



Instruments of Social Change

BY ERIKA SHAKER

It's difficult to begin this editorial without focusing on the spectacular cover design. It is an image inspired by Virginia Gluska's piece, "The Meeting of Four Strings and a Bow", where a truly innovative educator integrated traditional Métis fiddle music into his classrooms in order to connect with and inspire students in Northern Manitoba. The effect has been transformative: "in remote and isolated communities, the fiddling deeply engages not only students, but also parents and community members. In addition to building intergenerational bridges, the stories demonstrate how the fiddle has become a contemporary instrument of social change for many communities involved.... these school fiddle programs are celebrating local

culture, creating a sense of belonging, as well as community and capacity building."

The violin is a powerful image — strings and bridges evoke the act of making connections between students and their classrooms, and between schools and wider communities — and is a useful starting point into an exploration of what we must help schools do in order to build progress in a range of areas: gender equity; creating sustainable communities; media education and analysis; a school system that values experience, and cultural and social relevancy over standardization and evaluation; social justice, and accountable public institutions.

Both Laura Pinto and Jan Pennycook examine different

aspects of the gender debates. Pinto interrogates the notion of “bright-sidedness:” how gender blindness masks the vast socio-economic inequities that still exist. Girl Power, she says, “is a misrepresentation of reality, and a more productive framing of women is called for in classrooms if we hope to address the very real gender inequities head on.” Jan Pennycook looks at a different aspect of the gender debates: so-called neurological differences between boys and girls that are used to justify differences in learning ability. “Just imagine how different schools could be if the focus was on cultivating the infinite potential of brain plasticity in each child rather than working the limitations of tired, social stereotypes,” she concludes.

Nicole Biederbeck, Tim Molnar and Tracy Webb look at a program designed to teach kids and communities about the importance of safe drinking water, and resources designed to empower students to “work cooperatively in groups; to engage in exploration and discovery learning through hands-on activities; to be motivated to focus on the environmental education themes of quality and conservation of drinking water; to engage in critical thinking, and to prompt students to be proactive in regards to environmental and particularly water issues and concerns.” Ellen Wilkes Irmish, an educator at Halton Conservation, talks about how we must help re-connect students with the natural world if we

are to have any hope of creating sustainable communities.

When our schools focus almost exclusively on standardization and evaluation what happens to cultural and social relevancy? Joanie Crandall and Skip Kutz look at how many of the accepted educational techniques that are based on competition and evaluation are in fact counter-intuitive and even damaging for Aboriginal students: “What is clear is that these anti-collective measures are counter to Native values of cooperation, collaboration and mutual respect. Simply stated, the assessment agenda is foreign and sometimes hurtful...” Larry Kuehn uses the Save Our Schools March in Washington DC to explore what the education reforms being promoted by the Obama Administration mean for individual teachers and their professionalism — and, disturbingly, how some teacher unions appear to be capitulating to this corporate-driven vision (to the dismay of many of their members). Ben Levin provides a detailed, accessible critique of one of the corporate-based education reform initiatives in the States — merit pay — which periodically makes appearances in the Canadian education debates.

In “From the Ivory Tower, to the Peace Tower, to People Power,” Brigitte DePape examines how many of our post-secondary educational institutions contribute to maintaining the power structure status quo rather than educating

young people in how to create positive social change. All appearances to the contrary, she explains, the current hierarchical system is not set in stone: “Far more powerful than towers of power is people power, which we can build by organizing our energy in movements. Simply asking the government to do the right thing doesn’t work often enough. So rather than give up, grassroots activists and citizens can work with organized energy and can take direct action, which are tactics outside of regular institutions, such as courts or elections, to achieve a concrete goal.”

Claire Polster also looks at universities in Canada, but instead focuses on how the growth in administration has had a tendency to make our institutions of higher learning less accountable, less collaborative, and less focused on education.

In a fascinating piece — “Reflections on Schooling” — educator Clara Morgan explores how various classroom readings connected with some of her students and their educational experiences. It is a lovely, thoughtful back-and-forth about how education theory intersects with personal experience.

This issue of *Our Schools / Our Selves* is also about the “bridges” between schools and society. Jacques Brodeur and Paul Orłowski look at this in two very different ways. Jacques uses the 2nd Annual Screen Overdose Conference to talk about the

actions educators took to examine the issue of media violence and war toys, and the ways in which Quebec legislation has responded to a very different set of priorities with regard to media exposure and children. Paul Orłowski looks at the *News of the World* phone tapping scandal and suggests ways in which educators might use this event to introduce a variety of relevant and timely topics of discussion (media concentration, the relationship between media and politicians, the role of media in society) into the classroom. He explains:

Teachers should reflect upon *how* the news is presented to the masses, and design pedagogy that illuminates the basic premise for a society to function, one that is based either on fear or on caring for one another, even for a stranger. By corollary, students should be given the space to ponder the manner in which the corporate media fosters a culture of fear. They should be made aware of these tactics so that they can decide if this is the role of the media they want.

Chris Arthur looks at another trend in education — financial literacy — and questions the degree to which schools, in teaching money management skills, are able to counter the overwhelming dominance of the consumer society in which we live. He argues,

much in the way Laura Pinto does with *Girl Power*, that financial literacy programs reinforce a distorted view of wealth, society, worth, fairness and equality:

Citizens should also be concerned that instructional time in schools is going to be used to promote a distorted picture of the economy where poverty is able to be overcome through financial literacy. While this is true for some, it is not the case for most who are in poverty. Poverty is a much more complex social and political issue than presented in most financial literacy literature.

Finally, Rick Hesch reviews *Emancipatory Practices: Adult/*

Youth Engagement for Social and Environmental Justice. He gives a lovely shout-out to the spring 2011 issue of OS/OS which dealt with a similar topic — youth engagement, and building an intergenerational strategy for positive social change (thanks, Rick!).

And here I return to where this editorial started — with the cover illustration — and for that I am extremely grateful to Nancy Reid for her vision and an inspired way into this issue's discussion of education. If schools are truly to be instruments of social change, how we can ensure that the change we build together is inclusive, empathetic, just and empowering; that it serves students, educators and communities; that it broadens horizons rather than narrowing them; and, finally, that its "strings" connect and engage rather than bind and limit.

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