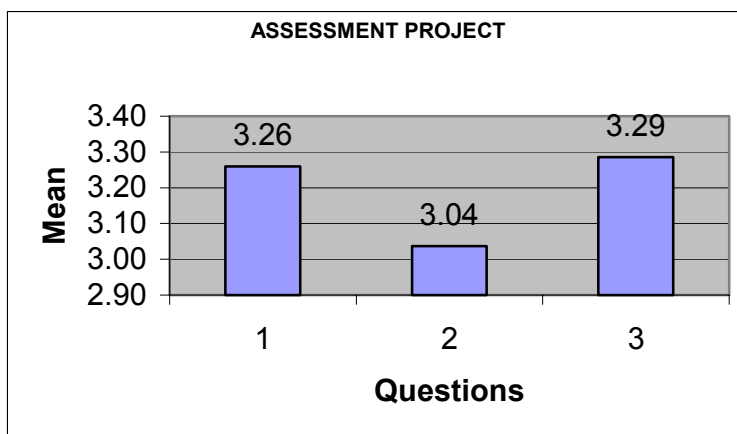


Figure 4
The Assessment Project

The final section of the questionnaire contained three open-ended questions and a final section for general comments. One question asked students to list three successes of the school, another, three failures of the school; and finally, three ways to improve the assessment project. The top five responses in each are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1
School Successes

Responses	Frequency
Math/Science program	11
Good teachers	11
Extra-curricular activities	7
Sports teams	6
Not much violence/not many fights	5

Table 2
School Failures

Responses	Frequency
School is dirty	17
Too many substitutes/Teacher absences	5
School is not safe	4
No choice of courses	4
Application of school rules	4

Table 3
Project Improvement Suggestions

Responses	Frequency
Use video-camera	8
More time	6
Administer questionnaire to entire school	4
Use cassette tape recorder	3
More photos	3

These three questions provided the project leader with a great deal of qualitative data – more than could be managed. Qualitative data add an important dimension to the results but require considerable time to process. The project leader found the students’ suggestions for improving the project to be excellent. The first response (use of video-camera) was certainly not unexpected. In the original project plan, the project leader proposed making a video of the assessment project. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, this idea was abandoned early in the process.

The students’ general comments provided a richness and variety of observations. Unfortunately, it was in this section of the project that the students’ weakness in expressing themselves in their second language was most apparent. In general, however, the poor quality of the students’ writing did not hinder a basic understanding of their meanings and intentions, and had the students completed the questionnaire in English, their comments and observations would surely have been more eloquently expressed. One student submitted a short composition on his experience of the project. The project leader felt it aptly captured the spirit of any school assessment process. A short excerpt, exactly as written by the student, follows.

En regardant nos photos, et les indications sous les photos, on peut remarquer que [notre école] n’est pas seulement une école, mais une société en elle même.... Je pense que cette projet était une très bonne idée, et nous a montrée beaucoup de choses dans notre école.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although none of the data generated can directly attest to this point, the project leader observed that the project did increase the students’ awareness and understanding of the concept of a mission statement. When the project was first introduced, most students had not ever heard the term, let alone understood what it meant. They were, of course, aware that they attended a French immersion/math-science alternative school, but the mission statement in its entirety was certainly not familiar to them.

Given the results of both the students’ questionnaires and the corresponding section of the final questionnaire, it appears that the students felt that the school is, in general, not successful in implementing its mission statement. Perhaps the school should undertake a serious evaluation of this aspect of its educational project.

A school assessment project is a monumental undertaking. Although the participants were limited in number and the content focused on only one aspect of the school, the amount of data generated was overwhelming for the project leader. The potential of the data collected has not been realised, but a more thorough and complete data analysis was impossible within the scope of this project.

Any assessment project, to be successful, requires sufficient time and resources. This project only scratched the surface of a complete school assessment. What seems obvious is that students indeed have a vital role to play as evaluators in an assessment project. Whether or not the students produced effective evaluation instruments or error-free data analyses or comments in grammatically sound and correctly spelled French is not the point. The students' response to the project was a positive one, and they were certainly stimulated and engaged by the experience. The goal of any educational activity - assessment project or otherwise - should be to do exactly that. In that sense, the project leader felt the assessment was a great success, proving the truth in the old adage: “If you want to know what a school is *really* like, ask the kids.”

Notes

¹ G. Lansdown, “Progress in Implementing the Rights in the Convention,” in S. Hart, C.P. Cohen, M.F. Erickson and M. Fekkoy (eds) (2001) *Children's Rights in Education* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001), p. 52.

² M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 3rd ed., (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), p. 151.

³ J.I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984), p. 57.

⁴ J. Rudduck, R. Chaplain and G. Wallace, *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?* (London: David Fulton, 1996)

⁵ W.J. Smith, L. Butler-Kisber, L.J. LaRocque, J. Portelli, C.M. Shields, C. Sturge Sparkes, and A. Vibert, *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life: National Project Report* (Montréal: McGill University, Ed-Lex, 2001), p. 22 (http://ed-lex.law.mcgill.ca/Schimp_e.htm).

⁶ H. Thomas and J. Martin, *Managing Resources for School Improvement: Creating a Cost-Effective School* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 39-41.

⁷ Cited in J. MacBeath, *Schools Must Speak for Themselves* (London: Routledge., 1999), p. 1.

⁸ W.J. Smith, *Measuring What You Value: A Primer for School Self-Assessment* (Montréal: McGill University, Office of Research on Educational Policy, 2000), p. 4.

⁹ W.J. Smith, W.F. Foster and H.M. Donahue, *How Does the Québec Education System Work?: A Primer for School Governing Boards* (Montréal: McGill University, Office of Research on Educational Policy, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁰ For an overview of this and other work on self-assessment, see W.J. Smith and John MacBeath, *School Self-Assessment: The Barometer of Quality for Students, Parents & Educators*. Montréal: McGill University, Ed-Lex, 2002) (http://ed-lex.law.mcgill.ca/Schimp_e.htm).

¹¹ W.J. Smith, *Measuring What You Value: A Puzzle Kit for School Self-Assessment* (Montréal: McGill University, Office of Research on Educational Policy, 2000).

¹² P. Campbell, S. Edgar and A. Halsted, “Students as Evaluators: A Model for Program Evaluation,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 76 (1994), p. 160.

¹³ See Smith, *op. cit.*, note 11, at p. 123.