

V.19 N.2 (#98) WINTER 2010 \$12.00

OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Native land, youth,
and the future

The impact of child
poverty on education

Teaching woodworking
in high school

standardized
change
need
earth
reproductive
aboriginal
kids
communities
knowledge
opportunities
young
justice
hope
poverty
learn
understand
succeed
teach
traditional
create
succeed

The Achievement

Agenda?

Education or Evaluation?



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OUR SELVES



Our Schools/Our Selves is published four times a year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 410-75 Albert St., Ottawa, ON K1P 5E7. This is Volume 19, Number 2, Issue #98 of the journal (Winter 2010). *Our Schools/Our Selves* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association. It is indexed in the Canadian Magazine Index and the Alternative Press Index.

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ISSN 0840-7339

PRODUCTION

Typesetting and design: Nancy Reid. Printed in Canada by DLR International Printing, 925, boul. de la Carriere, Gatineau, QC. Publications Mail Registration No. 8010.

Cover Artwork/Design: Nancy Reid (www.nrgrafix.com)

First Page: Nancy Reid

The opinions expressed in *Our Schools/Our Selves* are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCPA.

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LARRY KUEHN and
ERIKA SHAKER

The Achievement Agenda

A struggle dominates education, these days. It is struggle between demands for standardization and the reality of diversity.

The standardizers — or “standardistos,” as Susan Ohanian calls them — want a system that is “accountable” in the counting sense. They have had the ear of governments that are convinced that the approaches of control from the corporate world must be applied to education.

Measurable objectives. Tests to measure. Achievement contracts based on the measurable objectives and exams. These are the administrative and political impositions on public education.

The rationale for this approach is that parents want to know how the school is doing. That’s fair enough. They have the right to ask the question. And educators have a responsibility to answer the question. But to answer the question, it is necessary to know what success means and how it’s determined. What do parents and the community want and expect from the schools?

The implicit assumption is that literacy and numeracy are the only things that really count — because they are what can be counted in a standard way through tests. Other things could be counted, but with more difficulty.

Obviously literacy and numeracy are important. But — with

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literacy in particular — these are not decontextualized skills; they are ways of understanding and being in the world. And that is a world of social context, of learning and doing that is related to the particular, not the standard.

And parents want much more for their children than just skills in literacy and numeracy. They want children who are excited about learning, who take joy in exploration and discovery, and whose social and cultural development is encouraged and shaped in positive directions.

Teachers want these things for their students as well. But achieving that richness and joy in the current classrooms is difficult, and is made more difficult by the obsession with the world of “achievement contracts” which miss so much of what *is* of value and *what* should be valued.

Listen to teachers. They will tell you about the diversity in their classroom. Many cultures. Many languages. A wide range of abilities and socio-economic realities. A variety of different kinds of homes and families. Inclusion of many students who not many years ago would be segregated and contained elsewhere.

This diversity chafes against a system that is about “alignment” with external goals that are standard and measurable and dealt with as a contract — a contract that is out of the control of the people engaged in the process of learning — the teachers and the students.

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley in their book, *The Fourth Way*, say that instead of more standardization, we need to be moving to “post-standardization.” They point out that “the world is becoming more, not less diverse, global and interconnected. A restricted, standardized diet of curriculum basics fails to connect with or capitalize on this diversity.”

Many see it like Hargreaves and Shirley. Then why has that not become the dominant perspective on the school system?

Several reasons: claiming that value can be reported as a single number or a league table of competitors is simpler. Even if one does not understand the basis on which the number has been determined, rankings give the illusion of hard and impartial facts. That is a lot easier to deal with than some complex system that looks at a wide range of elements, including the social and cultural context and debates about what should or should not be in the curriculum.

Miscommunication is a factor as well. When a teacher expresses concern about having to teach to the test, the parent may think that what is meant is that the teacher wants to test on things that have not been taught. In fact, what the teacher is saying is that standardized tests narrow what can be taught, causing many valuable and enriching elements to be excluded and abandoned.

What the teacher is saying is that standardized tests narrow what can be taught, causing many valuable and enriching elements to be excluded and abandoned.

When a teacher points out that standardized test results largely can be predicted by socioeconomic status, many in the public see this as making an excuse for not demanding more of students who come from families living in poverty. This is an internalization of the myth that we could all achieve success — if only we made the “right” choices in life. Of course, lower expectations can be a problem that accentuates the differences that children bring to school from their circumstances.

But the real message is that the school cannot alone overcome the very powerful factors of early learning and those first few years of life. Families struggling to survive economically or which are otherwise marginalized have less to provide to their children of the pre-school experiences that are a solid base for learning in school.

The answer to producing more equality in the society must include the whole community. Well-paying jobs for parents. Employment policies that allow parents — both parents — to have extended leaves when the children are in their first years. Increases in welfare rates and improvements in employment insurance. Low-cost child care. A social safety net that serves all of us well, but especially those who need it most. All of these are factors that must be addressed — along with changes in the schools to support these students more effectively if we really want to produce more equality in the society. Schools can only be one factor.

Standardized, high stakes tests and punishment of teachers and schools will not overcome inequality or reflect the diversity of the classroom.

Those who want equality and the valuing of diversity must develop an alternative program to the “accountability” systems that continue to dominate the discourse of education evaluation.

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This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* addresses some of these themes specifically; other articles provide valuable context to the standardization debate and its implications for students, classrooms, teachers and communities.

Drawing on recent data about poverty — particularly children and families living in poverty — Margaret White outlines the ways in which the structural causes of poverty undermine success in school and, ultimately, our cohesiveness as a society. Further, Laura Pinto and Hannah Chan explore the ways in which the “new” panacea — financial literacy education — purports to give students the tools to solve their own financial problems; however, these programs are sorely lacking and even misleading when it comes to either a gender or socio-cultural analysis. The result is a reinforcement of the myth that people who are economic casualties have simply made poor choices, rather than providing students with what is truly needed: an exploration of how the economic playing field marginalizes women and, in this analysis, Muslims.

What happens when the multi-faceted and non-linear process and experience of education becomes confused with the single-minded, standardized goal increasingly referred to as “achievement”? Anthony Marco describes the difference between the two: “*Achievement* is about standardized test scores (the higher the better). *Education* is about being able to integrate knowledge into life. *Achievement* is about being labeled at-risk when considered below average. *Education* is personal, and not subject to the abilities or collective grade point scores of people who happen to be the same age.” Susan Ohanian provides a scathing analysis and thoughtful exploration of what this business-driven agenda has meant in the U.S. Larry Kuehn discusses how standardization of certification of teachers across Canada has vast implications for the training, professional and working conditions of educators, as well as the variety of education and social needs of schools and students throughout the provincial and territorial education systems across the country. He explains: “as an economic unit, a teacher is a teacher wherever they teach. From a socio-cultural perspective, a teacher is rooted in a particular community, and the education that leads to their certification should take that into account.” In “In Defense of Failure (and other lost learning opportunities)” Erika Shaker looks at what living in perpetual fear of the possibility of failure has led some schools (and even wider society) to do when it comes

to ensuring “success”. And Hugo Aboites, writing from Mexico, provides some insight about what increases in this employer-driven standardization agenda has meant to education in Central and South America.

And what does this move towards standardization mean for the diversity we know is present every day in our classrooms and communities? After all, students and their families have never been standardized, and neither are the communities of which schools are an integral part. Larry Kuehn in “So Long, Constructivism. Hello, Smart!” draws on his experience at the National Education Computing Conference to explore the latest rhetoric about creating more open classrooms and more versatile teachers using the latest technology — in this case, the “Smart board.”

Brooks et al discuss how schools are just one means among many by which GLB youth can access information (both accurate and inaccurate) about HIV and, through research based in part on a series of interviews with students, try to determine how public education can improve its performance in this area. In “Queer Education Around the World,” James Chamberlain explores the work being done to ensure that schools provide a nurturing, safe environment for students and teachers regardless of sexuality by, among other things, challenging heteronormativity. Sadly, the stories are not always positive, but it does appear that progress is being made.

David Clandfield takes this part of the discussion further and examines how schools can and should become “community hubs,” fully integrated into a variety of aspects of community life; in fact, by embracing principles like recycling and sustainability they can help facilitate progressive community growth and renewal. Professor David Kowalewski describes how in his university classes he works with students to help them integrate themselves into the environment by working with and within the natural habitat: “Respectful use of nature in a hands-on way, in order to fulfill one’s most basic needs, necessarily leads to a geometric increase in natural knowledge. For environmental educators, to ignore such opportunities would seem a tragic mistake.”

Jessica Yee points out the ways in which working to protect the land is integrated into her work in sexual and reproductive health. She explains “while I am still a learner when it comes to subjects like environmental justice and food sustainability, I know that,

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because I cannot separate myself from my surroundings, these too are the realities that I — that we — must simultaneously deal with when discussing things like sexuality and violence prevention in our communities. I have to be informed. We cannot pit one issue against another as ‘more pressing’; they all affect us somehow....I’m not just an Indigenous feminist reproductive justice freedom fighter. I’m Native, and it’s my inherent duty to care about the earth every day, in every way that I can.”

John McCormack has contributed a thoughtful article about his experiences learning and teaching woodworking in high school and college in the U.S. It’s a fascinating exploration of the relationship between art and craft, profession and vocation, and how the two poles, so often kept apart, come together in the act of what he calls “design and making.” He concludes with some suggestions about how we need to rethink how we teach art and design (using woodworking as an example) as part of a general education that encourages students to explore both their independence and creativity.

The cover design for this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is a bit of a departure, but we thought the “word cloud” might provide an effective way to demonstrate the broad selection of the themes explored by the articles. Further, it speaks to the interconnectivity of many of the various concepts and issues that both impact and are impacted by education — and are so often at odds with the “Achievement Agenda” that repeatedly appears to privilege narrow evaluation over broad, authentic education and learning, and standardization over diversity.

* * *

Larry Kuehn and Erika Shaker