

What's the Capital of North Dakota?

Successful adults do not remember the "basic" facts and definitions they spent so much time learning in school.

DONNA GAIL SHAW AND JUNE H. BUHLER

In an effort to see if more time-on-task and memorization of facts are essential to success as an adult, we conducted an informal survey.

We first asked graduate students to recall one area of the curriculum on which they spent much time and effort in their elementary school years. Most of the students remembered topics in social studies, English, and math.

The next step was to examine the importance of content or skills on which much time is spent in the elementary classroom. Our graduate students randomly selected and interviewed over 250 successful people from different educational backgrounds. These were people who were prosperous or happy in their chosen field of work (homemaker, building contractor, administrator, for instance), and were either high school dropouts, high school graduates, college graduates (nonteaching), or teachers. The graduate students then asked them questions relating to the three areas identified previously.

The social studies items included content questions dealing with the names of states and capitals, presidents, continents, oceans, important dates and people, and specific terms. The English questions included definitions of such terms as participle, gerund, preposition, direct object, interjection, contraction, conjunction, adjective, and simile. The math questions were concerned with such terms as minuend, exponent, integer, divisor, quotient, and common denominator.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of questions the interviewees answered correctly. Even when they didn't know the answers, many of the people were willing to venture a guess. For instance:

What is an exponent? "Someone who lost an election." "It's political and I don't discuss politics with anybody."

Define the term peninsula. "I don't know, but I think I had some the last time we had Mexican food."

What is an imperative statement? "It's a lie."

What is a past participle? "A past participle? I don't remember what a participle is." "A what? Are you pulling my leg?"

What is a quotient? "Something a famous person says."

What is an interjection? "A shot you receive at the doctor's office."

What are the names of the oceans of the world? "Questions like that made me leave school."

While all of the people who were interviewed were regarded as successful adults, very few could name the states and capitals or define specific English and math terms. Yet they obviously did not need that particular information for success. Successful teachers did relatively well compared to other successful people, but even their scores were not exceptional. If these things are considered important for teachers to know, why were the teachers' scores not higher?

From the results of these interviews, it appears that much of what is emphasized in the elementary curriculum is not necessary for successful adulthood. Many of the interviewees expressed the feeling that memorization of facts is not a good way to learn; facts are not remembered unless they are used continuously. They felt that understanding the whole picture and knowing how to use reference materials were more important. Many of them also suggested em-

phasizing more career or vocational education.

Administrators and teachers need to look seriously at the kinds of things we spend so much time on in the classroom. Are we emphasizing the memorization of definitions that will soon be forgotten, or are we stressing the acquisition of skills that will help individuals become productive adults? □

Donna Gail Shaw is a Teaching Fellow and June H. Buhler is Associate Professor, Division of Elementary Education, both at North Texas State University, Denton.

Figure 1. Percentage of Interview Questions Answered Correctly

Interviewees	Social Studies	English	Math
High School Dropouts	23%	8%	0%
High School Graduates	33%	35%	20%
College Graduates (non-teachers)	48%	47%	27%
Teachers	63%	58%	36%



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