

# Toward a Learning Society Network: How Being One's Brother's Keeper Is in Everyone's Self- Interest

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## ABSTRACT

In societies with pronounced social and economic disparities, well-being is lower than in societies where differences are less pronounced. This is true across the social spectrum, and across many indices, including literacy, numeracy, and aggression. Although we are learning more about the core dynamics of human development (i.e., what is required in order for a child to acquire the physical, emotional, and cognitive tools to make a good life), this information is not readily accessible to or accessed by those who most need it. By facilitating the developmental health of all children, we can enfranchise diverse participation in a knowledge economy, thereby not only enhancing individual opportunities, but also increasing available social capital and national competitive advantage. An attempt to establish a learning society network is described that is working to engage widespread participation in an ongoing virtual dialogue to support optimal developmental outcomes for all children.

Toward a Learning Society Network:  
How Being One's Brother's Keeper Is in Everyone's Self-Interest

Although modern societies have an enormous capacity for wealth generation, there are many signs that our children and youth are at increasing risk of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency, and violence. And although families with young children are the most vulnerable, and economically poor families are at the highest risk, the changes are so widespread that negative consequences are occurring even for those who are secure economically.

We are living in an era of accelerating pressures and uncertainties, in a time of escalating change and rapidly increasing divergence between those who have the competencies to participate in the emerging knowledge economy, and those who do not. We are learning more and more about the core dynamics of human development (i.e., what is required in order for a child to acquire the physical, emotional, and cognitive tools to make a good life). This information, however, is not readily accessible to or accessed by those who most need it. Frontline practitioners working with children and their families, legislators, and parents of high-risk children are far too busy coping with their daily responsibilities, and are without the necessary scientific training, to make practical sense of the growing body of research as it is published. Additionally, the knowledge is generated in bits and pieces by scientists working in their own fields, with little interaction with those in other fields. The complex interrelationships among scientific findings are rarely understood in any contextually complex and practical way, by the scientists themselves, practicing professionals, or by the public.

In the late 1990's, Dan Keating and Clyde Hertzman of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research brought together several eminent researchers to consider the impact of individual and community health on society as a whole (Keating & Hertzman, 1999; see also <http://lsn.oise.utoronto.ca>). Their collaboration led to an important set of resources that provides an essential reference point for those interested in community health and well-being, and that provides a theoretical, empirical, and conceptual foundation for further work toward these goals.

One of the volume's key concepts was the "gradient effect": in a consideration of developmental health at the population level, it was concluded that many important aspects of individual and societal well-being are greatly affected by the steepness of socioeconomic status differences within populations, the gradient in

question. In societies with sharp social and economic differences, well-being was found to be lower than in societies where differences are less pronounced; and contrary to common perception, this was found to be true across the social spectrum from the least to the most advantaged members.

For example, in an investigation of cross-cultural literacy patterns, it was found that those countries with the highest levels of literacy have the shallowest gradients; that socioeconomic mixtures of students at school predict collective academic standing; and that in a number of ways, equality is good for the more privileged as well as the more vulnerable members of a community (Willms, 1999).

When the gradient analysis was applied to mathematics achievement, it was found that the steeper the socioeconomic gradient, the lower the average mathematical achievement. It was shown that appropriate early childhood interventions can remove the impact of the gradient effect on those who are most disadvantaged by it (Case, Griffin, & Kelly, 1999). Implementing such interventions works to increase population numeracy skills, increases the community's store of intellectual capital, and enhances a nation's competitive advantage in a global economy.

In a consideration of factors affecting cognitive development and aggression, it was found that (1) major influences included family income, maternal education, single parenthood, and neighbourhood; (2) the roots of delinquency and criminality are in early childhood; (3) socioeconomic gradients can be buffered by family factors; and (4) these factors are powerfully susceptible to intervention (Tremblay, 1999). When communities support their high-risk families in acquiring and practicing healthy child development habits, therefore, children are far less likely to be alienated, aggressive, and violent, which has obvious benefits for society as a whole as well as for the individuals and families in question.

In a consideration of fundamental developmental processes, evidence for critical periods and factors in brain development was discussed across a variety of animal species, concluding that (1) stimulation received at critical periods is an important determinant of lifelong skills in competence and aging (Cynader & Frost, 1999); (2) manipulations of the early environment can change life chances from the poorest to the best, with a particular effect on the developing individual's biological response to stressful circumstances (Suomi, 1999); (3) psychosocial factors are linked to immunological well-being and disease (Coe, 1999); and (4) the

development of cognitive competence (a.k.a. intelligence) is a social process (Keating & Miller, 1999).

It was argued that in order to support developmental health in an era of profound unprecedented transformation, we must work toward nurturing a "learning society network" which works actively and collaboratively to understand and support healthy human development across the population (Keating, 1999b). Investigations of various learning environments were discussed, both in the workplace and the school, showing how social processes, feelings, and attachments mediate intellectual growth (Rohlen, 1999). Methods were described of transforming schools into learning organizations that take into account the social embeddedness of learning. By changing the cultural and technological environments of children's learning to capitalize on the process of collaborative knowledge-building, thereby expanding their developmental capabilities, we can give people the tools they will need for full participation in the knowledge-based economies of the information age (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1999).

A public health approach to adolescent mental health problems was described, highlighting both the limitations of and opportunities for compensatory strategies (Offord, Kraemer, Kazdin, Jensen, Harrington, & Gardner, 1999). A coordinated community program to enhance child development in poor urban communities was described, illustrating the crucial connections between support for child development and the promotion of community development (Bouchard, 1999). Efforts to support child development in aboriginal communities were described, illustrating diversity and inclusion issues that constitute essential challenges of a learning society (Pence, 1999).

In conclusion, three major themes can be drawn from this collaboration (Keating, 1999a). First, the wealth of a nation is rooted in the developmental health of its individuals; it is in everyone's self-interest that every child have the best possible chances for early health, happiness, and opportunities to learn. Secondly, enhancing developmental health requires a deep understanding of the core dynamics of human development, from biology to society. Finally, a nation's prospects for adaptability in a period of rapid change depend upon its ability to become a learning society.

In his historical study of the organization, Handy (1987) reviews its cyclical nature and articulates an organizational theory from the perspectives of the individual, the organization, and the systems and interactions within the

organization. In a technology-dependent knowledge society, the emergent paradigm is the "learning organization" in which activity that is based on the individual as primary in the production of new knowledge, within a sophisticated technologically-supported communications system, provides unprecedented possibilities for wealth generation and opportunity. Nonaka (1994) proposes a dynamic theory of the learning organization as one that engages in the identification and definition of problems, while actively developing the knowledge innovations necessary to solve them, very similar to the concept of the knowledge-building community articulated by Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999).

The underlying dynamic processes of such an organization, which Nonaka calls the self organizing process of knowledge creation, begin with the individual bringing tacit knowledge and organizational experience into an interactive social situation with others. As perspectives are collectively articulated and shared, concepts gradually become crystallized and then justified, before being integrated with the knowledge base and contributing to the expanding network of organizational knowledge. These key characteristics of the knowledge organization present a major paradigm shift from our traditional hierarchical institutions. As Handy states, "Organizations which can allow old ways to die and new ways to grow will survive and have the chance to prosper." (p. 412)

The learning or knowledge-building organization provides a useful model for the learning society network argued by Keating as necessary for building and disseminating the complex understanding of the core dynamics of human development, that is required to support widespread developmental health in a time of escalating change and stress. Emerging from this perspective is a collaboration between the Invest in Kids Foundation and the University of Toronto, and many others: "WebForum 2001: A Millennium Dialogue on Early Child Development," which is being developed as an attempt at creating a self-sustaining virtual learning organization for human development. WebForum 2001 is built on a foundation of knowledge created by eight internationally-renowned experts from diverse medical, neuropsychological, and psychological fields, as they consider the current state, and productive future directions, of their various areas, and then participate in an open forum where they discuss their own and each others' fields. The audience members, who are also participants in the knowledge creation process, are diverse in many ways, although alike in their concern for healthy child development.

The goal of WebForum 2001 is to create an evolving context for diverse collaborative participation in complex understandings, a virtual place for puzzling through to practical implications of current findings that pertain to early child development. Building on the familiar conference model which is constricted by considerations of time and space and money, WebForum 2001 will leverage the power of the internet to reach as wide an audience as possible, working to sustain multidirectional communication and further knowledge creation through the use of web technologies such as a webcast, an interactive resource network, and distributed education. For more information see [www.webforum2001.net](http://www.webforum2001.net)

It is hoped that by pooling our resources of knowledge, understanding, and caring, by being willing to learn from each other and to make our discussions easily accessible, we can work toward a world in which every child will grow up healthy, intelligent, and well-loved, thereby enriching us all.

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