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OUR SCHOOLS OUR SELVES

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Grading vs. learning

Policy shifts and the effects on environmental education

The truth about homework

REDEFINING THE ESSENTIALS: CHALLENGING THE LIMITS ON OUR SCHOOLS

BY-LAW 675-79

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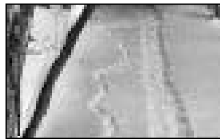 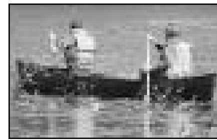

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Reclaiming the "Essentials"

BY ERIKA SHAKER

Public education is an ongoing experiment: its content, purpose, role, and structure have been debated since its creation. And with good reason: few institutions hold as much sway as the neighbourhood school. For eight hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year, it provides care — in the broadest sense of the word — to the children of the community until they reach the age of 16. And it is tasked with the staggeringly huge responsibility of providing illumination to hundreds of impressionable minds.

And therein lies what is perhaps an irreconcilable tension. Not only does the school provide a wide array of learning resources and opportunities to children who otherwise might never have access to them, but it also defines what is "worth" knowing, and — by its omission from the curriculum — what is not. It not only encourages children to learn the difference between "right" and "wrong," but it also tells them what that difference is. And, just to make it undeniably clear to students what they should and shouldn't do, the school is responsible for adhering to and reinforcing a complex system of assessment, grades, rewards and punishments.

Of course, this goes beyond the "right" or "wrong" answer on a test, or a passing or failing grade on a report card, or being promoted to the following level or having to repeat a year. In *Foucault and Education*, Dave Jones suggests that "as nineteenth century philanthropy identified the undifferentiated squalor of the city as an

object of concern, it introduced a pedagogical machinery to normalize it....an 'innovative' system based on rewards, punishments and an ingrained sense of the necessity of competition to ensure that the school could manufacture a disciplinary society." (57-58)

Such discipline was reinforced not just by the teacher (deemed the "moral embodiment of the school") but also by the normalizing environment of the school and normalization of student behaviour within that environment. "Disobedient" students would realize the error of their ways not only from the disapproval of the teacher, but also, and more importantly, from the onlooking, obedient students — creating and reinforcing "an ethical regime that stimulated morality from the shame of offending rather than a 'fear of the rod.'" (64)

As an aside, education marketing literature — designed to promote and sell the school as a marketing medium to potential corporate sponsors--mirrors the previous description of the school as the most effective institution in which to change the behaviour and attitudes of future workers and consumers remarkably closely.

But even in this nineteenth century incarnation as the mechanism that normalized and manufactured a disciplined society of workers and consumers, the school played another role. It provided access to education as a fundamental human right--not as a privilege--to those who might otherwise not have access to it. It offered the underprivileged the opportunity to rise beyond their "pre-determined" roles in society, throwing the accepted notion of natural order into doubt. It conjured up the spectre of social insubordination — at state expense. And it opened up the possibility of progress, of improvement, of universal access to realms once the sole domain of the privileged.

In other words, it was also the institution that ensured the possibility of empowerment, of positive collective social change.

The public school encapsulates these two competing ideologies: control and empowerment. And this tension is, I think, evident in the ongoing education debates.

If the school is *only* an elaborate mechanism of control, designed to reinforce the needs of the élites and the demands of capitalist society, it would not make so many people so nervous. I suspect that it would find itself spending far less time defending decisions to provide to students a broader range of programs rather than focusing solely on those subjects guaranteed to improve easily measurable "outputs."

Similarly, if the school is *only* about expanding the intellectual horizons of its students, I have to think the current debates questioning the need for ongoing evaluation, high stakes testing, traditional methods of discipline, and "classroom rigour" would not be confronted with such resistance. Or that so many teachers and

school boards and students and parents would bend over backwards to try and defend their schools on the basis of how well they conform to these market-based forms of assessment.

This issue of Our *Schools/Our Selves* began with a focus on outdoor education, but quickly evolved into an attempt to examine some of the driving forces to which our schools are "encouraged" to respond: "cost-effectiveness," high-stakes assessment, privatization and competition. What are some of the resultant effects of these limits on schools, on students, and on how we perceive education in a broader societal context? Finally, what can we do — what is currently being done — to confront the limits placed on education…or, as one author asks, to confront the institutional limits of education itself?

A significant focus on outdoor education remains, however. Sandra Mayberry recounts her experiences as an Outdoor Ed. teacher throughout the Rae and Harris/Eves years: her article provides an encapsulation of how policy and funding shifts in education forced the scaling-back of a once-embraced component of public education in Ontario, one that literally moved past the schoolhouse walls in order to broaden the educational horizons of students and teachers. "Weaving Loincloth with Whitecoat" is a detailed examination of an outdoor winter camp that integrates pre-modern, Aboriginal living skills with modern scientific skills in an effort to expose its young participants to "wilderness survival, community connectedness, cultural appreciation," and potentially enhance other dimensions of a student's learning. "Sustaining Outdoor Classrooms" provides readers with a hands-on blueprint for maintaining what author Amanda Kail writes "can play an important role in creating a knowledgeable and conservation-minded populace with a sense of environmental stewardship."

The ideology of cost-effectiveness — the "lean, mean education machine"--has had a significant role in reinforcing a pared-down, stripped-back vision of education — both in and out of school. As I recount in "School Board Foundations: An 'essential' overview," while schools are forced to do "more with less," education or learning foundations are springing up across the continent to fill the void. But if foundations are there specifically to "enhance" education, where does this leave the less privileged communities forced to offer merely publicly-funded "un-enhanced" education? And, as funding for national reading initiatives (as Carol Goar writes) is cut by a government intent on "trimming waste," we need to ask ourselves — and our elected officials — what this means in light of our discovery last spring that 60% of elementary schools are forced to fundraise for library books.

The sense that students are somehow getting off too easy

seems to be lurking just beneath the tough-love education policies meant to reassure parents who are concerned that every day is like a series of out-takes from *Animal House* or *Fast Times at Ridgemount High*. This is explored by Alfie Kohn in "The Truth About Homework" where he questions the real benefits of homework and offers teachers tips for how to test the benefits of what so many of us take for granted as an educational necessity. And Satu Repo has written a wonderful review of Alfie Kohn's recent book *The Homework Myth: Why our kids get too much of a bad thing*, expanding on many of these themes. In "Deepening Democracy," Maria Hantzopoulos describes a school-community-led method of discipline that has been overwhelmingly successful. This flies in the face of the reigning "three strikes" mentality that has had overwhelmingly negative impacts particularly on students at risk — the very students, incidentally, who are also most often the casualties of high-stakes assessment adherence and cost-cutting onslaughts. And Alison Molina's review of Peter Hennessy's book *From Student to Citizen* examines the relationship between public education and participation in democratic society.

Carlo Ricci and Pat Armstrong provide a detailed exploration of their experience with EQAO's grade 6 assessment — and ask what role parents really have in determining whether or not there really is a "choice" to participate in standardized testing in Ontario. Of course, the prevalence of high-stakes assessment in education has had a number of impacts on how we perceive education — or what we expect from our schools. "Promoting Play" and "Schools, Pressed to Achieve, put the Squeeze on Recess" discuss how free time, recess and unstructured play are all casualties in the push for schools to achieve better and better scores on standardized tests — which, in the U.S., often determines funding. And Barbara Meltz points out the very profound benefits of what I'll refer to as non-battery-operated learning development — human communication. This is particularly significant when education marketers are promoting computer programs for children as young as six months in order that kids get a "head start on learning." It's never too early to compete, apparently.

Of course, competition, assessment and privatization are not the sole domain of K-12 education. In "No Time to Think," Heather Menzies and Janice Newson discuss how the technology-enhanced work environment on university campuses has facilitated a cultural shift with profound ramifications — less face-to-face time with students and colleagues, for example, and less time to properly engage with scholarly material.

In "Giving Up the Grade," David Noble demonstrates how he deliberately structures and conducts his university classes to definitively separate "education"

from "evaluation" — freeing students from the tyranny of competition and assessment to fully participate in the educational process. And Joseph Graves, a former student of Dr. Noble's, reflects on his initial response to Noble's decision — and his eventual shift in mindset that led to a complete reversal in how he perceived not just his approach to education but the entire process of education itself.

We have also included two articles exploring education from a very different perspective. "At Anarchist U., it's all about Structure," gives readers an understanding of a Toronto-based experiment providing free university according to Anarchist principles. "Academic Squatting" goes even further and confronts not just the limitations placed on education but the institution of education itself. Rancourt's philosophical context and direct writing style provide a close and critical examination of the Anarchist view of the university as an institution designed to train "clients" to assume their places within a capital-driven system — and of how he and his students turned this on its head.

The photographs — including the one used for the cover, which speaks to so many of the subjects examined in this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* — were provided by Patricia McAdie. I invite readers to enjoy some of Patricia's other work at http://www.flickr.com/photos/pjmcadie/.

If anything, today's education debates are more pronounced, more vociferous, and perhaps even more pertinent — particularly as public institutions become increasingly vulnerable to ideologically-charged discussions about the role of the state, the demands of the marketplace, and our responsibilities to both of those entities — and to each other. To critically examine public education — not just the curriculum, the policy, the content and the administration, but the actual purpose, role and structure of public education itself — is no easy task. It requires setting aside preconceived notions, both positive and negative. But awareness of this uneasy balance between two competing ideologies of the school — control and empowerment — is, I think, necessary if we are to understand why our public schools are the subject of such debate. And it is the only way to effectively work together for the ongoing improvement of this vital democratic tool for positive collective social change.

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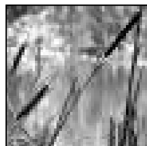

Giving Up the Grade

BY DAVID F. NOBLE

Critical pedagogy has long condemned grading as an impediment to genuine education, but critical pedagogues continue to grade, as a presumed condition of employment. "I hate it but I have to do it" is their lame lament.

But they no longer have to do it. Throughout the thirty-odd years of my university teaching career I have always found ways around grading, primarily by giving all A's, thereby eliminating grades *de facto* if not *de jure*. Last year for the first time, after long bemoaning my "anomalous"practice, York University officials formally prevailed upon me henceforth to designate my courses "ungraded " (a pass/fail option without the fail), thereby taking them off the radar and perhaps unintentionally establishing a promising academic precedent.

As a tenured full professor, of course, I do enjoy an unusual degree of job security, a privilege provided by a paying public in need of some truth and thus some unshackled, socially responsible scholars. Moreover, as a unionized employee I am protected by a collective agreement which requires only that I submit evaluations on time without specifying what they "should" be. Thus I am indeed in a good position to challenge the grading regime, but so too are many others who continue to grade.

Why? Typically, as already indicated, colleagues express a fear of administrative reprisal. But they embrace grades also for other, unspoken, reasons, perhaps unacknowledged even to themselves.

Grades offer teachers a convenient device for allaying their anxieties about their own abilities by shifting them onto their students, through an endless round of tests, examinations and evaluations. Grades get teachers off the hook; they preserve professorial authority and are indifferent to professorial incompetence. Bad faith protestations about administration requirements can mask the fact that grades serve the teacher at the expense of the students, and at the sacrifice of education.

But in all this the primary reason for the existence of grades — publicly-subsidized pre-employment screening — is rarely acknowledged. Grades appear to be a matter between teacher and student — until they are "submitted." At that point those for whom

grades are really given — those who have perhaps never even stepped into a classroom — gain access to the measurements of their prospective labour force. Here is the silent third party in the halls of academia, the so-called elephant in the room, to whom academia has too long been hostage. Eliminating grades eliminates the elephant from the room, emancipates academia and reintroduces education.

The elimination of grades at a stroke shifts academic attention from evaluation to education, where it belongs. When skeptical colleagues protest that it is not fair for me to give the same grade both to people who work hard and to people who fail even to show up, I remind them that these people are not getting the same reward because the people who work hard also get an education. "Oh, yeah," they say, remembering as an afterthought what should be at the forefront of their profession.

Students themselves have collectively never resisted my refusal to grade them, and our experiences have been mutually rewarding beyond measure, and all measurement. With grades no longer a matter of concern, no time is ever wasted on discussions about evaluation — heretofore students' primary preoccupation. Without having to fear or defer to professors or peers, students are freed for forthright and authentic engagement, an essential ingredient of genuine education, and discover that they are not alone, despite the rituals of competitive individualism enforced everywhere else around them.

With the substitution of encouragement for evaluation, intellectual excitement becomes the defining element in the educational ethos, replacing anxiety--which, as every parent knows, is lethal to learning. Abandoning grades annuls alienation: students no longer depend on others for a sense of their own worth.

Without grades, students do not have to try to read the professor's mind — an impossible task anyway, so philosophers tell us — and can instead concentrate upon reading their own minds, self-knowledge being the grail of education. With grades gone, and having thus side-stepped the institutionally routinized regime of infantilization so corrosive of self-respect, self-confidence and self-worth, students can now begin to take themselves and their own thoughts seriously — for too many an altogether novel experience. This is the only true end of education.

The elimination of grades is no longer merely a theoretical proposition. It is an actuality, and a precedent, given my experience at York University. I now teach officially-designated "ungraded" courses with the formal sanction of the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and in full recognition of the Vice President/Academic. From this fertile ground, I advise my colleagues across the country: Try it; you are bound to like it. And so, I suspect, are your students, who

will at last start receiving what they have been presumably been paying for and what we have been professing to provide.

Historian David F. Noble is a professor at York University in Toronto.

Response to "Giving Up the Grade"

A STUDENT EXPLAINS

I first took a course with Professor Noble in 1992 when I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree. I remember that first day of his class vividly, as it was a turning point in both my approach to education and my views of our education system.

Professor Noble's first order of business on that first day of class was to inform the students that they could all have A's. As a student who was already scoring straight A's, many thoughts were racing through my head — is this a joke? How could he possibly give A's to all these other schleps when they surely won't deserve them? This is unfair! This surely was not a serious way to go about conducting a university course.

My initial skepticism was actualized as the first few weeks of class produced the typical scenario in university undergrad seminars — four or five of us were doing the readings and engaged, while the other 25 or so sat uncomfortably, some hoping not to be called upon, and others saying something, anything to score a participation mark.

A funny thing happened along the way. By the time we hit the halfway mark of the course, virtually all of the students were highly engaged in the material and discussions each week. These are students who would have never otherwise been so engaged or thoughtful about their studies. They were no longer being processed; they were learning.

For myself, it completely changed the way I approached my education. No longer was it about completing this or that course requirement, pleasing a professor or filling another degree requirement. It was about learning. I was freed from the prison house of grading. I learned how to learn — not how to get good grades (which, though no longer was consumed with concern for them, I still managed to do, incidentally).

Joseph Graves is a former student of Dr. Noble's and graduated from York University suma cum laude in 1994.

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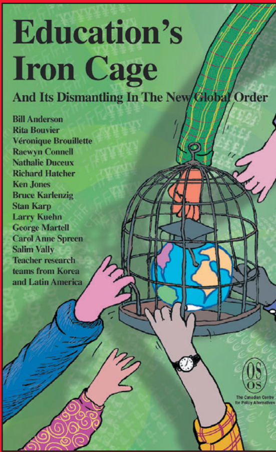

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—*The Utne Reader*

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