



Bright Ideas

BY ERIKA SHAKER

As with many of the issues of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, the theme tends to evolve over time, often becoming evident only in the final weeks of production. I prefer that — I love to watch the theme develop organically, and I frequently find myself marveling at how articles from so many different authors living in communities across the country (or in other countries) and writing from a variety of perspectives often seem to be tackling the same issues — or closely related ones — at the same time. And I especially enjoy how conversations I have with friends, colleagues and even strangers somehow help the different threads of the education discussion knit themselves together in unpredictable ways.

So perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that one major influence was a conversation I had with a friend earlier this year while I was on maternity leave. She was describing the process her son, an accomplished musician, went through while auditioning for a spot in a music program. Turns out that even though he knew what to expect, the process as he lived it was fairly surreal. He walked into a room, and found himself alone except for a curtain behind which were the examiners. He took his place in the centre of the room, read the instructions that had been left, played the musical pieces he was instructed to perform...and left. Other than the music itself, the entire process was conducted in total silence — something he, as a

performer, found incredibly frustrating and somewhat counterintuitive. His mother explained: to him, so much of playing music is the give-and-take with the audience; the feeding off of the energy and excitement he is able to cre-

What we have done is embraced a philosophy of education that, rather than focusing on how schools can do well for all kids, instead forces kids to do well for schools.

ate by his playing — the response of others to his personality as expressed by his playing. So to have that erased; to have music reduced to the mechanical and technical playing of notes as perfectly as possible; to the precise following of instructions left by anonymous judges: it just seemed ... odd.

Odd indeed. I actually found myself a little creeped-out by the description of the event. But then I asked myself — is this any different from how we use standardized tests to determine “how well kids have learned,” or “what kids know” or “how well teachers teach”? This “measure” also eliminates the intellectual give-and-take and the social, collective context; the learning that comes from a robust, ongoing class discussion; the excitement that is generated in unlooked-for places and spaces of learning that takes

all of us in directions we could never have predicted and leaves us all richer for the experience.

In this narrow framework, learning — and everything that comes of it — is, in effect, reduced to how a process (rather than an experience) is measured through a test. And when the results of the tests are trotted out to answer all those questions we have about our students and schools and teachers, what we have done is embraced a philosophy of education that, rather than focusing on how schools can do well for all kids, instead forces kids to do well for schools. If students do badly on a test, schools and teachers have done badly for students. The test doesn't fail; but everything else does. This isn't good pedagogy — it's bad logic.

This issue of *Our Schools* is about how students and educators are confronting and resisting this narrow view of education, one that is often (although not exclusively) driven by a standardized, testing-based agenda. Some of the articles focus on strategies within the school system; others look at the very structure of schooling itself. Some tackle the issue of education and social justice; others look at how a narrow definition of education has led to standardization and corporatization in the classroom, with significant implications for life outside of school. Readers will also notice the influence of Paulo Freire on many of the authors, implicitly and explicitly.

Jan Pennycook tackles the political context of education reform in a three-part article that lays out the concepts of standardization, merit pay, high stakes testing and teacher professionalism in Canada, the U.S. and Finland with highly detailed yet breathtaking clarity. Andrew Hodgkins in “Petrol’s Paid Pipers” takes a close look at the influence of the oil industry in school curriculum in Alberta, particularly in the context of an ad-hoc approach to environmental education. In many ways these two authors provide a framework for the other articles in this issue, because they identify the key questions on which others elaborate: to whom do our schools belong, and who and what should (or do) they serve?

Our authors are not dealing with minor questions: is education synonymous with schooling, and what does this relationship mean for rural or Indigenous knowledge, wonder Derek Rasmussen and Reem Khan in their articles examining, respectively, education in Nunavut and rural Pakistan. And what are the implications for how we think about “development” and “civilization” in the context of education?

Much in the same way that we often confuse “schooling” with education, other authors examine the seemingly “natural” relationship between grading and learning. Stephen Tedesco puts the (dis)connection between grading and learning into the context of a

PhD program. What, he asks, do grades contribute to the pursuit of knowledge at that level — and is it positive? Teresa LeGrand talks about Ottawa’s Alternative schools in the context of a program review that highlighted the philosophy of an Alternative Program that is inherently non-competitive, multi-generational, flexible and ungraded. And Carlo Ricci, Pam Laricchia and Idzie Desmarais take these principles even further in their article about Holistic Learning or, as it is also called, Unschooling — what Idzie describes as “the realization that life and learning are inseparable. The realization that what unschooling is, is true life learning (the knowledge that living equals learning), and thus can’t have start times or endpoints.”

What aspects of education are being neglected in a cost-cutting, standardized framework? John Vitale explores the ways in which music education is available only sporadically in schools across Ontario, and the ways in which students are being shortchanged by insufficient access to an aspect of education that provides such richness to the learning experience and to their lives.

Can we hope for transformative positive social change through a traditional school structure? Cathleen Haskins looks at how educating for peace means much more than importing a curriculum, but rather requires a different way of schooling (Cathleen’s analysis and prac-

tice is grounded in the Montessori philosophy), one that is attuned to how students learn from and with each other in a mutually respectful and empathetic setting. Similarly, Larry Kuehn looks at the experience of educators in

“You Are Where You Sit” is a fascinating case study of how the simple act of rearranging classroom furniture sparked a conversation with his class about power, inclusion, exclusion and justice.

Columbia and the teacher union’s proposal to establish “an international campaign to have schools identified as ‘Zones of Peace.’ The message is for everyone to stay out of the school with their arms — guerillas, paramilitary, gangs, army and drug shippers....The proposal.....calls not only for keeping the social violence outside of school, but also to introducing programs on non-violent ways of solving disputes — disputes among adults as well as children.”

We often take empathy as a starting point in peace education and anti-bullying programs. But does “using” empathy in education allow students to falsely imagine a common experience with someone else? This is a question that Tim Claypool and Tim Molnar address from their different professional perspectives (Claypool is a psychologist and

former Roots of Empathy instructor, Molnar is an educator). And as the article indicates, it’s not an easy thing to face; Molnar writes: “Was seeking to be empathetic perhaps a grasping after who I might want others to be, projecting my sense of self onto or into others, an imagining of their emotional state which in the end might be simply a confirmation of the validity of my experience?”

What do students and educators learn from addressing (rather than minimizing) issues of difference and diversity, and by tackling marginalization face-on? Noor Al-Shanti looks at this issue from the perspective of a new teacher and proposes ways in which online discussion might provide an interesting opportunity to talk about diversity and how we prejudge. “Teaching Against the Grain” by Jennifer Hayden-Benn describes how she, a music teacher in an inner-city school in Montreal, along with a number of her students started a social justice club. She talks about how poverty and race-based marginalization experienced by many of her students became points of entry into a broader conversation of social justice on a global scale. And Tom McKenna’s article “You Are Where You Sit” is a fascinating case study of how the simple act of rearranging classroom furniture sparked a conversation with his class about power, inclusion, exclusion and justice.

I mentioned that the teachings and philosophy of Paulo

Freire feature prominently in this issue. Henry Giroux has written a lovely tribute to the life and work of a man whose influence on democratic education continues to be profound. And readers will note the number of articles in this issue where authors comment on the influence his work has on them as educators and as students.

When I started speaking with Dirk Van Stralen about the cover illustration, I was at a loss as to how he might manage to translate such a broad range of topics — Alternative schools, empathy and ethics, peace education, attacks on unionized teachers in Columbia, constraints on music education, the oil industry and environmental education in Alberta, education in Nunavut — into a comprehensive image. Could he possibly illustrate

something along the lines of turning a school inside-out, pushing limits, and empowering those who work and learn within it?

How he did it I don't know — but the glorious cover design evokes so much of what the authors express in their articles — the transformative nature of education, the lifting of barriers, the pushing of limits, and the power of possibility. It's truly breathtaking. And, as always, Nancy Reid does a remarkable job with layout and photography and is an ongoing pleasure to work with.

I like to describe each issue of *OS/OS* as a thoughtful, spirited, multifaceted conversation....and this was a particularly good one. My profound thanks to all who contributed — and to all the readers who continue this important dialogue.