EDITORIAL

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Connecting the Dots
The international privatization agenda

Debates over education have always been heated. But these days the very concept of public education, the students who are served by it and those who are employed in this sector, are in many ways either being neglected or are under sustained attack by political and corporate elites.

Privatization is no longer creeping — in many cases it is stampeding through entire school jurisdictions. Ontario is struggling with the so-called "math wars" while pointedly avoiding very necessary conversations about who standardization and the culture of simplistic evaluation hurts most and why. And, at the time of writing, BC teachers are on the picket lines in an attempt to force the BC government to honour collective agreements after two court decisions backed the union's assertions that the government had bargained in bad faith. They have, incidentally, also launched a fantastic Twitter campaign to illustrate what they are willing to strike — without pay — for: #thisismystrikepay.

It is in the shadow of a bitter labour dispute that has massive implications for collective bargaining and for adequate funding of public education (regardless of "the demands of the economy" or the "balanced budget" rhetoric) that this summer issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is positioned.

Tara Ehrcke provides us with some background information vital to understanding what's behind the current BC teachers' strike. For those of you who have been unaware of how this current action has evolved — and the provincial government's role — it's required reading. It also provides a quick deconstruction of the anti-teacher and anti-union rhetoric that management (in this case the provincial government) is all-too-quick to throw at workers and their representatives.

Of course, "economic reality" is also used as a weapon of choice to make the case during bargaining that fair wages for workers are not just unaffordable, they're unrealistic. But as my colleague Iglika Ivanova points out (refuting claims made by the Canadian Taxpayer's Federation), BC teachers' wages have had very little to do with the economic growth the province has been experiencing.

The economy — and our required deference to it — is present in other aspects of the education debates as well. Lisa Howell examines how youth activism and political awareness is being co-opted and subverted through the commercialism and historical white-washing throughout the highly promoted "We Day" celebrations. In "Austerity U," the authors explore how post-secondary institutions and students are being blamed for the devastating reality of high unemployment, low-quality jobs, debt, and increasing expenses. The message from policymakers and corporate elites is simple: "universities are out-of-control institutions that are doing a bad job of preparing students to walk the tightrope of life in austerity capitalism without a net."

Much of this agenda focuses on shutting down debate and political organizing on campus — because, as Hans Rollmann illustrates, we know what can happen when students *do* organize in pursuit of a common goal, particularly when policymakers are prepared to be convinced by facts rather than swayed by rhetoric. As a result of sustained student organizing, thorough research and a commitment to affordable university education, Newfoundland and Labrador now has the lowest fees in the country. And:

> We did these things long before Danny's oil money started rolling in. The most daring of the tuition fee reductions was done when the province's finances were still in a dire state. We did these things because things were desperate, not because we were rich (which we weren't). If we could do these things when the province's finances were in a terrible state, just imagine what we can do now that they're improving.

Newfoundland and Labrador is indeed a bright light in the tuition fee debates. But reframing education within the confines of austerity is not just a post-secondary phenomenon. Several provinces have been busy integrating content about "entrepreneurialism" and "financial literacy" into their respective k-12 curricula. Of course, their level of critique about the economy in the context of socioeconomic inequity is lacking, to say the least. Luckily, Laura Pinto and Chris Arthur have a rigorously analytic and contextualized approach to both these topics and how they have become both unquestioned and mythologized inside and outside the classroom. As Pinto explains, "entrepreneurship curriculum encourages passive student acceptance of existing economic, labour market, and social conditions."

Arthur elaborates:

> The best practices for improving financial security are not individual consumer solutions but collective political solutions, and to support the implementation of these effective solutions we must promote a different, more critical financial literacy education. Unfortunately, instead of promoting a literacy supportive of effective collective solutions, researchers and financial literacy advocates limit our possibilities to ineffective individual solutions that exacerbate already unequally apportioned financial insecurity.

Economic productivity is also used as an indicator to measure how "well" schools are preparing students to assume their roles as workers in the global economy. And, no surprise, standardized tests are a very powerful political tool to "prove" what schools (and teachers) are doing "right" …but more often what they're doing "wrong". This is being played out in Ontario in the current round of "math wars" as explored by Xuefeng Huang in his article. Larry Kuehn puts this testing-driven agenda into the global context (the Global Education Reform Movement — GERM for short).

One particularly troubling aspect of GERM is data-mining and surveillance, topics that have been very present in Canada as a result of debate over recent legislation ostensibly needed to protect Canadian from online crime. These debates are particularly intense because of increasing public awareness of cyberbullying, in large part as a result of the suicides of Rehtaeh Parsons and Amanda Todd. But in her article, Clare Mian goes several steps further, putting these debates over

online safety into the broader context of how we care for our kids, how kids understand concepts of online safety and bullying, and the issue of privacy in general. She explains: "No one seems to be pointing out the obvious: the tormentor of Amanda Todd has since been identified and arrested (in the Netherlands), using tools currently available to law enforcement and Courts. Others, such as the tormentor of Alysha Reda in Kingston, Ontario, were similarly identified and charged under the powers available to the Ontario Provincial Police and the RCMP."

How we understand "safety" as a social construct is explored by Ozlem Sensoy and Gerald Walton in "Istanbul Gone Wild". Upon their return from a trip to Istanbul during protests in Taksim Square, they examined the deeply engrained dichotomy between "safe" (Western, progressive, civilized) and "dangerous" (savage, Eastern, backwards) and ask:

> Who gets to feel safe? When? Where? Who gets to presume or decide if others feel or are safe? Relative to others, who has to think about and strategize to ensure their own safety? Who benefits from the idea that some places (neighbourhoods, towns, cities, nations) are inherently and fundamentally safer than others? And, critically, why is "safety" in schools promoted by policy and educational campaigns that, by and large, do not identify the ways in which identity difference from the norm or majority is predictably targeted?

As a special treat for readers, and in recognition of the need for especially pithy content during the summer months, this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* includes a special section, edited by Carol Anne Spreen and Salim Vally, about privatization of public education on a global scale. The articles look at the market-based restructuring of education in the context of austerity, neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and how these trends are playing out in different jurisdictions and with what effects. According to Spreen and Vally, this section:

> …will examine the deleterious effects of privatization on the right to education, weducation quality, equity and teaching. Each article argues that at the behest of neoliberal ideology, privatization, far from reducing inequality and stratification in education, substitutes good public policy with the vagaries of charity or the single-mindedness of profit-making.

I have no doubt that readers will, as I did, find fascinating how so much of what they are experiencing in the debates around education restructuring will be nuanced, reinforced, and challenged by this exploration of how similar trends are playing out internationally; and, on a personal note, I'm thrilled that all contributors were so generous with their time and expertise. Carol and Salim were also an absolute treat to work with — and readers may remember their contributions from earlier issues of *OS/OS*.

The cover photo was provided by Mathieu Murphy-Perron, and I encourage readers to check out some of his other equally fantastic work at matness.ca.

My sincere thanks, also, to Nancy Reid for her keen attention to detail and her (always) excellent craftpersonship in helping to assemble this issue.

Have a wonderful summer.

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