

Issue Three (Fall 1994)

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

Sandra Klinck

I would like to welcome all the new members to our Seven Oaks community. You have joined a community where professional development is extremely important and highly valued. This professional development journal is intended to encourage a communication network among colleagues. It provides the opportunity for people to share thoughts, ideas, and conference information. Colleagues have an opportunity to share, agree and disagree and challenge opinions and ideas. Rather than providing answers to questions this document seeks to provoke thoughts and ask questions.

Statistics - a simple word but one that aggravates and frustrates me. Why? There are some people who believe that there isn't a problem unless they can provide statistics to prove it. Statistics are strange things. They are constantly used to prove or disprove something. They are tools for excuses or simply a means to shift the blame for a situation onto someone else. Their purpose is to prove there is a problem. It seems we constantly spend too much time, energy and resources discovering what we already know. What is needed are concrete suggestions, ideas, plans about steps we can take to reduce and eventually eliminate the problems.

We are all aware of the children who constantly arrive in our classrooms starving not only for food but basic human needs. Do we really need statistics to tell us there is a problem? Instead of waiting for the statistics we should be asking the question, "What can we do to address the problem?" It is a question for which I do not have the answer. Consequently, does that mean that I should ignore the problem until someone wiser tells me what to do, produces more statistics, or introduces a curriculum change, or alternatively, do I look for solutions? I am not trying to make a serious problem seem frivolous. I realize that there are people who are already struggling with numerous problems. What I am trying to challenge is our general complacency. Our acceptance of the unacceptable. Are we really so disillusioned and frustrated that we accept rather than question, wait for solutions rather than create them, and assume they won't make much of a difference? It is amazing what can happen when we take the initiative and challenge that assumption.

This is my way of introducing our new members to the journal. I want to encourage them to ask questions, challenge assumptions and search for answers. There are so many challenges facing us as educators today and so many areas in which we all recognize changes must take place. This is just one, a very important one.

Welcome to Seven Oaks, a place to face some of those challenges. A place where children have the right to participate in determining their future. I hope this journal will provide a starting point for your questions.

SUPERINTENDENTS' TEAM MESSAGE

Ken Burron

How can we best educate the children in our care? This is one of the most fundamental questions facing education today. It is also a very complex question with diverse perspectives.

Unfortunately, present discussion frames the question as a "value per dollar" issue. Judging by government pronouncements and resultant media focus, it appears that if we can fix the things that are wrong with the system the result will be improved education, and therefore better value per dollar. There is a promotion of simplistic approaches to a very complex phenomenon.

Consider it in light of teacher-student interaction, one of the most profound variables that affects the education of the child. What is the teacher's responsibility? What part does the teacher play in providing the best education for the child? The response to this question depends on philosophical orientation, which also impacts on the "value-per-dollar" perspective.

If the purpose of education is viewed as preparing students for some anticipated set of conditions that will exist upon completion of formal schooling, teacher-student interaction will be controlled through the establishment of a prescribed program, the success of which will be determined by student performance on some instrument of measurement such as a standardized test. Should the results of the test be deemed unfavorable, system adjustments will be made in correction. This is a process-product orientation where the teacher becomes the technician and the student is viewed as a component-adjustable product. I think of this as a Rubik's Cube approach: make the right moves and the result will be perfection. Or use the child's toy transformer metaphor - if I turn the components the right way, I can change the toy robot into a car and I can make this gun into an airplane, etc. Either way, the end result is controlled by pre-determined outcomes. The process-product approach leaves little room to consider individual differences among students and little room for individuality, judgement and discretion on the part of the teacher. The underlying assumption is that there is a way that education can be done and brought to a finite conclusion. Furthermore, it can be judged acceptable or unacceptable by a universal standard. This fits very nicely into the value per dollar framework.

If education is viewed as enterprise, whose purpose is to prepare students to function responsibly in a democratic society where the known conditions are limited to the values of humanity and justice, a very different perspective of teacher-student

interaction will result. The role of the teacher will be dramatically different from a dispenser of education prescriptions. Teachers will be required to make critical and informed judgements that take into consideration their practice, their students and their perceptions of the purpose of education. This is not a finite process with readily measurable standards. This doesn't fit into a value per dollar framework very well.

The challenging part of this is to approach it on a personal level. Ask yourself some questions, such as: What is my philosophical orientation? Does my practice reflect my beliefs? Are my philosophy and practice congruent? Are they grounded in sound educational thought? Bring into the reflective mix your personal values and the values of your school and those in Seven Oaks School Division. Is there compatibility?

This can be assisted by discussion with colleagues, reading, and thinking through issues. It is every bit as important as the day to day activities in the classroom. This also is a way to ensure that dollars spent on schooling are bringing good educational value.

A RATIONALE FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN OUR SCHOOLS

Harvey Zahn

So do we dare take any slice away from our education system? If we do, can that slice be adequately filled by others? Consider the following: Parents of very skilled ballet dancers, hockey players, gymnasts, swimmers, martial arts enthusiasts...are, at great expense of time and money, able to give wonderful positive opportunities to their children. However, the vast majority of parents have a difficult enough time supporting the kinds of programs offered at our schools and are hard pressed to find the resources to provide private instruction. Yet at best, even for those who are fortunate enough to be able to spend the needed money and time, a problem still exists. Excelling at one activity does not necessarily prepare someone for a well balanced life of active living. This is a life where partaking in physical movement, whether that means tennis, cycling, walking or cross-country skiing, is engrained as a valued, healthy, enjoyable, and needed diversion. This is a daunting task and becomes more so all the time as we press further into a world of watching professional athletes at the expense of our own active involvement. How do we motivate our young and provide them with the skills to appreciate physical activity?

During physical education classes, very young children are provided with the basic skills necessary for success in a variety of physical pursuits. Some of these students learn very quickly due to predisposition or early home experience and are more able to take advantage of complex activities as they are presented. Other students require time and patience to remain interested and involved. Eventually with exposure to many opportunities, most students will find activities that suit their unique interests. However, many factors are at play to dissuade young people from continuing their natural need for activity. Of the many factors, such as the role of the media in its portrayal of sport, easy availability of non-active alternatives (such as electronic recreational devices,) or simply the demands made on students to work, the most destructive factor may be the idea that one should excel at something or not participate. Physical educators are increasingly aware of this last point and are providing more opportunities that are inclusive with emphasis on the process (the enjoyment of moving) rather than solely on the end product (the score of the game or the best player). Yet many factors influencing our young people about activity continue to be beyond the school doors. Even the best intentioned parents cannot hope to provide their children with a vast array of physical experiences that will help them combat the influences that pull all of us away from living part of our lives as physical people. Nor can physical education programs succeed without parental and societal support. This teamwork must continue along with volunteer organizations such as community clubs.

Physical education not only deals with the physical domain, it also is a place to reinforce fair play and positive attitudes toward competition. This is another difficult task that parents and educators must deal with as we once again note the influence of sport as it appears on a variety of electronic sources from tv to video games.

The above only begins to scratch the surface of what role physical education has in our increasingly inactive society. It appears that an agenda has been set to let the people increasingly provide for their own children's physical activity. If we move away from physical educators, classroom teachers cannot hope to provide the energy and expertise needed to cajole students to learn the needed skills. Gyms will increasingly be empty or at best be filled with a few naturally talented individuals.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER

Harvey Zahn

Henry is always first through the gym doors. Students choose a piece of equipment and begin being active. I realize it is the only time the vast majority of my students will practice catching, striking, climbing, hanging, dancing...Henry often brings me something to look at that he considers interesting. Today it is most interesting. A deck of cards with each card being a different illusion grabs my attention.

This is the entry segment of the class - students are obligated to try different activities they normally would never attempt. Like all students, Henry enjoys this time. A free choice of activity within certain boundaries. Henry takes some time to show me his prized cards while I keep an eye on Mike. He appears to be making his first attempt at the cargo rope. Some students scamper up the rope with confidence and ease, yet for Mike it is a courageous first try.

Promoting activities as not being for boys or girls, but for anyone who wants to try them, gives kids permission to try something new. Henry shows me a card of an old woman that can also be viewed as a young woman. I try to also notice Pam playing basketball, surrounded by 5 or 6 male players. She got the message!

Specific fitness training. Sounds ugly doesn't it? It requires some word play and other techniques to motivate many to take part in "Muscle Time". Students switch from the first entry activity to cardio-vascular, flexibility, strength and muscle endurance activities. The activities are done in pairs or alone. I wonder how often our students use their upper body strength or stretch their shoulders? We don't even have to open many doors with our arms or walk up stairs anymore. This opportunity to use our muscles diminishes, but not during muscle time. I know Mark hates running. He knows I'm watching him complete his run. His pace is good, but he hasn't learned to appreciate the huff and puff as a positive feeling and decides to sit out. Station day Friday, the big carrot this week will be the time Mark and I will discuss this matter once again. I will become a counsellor, motivator and coach for Mark, who will anxiously sit out 5 minutes of station day while we discuss the issue.

Stacey loves flexibility activities to a fault and I have to cajole her to move on to muscle endurance. She grabs Jennifer and they giggle as they do the wheelbarrow.

Time moves on and so does the class. Learning is a long process and that is what "skill time" allows - a long period of time to practice. Everyday one of three skills is practiced

over many days and repeated in weeks to come. After "muscle time" this distributed practice schedule gives students the time needed to improve their skills. So many students get an opportunity to experience training in a diverse number of physical skills. Jeff definitely doesn't get any opportunities outside this class. As students move to organize 3 vs 3 soccer keep away - passing, offense and defence skills - Jeff lingers around the edges of play. At least he is not unpopular or shunned, but he spends little "time on task" - a catch phrase used during this segment of the class. His skills are so very weak that he is part of our Basic Motor Skills program. Kids here get one-on-one attention by a teacher or peer helper. Yet during skill time, he is hard pressed to join in a group and experience any success. I invite him to pass a ball with me today.

The information age is upon us. Students in class stop skill time and get a head full or should I say a heart full of ideas. Physiology, promotion of extra curricular events, skills in communication during play (... "you got me, nice throw" ...tone and body language in addressing teammates...) fair play concepts, self control techniques...this is information time. This is the time we undo what Don Cherry (Mr. Unhockey) or the Power Rangers (whoever they are) have taught our children. I try to "Catch a Smile" - find positive comments any time during class. It's the end of the month and students are invited to check the "Catch a Smile" board, noting some of the comments that were caught. The favourite one seems to be Jose's, "You're up next Val, I've had my turn". This is not our usual Jose. Something is registering in his consciousness!

"New skills" time. Is it dance today or stuntmasters, overhand throw, creative expression, juggling, floatvolley...

Dessert is not something we can always enjoy. Today it is a 45 minute class and all went very well. Our class ends with a quick game of ball tag. It's just for fun, yet students move more in these two minutes than they will for most of the day.

Eight more classes, one lunch activity, a lovely quiet prep to count T-shirt money and note who goes to cross-country running, a phone call to a parent, and the day is done.

Time for a swim to take care of my own physical health needs. Family responsibilities round out the day. It is comforting to know my children had many slices out of the pie of life at school. They had a music experience - band, learned to use a sander in shop (I for one can't bang a nail straight), discussed paragraph writing (good thing I could help with that skill tonight), played a ball related game (our house is too small to do that!), did work in math related to order of operations (I used to know that in grade 7). Some evening school work, a meeting or perhaps a tube night ends the day.

BORN TO READ ...PROMOTING LITERACY FROM BIRTH...

Mary Ann Fowler

Family literacy encompasses more than parents preparing children for success in school. It represents a wide range of practices through which parents share cultural values and ideals and through which children learn social as well as cognitive strategies. Educators have learned that all families, parents and children, engage in shared literacy. Sometimes events and practices support school-based literacy. Other times, events and practices support non-school based but equally important concepts and ideas...Family literacy is a function of individual interactions with print within a multidimensional range of literacy and personal experiences...it is woven through the entire social fabric of family and school life.

(Family Literacy and Learning in School: Building Key Partnerships, Preconvention Institute, IRA Convention, 1993, San Antonio, Tx.)

Educators are concerned about the number of children arriving at school already at risk in their language development due to the limited opportunities they have had to listen to, speak, read and enjoy language. The Born to Read project arose from the needs identified in our school communities, in the City of Winnipeg, and throughout the country of Canada.

In 1991 a Born To Read committee (within the Reading Council of Greater Winnipeg), was set up with a mandate to reach potentially at risk families and to encourage a supportive literacy program in the home beginning at birth.

After much planning and research by the Born to Read committee and with financial support from the National Literacy Secretariat in Ottawa, the program began its mission in January 1993. Throughout 1993 and early 1994, the Born to Read program with the support of the City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurses and the City of Winnipeg Library, targeted approximately 2,500 families living in the culturally diverse, inner city of Winnipeg.

The Born to Read program was simple. Shortly after the birth of a baby, a City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurse made a visit to the family. At this time a Born to Read package containing an information booklet for the parent(s), a child's book, a leaflet from the City of Winnipeg Library and in some instances a t-shirt and/or book bag was shared with the family. During this visit, the Public Health Nurse reviewed the informational booklet, the leaflet from the library and in some cases shared the child's book. In cases of families where English was their second language, the informational booklet was available in four other languages. The City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurse

was the LINK to the families in the inner city. This nurse was the ambassador for Family Literacy.

The information in the Born to Read booklet attempted to promote literacy opportunities for these families within the context of their natural setting. Language in the form of talking, singing and reading was advocated. Simple suggestions as to "HOW" the talking and the singing could happen throughout the day were outlined...at bath time, feeding time, play time, during walks in the neighbourhood...to the library, the grocery store or to the park.

The program was evaluated through questionnaires completed monthly by the City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurses. One section on the questionnaire states:

Please share some recipients' comments either positive or negative as well as your observations about package distribution.

The City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurses shared the following comments:

"This was the only book and they had an older child too, so it could be used for both. I taught them the actions that go along with the book, so they could do an activity with the toddler. I showed them how they could use the book for language and colour development and they said they would not have thought of these uses."

"The family started reading immediately to their sixteen month old toddler."

"The other young children in the family were particularly pleased to get the book."

"One Vietnamese lady said, 'Oh! I can read to my baby in my language, that's incredible.'"

"Overall the shape of the book attracts all children and mothers when they receive the package."

"This is a great idea...to promote not only literacy but also parent's self-esteem because parents feel that they can take part in teaching their children."

"The recipient was happy to learn about the services of the library re: children's books and toy lending."

"The parent was interested in the book. I read it to her three year old son and she copied how I read it after I had finished. I feel this was a very effective way to get this information across to parents."

"The families loved the 'Born to Read' booklet because it explained ways to interact and enhance baby's learning."

"One mom told me she never thought that reading to an infant could make a difference. She was very happy to have the package."

"Great! The twelve year old sister began reading with the baby that afternoon and the mom said that the package was very special and would be treasured."

"One package was handed out to a single father of an eight month old. He thanked me and stated that 'he would read to the child' as he spends much of the day playing with her and wants to be a good parent."

Pat Koppman, a former president of the International Reading Association is quoted as saying: "Literacy is not a destination, it is a journey." It is the hope of the Born to Read committee that this program has put us one step forward in this journey.

The Born to Read project was recognized by the International Reading Association at the annual convention in San Antonio, Texas in 1993. The project was a finalist in the Local Council Community Service Award category. In 1994, the project received further recognition from the Reading Council of Greater Winnipeg.

The Born to Read project is grateful for the interest and support received from: The Reading Council of Greater Winnipeg, The National Literacy Secretariat, Department of Multiculturalism & Citizenship, The City of Winnipeg Public Health Nurses, The City of Winnipeg Library, Blue Frog Book Distributors, Duffield Desktop Publishing and the Kindale Occupational Centre.

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COMMUNITY SERVICES

Janet Schindell

Community Services is a credit course offered at the high school level. This program currently runs at Garden City Collegiate with a 1994-1995 enrollment of approximately 300 students. It is offered on a flex-time schedule which means that students complete their volunteer hours during their spare time (weekends, evenings, after school).

The main goal of this program is to give students the opportunity to become active in their community in a volunteer capacity. A secondary goal is for students to gain self-awareness, enabling them to develop better interpersonal skills.

During the 1993-1994 school year, seventy-one agencies accepted our students. This year we expect an increase in the number of agencies participating. The placement of students depends on their personal experiences and backgrounds. Students tend to feel most comfortable in places like personal care homes, youth groups, museums, hospitals and sports complexes. This year the North Y of Winnipeg as local community centres have been tremendous supporters of our Community Services program. Peer-tutoring in schools is an additional option.

What do students gain from volunteering? The following student comments are student reflections on their volunteer assignment:

"Besides obtaining a course credit the volunteering I did gave me a sense of pride...My placement required a lot of responsibility and gave me practical work experience I can use in the future."

"One of my needs that was fulfilled was my natural instinct to care for people."

"Thanks to volunteering, I feel I have more patience...I feel so happy to see smiles on the athletes' faces because of my presence...It is really easy to be yourself around them, I am grateful for having the opportunity to volunteer for the Special Olympics."

As is evident from their responses, students gain an unmeasurable learning opportunity.

The Community Services program runs successfully because of the time and energy given by the many people involved. The teacher must act as a co-ordinator and phone

various places to set up volunteer placements. The teacher endeavours to make personal as well as verbal contact with the target agencies in order to obtain a suitable student-agency match. This indicates the degree of commitment necessary to set up the program. The volunteer agencies are key to the success of this program. They provide the student with a reasonable task and monitor as well as evaluate the student. Other teachers are also involved in interviewing and monitoring student progress.

In order for this program to enjoy positive results, all participants need to be recognized and appreciated. That is what makes Community Services so unique.

I deemed it appropriate to end with a quotation from the journal of one student which reflects the sentiment of many: *"It is important to share in order to learn."*

THE ILLUSION OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Matthias Meiers

Ostensibly the current debate over standardized testing and enforced grade-specific learning is about improving the educational experiences of children in the public school. The issue at the heart of the matter, however, is the social-policy mission of the school system. In the publication *Renewing Education* school children are viewed as economic entities which must be prepared "to compete in today's competitive world". However, the treatment of children as products and economic entities to the exclusion of their humanity is educationally unsound and morally wrong. Furthermore, *Renewing Education* and its "blueprint for action" is a disquieting echo of the effective schools movement in the United States.

The American proponent of educational reform, D. Thomas, outlines a misguided three-step approach for creating an effective school. Step ONE prescribes the gathering of data on the school's achievement test scores, on the attendance levels for staff and students, on the drop-out rate and on the amounts of money spent to repair the damages caused by vandalism. Step TWO entails comparing the collected data to corresponding data from "effective schools". These are available from an organization which calls itself "The Network of Effective Schools". Step THREE consists in discussing the comparative study with the principal and selected trustworthy teachers in order to develop an action plan which will lead to higher performance on standardized tests and eventually membership in the network. Here academic and educational excellence is confused with high scores on commercially prepared achievement tests.

Thomas misses the mark because evaluating the effectiveness of a school entails a clear understanding of the school's purposes and of the ways adults work with children and each other to attain these purposes. One also needs to ask if the goals and the manner in which they are realized help children develop their human and academic potential. Schools which train young learners for achievement-test olympics circumvent this critical inquiry into educational values and methods and declare it irrelevant.

Achievement tests are based on the nonsensical assumption that all children of an age group must be made to strive for exactly the same goals and must be judged by the same criteria or standards. Somewhat incongruously, Thomas asserts that "liking students is a prerequisite to teaching" and "that success for every student is the basic purpose of schools". However, success as defined and measured by achievement test scores describes the efficiency of an institution and the quality of human experience and learning. Thomas' methodology of school improvement and his standards of excellence are irrelevant to education because authentic learning is contextualized in the experience of the individual learner and in an understanding of what constitutes meaningful curriculum.

In most instances standardized testing is a manipulative attempt to control the classroom curriculum by forcing teachers to teach to the test. Proponents of this method of curriculum implementation refer to this dynamic as "measurement-driven instruction" or "MDI". This approach has its critics, one of them Kieran Egan who writes,

We must recognize that, at the moment, procedures of evaluation of learning are vastly cruder than learning itself. We should be...ever wary of the temptation to make learning cruder so that we can measure it more securely.

The consequences of MDI are an unimaginative, crude and usually pre-packaged educational programme which values good performance on standardized tests and the appearance or illusion of effectiveness more highly than the real academic and social development of individual students.

The human costs of MDI, however, are more far-reaching than the boredom inflicted by its irrelevant and thoughtless curriculum. Strict grade-specific learning and standardized evaluation, as outlined in the literature of the effective-schools movement in *Renewing Education* mandate the retention and "failure" of children whose individual pace and learning style do not coincide with the arbitrarily established norms. The educationally unfounded assumption behind these norms is that each grade can permit only a very narrow range of individual differences in academic skill development. Each grade is thus like a station in an assembly line and at each stop the child is taught or modified in a particular way to meet the "economic needs" of society. Lack of preparedness for the next grade thus requires retention.

However, failure is destructive to school children in two ways. First, it defines the "retained" child as a failure and makes him/her appear inferior to the peer group.

Second, MDI entails a narrow, inflexible conception of curriculum in which learning is irrelevant to the learner's academic potential and individuality. In this manner children are cheated out of intellectual curiosity and the understanding of learning as a process that is goal-directed and contingent on a serious commitment to personal growth.

The factory model of schooling coupled with the quality control of standardized testing encourages passive acceptance of an incoherent and irrelevant curriculum in most students who see a meal ticket in education and elicits various forms of revolt in others who recognize that non-achievement is dooming them to economic failure. In either case the school is not a place of learning but a social-policy instrument which assigns winner and loser identities and eventually corresponding positions in the socio-economic hierarchy. Teaching a child that he/she is inferior to the peer group is not a moral purpose.

The focus of educational policy must be on learning and on the conditions which facilitate it. Glasser writes that control over the learning processes that lead to lasting and meaningful achievement rests with the learner and furthermore that students and teacher must be partners in the same enterprise:

Teachers will understand that they need students; there will be none of the adversary power struggle that is so destructive in the standard classroom. There will be no phoney awards or slogans like "back to basics" or "excellence in education" to try to motivate. Since the students are part of the process, they will constantly be looking for ways to improve it. (p. 62)

In addition to actively involving students in their learning, good teaching also facilitates a more purposeful and compassionate existence. Egan writes:

It is the problem of communicating meaning from mind to minds that is at the tough heart of teaching, and it is the importance of the range of meanings for making individual lives better that makes education a serious enterprise. (p. 405)

This moral dimension of bettering individual lives is absolutely essential to good education and is totally from the philosophical framework of the effective-schools movement. Thomas' statement that "society depends on students' being well educated" because "it is important to the nation socially, economically and aesthetically" cloaks an immoral social policy (entrenching socio-economic inequity) under a vapid, self-evident truism. The benefit of society at large of people who do well on standardized tests is not automatic. Society will, however, benefit from large numbers of people who are active, lifelong learners, committed to realizing their potential and compassionate to their fellow human beings. By enriching the existence of children, schools can morally improve society. Responsible educators emphasize academic skills and moral values crucial to the progress of the human community. Therefore, curriculum must be based on our understanding of how children learn best and on educational goals that will facilitate their development into moral and contributing members of human society.

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