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  January – June, 2006
These are challenging times for those of us who work in education. From within and without, we hear calls for more change faster.

- In mathematics and science, we are called upon to help stem the leakage of science, technology, engineering and math professionals.
- In language and literacy, we are confronted by a huge influx of English language learners.
- In secondary education, we are told that perhaps a third of all high school students do not graduate.
- In administration, principals, superintendents and school boards are scrambling to meet requirements for AYP while competing with new rivals in the private sector and publicly-funded charter schools.

Bad news?

Not necessarily. Let us admit it openly: competition can be healthy—not only with our peers in the U.S. but internationally. It is a global economy, after all, and the stakes are high. So let’s agree to look at this as an opportunity. Education schools can renew their covenant with the public by training practitioners who have strong content knowledge (and pedagogical content knowledge), who understand the challenges of heterogeneous classrooms, and who are skilled teaching professionals.

Research schools of education such as Peabody can add to the body of knowledge about how children learn, what they ought to know and when, effective practice and how schools and school systems can be run to maximize student achievement.

We can add our own voices to policy debates and gain credibility by engaging not as ideologues protecting turf but armed instead with sound empirical data and pragmatic strategies for success. We must be unbiased, and perhaps a bit iconoclastic.

This issue of Ideas in Action profiles several such Peabody faculty members—people willing to take a fresh look at high-stakes problems.

- Carolyn Hughes, special education, is personally committed to helping the dropout problem. She knows there are multiple social factors that contribute to dropping out, and that complex problems require multifaceted solutions. Her mentoring program, pairing Vanderbilt students with students in troubled high schools, deals with the problem at the individual level, one student at a time.
- David Dickinson, teaching and learning, lived through the reading wars. He knows the benefits of phonemic awareness, but he is willing to ask for more. His work with preschool teachers emphasizes the basic building blocks of language, vocabulary, and classroom conversations in the effort to strengthen reading throughout schooling.
- Donna Ford, special education, and Gil Whiting, human and organizational development, are calling upon universities to bring conscience to the problem of the achievement gap. This summer they tested a program that targets black male students as individuals and encourages them to develop the character traits that will empower them for academic success.

We note, as well, Peabody’s receipt of a $10 million IES grant to establish a national center to study teacher performance incentives, and the return of one of our old hands in learning technology.

As always, we welcome your own ideas.
Dean Receives Two Federal Appointments

Peabody dean Camilla Benbow has been appointed to two bodies with important influence over federal education policy and research funding. In May, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings named Benbow vice chairwoman of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. In June, President Bush nominated her to a six-year term on the National Science Board, the oversight board for the National Science Foundation.

The math panel is modeled on the highly influential National Reading Panel, whose recommendations were largely incorporated in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Reading First and Early Reading First programs.

The math panel will examine and summarize the scientific evidence related to the teaching and learning of mathematics, with a specific focus on preparation for and success in learning algebra.

Of her appointment to the math panel, Vanderbilt Chancellor Gordon Gee said, “There are few scholars who have had as big an impact on education policy and practice as Camilla Benbow. Her selection as vice chair of this critical panel is further evidence of the importance and power of her work.”

Speaking of both appointments, Benbow said, “If we are to remain competitive in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, we must do a better job of engaging and educating K-12 students. We cannot afford to wait until they get to college. I hope by serving in these two capacities I can provide input that will yield benefits for all students.”

An educational psychologist, Benbow is a national expert on giftedness and talent development. She co-directs the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, a 50-year study of 6,000 individuals begun at Johns Hopkins University in 1971.

Textbook Series Will Feature Peabody Authors

This fall will see the inauguration of a new line of textbooks on education leadership with the Peabody name attached: The Peabody Education Leadership Series. The series is being published by Allyn & Bacon, a division of Pearson Education known for excellence in the social sciences, humanities, and education.

James W. Guthrie, professor of public policy and education and chair of the Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations, is coordinating the series and is also the lead author of its first volume on education finance and policy. His co-authors are Matthew Springer, Eric Houck, and Anthony Rolle.

“This is, to my knowledge, the only such contract with an education institution,” said Guthrie. “It says something about the breadth of this college that we can undertake this series using authors drawn entirely from the Peabody community.”

The series, which may number 10 to 12 volumes, is being published in paperback to keep costs at a minimum. Each will include a number of instructional aids. The texts will make extensive use of case studies drawn from current events in the field of education.

“Our goal is to make the intellectual content relevant. We especially want to create a resource for learning that will be helpful to professors who have experience in the field of education administration, but who perhaps are stretched too thin by their teaching duties to keep up with everything that’s happening,” said Guthrie.

Two other volumes to be published in 2006 will deal with accountability and organizational dynamics. Planned volumes will address school–community relations, leadership, technology and instruction, education law, and learning.

Institute for Library Leaders to Offer Scholarships to Underrepresented Groups

Beginning in 2007, a summer institute for academic librarians will offer full scholarship support to leaders of libraries in historically black colleges and universities, tribal colleges, and Hispanic-serving institutions. The intensive, five-day experience is one of the offerings of the Peabody Professional Institutes.

The college has received a grant totaling nearly $90,000 over five years from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to provide tuition support and travel expenses, as well and housing and most meals, to 10 attendees over the next five years.

Sharon Weiner, director of the Peabody Library and a principal architect of the institute, said, “HBCUs, tribal colleges, and other minority institutions face funding challenges, and it is hard for them to support the attendance of librarians at costly institutes. Not only will this grant make attendance possible, it will give others the opportunity to interact with leaders from minority institutions and to benefit from their perspectives.”

Weiner added that the scholarships will be available not only to librarians from these institutions but to any librarian from an underrepresented group.

The Institute for Academic Library Leadership takes a different approach to leadership than many academic librarians are used to, said Weiner. “We look at some of the key challenges facing colleges and universities—things like student retention, fundraising, and assessment—and then we examine the role that libraries can play in addressing these issues.”

She cites the academic integration of first-year students as one area where libraries can provide assistance by educating students about the intellectual resources available to them. Since the greatest drop-off in retention occurs after the first year, early training and assistance offered by librarians can have an institutional-wide impact.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is an independent grant-making organization of the federal government. The grant to Peabody was made through the Institute’s Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program. The program provides funding for recruitment and education of librarians and for their continuing professional development.

Educational Software Firm Founded at Vanderbilt

An education assessment company founded at Peabody has been purchased by a major producer of digital video-based learning products. Discovery Edu-

More information on the National Math Panel can be found at: www.ed.gov/about/bdcomm/list/mathpanel/index.html

Read the news release about Dean Benbow’s nomination to the National Science Board at: www.vanderbilt.edu/news/releases?id=26968

To learn more about the Peabody Professional Institutes, or this opportunity, visit: www.vanderbilt.edu/ppi
cating, of Silver Spring, Md., announced the purchase of Nashville-based ThinkLink Learning in April.

ThinkLink’s primary product is the Predictive Assessment Series, which predicts student performance on high-stakes tests administered by states. By monitoring and predicting proficiency, mastery and adequate yearly performance on the tests administered by their state, teachers can better target classroom efforts. The results of high-stakes tests are important to meeting mandates for improvement under No Child Left Behind.

“One of the things that characterize Peabody is our commitment to moving the results of theoretical research into the field where it can be applied to benefit real learners,” said Dean Camilla Benbow. “ThinkLink has offered an excellent model for doing this.”

Vanderbilt established ThinkLink as a separate company in 2000. Current Peabody faculty collaborating with ThinkLink include Dean Benbow and Stephen Elliott, Dunn Family Professor of Educational and Psychological Assessment.

Milner Recognized for Research on Race, Equity in Education

Rich Milner, assistant professor of education, was honored in the spring with an Early Career Contribution Award from the American Educational Research Association. The award, presented annually by the association’s Committee on Scholars of Color in Education, recognizes a scholar in the first decade of his or her career following receipt of the doctoral degree.

Milner’s research focuses on the roles teachers’ thinking and beliefs play in the development of language arts and other curricula; on urban education and access to education in urban areas; and on race, culture and equity in education. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in English education and language, literacy and culture.

“Rich Milner is a very promising scholar and it is great to see his early output recognized by the nation’s largest organization for education research,” Dean Camilla P. Benbow said.

“I am thankful that my research about under-served populations has been recognized by such an important organization,” Milner said. “Being included among the most distinguished and promising scholars of color in education is, indeed, humbling.”

Milner is the co-editor, with E. W. Ross, of a book currently in press, “Race, Ethnicity, and Education: The Influences of Racial and Ethnic Identity in Educa-

tion.” Since joining the Vanderbilt faculty in 2001, he has produced 24 articles for peer-refereed journals and numerous book chapters, book reviews and invited publications.

Milner received his doctorate in curriculum studies from the Ohio State University in 2001. He earned a master’s degree in educational policy and leadership from Ohio State in 2000. He also received a master’s in teaching and a bachelor’s degree in English from South Carolina State University in 1997 and 1996, respectively.

To learn more about Professor Milner, visit peabody.vanderbilt.edu/x1120.xml

Video Wasted on Toddlers, Unless It’s Interactive

Your toddler can sing along with The Wiggles and knows Big Bird’s face as well as she knows her own, but are those hours spent watching children’s videos really helping her learn? New research indicates that parents should choose videos with high interactive content if they want their children to be educated as well as entertained by their time in front of the tube.

The findings were published in the May 17 issue of Child Development by Vanderbilt University psychologists Georgene Troseth and Megan Saylor.

“By age 2, children have figured out that other people are a primary source of information about the world, and they use social cues such as facial expression and where a person looks or points to gather that information. As a result, they are more likely to learn from a person on video whom they perceive as a conversational partner,” Troseth said. “In our study, if a video was not interactive, children were much more likely to dismiss the information being conveyed.”

The toddler entertainment market has exploded in recent years — infants, toddlers and preschoolers in the United States watch an average of one to three hours of television and videotapes a day. But there is little information on what makes effective programming for these tiny viewers.

Troseth, Saylor and research assistant Allison Archer conducted two experiments to better understand which type of video best engaged toddlers. In the first, they tested differences in learning from video and from face-to-face interactions among 24 2-year-olds. A woman on a TV screen told the children where to find a stuffed animal hidden in another room. She then gave a second group of children the same information in person. The first group of toddlers rarely found the stuffed animal, suggesting they just didn’t believe or listen to the woman on the screen. The children given the instructions in person usually found the toy.

In the second experiment, the researchers used a closed-circuit video system to make the video interactive. The woman on the screen could see, hear and respond to the children through conversation and games. After five minutes of interacting with the woman on the TV, children used the information she provided to find the hidden object.

Troseth and her colleagues believe the results indicate that because toddlers understand the difference between their “real” environment and what they see on videos, they are likely to dismiss information offered by someone on television unless that person is clearly interacting with them. This interaction can include tactics such as asking children questions, using their name, or referring to something the child can see and touch in their real environment.

“There is good evidence from other research that watching shows such as Dora the Explorer and Blue’s Clues in which characters speak directly into the camera and wait for responses can positively impact children’s mental and language development,” Troseth said. “Our new findings have implications for educational television aimed at toddlers, as well as for the use of video images in research with this age group.”

Troseth also offered some advice for parents feeling guilty about turning their kids over to the electronic babysitter.

“As long as video exposure is a small part of infants’ and toddlers’ daily activities, and those activities include lots of time interacting with family members,
parents should stop feeling guilty,” Troseth said. “What’s bad is if the television is always on in the background—this disrupts parent-child interaction and the quality of children’s play.”

*Child Development* is an academic journal published by the Society for Research in Child Development.

**Girls Have Big Advantage Over Boys on Timed Tests**

New research attempting to shed light on just how do male and female brains differ—has found that timing is everything.

In a study involving over 8,000 males and females ranging in age from 2 to 90 from the across the United States, Vanderbilt University researchers Stephen Camarata and Richard Woodcock discovered that females have a significant advantage over males on timed tests and tasks. Camarata and Woodcock found the differences were particularly significant among pre-teens and teens.

“We found very minor differences in overall intelligence. But if you look at the ability of someone to perform well in a timed situation, females have a big advantage,” Camarata said. “It is very important for teachers to understand this difference in males and females when it comes to assigning work and structuring tests. To truly understand a person’s overall ability, it is important to also look at performance in un-timed situations. For males, this means presenting them with material that is challenging and interesting, but is presented in smaller chunks without strict time limits.”

The findings are particularly timely, with more attention being paid by parents, educators and the media to the troubling achievement gap between males and females in U.S. schools.

“Consider that many classroom activities, including testing, are directly or indirectly related to processing speed,” the authors wrote. “The higher performance in females may contribute to a classroom culture that favors females, not because of teacher bias but because of inherent differences in sex processing speed.” An additional question is whether this finding is linked to higher high school dropout rates for males and increased special education placement for males that do stay in school.

In their new article, Camarata and Woodcock focus on understanding differences in “processing speed” between males and females.

“Processing speed doesn’t refer to reaction time or the ability to play video games,” Camarata said. “It’s the ability to effectively, efficiently and accurately complete work that is of moderate difficulty. Though males and females showed similar processing speed in kindergarten and preschool, females became much more efficient than males in elementary, middle and high school.”

The researchers found that males scored lower than females in all age groups in tests measuring processing speed, with the greatest discrepancy found among adolescents. However, the study also found that males consistently outperformed females in some verbal abilities, such as identifying objects, knowing antonyms and synonyms and completing verbal analogies, debunking the popular idea that girls develop all communication skills earlier than boys.

The researchers found no significant overall intelligence differences between males and females in any age groups.

The research was published in the May-June 2006 issue of the journal *Intelligence*.

Camarata and Woodcock compiled their results through an evaluation of three sets of data collected from 1977 to 2001 as part of the Woodcock-Johnson Series of Cognitive and Achievement Tests.

Camarata and Woodcock plan to conduct studies to measure actual brain activity using tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, and event-related potential tests to better understand which brain areas are playing a role in processing speed, and how these areas react differently in males and females.

The researchers found that males over-4

**Helping Children Handle Stress, Emotions May Help Stuttering**

Children who stutter often face greater challenges managing their behavior and emotions than other children, researchers have found, offering new insight into how to help these children in a more holistic way.

“Our findings indicate that young children who stutter are more apt to be emotionally aroused, less able to settle down once aroused and less able to control their attention and emotion during everyday stressful or challenging situations,” psychologist Tedra Walden, a co-author of the research, said.

“Stuttering, as it continues, can impact a child’s academic, emotional, social and vocational potential and development. Therefore, if we know more about how emotions influence stuttering and then use this information to more effectively treat early childhood stuttering, we should be in a better position to decrease the long-term negative effects of stuttering in children as they get older,” she continued.

Edward G. Conture, a co-author of the research and director of graduate studies in the Vanderbilt Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences, said, “These new findings tell us that when parents tell clinicians, for example, that excitement increases their child’s stuttering, clinicians should try to see how and when certain emotional states increase or maintain the child’s stuttering.”

In addition to Walden and Conture, the research team included Vanderbilt researchers Jan Karrass, first author of the research, Corrin Graham, Hayley Arnold, Kia Hartfield and Krista Schwenk. The research is in press at the *Journal of Communication Disorders*.

The researchers used a standardized test of emotions, surveying the parents of 65 3- to 5-year-old children who stutter and 56 children of the same age who do not. The parents filled out a 100-question survey designed to determine how the children react to emotional events and how well they are able to control these emotions. The children participated in two laboratory tests to gauge their language use and speech abilities to ensure that the only speech-language difference between children who do and do not stutter, at least for this study, was restricted to stuttering.

The researchers found three primary differences between young children who stutter and those who do not. The children who stutter were more emotionally aroused by everyday stressful or challenging situa-
tions than their non-stuttering peers. It took these children a longer time to settle down once they had become aroused. And, the children who stuttered were less able to control their attention and were more likely to become fixated on a distraction.

The authors also found that the degree to which children who stutter are able to regulate their emotions, combined with how strongly they react to upsetting or exciting situations, played a role in the frequency, duration and severity of instances of stuttering.

“Our findings seem to indicate that kids with behavioral and emotional issues are at greater risk of stuttering, that not all aspects of their emotional reactions can be blamed on stuttering, and some of these reactions may pre-date the onset of stuttering and actually contribute to its onset and development,” Walden said.

Walden is a professor of psychology at Peabody, an investigator in the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development and a member of the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies.

Conture is a professor of hearing and speech sciences and a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center investigator. He is the author of over 100 articles, books, book chapters and videos on stuttering.

The research was supported with funds from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, and Vanderbilt University.
Educational Software Pioneer Returns to Peabody

The Man Behind Read 180 makes a 180° Turn

There’s no place like home, or at least no place like Vanderbilt’s Peabody College, for “new” faculty member Ted Hasselbring.

Hasselbring returns to Peabody this fall as research professor of special education after spending six years as the William T. Bryan Professor and Endowed Chair in Special Education Technology at the University of Kentucky. Prior to that, Hasselbring taught at Peabody from 1982 to 1999 in the Department of Special Education. He also served as co-director of the college’s Learning Technology Center and was a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center investigator.

Hasselbring returns to Vanderbilt to continue his research with educational software to help struggling students gain the literacy and mathematical skills they lack. He is best known as the creator of Read 180, a reading software program now managed by Scholastic, Inc. Read 180 is in more than 10,000 schools and has been used by more than 1 million students. Last year, revenues from the software program brought in more than $4 million to Peabody.

“We welcomed him back with open arms,” said Camilla Benbow, the Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education.

“Ted’s innovative application of technology to education is well known. More important is his commitment to help students, especially those who have learning disabilities, achieve academically. Peabody has long held the same commitment, so it is a pleasure to welcome him home.”

Read 180 is a software program that students use every day in classrooms to build fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Originally called the Peabody Learning Laboratory, it started as a pilot project in Orlando, Fla., schools.

“They contacted us because they had a problem with a high dropout rate, a high truancy rate and significant behavior problems,” Hasselbring said. “When they analyzed these kids, they found out that none of them could read. So they realized, ‘we don’t have a dropout problem, we have an illiteracy problem.’”

Hasselbring and his colleagues developed and tested their literacy program over five years in the Orlando schools.

“We found that for every year we spent on intervention, we would get two to four years of growth in fluency,” he said.

Back at Vanderbilt, Hasselbring looks forward to collaborating with researchers across the university to identify and support similar projects that can translate into classroom applications.

“As a researcher, one thing that you want to know is that your research is making a difference out in schools. I hear weekly from teachers and kids about how their lives have changed because of Read 180,” he said. “I think we have an opportunity to do that again here at Peabody because there is so much good research going on.”

Hasselbring is currently interested in exploring a math application based upon the principles of Read 180.

“As bad as the reading problem is, I think the math problem is at least as significant, so we’re looking into a math intervention program,” he said.

Though not teaching, Hasselbring expects to work closely with faculty to seek out opportunities to share research with the future teachers Peabody trains.

“I felt in the past that my research really influenced what I was doing in the classroom,” he said. “The Peabody faculty comprises very good researchers, and as we learn things at Peabody, the faculty are very good at bringing that cutting-edge research to the classroom.”

Hasselbring has won competitions for educational software sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children and Johns Hopkins University. He has held committee posts with the National Governor’s Association and the National Academy of Sciences. He also has been a visiting scholar at the National Institute of Special Education in Tokyo, Japan; the China Disabled People’s Federation in Beijing, China; and the U.S. Information Agency in Minsk, in the former U.S.S.R.

A prolific scholar, Hasselbring has authored or co-authored three books, 40 book chapters and numerous journal articles. He has been principal investigator or co-principal investigator for grants totaling more than $19 million.

Hasselbring earned his Ed.D. from Indiana University in 1979, majoring in special education. Prior to joining Peabody, he taught at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.
Peabody Wins $10 Million to Study Impact of Performance Incentives

Grant establishes second federally-funded center in education policy

A new national research and development center has been established at Vanderbilt to answer one of the thorniest questions in education policy – do financial incentives for teachers, administrators and schools affect student achievement?

The center was created through a $10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences.

“This center will give us hard data that we can use to finally understand the relationship between performance and incentives and will give policymakers real input on how best to invest resources to improve student learning and success,” Camilla Benbow, Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development, said.

“Having a National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt means that the lessons learned here in our city are ones that will provide crucial information to educators and policymakers across our country.”

Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell

The new center’s first project will examine the effect of student achievement-related bonuses for teachers on individual and institutional behavior and dynamics.

“Nashville understands the importance of education and the value of innovative research,” Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell said. “Having a National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt means that the lessons learned here in our city are ones that will provide crucial information to educators and policymakers across our country.”

James Guthrie

Quick Q&A

We spoke briefly with Professor James Guthrie, executive director of Vanderbilt’s new National Center on Performance Incentives.

**Question:** What makes the Vanderbilt project distinctive?

**Guthrie:** Teacher participation in the project is entirely voluntary. It also includes a "control group" for comparison purposes. This is the only valid method of judging whether the test scores of some, but not all, students will be affected by making those teachers eligible for incentive payments.

**Question:** Are there other advantages?

**Guthrie:** One advantage is focus. We will be studying the impact of performance incentives for a collection of highly incentivized teachers, since they are the ones immediately responsible for individual student performance.

**Question:** Will the research be selective in terms of schools?

**Guthrie:** Initially, our project is directed toward teaching and learning in all Metro Nashville middle schools. But we are the nation’s center on performance incentives (by designation of the Department of Education); we plan to have concurrent similar projects in other states.

Incentives at Vanderbilt means that the lessons learned here in our city are ones that will provide crucial information to educators and policymakers across our country.”

“I am impressed with the honesty and openness of the researchers on the project and believe that this collaborative work will be worthwhile. An ‘incentive’ is in the eye of the beholder,” Jamye Merritt, president of the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association, said. “This research will help us better define the word as it relates to teaching.”

James Guthrie, professor of public policy and education, chair of the Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations and director of the Peabody Center for Education Policy, is executive director of the new center. Matthew Springer, research assistant professor of public policy and education, is the center’s director.

Peabody College is also home to the National Research and Development Center on School Choice. The new center makes Peabody the only education school in the country to host two national research and development centers funded by IES.

“As a national research and development center charged by the federal government with exercising leadership on performance incentives in education, our team is committed to a fair and honest evaluation, and not some predetermined outcome,” Springer said.

Joining with Vanderbilt in the new center’s work is The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit public policy research institute based in Santa Monica, Calif. The center is also working closely with Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, the Metropolitan Nashville Public School Board, the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association, Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell, the Nashville Alliance for Public Education and the Tennessee Education Association.
The Right Combination

Carolyn Hughes brings mentoring program to troubled schools

Large urban school systems face a daunting challenge: how to meet the graduation rates mandated by their states under No Child Left Behind. In Tennessee, for instance, the legislature has mandated that by 2013-14 high schools must graduate 100 percent of their students on time. Already, Tennessee schools are supposed to have a 90 percent graduation rate. As a system, however, the graduation rate for Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools is only 60 percent.

Carolyn Hughes, professor of special education, is trying to do something about this. For the last three years, Hughes has been piloting a mentoring program that pairs college students with students in two of Nashville’s high-poverty high schools. Hughes acknowledges that the dropout issue is one of her great passions. “These students need to feel valued,” she says.

Hughes is best known in the special education community for developing a “peer buddy” program initially tested in Nashville high schools and now being disseminated nationwide. The program pairs special education secondary students with students in the general education curriculum. These students mentor their peers with disabilities academically while also building relationships that can help integrate the special education students with the wider social, athletic, and cultural life of their schools. Last year, Hughes and Erik Carter, M.Ed.’98, Ph.D.’04, co-authored a book, Success for All Students (Allyn & Bacon), to meet what had become a steady demand for technical assistance in replicating the program nationwide.

“The Peabody College Mentoring Program seemed to me to be a natural extension of this work,” says Hughes. Mentors are drawn from a service-learning class Hughes offers, “High-Poverty Youth: Improving Outcomes.” Students in the class are paired with general education students from Nashville’s Maplewood or Stratford comprehensive high schools. Both schools serve economically troubled neighborhoods in East Nashville and have graduation rates at or below 50 percent. Mentors may also be paired with students in one of several local after-school programs.

The Vanderbilt students act as role models for high school students who are in the process of transitioning to adult lives. They help with school assignments and high stakes test preparation; encourage mentees to complete high school; give advice about goal setting, managing responsibilities, or applying for college; and offer friendship and other support as their mentees make plans for the future. Typically, mentors spend time with their mentees once or twice a week, talk with them on the phone, or communicate via e-mail. “For many mentees, a caring and consistent adult presence can make a positive difference in their outlook and aspirations,” says Hughes.

Nor is the mentoring program a one-way street. The mentors themselves benefit from interacting with youth who come from very different backgrounds than is typical for many Vanderbilt students. The Vanderbilt students are required to put a certain number of hours into mentoring and to keep a journal reflecting on their experiences. During class sessions, the students discuss readings...
and learn about the effects of poverty on youth, their families, and their schools. For many, the program provides their first opportunity to develop an experiential awareness of the inequalities that exist in schools, neighborhoods, and broader civic and economic contexts. “Some of them discover a real passion for service,” she says.

“For many mentees, a caring and consistent adult presence can make a positive difference in their outlook and aspirations.”

Special Education Professor Carolyn Hughes

“...discernment, or influence others. I hope this is knowledge they will pass along.”

Hughes’s commitment to helping disadvantaged students is deeply felt. In 2001-02, she took a year’s sabbatical to teach middle school boys with emotional disturbance in one of New York City’s troubled schools. But she is certainly not alone in her concern about high school graduation rates. In April, Time magazine highlighted the problem of graduation rates with a cover story entitled, “Dropout Nation.” Coinciding with the publication of that story, Oprah Winfrey devoted two consecutive episodes of her show to the issue. Since then, statistical experts have engaged in a small war over how to measure the dropout rate. Whether one believes the dropout rate is as high as 30 percent or as low as 15 percent, either number represents a growing threat to a nation competing globally in a science and technology-based economy.

A month prior to the one-two punch of Time and Oprah, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation released a report on the issue, “The Silent Epidemic.” The Foundation’s report is significant in that it gives voice to actual high school dropouts—to the reasons they give for leaving school, and to the possible reforms they think might have enabled them to stay and graduate. The report was developed by Civic Enterprises with Peter D. Hart Research Associates; together they conducted focus groups and interviewed 467 dropouts nationwide between the ages of 16 and 25. Those interviewed came from a wide variety of urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds; whites, blacks, and Hispanics—both male and female—were represented.

In Nashville, Metro Superintendent Pedro Garcia, Mayor Bill Purcell, school principals, community leaders, parents, and even students are also concerned. Hughes has recently been appointed to a task force made up of representatives from these groups charged with developing strategies to address the issue. Garcia has earmarked $100,000 in next year’s budget to devote to the challenge. The mayor has also received a $40,000 planning grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors to study the issue. According to Hughes, the group is exploring such ideas as flexible scheduling, reorganizing the school day, and creating learning communities or academies with particular career themes within larger high schools. Based on her assessment of the impact of the peer mentoring program so far, she sees mentoring as another valuable strategy in the struggle to keep young people in school. “Testing and accountability are good things, but there is a price to pay, and I worry that it may be paid in time spent on building positive relationships. Mentoring addresses this problem.”
Two Vanderbilt faculty members are leading the university into the forefront of institutions working to ameliorate the academic problems of African American and other minority students in the nation’s K-12 schools—the so-called “achievement gap.” Donna Y. Ford is Betts Professor of Education and Human Development and a member of the Department of Special Education. Gilman Whiting is senior lecturer in African American and Diaspora Studies. He also lectures in Peabody’s human and organizational development program.

Ford and Whiting have created the Vanderbilt University Achievement Gap Project, a multi-faceted effort aimed both at raising consciousness and at offering solutions to the disparity in academic achievement between minority students and their white peers.

They kicked off the effort in July with a two week Summer Scholar Identity Institute. One hundred black male students from the 100 Kings program, established by the 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, were invited to spend their mornings on the Vanderbilt campus where they participated in a series of activities and talks intended to help them conceive of themselves as scholars—fully capable of success not only in school but in life. The students all attend Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

Ford and Whiting met in the fall of 2005 at Vanderbilt’s Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center. Whiting’s background was very similar to the young African American males that are the primary focus of the achievement gap project. He moved frequently as a child in Rhode Island, struggled in school, and would not have thought himself likely to end up in an academic career. He went to college on an athletic scholarship (track) and subsequently became an Army officer before pursuing graduate study at Purdue University.

Ford’s academic research has focused not on the academically disadvantaged but instead on students who are gifted and talented. Ford focused on gender differences in achievement for her dissertation and wrote her first book with her son and other black males in mind. She has been studying and working with gifted black students who underachieve on a formal basis since 1990.

Both share a strong social conscience and a deep concern for the academic plight of minority students. Data shows they have good reason to be concerned. Since the mid-1980s, test results for blacks and Latinos, while improved, have largely failed to narrow the gulf with the scores of their white peers. In the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 39 percent of 4th grade white students scored at or above the proficient level in reading. For blacks, this number was only 12 percent; for Latinos, it was 14 percent. In math, the numbers were 42 percent, 10 percent, and 15 percent, respectively. These gaps continue in high school.

Nationally, No Child Left Behind seeks to close this gap by requiring that states disaggregate data and demonstrate progress by racial subgroups. However, many scholars, teachers, and administrators doubt that testing and accountability are sufficient in themselves pull up the scores of blacks and Latinos.

Whiting describes how complex the problem really is: “The data show that in schools, the poorest groups get less funding. But lowest SES whites still get more funding than lowest SES blacks. We’re really talking about multiple gaps: the expectation gap, the opportunity gap, the funding gap, the health gap. We need a comprehensive solution.” He
adds that in predominantly black schools teachers tend to be the least well prepared and the lowest credentialed. They have less experience and lower on-the-job attendance. Ford adds that both the funding gap and teacher quality gap contribute to the bigger issue of the achievement gap.

Ford says the summer institute has increased her empathy for the teachers who work in these schools. Describing her own initial discomfort in teaching to the young black teens and pre-teens participating, she says, "We’re two black professionals, and even our awareness is being challenged. Is it culture, age, development, economics? What makes it challenging for us?" She too emphasizes the many dimensions of the problem, which include not only schools but culture, family life, social systems, and psychology, including issues of attitudes and self-identity.

As ammunition, Ford and Whiting cite Paul Barton’s 2003 report, Parsing the Information Gap, published by the Policy Information Center of the Educational Testing Service. Barton identified 14 correlates of achievement in which measurable differences among subgroups existed. In schools, for instance, correlates included the rigor of the curriculum, the quality of teacher preparation, the level of teacher experience and their attendance on the job, class size, and the availability of technology-assisted instruction.

Outside the classroom, correlates included birth weight, exposure to lead, hunger and nutrition, reading to children, amount of television watching, parent availability, student mobility, and parent participation. Simply to glance at the list is to realize the number of academic disciplines that would need to be involved in any comprehensive attempt to address the achievement gap.

But Ford and Whiting are persuaded the effort must be undertaken, and they believe Vanderbilt is in a position to play a leadership role. “We have the intellect, we have the resources. The question is: do we have the will? Will we make it a priority?” says Ford. She stresses that the project is an ongoing commitment. She and Whiting have designed a program that is collaborative, cross-disciplinary, and comprehensive. Building on the Scholar Identity Institute, which is supported by Vanderbilt’s Office of the Provost in addition to 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, the two hope to expand on the relationship with Nashville schools and to establish a similar relationship with schools in Memphis.

"We’re really talking about multiple gaps: the expectation gap, the opportunity gap, the funding gap, the health gap. We need a comprehensive solution."

Gilman Whiting

The activities of the institute are built around describing, discussing, and nurturing these characteristics in the attendees. Guest speakers from within and outside the Vanderbilt community model desirable traits.

Whiting acknowledges that occasionally he has to be confrontational. “These kids have been brainwashed,” he says, referring to the widely held idea among black males that applying oneself to success in school is “acting white.” “Things like getting As and Bs or speaking standard English are considered acting white. We have to start by dismantling that concept.”

Toward that end, simple acts can have powerful symbolic repercussions. Whiting and Ford demand, for instance, that the institute’s scholars-in-training sit at the front of the lecture hall where the institute is being held. “When they choose to sit at the back of the classroom, it creates an unnecessary barrier to their own success. Fifty years ago, a generation of activists marched in the summer heat wearing dark suits and ties to earn them the right to sit at the front. I want them to remember that,” he asserts.

Young, Male, and Black: What It Takes to Get Ahead

In designing Vanderbilt’s Summer Scholar Identity Institute, Gilman Whiting and Donna Ford sought to create a program that was less about subject matter content and more about developing success-oriented attitudes and behaviors. The resulting curriculum was built around showcasing and instilling nine characteristics that Whiting and Ford believe give young, black men an optimal chance of success. These nine characteristics are:

- Self-efficacy
- Willingness to make sacrifices to achieve one’s goals
- An internal locus of control
- Aspirations and long-term goals
- Self-awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses
- The need for achievement being greater than the need for affiliation
- Academic self-confidence
- Racial identity and pride
- Masculinity
David Dickinson is that rare creature in education: a male with a particular interest in early childhood education. As might be guessed, Dickinson’s path into the field was an indirect one. A comparative religion major as an undergraduate at Oberlin, Dickinson also minored in education. “I was interested in the big picture issues, like how cultures shape people’s thinking,” he says. “At the same time, I was interested in children and especially in trying to make a difference for children in low-income communities.”

While an undergraduate, Dickinson spent a semester in Philadelphia working in the public schools. After graduation, he moved into teaching. “I was drawn to the elementary grades,” he relates. “It was really only when I moved to graduate school that I ended up gravitating into the early childhood area. And that was because I got interested in language development.”

One moment was particularly galvanizing. “When I was teaching in West Philadelphia, I was working with an all African American population from working class homes. I remember one girl, Sherry, a fifth grade girl who was able to decode sounds pretty well. I remember one day when she was able to sound out the word “prairie.” I asked her if she knew what it meant, and she had no idea. It was a completely unknown word to her. This was the kind of thing a lot of the kids I was dealing with were facing. They didn’t have the language background and skills they needed for deep understanding, and they were right on the cusp of moving into middle school. Then I applied to Harvard and the person I went to work with there was particularly interested in language issues.”

Dickinson received his Ed.D. from Harvard in 1982 and went on to teach at Boston, Tufts, and Clark universities before moving to the Education Development Center in 1994. In 2002, he joined the faculty at Boston College, from which Peabody recruited him in 2005. He teaches in Peabody’s doctoral program in language, literacy and culture. Dickinson’s Handbook of Early Literacy Research (Guilford Press), which he co-edited with Susan B. Neuman of the University of Michigan, was published last year. The two also co-edited the first volume, published in 2001.

This fall Dickinson is embarking on a major new collaboration with Ann Kaiser, professor of special education. Armed with a grant of nearly $3 million from the Institute of Education Sciences, the two are initiating a four-year curriculum study involving 60 Head Start classrooms in Birmingham, Alabama.

“We’re going to implement a curriculum that I helped to write with Judy Schickedanz called Opening the World of Learning (OWL),” he says. “It provides a lot of guidance to teachers in ways that help children build their knowledge of the world and their vocabulary as well as basic literacy skills,” says Dickinson. Forty of the 60 Head Start classrooms will use this curriculum while the other twenty will serve as the control group.

In addition, half of the OWL classrooms will adopt elements of Kaiser’s Enhanced Milieu Teaching. “Ann has been developing this over a number of years, and she’s used it for children with significant language delays or behavior problems, as well as children with autism and with Down Syndrome. We’ll be targeting the lowest children in these classrooms in a very focused way that we think can have major effects on their
language and early literacy development," says Dickinson. This is the first time Dickinson will have done such an intensive intervention. "Prior to this I did a descriptive study where we followed low-income children from age three up into middle school," he says. "We observed their experiences in homes and classrooms and found that the experiences in the classrooms accounted for as much variation in outcomes in kindergarten and then fourth and seventh grade as did our measures of the home background. People would never have expected that the preschool quality measures could match the impact of the parents."

Another swing of the pendulum

The so-called "reading wars" of the 1990s are over, and the skills-centered approach to reading instruction has largely been enshrined in No Child Left Behind, including the Reading First and Early Reading First programs. For Dickinson, this is mostly a good thing, although he voices some reservations.

What concerns Dickinson most is the question of how to build vocabulary and language skills. "As the importance of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge has become well established it's turned into performance standards for preschools and kindergarten. So preschools are now under pressure for instruction that they never experienced before. The danger is that teachers start doing direct instruction in letters and numbers and colors and sounds, but it doesn't include these broader language skills. There's the potential for a narrowing of the preschool curriculum to things that schools were pretty good at doing already."

This is your brain on words

So just how important is a quality preschool experience to long-term learning? "We're just beginning to understand the possible impact that rich learning experiences in preschool can have on children. It may be very critical," says Dickinson. He points to several longitudinal studies that suggest a well-done preschool program does have lasting effects. "The well-known one, from High Scope, has followed children out from four-year old programs into adult life, and you see enduring effects. The Abecedarian Project has followed people to age 21. Whether the effects are around academics, or whether they're around children acquiring the abilities to regulate their attention, to relate to others, or acquiring the abilities to regulate their attention, to relate to others, or whether their [sic] emotional development is impacted, there are enduring effects. The Abecedarian Project has followed people to age 21. Whether the effects are around academics, or whether they're around children acquiring the abilities to regulate their attention, to relate to others, or whether their [sic] emotional development is impacted, there are enduring effects."

According to Dickinson, "Pat is a teacher who was very engaged instructionally. She wanted to make sure kids were learning all the time. But she never let the kids talk. There was not a space for the children in the conversation," Dickinson says. "But because she's a really committed, hard working, smart teacher, all I needed to do was have a session with her and say these are the important things, this is what a good conversation looks like, and then start the process of reflection."

On June 19, Dial shared the podium with Dickinson at the second Tennessee Pre-K Summer Institute, a conference for teachers from across the state sponsored by Peabody and the State of Tennessee. Dickinson presented data showing how important conversations are for building the repository of words students draw on later for academic success, and he shared his methods with teachers for creating more effective classroom conversations. Dial spoke and showed some of the video taken in her classroom.

Two clips offered a before and after look at the casual interactions Dial had with children during centers time. In the first, Dial is directive, practically taking over the children's play. The second shows her listening, asking questions, and following the children's lead conversationally. The children, for their part, are considerably more engaged.

"You have to up your level of questioning," says Dial, who advised the teachers to listen more and talk less, to model appropriate vocabulary, and to use centers and small group time to the maximum. "It doesn't matter how many years experience you have. Being a teacher is hard. This is a hard job."

But Dial found she was up to the challenge and that even with her experience, it is never too late to learn new skills. When her supervisor approached her with the idea of collaborating with David Dickinson she was intrigued. Dickinson talked with her about observing her class, making video and audio recordings of her teaching, and offering assessment and constructive suggestions.

"When I saw the first videotape, I had to sit down," says Dial. "When the centers were going on, I would take over the center. I call it the bulldozer effect. I would not take the time to observe, to stay back, wait, and see what the children were doing."

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others, to function in groups, that’s not so evident.”

“There have been several studies in addition to the one that I did that indicate that the richness of language in preschool and kindergarten has effects that appear later in fourth and fifth grade reading,” he says. “It’s not clear what the mechanism for that is. It might simply be that the accumulation of good strong vocabularies when children are four and five becomes the pool of words they need for later reading. If they are in rich environments they get them, but if they are not in supportive environments in homes and classrooms they may go without. Classrooms have been repeatedly shown to be pretty weak settings for teaching language and vocabulary skills, so they may not pick up the vocabulary in school. It also may be that if you get children starting to use language productively, they become self-teaching mechanisms.”

Dickinson says that brain-based research is also contributing to our growing understanding about the development of language skills. Studies on neural plasticity have shown that from age three up through middle childhood is a period of maximum density of synapses, as well as a time of high metabolic activity in the brain’s language areas. This may be a time of peak development when children are naturally primed to take advantage of language experiences. It’s possible, Dickinson says, “that getting a rich infusion of language experience at this point will have effects on later language, on literacy, and maybe on phonemic awareness.”

Walking the talk

“Just in the last few years the field has begun to recognize the important of language. Partly that comes from attending to the needs of children from low-income and second language backgrounds where issues of language learning are of particular importance,” Dickinson says.

When asked what forms such supports might take, Dickinson says conversation is critical. “In the longitudinal study I did, the quality of the teacher’s spontaneous conversations with children as they engaged in centers activities was the strongest single predictor of how children did better. Other predictors were things like the quality of conversations during book reading and the intellectual content of group meetings, so the kinds of interactions the teachers engaged the children in are important. All the research on mother-child interactions, or father-child interactions, makes clear that children learn language as they interact with somebody who’s listening to them and supporting them. It seems that that’s probably the most important activity in preschools, too.”

This is a point Dickinson stresses when he works with in-service preschool teachers, something he does often. “What I’ve done, essentially, is create a kind of university course for preschool teachers,” he says. “Many preschool teachers don’t have foundational knowledge about language and literacy development. I focus on the importance of engaging children in extended conversations, on being responsive to them, and on helping children extend their thinking.”

In a pilot study for the Birmingham project, Dickinson has been working with preschool teachers in Lawrence County, Tn. In addition to in-service training, Dickinson has been audiotaping their interactions with children. He and his graduate students then transcribe conversations and offer constructive criticism. “I’m trying to help the teachers become more aware of how they interact with the children and the quality of the language that’s coming from the children.”

“This is why I’m so concerned about a narrowing of the curriculum,” says Dickinson. “You can teach a four-year-old to recognize an A, but they’re going to learn to recognize an A in kindergarten, probably. So if all of your games are concentrated around a narrow set of skills, and that comes at the expense of building language skills, conceptual skills, the ability to interact and stay focused on tasks, then we may actually be undermining where the more long-term effects of preschool might be.

“My data suggest that these language skills may be one area that is going to have sustained long-term effects, and if we don’t target these with four-year-olds who are coming from at-risk backgrounds, they may not get it when they get to kindergarten. And they may never quite recover from that.”
On the Shelf
Books by Peabody College faculty
2005–2006


Selected Grants
JANUARY – JUNE, 2006

As reported by the Vanderbilt Office of Sponsored Research.
(Does not include grants of less than $25,000.)

Dale Ballou, Leadership, Policy and Organizations: $85,445, Smith-Richardson Foundation, “Achievement Trade-Offs and No Child Left Behind,” Mark Berends, co-principal investigator


Timothy Caboni, Dean’s Office: $25,000, Institute of Museum and Library Services, “IMLS—Peabody Professional Institutes — Academic Library Leadership”

Paul Cobb, Teaching and Learning: $1,412,555, National Science Foundation, “Designing Learning Organizations for Instructional Improvement in Mathematics,” Thomas Smith, Andrew Van Schaack, and Laura Desimone, co-principal investigators


Donald Compton, Special Education: $1,192,371, Department of Education, “Response to Intervention as an Approach to Preventing and Identifying Learning Disabilities in Reading,” Douglas H. Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs, co-principal investigators


Elizabeth M. Dykens, Psychology and Human Development: $265,413, Public Health Department, “Prader-Willi Syndrome: Correlates of Compulsivity”


Rogers Hall, Teaching and Learning: $45,685, National Science Foundation, “Diversity in Mathematics Education: Building Infrastructure for Learning and Teaching Mathematics with Understanding”

Craig Anne R. Heflinger, Human and Organizational Development: $217,669, Public Health Service, “Substance Use Disorders and Service Use Among Rural Youth”

Mary Louise Hemmeter, Special Education: $338,035, Department of Education, “Effects of Group and Individual Interventions on Emerging Literacy in Preschoolers”; $65,000, Department of Education, “Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior”

Robert Hodapp, Special Education: $74,661, Public Health Service, “Children with Disabilities and Sibling Hospitalization”

Carolyn Hughes, Special Education: $249,912, Department of Education, “Multidisciplinary Program in Severe Disabilities: Accessing the General Education Curriculum”


Office of the Dean
Vanderbilt University, Peabody College
Peabody #329
230 Appleton Place
Nashville, Tennessee 37203-5721