

V.22 N.4 (#112) SUMMER 2013 \$15.00

# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

Next Up: Finding  
the Change-makers

Has the Silence on  
Bullying been Broken?

Gay-Straight Alliances  
in Schools



# CREATIVE LICENSE

Education, Social Justice and the Arts



Activism means not being afraid to take to the streets!  
Rodney Diverlus at the 2012 National Student Day.

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ERIKA SHAKER

## The Art of Education

As so many educators, parents and students will explain, the key to engaging kids in school — from those already interested to the most marginalized and withdrawn — is to provide as many opportunities for kids to get excited, to participate on their own terms, without pressure; to allow them to find their own comfort zone and then push themselves in new and unexpected directions; to create something spectacular and unexpected in their own time and in their own way.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* focuses on the links between the arts, education and social justice. It explores the ways in which educators (inside and outside the traditional classroom setting) and students are using dance, music, poetry and illustration to illuminate the act of learning as well as to open up space for challenging conversations about race, gender, privilege, and fairness.

Sarah Wun discusses how she used a lesson in drawing to teach socialization skills and, more specifically, to connect with a student who had previously been reluctant to participate in classroom discussions and activities. Richard MacKinnon teaches art in a correctional setting and describes the challenges he faces as well as the increased flexibility and autonomy he enjoys. And Tamla Matthews-Morgan, director of a number of educational arts programs, discusses the experiences she shares with her fellow educators and students: “Creating, exploring,

trying and simply being open to new experiences in an environment of safety and encouragement and can change children's energy, the way they see the world and most importantly the way they see themselves."

Making the world safer — starting with our schools — for our youngest and most vulnerable is a topic explored by Claire Mian. Bullying (and cyberbullying) has forced us to rethink the lessons we are (or are not) teaching kids about healthy relationships. She concludes on a somber note: "As I finish writing this article, today's news brings results of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) that show one-third of Canadian Kindergarten children are at risk... Sadly, it shows that our failure to raise our children in safe, kind and respectful environments starts early."

Jenny Kassen and Alicia LaPointe continue this discussion, examining the role that Gay-Straight Alliances play in creating safe spaces for students, and fostering healthier school environments for everyone. After all, "Since safety is related to school enjoyment and academic success, GSAs should not be the only places where students feel at ease. Educators should extend the safety net that GSAs provide by cultivating inclusive learning environments in their classrooms. For teachers, the challenge is to foster a community of safety that parallels that of a GSA."

Carolyn Souaid and Endre Farkas explore how their collaboratively-crafted poetry "Blood is Blood" provides opportunities to discuss issues of tolerance, conflict, and understanding. They explain:

Much of art is triggered by a passionate reaction to something in the world. The artist then does what the artist does best: expresses this human impulse through a particular medium. If the work is successful, it strikes an emotional chord in those who experience it. Understanding this basic process is essential. It is what educators must explain to students before tendering a work of art for study, whether a painting, a musical composition, or a literary text. Knowledge of what provoked it is the "way in." Once they are in, students can then engage with it on other levels, thereby deepening their experience.

Artistic expression — through illustration, choice of dress, style of music — can be and often is a deeply political act. Len Wallace discusses the way in which song and poetry have been traditionally used to counter the lack of control so many people felt (and continue to feel) in their day-to-day lives: "We develop ways and means to give meaning to our lack of control and to the conditions of our lives through a poetry of thought and action."

The arts can provide opportunities to disrupt dominant power structures and discourses. Austin Liu uses the popular classical music program and educational philosophy *el Sistima* as an example of Latin America's "history of using the tools and institutions often associated with oppression as means of liberation." John Vitale uses the metaphor of Jazz music to explore questions of equality and solidarity in our schools in the pursuit of a more socially just system of education. And Sameena Eidoo explores the "transformative possibilities of spoken word poetry for marginalized and excluded youth through the stories and voices" of two young men born in Canada and belonging to Muslim and Afro-diasporic communities.

The links between the arts and social justice are also examined by Julie Hartley, a founding co-director of Centauri Summer Arts Camp, now in its nineteenth year. She asks rhetorically if the camp's "sense of social responsibility should be stronger because we were an arts community. Why? Surely because an artistic creation reflects not just the world as it is, but the world as we hope it might one day be."

The arts are uniquely positioned to teach about inspiration and innovation as a part of the creative process — and not in a piecemeal way. It should go beyond "teaching" arts, as Helen Yung asserts, to be more about "growing individuals".

Holistic experiences engage the parts of our selves that make us the most fundamentally human, that will one day, very very soon, distinguish us from pre-programmed robots.

In a deeply personal piece, Rodney Diverlus traces his evolution as a dancer and an activist, and leads readers on a thoughtful analysis of how the arts — specifically dance — expose, and potentially help create the conditions to reject, inequality. He explains: "radicalizing dance starts with the acknowledgement that dancers are inherently activists. Our role is not to simply perform but to actively work to restructure our common human experience and our understanding of society and community."

Ariel Aguilar, an undergrad at Queen's, is witnessing first-hand some of the same issues that Rodney, as a student activist, was so politicized by. Describing the ongoing overcrowding, underfunding, and deferred maintenance going on at his university, he asks "what will future students say of us? Will they say we remained blissfully ignorant and turned our

back against the ideals of public education? Will they blame us for failing to stop the degradation of our own universities? I hope they will note the opposite: that we resisted, that we fought for education as a right.”

Maggie Frampton, Lauren Howard, Ainsley Munro and Jennifer Prosser, all grads from the inaugural year of Ottawa’s Next Up Program, continue this focus on political, social and community engagement. They describe what brought them to Next Up, interview founders, recent grads, alumni and Advisory Board members, and offer “a holistic and sincere overview” of the program. In the words of one of the newest grads:

We are currently at a pivotal point in history. The pressing issues that our generation faces are of global significance, perhaps more so than past generations. Never before have we had so much access to information or to each other.... We’ve inherited a broken system. It is our generation that must innovate the collaborative solutions required to revitalize it.

In a unique (and collaborative) example of how creative writing, illustration and history can come together in a multifaceted learning experience, we have included an excerpt from an upcoming book: *Our Lives: Girls’ and Women’s Stories Across Two Millennia*. In the words of the book’s editor John Connolly, “This initiative is the evolution of discussions about blending creative writing and accessible scholarship. Learning about the lives of girls and women over a lengthy period of time is intended to stimulate discussion about those lives as well as their counterparts today.”

It’s no secret that as schools are increasingly forced to focus on teaching to the test, measurable outcomes, and rigour — while compensating for inadequate funding — the arts are often considered dispensable “extras”. But as so many of the authors in this issue have pointed out, the creative process embodies invaluable lessons for all of us. As Farkas and Souaid remark, “Most art is inspirational, which is to say it comes out of Eureka moments — some quiet, some loud, some slow, some quick. The way it manifests itself is a mystery.... Art is the result of a creative process. And this process requires dedication, perseverance and sweat.”

Certainly this has been my experience working with Dirk Van Stralen, who never ceases to amaze me with each cover illustration he produces. I am, as always, privileged to see this most recent result of a Eureka moment. My extreme gratitude, as well, goes to Nancy Reid, whose artistic talents are apparent on each page of this, and every, issue.