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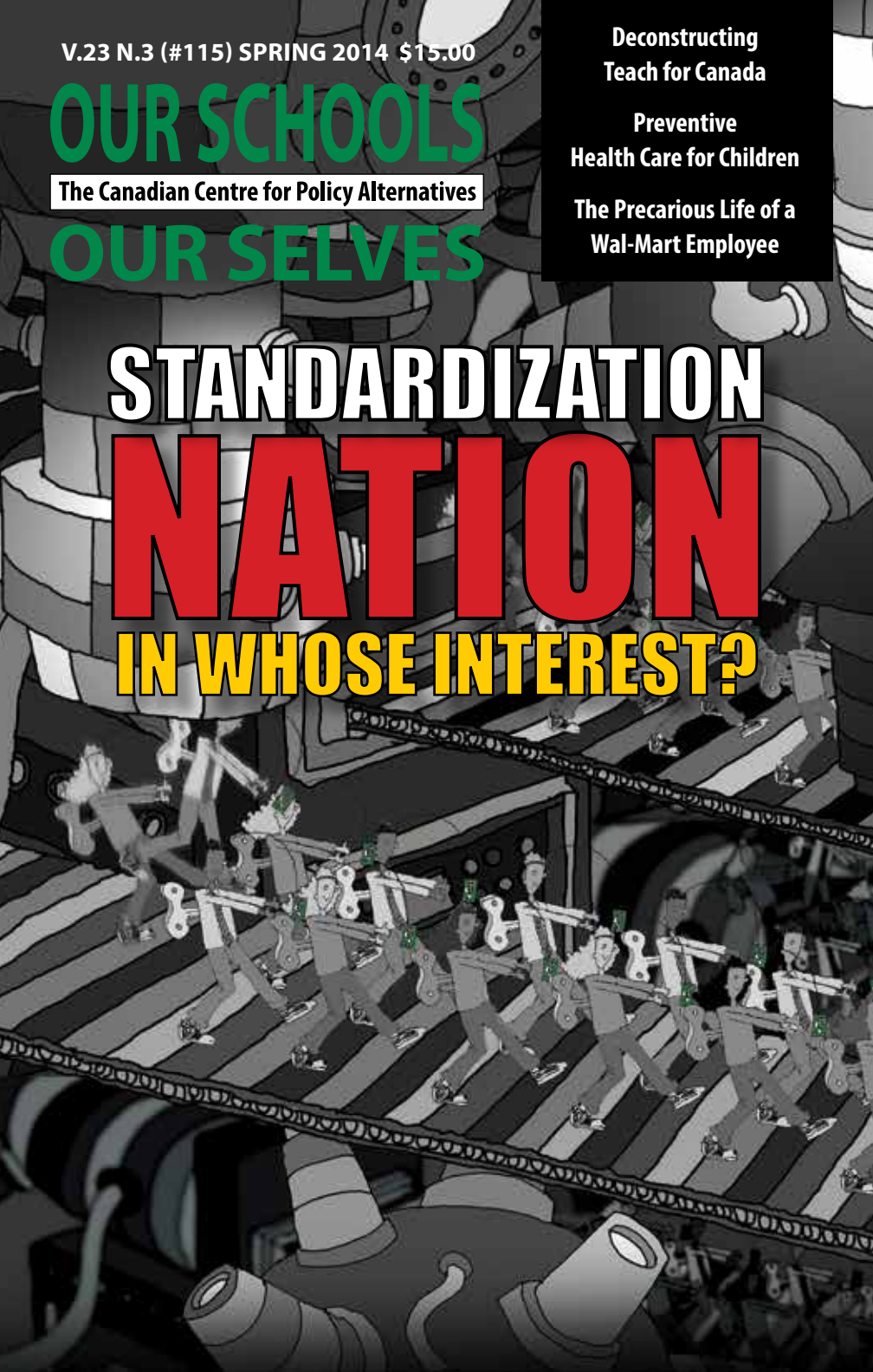
OUR SELVES

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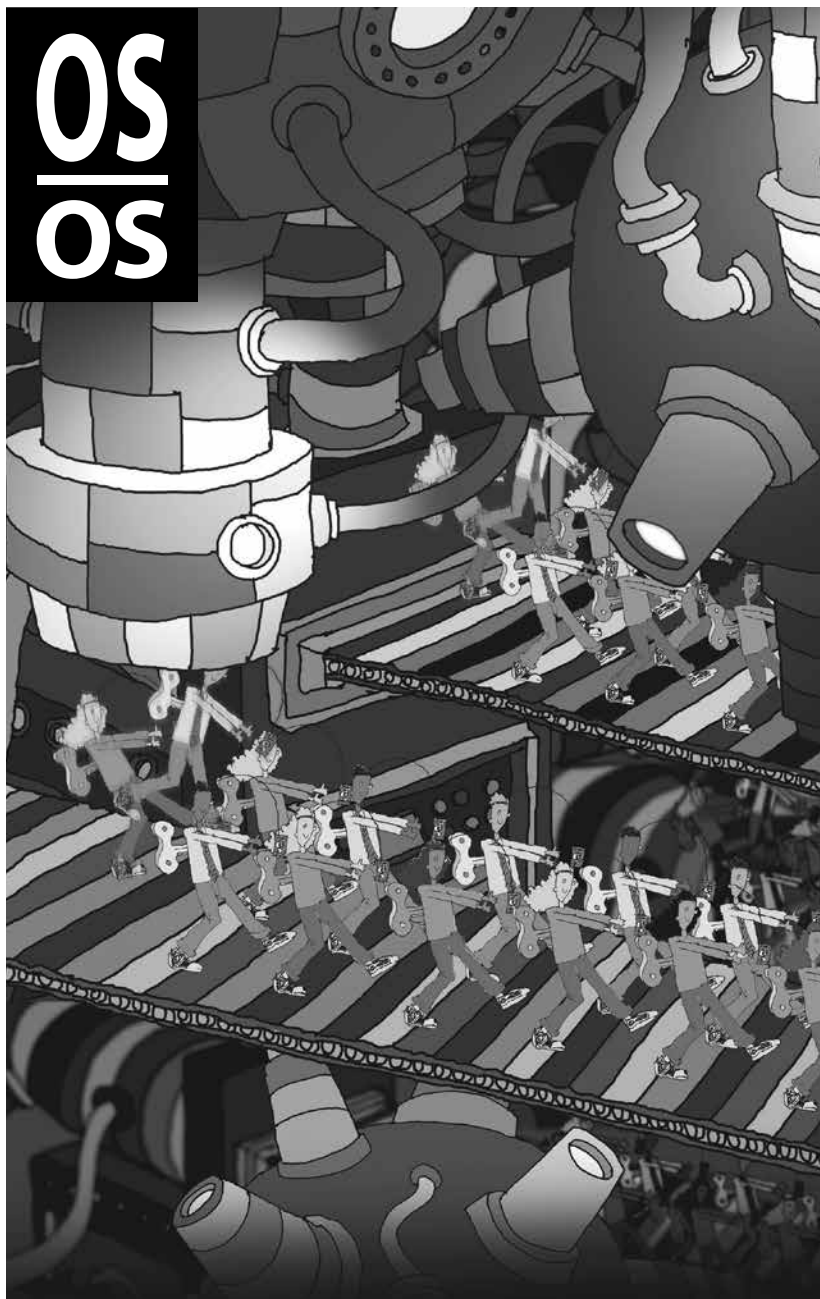
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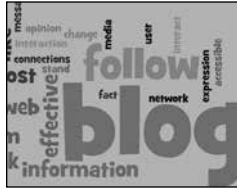
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ERIKA SHAKER

Breaking the Mold

How to get the schools (and communities) we need

That education is in many ways being pressured to become more standardized and more outcomes-based in order to meet corporate workforce demands is no secret. But students are anything but standardized; to pretend otherwise, and to implement education and evaluation systems that are based on standardization ensure mass exclusion as we define “success” within extremely narrow parameters based on even narrower assumptions.

More broadly, a standardized view of what constitutes a “good” education has broader social implications as well. But healthy societies encompass so much more than narrow market-based requirements; they depend on how we live together, care for each other, and ensure that we are becoming more — rather than less — equal.

And so, when talking about this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, I’d like to start with Dirk Van Stralen’s cover illustration because it reinforces how education and society is poorly served by blinkered adherence to market-based standardization. This is exemplified in Josh Cole’s article where he looks at the rise of utilitarianism in education, exemplified by international standardization in the form of OECD’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and its usefulness in whipping up panic about how “our kids” are doing compared to their worldwide competition.

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But what is left out of a standardized model of education that increasingly forces “teaching to the test” in order to ensure optimal market-based outcomes? Safe schools, support for students, and the emotional wellbeing of kids in communities are key to ensuring kids are learning. Anuradha Dugal looks at in-school programs that teach about healthy relationships (as opposed to focusing exclusively on bullying prevention) and how violence in relationships can happen. And the notion of a one-size-fits-all education in a pluralistic society is fundamentally inadequate: Francis Bangou and Douglas Fleming examine how ideas of multiculturalism and citizenship are translated to second language students from immigrant families in Ottawa. According to the authors, “citizenship cannot be viewed simply as subject matter for formal classroom treatment. We must also be cognizant of how our students ‘live’ citizenship in their everyday lives.”

Of course, building cohesive communities and ensuring kids are healthy, safe and happy is something that needs to happen long before the first day of school. Sulemana Fuseini examines key preventive health care measures that would improve the health and wellbeing of all kids, particularly the most vulnerable.

The health of families and communities impacted at a very basic level by the food we eat: Diandra Oliver traces her personal journey in the area of food security, and identifies the connections between community and family health, equity and justice, power and privilege, self-determination, and popular education.

Nora Loreto explores how we pay for the care we are all entitled to receive through a public health care system; the taxes that, in her words, ensured that:

I was never was never asked if I could afford to pay for the machines that helped clear my babies of jaundice, or for the three blood transfusions. Doctors didn't offer me options based on my ability to pay. The public healthcare system did what it's supposed to do: provide high-quality healthcare to me when I needed it.

This is not to suggest that society is by any means equitable: vulnerable populations across the country are further socioeconomically marginalized by the constant reinforcement of neoliberal, colonialist policies. Teach for Canada is a new initiative that purports to “fix” the problem of inadequate First Nation education funding by providing

recent university grads a crash course in teaching and sending them to teach in remote First Nations communities for two years. Tobey Steeves, Dawn Burleigh and Robert Genaille each look at different aspects of this modeled-after-Teach-for-America initiative to explain why this is, according to Dawn, “an attempt to privatize a service that preys on the North and continues to position Aboriginal communities and their education system as deficit-based, requiring the saviours from the South to rescue their system by recruiting ‘exceptional young leaders’”.

Economic “realities” also contribute to social disparities. The plight of young workers is becoming more widely understood as younger people have been decidedly left out of the so-called recovery — and then referred to as “entitled” when they point out the inadequacies of the system they are told they need to try and “fit in to”. Karen Foster offers some advice: get angry. “Everyone is pressing you to adapt to the present. But you can *not adapt*. You can *not re-train* for a job that might just disappear like the first one you trained for. You can *not work* for minimum wage when you graduate. You can *not mold* yourself into the perfect worker so that corporations can escape the cost of training you.” She also, incidentally, has some advice for those who “succeed” in this current economy: “If you get a good job, good for you. But it will be your duty to ally yourself with the growing legions of young workers who are exploited — and underemployment is exploitation — just because they can be.”

“Working for *Whose Family?*” recounts the personal experience of a former U.S.-based Wal-Mart employee who, burdened with student debt, found herself trapped in a cycle of low-paid work that eventually resulted in an untenable home-life. “People can claim that we could simply find another job with better pay and hours, but the reality of the economy we live in, in addition to needing a college degree (and incurring the debt that goes with it) for anything other than a service or manual labor job, makes this an impossibility.”

Markus Moos also looks at young workers and explains how economic and generational shifts are changing the structure, layout and potentially the cohesiveness of the cities in which we live. He asks if “the increasing segregation of young adults into trendy inner city neighbourhoods ... will increase intergenerational tensions. Will it become more difficult to relate to previous generations for those

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who spent their young adult years only amongst other young adults? Will older generation see young people as difficult to relate to and understand and visa-versa because they are not 'exposed' to each other on a regular basis?"

Finally, two reviews (of the film *Schools that Change Communities* and the book *Tenir Tête*) explore the connections between education, justice, social change and empowerment and reinforce the role schools at all levels play in shaping (as well as reflecting) the communities in which we live.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is an opportunity to look at education perhaps more broadly than we normally do — at what is often left out of the education debates even though it impacts them enormously. I am, of course, talking about the different socioeconomic realities so many of us live, and which have an enormous effect on what kids bring with them (or, conversely, what they do *not* bring with them) to school every day.

I am also talking about the narrow assumptions that those in positions of power often make about how to "fix" education (or perhaps just "fix" those who can't seem to fit into a standardized, outcomes-based idea of what education should be). But it comes down to this question: what kind of world do we want to build, together, for all our kids? And if we capitulate to a market-model of what "we need", how many of us are prepared to be left — or are we prepared to leave — behind?

ERIKA SHAKER is the Executive Editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.