

## “Learning to Focus on our Strengths”

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer - Professional Development

**“Great learners question the labels given them and ultimately know that they must be the authors of their own lives.” — Kirsten Olson**

As I prepared to write down a few thoughts for this month's news, a couple of events contributed to my thinking. On October 5<sup>th</sup>, I listened to the CBC interview by Terry Seguin of New Brunswicker **Dr. David Bardsley** author of *The Less Than Perfect Child*. (To hear the interview for yourself, the podcast is available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/information-morningfredericton/2011/10/05/dr-david-bardsley/>)

Dr. Bardsley's story is a remarkable one to say the least. As a child growing up here in NB in the 1950s, he was diagnosed as being “mentally retarded” and even institutionalized. At one point near the end of the interview Terry asks Dr. Bardsley how he believes he overcame the odds to become a very successful dental surgeon in Vancouver. He is quick to respond and credit the support of his parents. “They insisted that I focus on my ability rather than my disability.” His parents also noted that his behaviours improved after vigorous physical activity and followed their gut to insist that his job every day was to “play as hard as you can.”

Dr. Bardsley believes that this optimism and focus on physical fitness allowed him to overcome his challenges and eventually make his way through university and medical school. It was over 20 years, later and rather by accident, that Dr. Bardsley finally discovered that what he actually had was Turette's Syndrome. Listening to Dr. Bardsley describe his thoughts and feelings from the perspective of a “strange

little child” is something from which every teacher and parent can benefit.

The second event that has shaped my learning this month occurred on the evening of October 13<sup>th</sup> when I attended a public lecture at UNB by Dr. Kieran Eagan. Dr. Eagan is the author of the recent book, *Learning in Depth: A simple innovation that can transform schooling*. Dr. Eagan's work at Simon Fraser University has inspired many to abandon some of their more traditional school structures, with curriculum miles wide and millimeters deep, in favour of students studying one topic “in-depth” for their entire K-12 experience. The idea is not that curriculum is ignored, but rather that it forces both students and educators to think “outside the box” in order to meet curricular outcomes through the lens of the students' assigned topic. I have to confess that when I first read Dr. Eagan's work I was more than a bit skeptical. It was during his lecture that a light bulb went off in my head and I realized that the basic premise of “in-depth” learning is that it is SO different from our usual approach and school structure that it forces the entire system to adjust and accommodate. Perhaps it really isn't about the topic after all, but the learning process we use to explore. I left the lecture not completely sold, but certainly intrigued and wanting to know more...

## Council Day 2012

It may seem like May 4, 2012 is still a long way away, but our three Councils are already working very hard to provide three quality programs at three sites in the province on our Council Day. (See locations and specifics below.)

This year, our Councils are pleased to continue their recruitment strategy for session presenters – there is currently a

call for proposals to present at any of our three Council Day Programs posted on our website.

If you have expertise that you would be willing to share with your NB colleagues, we welcome you to apply using the specifics as outlined in the *Agreement of Service* that is found under the *Council Day* icon.

Should your proposal be accepted, confirmation of your inclusion in the Council Day Program could be expected by February.

We know that there are many NB teachers who have phenomenal expertise to share with their colleagues...**we need you!**

**Share Your Expertise!**

**Mark Your Calendar!**  
**Council Day 2012, Friday, May 4<sup>th</sup>**

**Presenters Needed!**

**Elementary & Phys. Ed. Specialist Strand – Moncton**  
**Middle Level & Art Specialist Strand – Fredericton**  
**High School & Music Specialist Strand – Saint John**

Do you have expertise that you are willing to share with your colleagues? Why not answer the Council's Call for Proposals and offer a session as part of one of our Council Day Programs? Go to [www.nbta.ca](http://www.nbta.ca). Click on:



## May I Recommend?

The August 2011 issue of *Middle Ground* is a great source of professional reading worthy of your time. Two of my favourite articles were: *Spotlight on Student Led Conferences* by Amy Brady and *Building Our Data Analysis Skills* by Rick Wormeli. Both of these articles remind teachers about the complexity and considerations that come with grading and communication regarding our students learning with their loved ones. (A nice reminder that it really shouldn't be taken for granted or assumed as an important skill set for educators.)

*Kappan* magazine's September 2011 issue contains a great article titled "*I Learned to Believe in Me*" by Kirsten Olsen. (I actually stole my opening quote for this article from here.) In four short pages, Ms. Olsen explores the findings of 10 years of research into the learning experiences of what she terms "great and resilient" learners. She contends that understanding these characteristics can help individual learners understand what is required to improve their own learning as well as show schools how to support learners of all kinds. (Certainly many links between this work and Universal Design for Learning or UDL work.) A nice addition is that *Kappan* now produces a professional development discussion guide with each of its issues that lends itself well for use as an activity for a school based professional development activity.

The September issue of *Educational Leadership* is titled *Promoting Respectful Schools*. There are two articles in this issue that I choose to highlight for you:

*Respect – Where Do We Start* by Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin makes the link between the respectful behavior of students in a school to the well being of staff and the health of their professional relationships.

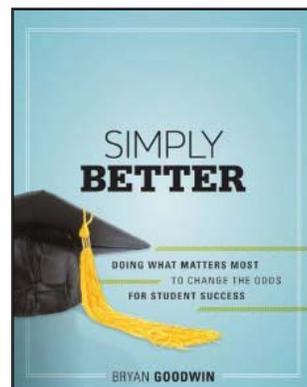
*The Threat of Accountabalism* by Phillip Schlechty is a well written 2-page commentary on the concerns he has with the obsession with "accountability" in our public school system that only focuses on standardized test scores. While clearly a US lens, many of his ideas apply in our NB context as well.

## Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to last month's book draw winner – Bonnie Demmons of Harry Miller Middle School in School District 6. A copy of "*Teaching Boys Who Struggle in School*" by Kathleen Palmer Cleveland. is on its way to you, Bonnie!

This month we are giving away a copy of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success* by Bryan Goodwin.

In order to have a chance to win, simply drop me an email at the email address below before **Friday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>** with the subject line – Book Give-Away.



## Website of the Month:

Project-based learning is certainly a topic that has been top of mind for NB educators for a while now. Another permutation of that same idea is "Place-based learning". Curious? Check out this link:

<http://www.edutopia.org/place-based-learning-measures>

## Closing Quote:

**"Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."**

— Albert Einstein