

# Issue One (Winter 1994)

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE S. O. T. A. P. D. CHAIR

**Sandra Klinck    Chairperson - P.D.**

At the Divisional In-service last February, I stressed that communication between colleagues is something very valuable and precious. It is our intention that "**Teaching Today For Tomorrow**" will encourage a communication network between colleagues. Many of the important sources of support we all need are right here in this division. Our colleagues are dedicated caring professionals. By networking, supporting, sharing, and caring about each other we can support each other. Providing the opportunity for people to share thoughts, ideas, and conference information is difficult when there are so many different interests. Perhaps writing in this journal will provide colleagues with an opportunity to share. There are so many challenges facing us as educators today and so many areas in which we all recognize changes must take place. Professional development is the vital link if we are to meet these challenges.

Professional development has traditionally been viewed as a high priority by our members. We use the words "professional development" as opposed to "teacher development" because we believe in ourselves as professionals. Therefore, as professionals we accept it as OUR responsibility to be involved in organizing our professional development.

What does this mean? What are our professional responsibilities? I believe this means we must strive to be involved in all aspects of educational decision making as well as our personal professional development. We all accept the need for change. If nothing ever changes then we would still be living as we were hundreds of years ago. History teaches us to reflect and learn from the past, and use this knowledge to create a better future. Change cannot happen overnight! Sometimes we become impatient when it seems that instead of improving we are regressing. As we adapt and change to meet one challenge another suddenly appears. At times we feel that we are constantly in a state of flux. Perhaps we are, but I would ask that we all have patience and determination to hold on to our vision for the future, especially in difficult times. Every child has the right to the highest quality education. The future will be in their hands. We must not abdicate our responsibilities. As professionals, even though we are feeling overwhelmed and somewhat frustrated, with more and more demands and less and less time, we have to continue to involve everybody in educational dialogue.

No matter where we teach, we are all feeling stress and the need for support. It is a time for us to collectively come together, network, support, share and care about each other. I hope this journal will provide a starting point for this network.

## **SUPERINTENDENTS' MESSAGE**

Manitoba's Minister of Education was recently quoted as having said that educators have "forgotten or never really understood what education was meant to be." One can infer that there exists a common understanding of the purpose of education, and that Mr. Manness has the understanding.

It is perhaps more accurate to say that the Minister is expressing his opinion, one of many on the purpose of education. However, his opinion receives much attention because he is the Minister of Education.

Each teacher also has a sense of what education is "**meant to be.**" That notion, hopefully, is supported by a combination of experience, formal academic preparation, personal beliefs or values and reflective thought, and is dynamic in that it is challenged by collegial interaction, current educational research and thought and the demands of society. It is important that we continue to wrestle with the question of what education should provide for the children, adolescents and young adults in our charge. To do so is to continue to develop as a professional.

The Superintendents' Team is pleased that this Journal has become a reality and is confident that it will become a successful means for fostering professional growth among teachers in the Seven Oaks School Division.

# WHAT IS THE POINT OF CRITICAL DIALOGUE? POINT OF CRITICAL DIALOGUE?

**Matthias Meiers**

Critical reflection and dialogue about what we do in our schools is a moral and pragmatic necessity in a community of learners. To describe this idea more clearly I first need to distinguish critical educational dialogue from other sometimes competing forms of talk about schooling or education.

In my experience much day-to-day dialogue on school issues involves primarily intuition and "gut reactions". This is quite understandable because teachers invest their personality and their personal values, such as concern and caring for the student and his/her development, into their view of themselves and their role in the classroom. Teachers seek to foster greater social, moral and intellectual maturity in their students and to this end engage in forms of parental behaviour. These are learned over a long period of time and they are rooted in the teacher's personal understanding of what constitutes good parenting and a successful outcome of her involvement in the student's life. Therefore, the teacher's parental behaviour defies "cold intellectualizing", and rightfully so because it would minimize the adult caretaker's humanity.

Intuitive hunches are essential but, I think, not sufficient for a well-rounded teaching practice for the following reasons. First, an intuition is by definition too vague to be shared or communicated effectively. It is essentially a half-baked idea and of little use to other educators or parents. If teaching were strictly an intuitive art, possible ways of achieving successful practice could not be described clearly but would remain enshrouded in a mystical haze. An intuitive hunch can only stand up to scrutiny, if it is made explicit. Only then can the teacher try to determine whether it is worth acting on. Thus, for example, a failed lesson plan or classroom dynamics "gone wrong" can become a valuable learning experience for a teacher who reviews his/her hunches, purposes and strategic behaviour in a critical manner. This would probably entail indentifying the implicit or up-to-now unquestioned or dogmatic aspects of his/her thinking and practice which have remained unformulated in the intuitive domain. I believe that the process of formulating the implicit is a fundamental first step in critical reflection and dialogue.

The purpose of critical reflection and dialogue is learning in its most fundamental sense. Critical dialogue presupposes that the participants in the process have entered into an egalitarian partnership to share their insights and tentative ideas on issues of common interest in a truthful and authentic manner. An educational issue is not studied in abstract isolation but in the context of the participants' personal and professional experience because the issue is relevant and important to their ongoing experience as educators and human beings. To strip such discussion of its human relevance means to render it worthless to the process of authentic self-directed learning, the purpose of critical dialogue.

We must also keep in mind that the teacher is not the only person who educates a specific child. Education is a joint venture in which adult decision-makers need to coalesce. The quality of their dialogue has direct bearing on the educational experiences of the child. Assertiveness, the ability to formulate clear messages and to listen attentively to the underlying themes of the other are at the heart of successful critical dialogue. These essential qualities earn the trust of other adult decision-makers. The teacher who critically reflects on the dilemmas of his/her practice can respond to parental demands or worries in a manner that will not exclude the parent from meaningful input. Educational leadership is an earned right which, I think, resides in those who clearly inform the other decision-makers of the choices and dilemmas facing them and offer moral and educationally sound courses of action.

A hazy conceptualization of the educational programme on the other hand can have deleterious outcomes. A parent may receive a muddled message and walk away with the impression that the educator does not know what s/he is doing even though the actual classroom practice might be based on precise intuitive hunches. The teacher may also without reservation accept demands regarding a change in the programme because s/he cannot formulate the rationale of the present programme or a meaningful alternative to it. The teacher may also chide the parent for intruding into his/her area of professional competence. These unfortunate scenarios, I think, describe possible links between the absence of critical reflection and harmful breakdowns in communication.

The process of critical reflection and dialogue becomes a moral and pragmatic necessity because such dialogue helps us discover that we face similar dilemmas and challenges in our classrooms and schools. It helps us become more meaningful and effective communicators particularly at a time when educators are under attack from politically motivated individuals and special interest groups seeking to impose their simplistic, retrograde and often contradictory views of "good remedies for an ailing system". We cannot afford to let their sloppy thinking become an authoritative voice in the eyes of the community. It is our moral responsibility as teachers to assert our vested interest in the human development of children and direct the focal point of public and professional discussion to educational purposes.

**FROM THE LITERATURE - SYNOPSIS/COMMENT:  
THE LURE OF CURRICULAR REFORM AND ITS PITIFUL HISTORY**

Larry Cuban, Phi Delta Kappan, October, 1993

**Ken Burron**

How do we effectively transform student knowledge and behaviour? Cuban explores this question, reviewing conventional approaches to curricular reform and exposing their shortcomings and then suggesting strategies that are based on an expanded notion of curriculum.

Educational policy makers have consistently attempted to correct the academic, social and economic ills of society through curriculum reform. The curriculum is thought to be the means of ensuring that what is desirable for the next generation to know will be taught. Often curricular reform is controlled by politically powerful special interest groups. The struggle to affect what is taught in schools is accompanied by heated debate and much discord. After the dust settles little actually changes because the assumption that the official curriculum has the power to transform teaching behavior and student learning is flawed.

Cuban points out that the official curriculum is only one of four curricula that students are exposed to in schools. The other three are the taught curriculum, the learned curriculum, and the tested curriculum.

The **OFFICIAL** curriculum is government approved and receives much public attention. It is expected that teachers will teach it and students will learn it.

The **TAUGHT** curriculum is what actually happens when teachers close the classroom door.

The **LEARNED** curriculum includes all learnings students acquire and goes beyond the official and taught curriculum.

The **TESTED** curriculum attempts to capture the official, taught, and learned curriculum and achieves this goal to a somewhat limited extent.

The current focus in this era of accountability and economic competitiveness is on the official and tested curricula. It is believed that by controlling what is taught society's ailments will be cured. Cuban suggests that a serious error is made when content becomes more important than teaching. In emphasizing the power of pedagogy he states that "How we teach becomes what we teach."

Strategies that can be employed in creating conditions which will reflect positively on transforming student learning and behaviour include countering the harmful focus on measuring an official curriculum by becoming involved in efforts to educate the public and policy makers about the power of the taught curriculum.

A second strategy is to develop the capacity of teachers to create their own means of integrating the four curricula. In effect Cuban is talking about developing pedagogy in teachers that results in a connectedness between the official curriculum and what actually happens in schools.

**Comment:**

Cuban presents his ideas in an easily readable form. As well what he says makes sense, particularly in the context of Seven Oaks where attention is given to the professional empowerment of teachers through initiatives such as the symposium series and the teacher team concept where educational ideas are the focus of discussion. Teachers should be encouraged and given support in their efforts to develop their abilities to make sound professional instructional decisions which take into consideration a variety of needs. While desirable in principle, in practice it can be somewhat intimidating, particularly when faced with the prospect of challenge by a public that is not overly supportive of the teaching profession. However, if teachers truly wish to affect student learning, it is necessary that they think through and come to a personal understanding of ideas such as those expressed by Cuban in this article. This, like most Kappan articles, is good reading and not time consuming. It will, however, stimulate your thinking.

## **STUDENT PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT (Portfolios as a Learning Tool)**

**Rory Paul**

An assessment revolution is shaking up education from pre-schools to professional schools. At the heart of this upheaval is the recognition that for all their virtues - particularly efficiency and economy - traditional standardized tests often fail to tell us what we most want to know about student achievement. According to Diana Hart in *Authentic Assessment, a Handbook for Education, ...* "standardized tests exert a powerful influence on curriculum and instruction by pushing teachers to 'teach to the test'."

In order to measure and evaluate learning purposefully and authentically, educators must use a variety of assessment tools. As James Aseltine says in *Performance Assessment: Looking at the "Real" Achievement of Middle Level Students*, "We must be accountable for measures such as cognitive outcomes and skill outcomes ... traditional assessments do not always represent the broader achievement gains of students ... We must be willing to use alternative forms of assessment that present the bigger picture of pupil achievement."

How do we in our classrooms begin to do that? Implementation of performance assessment, including the development of student portfolios may provide the mechanism. Portfolios that contain examples of growth in understanding and other successes become the evidence for students to "show" when reporting their real achievement.

Portfolios contain an assortment of student work and are a means for continual assessment. They are the intersection of instruction and assessment.

Student portfolios can provide:

- (1) A basis for discussion with peers, teachers and parents.
- (2) Documented demonstration of skills and understanding.
- (3) A means to reflect on one's work.
- (4) Documentation of development and growth in ability, attitudes, and expression.
- (5) Demonstrations of different learning styles.
- (6) Chances to make critical choices in selecting work for inclusion.
- (7) Methods for making connections with prior knowledge and learning.

(8) Opportunities for students to trace the development of their learning.

### **Getting Started**

The planning, preparation, and time involved in teacher decisions before implementing a portfolio system are critical. One of the questions to be considered is, "What are the purposes of a portfolio; how will it be used?"

- (1) Is it going to be part of the final evaluation grade in a summative assessment?
- (2) Is it going to be used for parent discussions?
- (3) Is the entire portfolio going to follow the student throughout his or her schooling?
- (4) Is it going to be used as a reflective piece for students to look back at their work and see their own development?
- (5) Is it going to be used as a school or division piece for comparison using pre-established criteria?
- (6) Will it be used for self evaluation by the student?

Students require guidelines for collecting and selecting materials. Questions to consider are: Do we include only finished products, works that are "still in progress", only 'best' work, or peer comments about the portfolio? Is there a limit to the number of items? Will teachers and students share in the selection process? Are teacher comments included? Will there be periodic entries?

Portfolios foster a sense of ownership among students for their work. Students actively collect and reflect on their work and make decisions about what work is representative of growth, effort, achievement, and the ability to apply and transfer knowledge. Possible collectibles include: homework, teacher-made tests, learning logs and journals, written artifacts, videos of performances, audio cassettes of speeches, readings, questions, and songs, interviews with students, observation checklists, self assessments, goal statements, work in progress, artwork, lab experiments, problem solving logs, and best work.

Portfolios can be tailored to meet any goal or criteria, and pertain to any content area. There are many ways to manage and organize portfolios as well. You may want to include:

- (1) A creative cover that reflects the personality or interests of the student.
- (2) A table of contents.

(3) A written comment about each item telling why each item was selected and how the student feels about it.

(4) A list of future goals based on the student's needs, interests, and self assessment of the portfolio.

(5) A letter from the teacher or parents to the student discussing comments, feedback, and encouragement.

## **Portfolios and Assessment**

Methods for evaluating portfolios will depend on your goals. Consider the learning outcomes and choose an evaluation procedure that best suits your criteria. Several options may include:

(1) Student work is assessed throughout the course. The final portfolio is not graded; it is a tool to display growth over time.

(2) One grade is given to the entire portfolio. The grade is determined by criteria set by the teacher and student.

(3) Each piece of work in the portfolio is graded separately on the basis of predetermined criteria for each assignment.

(4) No grade is given on the final portfolio, but pieces are selected to represent the student's work for a year.

(5) A self assessment of the portfolio by the student.

(6) Several pieces from the portfolio are passed on to the next teacher.

(7) The senior portfolio is refined for job interviews.

At Leila North, portfolios are being used to supplement methods of reporting student progress with parents. Several times during the school year student-led discussions take place at the school. Students meet with their parents to present their portfolios. While the teacher is there to add comments, the students are expected to lead the discussion. Both parents and teachers have been impressed by the leadership and independence shown by even very young students during their portfolio presentations. A recent informal survey of parents whose children are involved in the portfolio assessment process showed that a large majority thought that they had a clear picture of their child's achievements.

## **Conclusion**

Before you begin using portfolios, talk to someone who has used a portfolio system and get advice about how to initiate the process. Also, take a moment to reflect about the use of portfolios. Think about the pluses, minuses, and interesting aspects of this system.

### **Plus**

- shows students how they have changed
- shows parents how students have developed
- serves as a source of pride for student
- enhances self esteem
- allows for self assessment

### **Minus**

- involves time
- requires storage of portfolios
- loss of portfolios can occur
- students moving in and out of school

### **Interesting**

- shows process not just product
- provides visual evidence for students to see growth
- can be kept from K-12

## THE SYMPOSIUM SERIES (A REFLECTION)

Teresa Hay

Teaching, our chosen vocation, is simultaneously demanding and challenging; demanding our time and energy to interact with a continuously changing society while providing the best possible educational experiences we can and challenging us to create and recreate our understanding of learning in today's world in order to benefit the future.

**The Symposium Series** has provided us with the opportunity to gather together as a community of educators to talk with people who have made it their life's work to study in-depth the issues with which we struggle daily. Theirs is not the definitive voice of authority, but a voice of much thought and study. Our voices exchange to further the understanding of both.

In a 1991 report to the Board of Trustees regarding **The Symposium Series**, David Coulter stated four purposes the series had. These were:

- to encourage critical reflection and discourse in education
- to facilitate interaction and exchange with respected scholars
- to stimulate local interaction and exchange on critical educational issues
- to inform the practice of education and provide a basis for critique

January 25, 1994 marked the beginning of the fourth series of symposia with a presentation and discussion with Tom Ulrich, a Staff Officer with the Manitoba Teachers' Society and a Research Assistant with the University of Ottawa. The topic: "Educational Reform: The Need for Vision" seems timely. Past speakers have encouraged us to consider "Teachers as Leaders: New Roles in Renewing Schools" (Anne Miller 1991), "Excellence as a Guide to Educational Conversation" (Nel Noddings, 1993) and "A Pedagogy of Understanding in the Classroom" (Vito Perrone, 1993).

Some speakers have been part of our annual Divisional Inservice, while others have spoken in the evening to those of us who have gathered to listen and talk with them. Our role as teachers is becoming increasingly complex. Our body of knowledge gained through experience and study needs to be shared and examined. **The Symposium Series** provides us with one vehicle with which to undertake this task.

## EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS

**Karen Hartikainen and Agatha Klassen**

We are part of the educators from around the world who joined together to share ideas and discuss issues at the Whole Language Umbrella Conference, held at the Winnipeg Convention Centre from August 5 to 8, 1993. We thank the Seven Oaks Professional Development Committee for granting our request to cover the registration fees.

The concept of "Whole Language" is based on years of research and offers another dimension to the teaching and learning of language. According to research, written language is best acquired when reading and writing parallel speaking and listening.

### **Highlights of the Conference:**

Yvonne Siu Runyan's presentation concentrated on the classroom environment where meaningful language takes place.

Author David Bouchard's book display included *My Little Pigs* and *If You're Not From The Prairies*. These have been put to good use.

Carmen Agra Deedy's *Agatha's Feather Bed* has provided opportunity to engage in the process of developing predicting and confirming skills in a classroom setting.

"Community of Learners" focused on a writing project with a class of students in Chicago. This project provides a practical approach to language learning across the curriculum with different age groups of students.

Jeanne Bryan talked about developing communication skills between home and school and suggested that newsletters, classroom experience books, community shared events, etc. do enhance these skills.

Robert and Marlene McCracken presented unique spelling techniques which they have personally developed.

A very humorous presentation by Priscilla Lynch dealt with the idea of giving ownership of the classroom to the children.

Publishers' displays: A variety of the best in children's literature and professional books were available for purchase. (We have a bibliography available for anyone interested).

These are just a few of the highlights. The main issues addressed were from the following strands: **Literature Evaluation Early Years, Middle Years and Beyond**. The common thread running through each was the belief that language is central to human learning: learning is personal and social and learning is fulfilling. Above all, whole language educators accept children as partners in learning and language.