

The background of the top section is a dark grey or black field. It is populated with numerous thin, light blue or teal lines that crisscross and swirl in various directions. Scattered throughout this field are many solid-colored circles of varying sizes. The colors of these circles include red, orange, yellow, light green, dark green, and grey. The overall effect is a complex, organic, and somewhat chaotic pattern.

ECHOES FROM THE GAP SERIES **BUTTERFLIES IN THE HALLWAY**

By Brooke Haycock

"If nothing ever changed, there'd be no butterflies."
— *Author Unknown*

Foreword: The Story on this Kid

"That's the story on this kid. Right there," the woman in the counseling office patted the thick file.

African American male, 17 years old. ...

The file followed Cornelius everywhere he went, growing with every new home, with every new school, with every fail, with every fight, with every year. Its contents coffee-stained and curled at the edges, passed through too many hands, like a hot potato no one wanted to be holding when the music stopped.

Multiple grade failures, multiple disciplinary infractions, truancy.

Years of half-baked plans, lackluster report cards, and hastily scribbled discipline referrals, all culminating in a carbon copied dropout form too cheery a color for the occasion.

The paperwork documents moments in time from perspectives that were never his own. All that's left to tell is the story of another young man out the door. Like so many others, reduced to the files they leave behind.

We've come to think of the trajectories of students like Cornelius as almost inevitable. Their stories tragedies unfolding just outside the school doors and, inside, educators virtually powerless to change them.

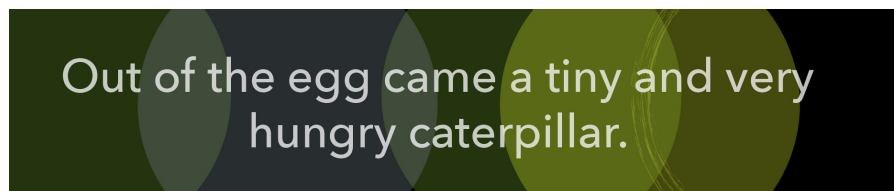
The numbers and files can't talk back to correct us. Can't sound the million echoes behind them. The stories of students lost in those numbers and an educational system that too often treated them as little more.

But what if they could talk back? And what if they told us that we got the story wrong? That the numbers are not nearly as inevitable as we believe, and schools' roles in creating them, not so insignificant.

The story that follows is true, based entirely on interviews with a young man I started getting to know five years ago, along with notes from his school file. His name is Cornelius. And while this young man you are about to meet is a unique and very special person to me, the truth is that Cornelius' story is all too common, versions of it echoing from the national statistics and the experiences of young people I talk with all the time.

Together, Cornelius and I offer you this story, as he tells it — and as I heard and even saw some of it — from the beginning. Really hearing his story is, I hope, an opportunity for educators to examine the often gradual processes by which students disengage from school — and, if we're honest, by which educators disengage from students — and spark conversations about how schools can systemically break what has become a too common narrative that somehow never quite tells the full story.

The Hungry Caterpillar: Elementary



"It was a book about a caterpillar, and it was turned into a butterfly."

Cornelius remembers author Eric Carle's story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* from Ms. Williams' kindergarten class, where the gregarious 5-year-old fell in love with reading — and with school. "I learned to read in kindergarten. I was one of the best readers. And it was because of her. It was the way she used to read books to me. Like the books were more than just pictures."

He raced home each day in his favorite Hot Wheels sneakers, Velcro half tended to, and bounded back the next day to be the first on the reading carpet in front of Ms. Williams.

Curious and full of energy, Cornelius always drew the attention he craved. "I guess you could say I was always playful. I'm gonna put it like that. I just liked being the center of attention. I was the youngest of nine kids my mom had, so I was used to getting more attention. And I liked it."

In first grade, he fell in love with math. "You could say two numbers, and I would subtract 'em and multiply 'em and add 'em in my head, give you three answers in a matter of seconds." His teacher, he remembers, made math fun. "We used to play games. We had these little dollar coins, and if we'd get a question right, you get one. And at the end of the day you could spend your little fake money on candy or whatever.

"It used to make me feel good."

But things started to change when the little boy so hungry to learn entered fourth grade.

"In fourth grade we had to read more books and bigger books. And I was still interested in the smaller books. I was having a hard time with reading."

He was too embarrassed to ask for help. "I always wanted to show people that I could do it myself."

Cornelius struggled unnoticed in the back of his class, slinking down in his chair hoping not to be called on, quieter and quieter with every passing day.

Cornelius needs to participate more in class and complete all assignments.

In fifth grade, he made friends with another boy who was similarly struggling. He would somehow always end up getting in trouble with this boy, but Cornelius still liked him, and felt liked and accepted by him. And being in trouble with someone else in class felt better than feeling stupid alone.

Cornelius needs to pay attention in class.

He finished the year hanging by the lowest grades he'd ever received. Middle school, he hoped, would be different.

Trouble: Middle School



Now he wasn't a little caterpillar any more. He was a big, fat caterpillar.

Though stumbling academically, Cornelius entered middle school determined to do well and to make his grandmother, who was his guardian, proud. But the school, like the neighborhood around it, was not an easy place to be an adolescent boy.

"It was really a violent middle school at the time. My brother was beefin' with some guys and they were in my gym class. And they were older than me, I guess, or bigger than me and more of them. And I used to skip class sometimes because I didn't want to face them. And I just started skipping."

That's when Cornelius met the other lost boys.

"There was a group of us. All skipping for different reasons. We would just run around the school."

Lost in plain sight.

Sometimes, they got a call home. Sometimes, they were given detention.

When this happened, he'd get an earful from his grandmother.

But the response from the school was never consistent. And no one there ever really talked to them about why they were skipping.

"They never really gave one-on-one attention with students at that school. They never really had the patience."

It wasn't long before Cornelius discovered skipping as a way to avoid not only the boys in gym class, but also struggle in his academic classes. He never skipped math, the class where he always

felt smart. But English and classes that involved reading were a different story.

Cornelius needs to attend all his classes regularly.

At the end of the year, Cornelius crossed the sixth-grade finish line with middling grades in most of his classes and a shaky attendance record, but still on his feet.

Then, that summer, Cornelius' grandmother died. He was devastated. "I just stopped caring. I felt like there was no one there to enforce rules on me or to make me sit down and do my homework. No one to care."

Cornelius and his brothers were sent to live with their aunt. "She was, like, our last resort. She was the only one we could go to unless we went into foster care with another family we didn't even know. And nobody wanted three boys."

It was the summer he found escape in a sketchpad.



When Cornelius returned to school that fall, quiet and withdrawn, the new principal was concerned. He noticed Cornelius' interest in — and real talent for — drawing and saw an opportunity, inviting Cornelius to lead the school's mural painting team at a district competition. To this day, Cornelius beams when he talks about it. "He saw that I was a good artist, and he wanted to take me. I did a whole mural up on the wall — I drew the picture and had a couple people help me with the paint.

"We were going up against all these other schools. And I got to play that special role, like, if I don't draw this picture, who is gonna draw it?"

But that magical experience outside of the school building, created by a principal who clearly cared, faded into the background as Cornelius continued to struggle inside of school.

In seventh grade, Cornelius' challenges with reading were catching up with him, as he struggled to keep pace with the academic demands of his classes. "In English, we had to do all these book reports. And ... I really didn't like reading anymore."

Because he was struggling at it.

"The teachers — they'd just pass out an assignment and — they just never really explained what we had to do. I mean like, they would tell us. They'd be like 'turn to page ... do this ... read this.' But they wouldn't go over it with us."

Cornelius needs to turn in class assignments.

Cornelius' efforts to avoid the work intensified. "I know it's bad but ... I would leave out. I would fall asleep."

Sometimes he would get in trouble for it. Other times his teachers didn't seem to care what he did. And never did anyone seem to draw the connection between Cornelius' behavior and his academic struggle. Nor did anyone ever ask him how he was doing at his aunt's house, where things were

also not going so well.

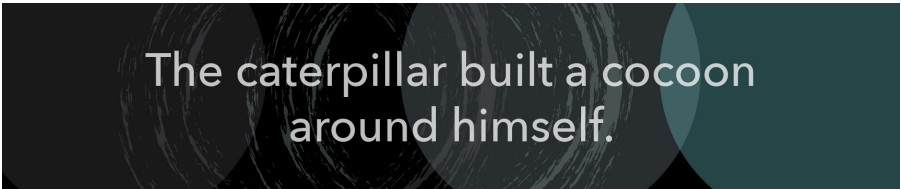
"I started getting further and further behind. And I just lost interest. I felt like I was too far behind."

Meanwhile, the school climate outside of classes was getting tougher to weather. "I was getting in fights. It was a lot of name calling other boys would do. I was always darker. Or where I lived. But I was never scared; I always faced them."

But he also started to face suspensions as a result. Three to five days out of school each time. No conversation. No intervention. Just consequences.

Consequences that ultimately played out far beyond middle school.

Alienated: High School



The caterpillar built a cocoon
around himself.

"When I started high school, there were so many students! I didn't have a lot of clothes. I had clothes that I'd been wearing for about two to three years. And everyone else there had like new shoes, new clothes. And from day one, I felt different. I felt left out."

It would be the year his aunt and the school had him placed in special ed. "I took the test — and I guess I failed it."

Cornelius' disability is Emotionally Disturbed.

Cornelius recalls the meeting like a bad dream. His aunt and adults from his school whom he barely knew twisting words he didn't know around him, sucking the oxygen out of the room. "My mind was just racing everywhere. I was trying to not care what they were saying and just think about something else."

Teachers report poor test scores, lacks initiative, does not complete class assignments, poor behavior, talking out, distracting others, and excessive absences.

His aunt did the speaking for him. Three years living with her, he'd learned not to argue.

It is the consensus of the team that Cornelius requires more specialized support to manage his behaviors and ADHD.

"So they, um, put me in different classes. Like, I'd have some normal classes and some classes would be special ed. And it was embarrassing, like, in the middle of the school year to go to all normal classes and then to switch over to special ed. And like, I know how people were talked about that were in special ed. I didn't want to be talked about.

"Then I really started losing interest in school.

"In the special ed classes, we would learn on a much slower pace. We would learn easier things. Things I would already know. Especially in math. I tried to tell the counselor that but she wouldn't listen."

It wasn't long before Cornelius' frustrations drove him straight out the door.

"I would just leave. Right out the front doors. There was security there, but they didn't really care if you left or came. They'd just say, 'You know you can't come back.' Sometimes, they wouldn't even say nothing."

He'd go outside, often not much farther, and draw. But nobody ever followed him.

Cornelius has had attendance problems in a number of classes.

Instead, when he returned they'd give him detention. Or suspend him. Again and again, as if pushing a student already reluctant to be in school further out the door was somehow going to get him back in it.

His counselor reports that he does not come for therapy.

"I just stopped caring when they'd suspend me. When it came to me, they would do things differently than they would with other students. Like they would sometimes give other students extra chances; they would just send me home. I started skipping more."

Sometimes when he was suspended, his counselor gave him work packets to keep up with his assignments. Other times she didn't. Sometimes he'd get one teacher's assignments but not the others. Each time, he returned further behind than the last and, each time, he was quicker back out the door.

Some of Cornelius' teachers tried to help, encouraging him to come to class and offering to help him make up his work. "Some of the teachers were really good. Like when I would come back, they would ask me where I'd been. But I was so far behind. They'd try to help me catch up on my work but — sometimes, when I'm behind, I would just give up." With no real school-level supports — or even basic communication protocols — for Cornelius and his teachers, any efforts on the part of his teachers to help ended up being too little, too late.

At the end of ninth grade, the school team told him he'd be held back. Cornelius "just wouldn't take responsibility for his learning," they said.

And neither, it was clear, would they.



That summer, just before the start of his second ninth-grade year, Cornelius was removed from his aunt's house and sent to live in a group home in another school zone.

"It was a lot going on. I was angry. I was held back. And I already felt older. The other kids looked at me like I was older. And I always just felt left out. I felt like the odd ball. Special ed."

The team agrees that Cornelius needs greater support in class and agrees to increase his hours to 20 outside of the general education setting.

So at his new school, with his new IEP, he was in all special ed classes.

Each time the school team met, and his aunt failed to show up, Cornelius would think it was finally his chance to speak for himself. To tell them what he needed.

"I always thought I would get off, like, get out of special ed. They could put me in regular classes. Even with younger kids. I just wanted to be in a normal class, learning at the normal pace that everyone else does."

Cornelius states he feels the work is "too easy," and he is "bored."

"But I guess it was a joke to them. Went through one ear, came out the other. I was still in the same classes."

It is the consensus of the team that Cornelius will remain in all of his special ed classes, and we will meet again in November to review his progress.

And each time his pleas bounced off adult ears, his connection to school — and the adults in it — became even more frayed. "When I was in school, I felt like leaving. Like, the minute I walked in the building I wanted to go."

Cornelius needs to improve interpersonal relationships with adults.

He started skipping more. He skipped right under their noses. He no longer cared if he got caught or punished. He sometimes wonders if he wanted to.

Teacher reports that student has not come to one class since his schedule change approximately four weeks into the school year.

"I would just walk the halls, or I would go skip in the art class."

He'd walked into the art room one day during class time. "The teacher didn't put me out. Instead, she called me over to her desk, and we actually talked about why I was skipping. It kind of surprised me because — I'm not gonna say she let me skip in her class — but it was basically my decision if I didn't want to go to class. I just had to draw and do something productive while I was in her room."

So, for an entire semester of French I, that's where Cornelius would go. To draw. And to avoid.

And the teacher, who Cornelius trusted and connected with and who probably could have helped Cornelius work toward fixing the problem rather than avoiding it, let him.



The third time through ninth grade, Cornelius found himself enrolled in the same classes he'd taken and failed two times over.

Even the teachers who cared about him, genuinely wanting him to succeed, gradually gave up. A little slower each time to report absences, a little slower to pick up the phone and call the group home. And quicker to kick him out of class with disciplinary referrals.

"I guess I used to skip class so much that — in the beginning, some teachers did ask but the others, they just didn't care. Then, everybody stopped caring. It was like you weren't their responsibility."

Cornelius didn't even have to skip any more to avoid being behind on his work or struggling with concepts. He'd just get himself kicked out. If they didn't care anymore, he was going to make clear that he didn't care either.

student has several disciplinary referrals for using profane language, disruptive behavior, failure to comply, and excessive absences.

Cornelius started getting longer and more frequent suspensions.

Cornelius was defiant. Five day out-of-school suspension.

Cornelius said "fuck this" under his breath. Five day out-of-school suspension.

Cornelius walked out of class and left the building. Ten day out-of-school suspension.

Cornelius tried to come back on school property while he was still suspended. 15 day out-of-school suspension.

Whatever the infraction, it always resulted in a punishment involving more time out of school for the student already behind and in need of more time in school, not less. And no indication in sight that those punishments were actually working — unless, of course, the intention was to rid the school of Cornelius, in which case they were working devastatingly well.

“I felt like they gave up on me. I guess I was giving up too. I thought there was no way I was ever going to pass the ninth grade. I was 17 and in classes with 14 year olds. I started to believe I wasn’t smart enough. I started to think like ... I’m gonna be left behind, for real. I just feel there was no hope.”

As Cornelius was struggling, behaviors crying out for help, the school began the process of having him transferred.

It is the consensus of the team that the school is no longer a good fit for the student. The student has not cooperated with school staff and is increasingly a behavior concern for other students. The counselor reports that she has made counseling available for the student but that he does not come. We are requesting a specialized placement where he can address his behaviors.

Cornelius dropped out later that year, with 2.5 credits after three years in high school.

Butterflies in the Hallway

When Cornelius reads this, he knows this is not where or how his story ends. But it could have been.

We could blame Cornelius’ aunt. His turbulent childhood. The social workers who came and went with devastating frequency. The trauma of his grandmother’s death. Many would simply blame Cornelius.

He didn’t do as he was told. He didn’t ask for help. He let his frustrations get the best of him.

He will tell you all these same things and more. He wishes he would have stayed focused. He wishes he’d stayed in his seat more. He wishes he hadn’t given up.

But real stories are rarely so simple, with good guys and bad guys and a classic narrative arc that bends into the sunset. Instead, they are messy and malleable, ricocheting off of one moment to the next, shaped and influenced by everything — and everyone — around them.

Including by schools.

In every chapter of Cornelius’ story, educators had powerful influence on him, whether they knew it or not.

Countless opportunities to intervene and redirect — on his way out the school doors as the school resource officers looked on, in the back of the art class where he sought escape. Consistent signals that Cornelius needed extra academic support, from as early on as his first struggles in reading and subsequent avoidance of work and class. And a million moments that could have been used to draw him in — when his grades and attendance began to drop, when he started to exhibit behavioral issues — but were instead used to push him further away.

We will never know how that might have changed things for Cornelius. But his story can provide educators an opportunity to imagine. To examine the process of disengagement over time and ask

where the systems broke down — across classrooms and schools, over grades and years — and when they gave up entirely. And how schools and educators working together, with coordinated systems supporting them, can change the narrative.

The problem with writing schools off into the margins of the story is that it means that educators collectively can't ever change how it ends. Nor can they change what happens to children like Cornelius who enter eager to learn — like hungry little caterpillars, hoping that someone will help turn them into a butterfly.



About This Series

Written by playwright-researcher Brooke Haycock, this Ed Trust series, *Echoes From the Gap*, puts front and center the stories of students. These are the young people behind the numbers we look at in our districts, offices, and states, those whose lives are deeply affected by — even determined by — their educational experiences.

We share their stories with respect for their privacy, by changing names and omitting details of place when appropriate. And, with respect for their words, whenever possible, we let those words speak for themselves. We do, though, attempt to zoom out from individual student experience to students generally, integrating existing national data to draw larger connections to key issues educators and advocates grapple with as they work to improve schools.

To view all of the *Echoes From the Gap* stories online visit:
echoesfromthegap.edtrust.org

To learn more about Brooke's work visit:
edtrust.org/dc/resources/catalyst-theater



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The following discussion questions are designed to engage school leaders and their staff. However, we want to welcome parents, community organizers, students, and others who care about our schools (and the students in them) to participate by tailoring these questions to fit their discussion groups.

1. What are your initial reactions to Cornelius' story?
 - a. Was this a familiar story? Were there any parts that surprised you?
2. Were there any pivotal points in Cornelius' journey where his trajectory could have been altered? What would it have taken to make this happen?
 - a. For example, what do you think about the art teacher's actions? What opportunities did she have? How about his middle school principal?
 - b. What would you have done to try and help Cornelius?
3. What behaviors or other trends are signals that a student is struggling or beginning to disengage from school?
4. What is your experience responding to students who are struggling? What have you done to try to re-engage them?
 - a. Were there times when your interventions were effective? What was different from the times when your interventions were ineffective?
5. What kinds of supports do struggling students need? What processes are in place at your school to identify struggling students and ensure that supports reach the students who need them?
 - a. What resources would help your school more effectively reach struggling students like Cornelius?
6. How are students and their caregivers, if at all, included in decisions and planning related to their academic performance and success?
7. What are some intervention strategies or supports your school could implement to re-engage and support students?



RESOURCE GUIDE

Not Just This Kid's Story!

by Hilary Tackie

Although “Butterflies in the Hallway” details the journey of a single student, it echoes the trajectory of many other students who leave school before graduation day and reflects findings from the dropout literature: (1) No single factor accounts for a student’s decision to drop out; (2) dropout is related to both a student’s experiences inside the school building and outside, in their family and community; and (3) dropout is not an event, but rather a process that often begins early in a student’s educational career.

As complicated and varying as these factors can be, there are many actions that educators can take that work toward preventing dropout, even during high school. Below we provide basic information about engagement, disengagement, and dropout in an effort to expand this narrative beyond Cornelius and provide information about what efforts can improve outcomes for students.

I. The Current Situation

Each year the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) calculates the national status dropout rate. This number represents individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or equivalency credential, such as a General Educational Development certificate. In 2012, the status dropout rate was estimated to be 7 percent — the lowest rate in a decade. However, the rates — 12 percent — were worse for low-income populations, as well as for African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos at 8 and 13 percent, respectively.

In addition to the status dropout rate, NCES calculates the event dropout rate, which represents individuals who were enrolled in school, were expected to return, but were not enrolled in grades 9-12 by Oct. 1 of the following year. In 2009-10, NCES reported a 3.4 percent event dropout rate, which represents over 500,000 dropouts that year. This rate has not changed much over the past few years — NCES reported a rate of 3.3 percent in both 2010-11 and 2011-12.

The decreasing status dropout rate and an increasing graduation rate clearly demonstrates that America’s dropout situation, which has been referred to as a “crisis” and an “epidemic,” can get better. In 2012, the NCES Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate exceeded 80 percent for the first time. Despite this accomplishment, the breakdown shows that students of color and low-income students have yet to reach that milestone. One barrier is that many students of color and low-income students attend what have been termed “dropout factories,” or schools that fail to graduate more than 60 percent of their freshman class four years later. GradNation reports that, in 2014, 23 percent of African American students and 15 percent of Hispanic/Latino students, (compared with 5 percent of white students) attend dropout factories. Although there is still a lot of work to be done, this is progress: In 2004, a decade ago, 46 percent and 40 percent of African American and Hispanic/Latino students, respectively, attended schools where graduation was not the norm.

NCES Dropouts, Completers, and Graduation Rate Reports

http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pub_dropouts.asp

GradNation

<http://gradnation.org/resource/building-gradnation-progress-and-challenge-ending-high-school-dropout-epidemic-2014>

Why Students Drop Out of High School, According to Their Own Reports

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/statistics/quick-facts/why-students-drop-out>

II. The Process of Disengagement

Students do not wake up one morning and decide to drop out of school. Dropping out of high school is, for many students, the culmination of a long history of increasing disengagement.

School engagement is typically measured by a student's academic, social, and extracurricular school participation; their positive feelings about teachers and the school environment; as well as their investment in learning and willingness to put forth effort. It is a strong predictor of graduation and is also tied to better academic performance and overall well-being. In comparison, disengaged students often display behaviors such as chronic absenteeism, course failure, disruptive behavior, feeling bored or unchallenged, and social isolation. One review of the literature on engagement and motivation finds that between 40 and 60 percent of high school students are "chronically disengaged."

While a disengagement trajectory is triggered by many factors over time, a weak support system for students is a commonly cited cause. Students who feel that their school environment is highly impersonal, neglectful, or against their personal success are likely to disengage from school. So, too, are students who feel their teachers have low expectations and standards of performance. This type of thinking is often internalized, leading students to believe that they are not capable of performing at high levels.

Without effective intervention, students who are no longer engaged can end up dropping out. The good news is that engagement is malleable and responsive to changes made to the school environment.

School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence

<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/Fredricks.pdf>

Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Appropriate Interventions

http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/nhsc_approachestodropoutprevention.pdf

III. Dropout Prevention and Re-engagement: What Works?

When asked why they dropped out (<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/statistics/quick-facts/why-students-drop-out>), students often respond that they were absent too often, they did not like school, or they could not keep up academically. Thankfully, there are actions schools can take to identify and provide intervention for these students — bringing them back into the building and engaging them in learning.

For example, research conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) showed that graduation can be predicted with 80 percent accuracy based on whether students qualified to move on to 10th grade and had not failed more than one core academic course (<http://ontrack.uchicago.edu/>). The use of the CCSR early warning indicator has helped keep Chicago students

in school and greatly increased the city's graduation rate. Tracking truancy and achievement data not only allows struggling students to be identified, it also helps schools to identify and address potential institutional problems. For example, using data to identify schoolwide patterns can help schools to recognize the individual talents of teachers and place students accordingly, change the upcoming year's master schedule to offer the classes that students need to catch up, and determine other supports students may require to succeed.

So what works? What do engaging schools look like?

Engaged students report feeling supported, challenged, and respected by their teachers. Their classrooms utilize curriculum that is both rigorous and feels relevant. Engaging high schools also make an effort to smooth the transition from middle school and work hard to catch early those who struggle. These schools hold high expectations for all students, but are also highly responsive to their students' needs.

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention:
<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies>

What Works Clearinghouse on Dropout Prevention:
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topic.aspx?sid=3>

National Academies Press: Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn (2003) http://www.nap.edu/download.php?record_id=10421