

V.24 N.1 (#117) FALL 2014 \$15.00

OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Is socialist
education possible
today?

Child Care 2020

Dewey and assessment

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a blue winter jacket and a red hat with a fur lining, is holding a yellow sign with red corners. The sign has handwritten text in black marker. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people's legs visible.

Poverty, Polarization, and the Educational Achievement Gap



FOR FAMILIES, FOR CHILDREN, FOR CHOICE INVEST IN CHILDCARE NOW!!!

IT'S NOT QUALITY EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN UNLESS IT'S REGISTERED EDUCATION

C'MON! REALLY YEARS LATER WE'RE STILL WAITING

DAYCARE IS THE BEST!





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Our Schools/Our Selves is published four times a year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives @250ne Community, 500-251 Bank St., Ottawa, ON, K2P 1X3. This is Volume 24, Number 1, Issue #117 of the journal (FALL 2014). *Our Schools/Our Selves* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association. It is indexed in the Canadian Magazine Index and the Alternative Press Index.

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Tel: (613) 563-1341 Fax: (613) 233-1458

ISSN 0840-7339

Production

Typesetting and design: Nancy Reid

Printed in Canada by RR Donnelley, 1500 Saint-Patrick, Montréal QC H3K 0A3
Publications Mail Registration No. 8010.

Cover, interior cover, first page and table of contents photos: Nancy Reid
Cover design: Nancy Reid (nrgrafix.com)

The opinions expressed in *Our Schools/Our Selves* are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCPA.

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ERIKA SHAKER

Poverty, Polarization, and the Educational Achievement Gap

Now that the first fall rush is behind us (or perhaps that's just wishful thinking on my part), it's a good time to take stock of how so many of the education-related issues circulating with the public, media pundits and policymakers are manifesting themselves in our classrooms, on our campuses, and in our communities.

The BC teachers' strike ended in September, though the issues behind it (adequate financial resources for students, particularly students with special needs or who are living in vulnerable conditions; decent salaries for teachers; respect for the collective bargaining process; enhancing the education system rather than balancing budgets on the back of already-underfunded schools) have not been put to rest: furthermore, these same issues are playing out in classrooms across the country.

How we care for and educate younger generations — from the early years right up to postsecondary — is consistently the topic of heated debate. One thing is clear, though: societies are changing, driven to a large extent by an economy that has proven itself to be anything but bulletproof.

But social progress is not only as a result of economic shifts. Societies that invest in people and the programs that provide a basis from which we can overcome inequality — while making our communities

safer, more caring, better educated and more cohesive — are not only more productive; they are, quite simply, happier and healthier places in which to live.

Let's start at the beginning of the educational process: Martha Friendly and Bozica Costigliola provide an overview of the fight for a universal child care program in Canada in the lead-up to ChildCare2020 — a national conference in November 2014 that aims to: “develop an inclusive vision of early childhood education and child care reflecting the needs of today's families and young children; ensure that this vision of ECEC was on the public agenda; and engage future generations to expand citizen and government support for ECEC.”

Thea Klinger examines how the priorities set out in Ontario's proposed Child Care Modernization Act may be hampered by “some conspicuous deficiencies that need to be addressed before the legislation can achieve its stated goals” of increasing safety, quality and accessibility of child care in the province.

Growing inequality — internationally, but more specifically in Canada — is resulting in increasingly unequal communities, schools, and educational experiences for students, particularly those who are already most marginalized. We know how precarity in the workplace and the economy contributes to substantially more stressful lives as well as less time spent with family and less community engagement, not to mention less money to spend on basic things like school supplies for kids.

Teachers see this every day (and have the worried conversations and out-of-pocket expenses to prove it). But in spite of what we know about precarity, inequality and poverty impacting a student's ability to engage in class, and connect with the broader school community (let alone a parent's ability and energy to navigate an overly-stretched system to seek help for their child), standardized testing is still implemented as an intensely problematic method for measuring student (and, by extension, school) performance. Jessica Schmidt examines the relationship between student achievement and social class polarization in Toronto. Ben Sichel, a Nova Scotian teacher, looks at how the achievement push has resulted in an emphasis on math — to the exclusion, in some cases, of other elements of an education.

More broadly, Lucyna Cresnik and Laura Pinto provide a much-needed critique of the “culture of poverty” framework that is too

readily embraced by many who work most closely with marginalized communities. And in a new section, Frederick Harris reviews online resources available to educators who are interested in issues of social justice — including poverty and marginalization — and would like to integrate them as teaching tools. Frederick also provides us with a thoughtful exploration of what he maintains is a misreading of Dewey with regard to assessment and its integration into the “modern school system”.

How we as a society choose to address a system of higher education that’s increasingly underfunded and positioned as an individual good (and therefore an individual responsibility) is the subject of Jordan MacLaren’s piece that tries to demystify a student aid system that is — by design — non-transparent, complicated, and in many cases counter-intuitive. She asks: “is this the most efficient, effective, fairest and most publicly-accountable way to ensure that all students, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status, can pursue higher education?”

Teachers increasingly find themselves on the front lines defending education from funding cuts — and are often “rewarded” with decidedly labour-hostile legislation, frequently bolstered by media quick to blame the unions while claiming to support the teachers who belong to them. Some of these issues are explored in Larry Kuehn’s Roundup. Michael Corbett’s lecture honouring J.B. McLachlan, an early 20th century Cape Breton labour leader, provides an opportunity to interrogate the capitalist/business mindset being imposed on our classrooms, and to propose how public schools can teach socialist education:

A contemporary socialist education would recognize diversity and the challenge of maintaining and sustaining strong bonds between people, but also between people, animals, and the physical earth. The relentless commodification of all of our relations has brought us to where we are today.

Interestingly, many of the aspects of a “socialist education” cited in this article operate in direct contrast to Trevor Norris’ exposure of how *Canadian Geographic Magazine* has partnered with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) to promote “classroom-based activities that normalize fossil fuel consumption and a lifestyle and culture oriented around dependence on fossil fuel

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consumption.” Initiatives such as this, he argues, raise key questions, including:

How compatible are commercial interests with educational objectives? Should education reproduce consumer values or aim to critique them? What is the difference between educating and acquiring a new market of consumers? The health of our schools — and of our planet — depends on how we address this question.

Of course, the corporate mindset to which Corbett refers is not only apparent in primary and secondary schools. Our universities and colleges, too, are responding to and in many ways internalizing this frame. Herbert Pimlott discusses the ways in which an increasingly precarious and casual workforce — adjunct professors — are playing a greater role in the educating of our students. But, as he makes clear, they are also being exploited as an effective cost-cutting measure, and the ramifications are profound.

...Contract faculty members often feel as though they are always considered and treated as second-class citizens. As precarious workers, contract faculty are already vulnerable to possible repercussions for their activism from both permanent faculty in supervisory positions and from administrators. This is why it is critical that faculty associations take the lead in modeling ways and means for supporting (not leading) contract faculty in fighting to improve their pay and working conditions.

Eric Howe looks at the (U.S.-imported) flawed Prioritization process designed to streamline and cut costs (as well as departments) at higher education institutions, is currently being implemented at a number of universities across the country, and how it specifically impacted the University of Saskatchewan. As he explains, “Prioritization is a budgeting process! It is hard to sufficiently emphasize the obvious: a budgeting process without a reasonable measurement of cost is humiliatingly nonsensical!”

Simon Tremblay-Pepin also critiques this narrow, corporate view of the “point” of a university education as it appears in *The Economist*:

It becomes much easier to present the changes proposed as simple evolutions to which we must necessarily adapt. Previously, the elite was educated in classrooms, now we have the Internet. Previously,

we received training in our twenties to then work the rest of our lives, now we must continuously reinvest in our human capital. Previously, research was done for the public sector, now it's the private sector that has the most pressing needs. Let's adapt!

There's no shortage of business-minded groups — the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation is one — anxious to poke fun at some of the less quantifiable, Humanities/Social Science-y aspects of higher education. Kayle Hatt and I use the CTF's mockery of Social Sciences and Humanities Federation of Canada (SSHRC) funding for various research projects, to talk about the public benefits inherent in providing students with opportunities to learn the practice of research and analysis while exploring a wide range of subject areas — many of which have informed our present understanding of a variety of topical issues.

Finally, Heather Hunter reviews Jim Silver's recent book, *Moving Forward Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal adult education*, currently available from Fernwood Press.

My thanks, as well, to Nancy Reid's fantastic photographs and cover illustration as well as her skill with layout and design, which both highlight and underscore so many of the topics explored in this fall issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

Enjoy the remainder of the season!

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