

Issue Four (Spring 1995)

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COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

Personal Professional Development Statement - June, 1994

Patti Germann

The subject I would like to address in this reflective account of my practice is that of communication with parents, a subject I have considered at length in the preceding two years. The importance of the teacher-parent rapport in fostering education is unquestionable. I would like to explore what forms the basis of a healthy positive rapport as well as some of the contributing practices.

A. Basic Principles

1) The progress of children

The foundation of my relationship with parents is our common interest in the progress of children. All communication is framed by this principle.

2) A sense of community

A second principle which defines this rapport is the idea that both a parent and I belong to a greater community outside the school. A community which itself has a strong common interest in the promotion of education. The school is a community-centred public institution.

3) The absence of absolutes

The knowledge base in the field of education is constantly changing as are community attitudes. My own views have been constantly reshaped during my eight years of teaching experience. The varying points of view and cultural backgrounds of the parent community give shape to a pluralistic framework of discussion.

B. The Practice of Communication

1) Information

Providing information about classroom activities, programs, behavioral expectations, and evaluation procedures is very important. I communicate this information mainly through classroom newsletters. I have always found a formalized presentation of the curriculum very useful. It is helpful for parents to see materials on display. Items such as geoboards or the teaching cards of the Second Step program, for example, are important non-conventional materials that parents have an interest in viewing, alongside other materials such as novels to be studied and the various complement of texts and reference materials. Shown at the beginning of the year during an open house, an academic display indicates very generally to parents the curricular themes and operational level(s) of literacy. A third way to provide general information is to prepare quick reference material to be posted for their benefit during the parent-teacher conferences. Such posters can respond quickly to such questions as "What exactly is the scientific process?", "What are the various spelling strategies?", or "What does the editing process entail?". The fourth way to convey information to parents is through an open invitation to drop into the classroom at any time during any activity. Such an opportunity to look around and to see what we are all doing offers a very direct portrait of school life.

Specific information about a child's progress is of course offered in the report card. Work sent home regularly also indicates to parents what their child is doing as well as how their child is doing. I keep at school a portfolio of the child's work, largely focused on writing progress, which the parent views during the interviews. I also show the parents books indicating the child's current reading level.

At times, special meetings are required to discuss special concerns about a child's progress. Once again a main focus of such a meeting is general information concerning my practices as well as my beliefs regarding how children learn. For example, I have explained in detail the reading continuum and how I evaluate a child's reading progress. This has proven to be a time-consuming endeavour. However, it is precisely this kind of investment of time that has produced in my experience the most positive results for the child. It is when parents come to understand what I am doing and why I am doing it that fears are allayed and a positive discussion about future actions can begin. What I do is no mystery and I do not have all the answers.

Information is a two-way street. The parents are a valuable source of information, regarding learning styles, for example, and must be assured

that this is recognized. Parents who have approached me with concerns about academic progress often have ideas about solutions and strategies. Programs that I have set up in response to special needs are attuned to what parents themselves have suggested. We are a team. The more information we mutually share, the better the planning.

2) Contact Time

Apart from the contact officially organized by the school such as the end of term parent-teacher conferences, I have found that other forms of regular contact are helpful. I set aside time each week to make phone calls. When a special program is being pursued I will regularly schedule phone contact. In one instance for example, it was agreed that I would call every second Thursday. This is reassuring to a parent with concerns. Where concerns are apparent it is very helpful to schedule conferences outside the interview times to allow for more time for the sharing of information and planning. I have the strong sense that time given to a parent is greatly appreciated. The investment of time strengthens this important relationship.

3) Documentation

It is important for me to keep records of contacts as well as content of discussions. These stand as personal reminders of actions as well as records of a child's progress. I have found it helpful to summarize lengthy meetings in a written form to be shared with all participants, often leading to an action plan. This serves as a check to insure we have all understood the same thing. It also serves as a reminder of the commitment to the goals consensually established.

4) Conflict Resolution

A healthy rapport does not preclude differences of opinion. Common interest, a sense of community, and openness are as always the key principles to positively resolving differences. Good communication skills require the sincere attempt to understand the parent's point of view. With a common goal in mind, solutions are thus negotiable and creatively sought.

5) Advocacy

A parent's primary contact with the school is through their child's teacher. There are times when I provide the communication link between the parent and other personnel. In certain instances I have been called upon to reflect their concerns, for example, about the new reporting system to the report card committee. Indeed, my role in relation to the parent and the rest of the school can be one of linking and supporting.

Support and trust received from parents is thus consciously fostered. I give this relationship thought and time because a good rapport between teacher and parent ultimately serves to benefit the progress of the child to whom we are both accountable.

Suggested Readings:

Kraft, Sherry and Martha Snell. "Parent-Teacher Conflict". *The Pointer* Winter (1980: 29-38.)

McVicar, Rosemary. "Common System Breakdown Scenarios". Paper presented at the SOTA Inservice, February 1994.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Cindy Burkett

Collicutt School is currently in its third year of receiving funding for two initiatives: a Parents as Partners program and a Language Development program. This article will focus on Parents as Partners.

The intent of the program is to support students and parents, helping to develop and reinforce effective strategies for dealing with anger management, self-esteem building, discipline, decision-making, and coping with family change. The school in turn should benefit through more appropriate and positive social behaviour of youngsters.

The main target group is at-risk children and their families. These are students who have difficulty making appropriate choices in social settings and who at times resort to violence when they are dealing with anger and frustration.

The objective of the program has been to provide support to students individually and in groups and to increase parents' involvement in ongoing and specific school activities, as well as to make resources available to them. Parent workshops have been offered (in partnership with Elwick's guidance program) and a wide variety of parenting books, videos and brochures are available at a Parent Support Centre within the school.

The funding has increased the time allotment of the guidance counsellor, provided professional development opportunities for the entire staff, and allowed for the purchase of a variety of parenting materials.

There have been positive effects as a result of the work with students in class, in small groups and one-to-one. Many parents have made use of the lending materials following discussions with various staff members. Parents are often encouraged and affirmed by information they receive that supports the positive role they are already having in their children's lives. Their willingness to drop in and discuss parenting issues at school has increased. As well, the spill-over effect has been growing. Schools and parent councils throughout the division have increasingly made use of the resources available.

There have also been areas of difficulty. In some situations parents of at-risk children continue to be reluctant to accept support from the school. We know that parents who are facing challenges are often the hardest to reach. How do we engage the involvement of a target group without threatening their sense of being capable parents? People who have some confidence in their parenting skills are often interested in attending parent workshops, discussing successes and failures and borrowing materials. Many of those who have experienced difficulty with their children or the school system are not.

How can we help to build confidence and provide encouragement and support to these people? Involving parents in ongoing school activities, making direct contact and encouraging them to include and involve other parents are helpful strategies. We can hope to break down barriers between home and school by maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, understanding, and acceptance. Time is an essential element. It is also true that because countless factors contribute to situations at home, interventions by school personnel may at best be limited in some cases. The program has provided Collicutt staff members with the opportunity to explore and increase skills in the area of student and parent support.

REFORMING FROM THE RIGHT: THE ASSAULT ON CANADA'S SCHOOLS

**excerpts from a keynote presentation of Heather-jane Robertson
Seven Oaks School Division Professional Development Day
February 24, 1995
{with permission of the author}**

The takeover bid to which we are being subjected could not succeed if our education system was not genuinely vulnerable. For having claimed that we are not guilty of all the sins of which we are accused, I am not implying that schools are without problems. These problems, and our unwillingness to come to terms with them have weakened our schools, and weakened our ability as educators to credibly influence the debate.

Our vulnerabilities are real and substantial. They include our complacency about the very existence of public education as an institution. Too many of us have silently practised the politics of accommodation; we have stood by while others try to rewrite the nature of the contract between schools and society. We have forgotten that schools do not exist to service a `client' relationship with individual parents, nor is their purpose to maximize future profits. Schools do not exist to teach children how to cope with the future, but how to create it. We have failed to make this point, we have dealt ineffectively with criticism, and we have been far too modest about our successes. Saving rural post offices has a more active lobby than saving public education.

Second, we are vulnerable because our gatekeepers have been marginalized. Teachers' organizations have found themselves increasingly out of the loop, partly because they move much too slowly and democratically to be able to keep up with education issues as they become more politicized, and partly because they have been consumed by their own internal politics. As it becomes clear that those influencing the debate are no longer other familiar gatekeepers, teachers' organizations have felt somewhat out of their depth. They have been targeted as `big union', and therefore impediments to an unfettered progress towards employers' rights. Unions claimed responsibility when times were good, and members are not particularly interested in hearing tales of woe about the World Bank when times are tough.

Boards of education have been marginalized from dealing with the big questions in education, in part because the downloading of school funding has put them in a position in which they have no room to manoeuvre, and in part because they are ideally situated to be captured by opinion-leaders and special interest groups. Ministries of education no longer appear to wield the influence inside education or the cabinet which they once did. Education ministries have been weeded of their educational expertise, and treasury

board officials seem more likely than education ministers to be making the judgement calls. Never before have people who have known so little about schools been making so many decisions about education.

Perhaps education's greatest vulnerability is the sheer number of politically - rather than educationally - motivated reforms with which we have had to contend. Across the country reforms which ignore everything we know about how change takes place are being mandated rather than implemented, then reversed when it becomes politically expedient. National testing comes to mind as the penultimate in politically-inspired reforms...and if you doubt that these tests are undertaken primarily for their `spin' value, ponder what it means when, in Nova Scotia, the list of school-by-school results was published not in the daily press, but in Frank magazine.

What is heard most frequently, especially from teachers, is that schools are vulnerable because they are being asked to do too much. To a point, I agree. But there is something else going on. At first, schools were identified as the most strategic point to make progress on a number of social policy goals, from bilingualism to inclusion, multiculturalism to safe sex. This work could be thought of as `pro-social'; while we might be annoyed that schools seemed to be doing more than their fair share of trying to achieve enlightened social policy, at least we had a sense that we were in harmony with community opinion - that we were all rowing in the same direction. What schools are now being asked to do is no longer just to reflect optimistic cultural values, but to swim upstream against the dominant values of our communities. This is no longer pro-social work, but anti-chaos work, and this is where it starts to come apart.

We are also required to deal with the chaos without ever giving it a name. A recent Globe and Mail item about the funding problems of a school `feeding' program, as it is so delicately called, tells us a lot about ourselves. The article explained that the lunch program was needed because "school officials believe that when children are fed it is easier for them to learn". Presumably, if they could learn anyway, it would be just fine to leave children chronically hungry. We deal with poverty by reducing it to hunger; we deal with hunger by reducing it to a learning disability. This illustrates the final vulnerability I will mention, which is perhaps the most difficult to remedy: the rapid decline in the valuing of children. The evidence surrounds us: the concern brought to bear only a decade ago on child sexual abuse has dwindled to the prurient interest of the tabloids. The family allowance program was ended without much in the way of public protest; no one claimed that the Conservative government was defeated because they failed to carry out their promise of a national childcare program. We allow 89% of children below the age of seven who live with single-parent mothers to live below the poverty line. Promotions for children's charities have even adopted the slogan that `children are our future'. Apparently, their status in the present is really beside the point, except as it relates to the comfort of adults.

Some of our vulnerabilities are self-inflicted, and some are externally imposed. While there is some hope that we might deal with these by reasoned debate, I am afraid that we are endangered by two trends. The first is the rise in populism, which proudly roots

itself in 'common sense' which too often translates as not wanting to be confused by the facts. The second is the quite evident decline in the valuing of children...when they are spoken of, it is too often from the vantage point of their being 'our' future...which means their status in the present is really beside the point.

There is an obvious readiness in the public mind to accept the commodification of children: Gerry Caplan, co-chair of the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, remarks that one group of young parents referred to their own children as 'marketable commodities'. So when critics of education frame children exclusively as either consumers or future employees, often there is not a lot of opposition to be heard. When the human spirit is reduced to its capacity to make money for others, and no one blinks, it may be time to turn our schools over to someone else. For if children don't matter, than neither does education as we know it. Our schools can become the bootcamps for the armies of global competition. And even bootcamps need teachers.

There is a great deal of work to do. Few educators have been vocal in questioning a utilitarian model of schooling. A recent Halifax study found that the vast majority of high school students, and equal numbers of their parents, thought the only real job of schools was to prepare students for the workforce. Less than 6% thought that "teaching students about the world" was a valid goal of a high school education. Regarding their life work, 93% of youth saw career exclusively in terms of making money...not to support a high quality of life, but to buy more things. Fewer than 6% associated a life's work with any notion of helping others, or contributing in any way to society. "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers...". If life is only a job, and a job is only money, then our schools truly are out of touch with the times. Much is made of the need to reach general consensus on the goals of education. I would argue that perhaps our goals for living deserve an equally rigorous analysis. If we were placed here only to have more to spend at the mall, then let's go for "McSchools".

There are no guarantees; schools are what they are because a public consensus exists that schools donot belong to teachers, or to parents, or to advertisers or to corporations, but rather to all of us and our children. Given the alignment of purpose of those already capitalizing on the vulnerability of schools, maintaining this contract will be no small accomplishment. If we are to convince others that the values upon which schools are created matter, all of us will need to be more open about our vulnerabilities, more conscientious about admitting to our weaknesses, and more assertive about our principles. This will require a movement with enormous integrity and resolve, and one with the will and capacity to find new allies. Given the strength of the forces wishing to capture education for their own purposes, to survive the assault on Canada's schools, we will need all the help we can get.

PRIMARY PORTFOLIOS

Karen Hosegood and Cathy Ratuski

As educators, we continually examine our ideas about assessment. In our case, this reflection led us to implement the use of portfolios with our grade two class as a means of assessing student achievement and initiating student self-evaluation. The portfolio allowed us to utilize different procedures for evaluating children and reporting to parents. In our class, it was used as a complement to the traditional report card. The parent teacher conference became a student-centered conference.

To begin, we corresponded with parents informing them of the portfolio process and explained the philosophy for doing so. Parents were also made aware that formal report cards would still be sent home. Updated information continued to be sent to parents right until the time of the conferences.

We envisioned the primary portfolio as a "show and tell" collection of student goals, student self evaluations and work samples, to be kept in individual student binders. When these were described to our young students, they became very enthusiastic and this high interest helped to establish their ownership of the portfolios. The process of developing portfolios began.

Student Goals

We first discussed the idea of goal setting with our students. We then brainstormed class goals as a large group and displayed them in our room. These class goals were referred to frequently and this enabled students to take ownership of them.

At a later date, each student met with the teacher to select two or three personal goals. Goals selected were academic, social, behavioral and/or personal in nature. Once recorded, they were included in the portfolio. The goals set by the student were discussed at the beginning of each student-centered conference.

Student Self Evaluations

Initially, we discussed what self-evaluation was with our students, using age appropriate language and examples as it was a difficult concept to grasp. Although there were many self-evaluation forms and checklists from which to choose, we found it necessary to tailor them to our specific needs and age/grade level. Included in the forms we developed were reflections on academic achievement, social skills and behaviour.

Through small group discussions and the use of appropriate forms, the children completed self-evaluations which became another part of their portfolios. The self-evaluations were used as discussion tools at each student-centered conference.

Work Samples

Personalized samples that showcased student strengths and growth from the beginning of the school year were put in the binders. Some samples showing areas requiring improvement were also included as we felt these were important for self-reflection. Many of the samples were simply examples of the daily routine classroom work. Due to the young age of our students, some of the samples were teacher selected in order to show both what was being learned in the classroom and what the students were capable of. However, the students were also given the freedom to select additional work samples and activities from the classroom as part of their portfolios.

Throughout the entire process, we worked with the students to help them better understand the reasons behind each stage in the portfolio development. We continually reinforced student ownership - "your goals" ... "your strengths" ... "your improvements".

Student Centered Conferences

Parents were invited to the student-centered conferences by student-made invitations which were sent home with the traditional parent teacher conference forms.

In preparation for the conferences, we role played the student-centered conference approach for our students. We provided them with an agenda for their presentations. Our students rehearsed with classroom peers, cross grade peers, and adults in the school.

At conference time, the student, parents and teachers met first and discussed the student's goals and self-evaluation. Students then shared the rest of their portfolios with their parents and were very excited to do so.

The entire process was very successful. At any given time, a number of different families interacted in the same area but focused on their own child's achievement. Parents willingly participated in activities with their children as they listened to the polished and knowledgeable presentations.

The development of the portfolio is an ongoing process, one that requires a commitment of both personal and classroom time. Flexibility and re-evaluation are key factors. We continue to seek new information as well as experiment and integrate our knowledge in this area of assessment.

ELWICK COMMUNITY SCHOOL HOME READING

Agatha Klassen and Carol Moar

Elwick Community School developed a partnership, focusing on the importance of student learning and the parents' role as partners in the education process. This partnership has been accomplished by encouraging participation in a Home Reading Program, and by motivating parents to participate in school programs and activities. This Elwick partnership will be presented under the following headings:

Kindergarten to Grade Two Home Reading

Grades Three and Four Home Reading

Grades Five and Six Home Reading

Reading Circle

Evaluation

Kindergarten to Grade Two Home Reading

Elwick Community School's Parents as Partners in Early Childhood Education began early in 1993. The teachers of K - 2 students, support staff and administration started discussing the needs of the kindergarten students at the school. Suggestions included strategies of school readiness activities for the children before entering school.

An Early Years Night in mid June was planned. Pre-schoolers, entering kindergarten in the Fall, and their parents were invited by phone to the evening information and activity session. Teachers set up activity stations: water table, playing cards, cut and glue, pre-reading, cooking, etc. All the hands-on experiences were done with materials readily found in the home. The children and their parents spent about ten minutes at each station. A representative from the public library was also on hand to answer questions and distribute library application forms. At the end of the evening session, students were each given a take-home bag containing a book, scissors, a pencil, papers, playdough, etc. Because of its popularity, this night has become an annual event.

The K - 2 Home Reading Program was also established. The teachers of K - 2 met to discuss philosophy, language development, and the implementation of a home reading program. Teachers purchased suitable books for students to take home each night. Parents make comments in a reading log and sign it, after their child has read a

selection. Knapsack-like book bags were made for each student by parent volunteers, support staff and teachers. The boxes containing the books are rotated among the primary classrooms on a monthly basis.

Teachers purchased books and materials appropriate for the parent book bags. Each bag contains games and various books, such as *Children's Arts and Crafts*, *Siblings Without Rivalry*, *About Feelings*, *Fun Food* and *Number Mysteries*. The games in the bags include Pick Up Sticks, Steeplechase, Scrabble, etc. The parent book bags are housed in the library and can be signed out at any time.

In February 1994, an evening kick-off session was held. Students of K - 2 and their parents were invited for an information session. Parents remained in the gym and saw a video about reading with children and learned about the student and parent book bags while another teacher entertained the children with stories.

Grades Three and Four Home Reading

The Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers met to discuss the mechanics of book organization, the preparation for parental involvement via letters and inserts, and a design for a Home Reading stamp and logo. The Home Reading Logo was created with computer assistance. The focus of the logo is the design of a book imprinted with "Excellence at Elwick". Above the book, in a rainbow-shaped arrangement, appear the words: "Elwick Home Reading". This logo has become very adaptable. Its use can be seen in magnified form on reading crates and in reduced form on stationery, and on parents' notes.

Most books were purchased at Canadian News and were then catalogued, reinforced with tape, and organized according to readability (easy to difficult), authors and series. Plastic crates housing the books are presently rotated between classrooms on a two or three month basis. Students sign out chosen books daily and place them into a Zip-loc bag containing a parent signature sheet.

Grades Five and Six Home Reading

In the Fall of 1994, the grade five and six teachers at Elwick School planned a Home Reading Program. They discussed the philosophy, and the purchase of suitable books, such as novels, magazines, and comics. To accommodate the academic needs of the students, the reading materials cover a wide range of reading levels.

The books were then organized into six categories: comedy, horror, adventure, mystery, fantasy, and animal stories. Six generic boxes with various types of books were also made. The books were colour-coded, stamped and taped by teachers and parent volunteers. The students were in charge of making an inventory list for each box. Each month two plastic boxes of books are rotated among the grade five and six classrooms.

Parents were made aware of the Home Reading Program at the November parent teacher conferences. A letter was distributed discussing parents' and students' responsibilities, as well as strategies for reading to or with their child at home. Students sign out a chosen book and then read it at home every day. Parents sign a reading log or sign their child's agenda book after reading.

Reading Circle

The circle connected parents and students in a Grade 3 classroom. It involved discussion and reading of books. Each parent received a packet containing a notepad, a dictionary notebook, a pen, and a "Parent Reading" leaflet.

Once a month since October parents and students have sat side by side in a circle reading books. A special feature involving books has highlighted each circle. For example, on one occasion parents were treated to the celebration of a book written by their child. A candle was given to each parent by their child in celebration of his/her achievement. Attendance by parents at this Reading Circle has been very encouraging. Most parents have attended.

Evaluation

The Home Reading Program evaluation included student and parent surveys.

Student responses:

"I like the home reading because it helps you learn things you didn't know before. I like the adventure books like the Monster From the Sea."

"I read so much that my mom calls me a book worm."

"It helps me with my vocabulary."

"I improve my reading skills. I also like fact books and funny ones."

Parent responses:

"It's a good time to share together."

"I know it is helping my son, he's learning words and is recognizing them. I strongly believe in the program."

"Being a working mother, it gives me special quality time with my child."

"We had family time together -- my younger children enjoyed it, too."

"I like the fact that my child chose the book and was responsible for reading and taking care of the books and bags."

In the Spring of 1995, final surveys allowing for reading feedback, comments and suggestions will be given to both students and parents.

The Home Reading Program values suggestions for continual improvement. It has met many needs and has helped the parents feel more connected with their children at school. This directly connects with the school's logo - **Excellence at Elwick**.

SEVEN OAKS ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

Carol Mowat, Mark Miles and Lori Wilson

Seven Oaks School Division now has a successful storefront/alternative program at 632 Leila Avenue. It is organized on the basis of flexibility and student accommodation. Alternative schools and programs are not new but seem to be enjoying a resurgence in varying forms. New forms are being examined by educators who seek solutions to prevailing problems such as support for "at-risk students", curriculum renewal, regeneration of school culture, improved student evaluation, and the school's relationship to the community it serves. Our alternative program continually explores these areas out of a confluence of necessity and interest.

In early October, we moved into our storefront location, and as more students were assigned, we operated as a high school re-entry program. However, this began to change as new students entering the program were placed there for behavioural reasons resulting in the program taking on two diverging aspects, those of a High School Re-entry program (ages 15-18) and a "Learning Assistance Centre" for younger students (ages 12-14). Our program provides a home-like environment to students who seem to be intimidated by the large, impersonal, hierarchical, and monolithic high schools.

Students who feel insecure as their personalities evolve and alter within their own perceptions sense that they cannot survive in such a school setting. They become angry, morose, and tend to drop out. Considering the current high school environment, the existence of many 'marginal' students, and the desire to achieve mandates yet unmentioned, the superintendents of Seven Oaks School Division have charged us with a task. The task is none other than that of charting completely open territory. We are to

discover what works with students in our school and what can be applied to other schools in the division.

Early in the effort to get our program underway, the design of the school environment became urgent. A floor plan was designed on the basis of students' and teachers' projected needs. As our design materialized, we realized that we had created a home environment where imperfections were accepted but improvement became a collective objective. Students who were usually reticent to mention any of their observations at any time, let us know how comfortable they felt. Parents visited periodically and offered their suggestions. The current of interest is intriguing; people want to make their ideas count for something and welcome the opportunity to influence the purpose of education so directly. The community has taken notice of the program. All the trades people who helped create our school expressed their support. Each regretted not having been in such a program. Alternative programs could easily encompass a community-based vision of education, a starting point for renewal.

Considerable freedom is granted to our school to create a new approach to education simply because the expectations of former schools, the school division, the parents and the students themselves have seemed negated through the students' failure. A new direction was deemed desirable. The home-like physical environment of our school was a signal to the students that rules could be negotiated. A school need not be limiting. After they enjoyed testing the limits for a while, the students were tentatively ready to start setting new rules with which they could agree. This was a novel type of social experience for them, one in which their participation counted.

Just as adults need to be a part of social communities, so do youth; the need to prove oneself capable of being responsible within the community must be exercised. Our school allows students to experiment in the ways of being responsible. In exercising their responsibilities, the students begin to feel a sense of partnership in the school and its mandate. The student group sometimes takes part in handling problems instead of letting adults take all responsibility.

Some students had enough problems following the rules at their previous schools. Bombarding them with the same rules in an alternative program would be pointless. Having fewer students and a smaller space in which to work allows more room for individualized discipline and programming. In order for individualized discipline to work, any interpersonal dynamic which asserts itself within the program must be democratic and be created through problem-solving.

The school is a particularly successful enactment of the humanist philosophy of the educators involved in its creation. Certain of its characteristics proclaim it to be yet another of the many alternative schools that have been established in Canada in recent years. For those of us who have created the school, it is more than an alternative. Rather, it is a way forward. Curriculum has developed in a completely unforeseen way. The presentation we made at a recent teachers' conference in Cuba, "Pedagogia '95", is partly the result of a unit we formulated in expository writing. Students were asked to

write their views of our program which were then to be included in a student journal. As the students started writing their articles, we decided to prepare a Social Studies unit on Cuba and show them how to research a topic. The students were highly motivated by the thought of having their views taken seriously. They produced a beautiful journal, *The Oaks Alternative Journal*, which was well received by their parents, educators, and the Pedagogia '95 conference participants.

Early in the program, students convinced us that nothing would please them more than to study Hamlet. The world of knowledge, art, and beauty, hitherto inaccessible to them, was to be breached; we read Hamlet as a class and attended Manitoba Theatre Centre's Performance. Hamlet was a hit! The students felt they had achieved something. Their enthusiasm effected a change in their attitudes; by second semester, eleven of our nineteen students were registered for one or more courses in their former schools.

As with any program still in the early stages of development, there are problems to be solved. A smoothly running program may never be developed in an alternative setting. The sense of human dignity and the necessity of its being created through human social connections are concepts essential to learning. It is crucial for 'marginal' students to establish trust in human relationships. Students readily discern teachers' concern for them, and display a natural tendency to be more cooperative where reciprocity is realized. Yet there is resistance to change on the part of both students and staff, and minor explosions do occur. Renewal of education encompasses a community's vision of its future. Alternative programs can provide a platform for discussion as well as implementation of change. Our experience demonstrates that there is a need for an alternative form of schooling and that it should meet several types of objectives. As for the re-entry students, such a program allows them the opportunity to readjust to the idea of regular attendance and completion of school work. Regarding those students whose behaviour renders them unable to handle the regular classroom environment, the program offers individualized attention and assistance in modifying their behaviour. The very idea of school is modified through alterations in expectations. The importance of change at the centre of our vision of school allows us to act immediately upon any situation which may be conducive to presenting new ideas to the students.

Our experience demonstrates that students respond to a school environment which assists them to achieve self-confidence and success at their schoolwork. Alternative programs can offer students an opportunity to learn at their own pace and not feel out of place. Each of the students in our program has felt a sense of achievement, however brief it may have been. This fact has been corroborated by the parents of several students who have communicated their satisfaction to us. The students' sense of progress has positively affected their behaviour at home. Successful in varying ways, the Seven Oaks Alternative Program is forging ahead, ready to take on new challenges.

THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

(A Presentation to colleagues at the 1995 Divisional Inservice Day)

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The life of a class is a story that unfolds during the course of the school year. It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide meaningful continuity, cohesiveness and direction to the experiences of children and thus structure a meaningful framework for this narrative. Children require an understanding of what purposeful and thoughtful classroom activity means to develop roles corresponding to that understanding. The first question I ask is "What existential understanding is the basis of a good classroom culture?" In my mind this question is tied to some reflection on existence and on the human condition in contemporary culture. My second question, "How is an individual's authentic existence situated in community?", relates to the understanding of oneself which is prerequisite to conscious participation in the life story of a community. My third question asks, "How can the teacher facilitate authentic community in the classroom?"

What existential understanding, then, is the basis of a coherent classroom culture? Education, as the project of initiating children into the culture of their society, must be conscious of the dehumanizing and the humanizing aspects of life in society. Martin Heidegger called this the age of "dreary technological frenzy" and "unrestricted organization of the average man." (p. 37)

The spiritual decline of the earth is so far advanced that the nations are in danger of losing the last bit of spiritual energy that makes it possible to see the decline..., and to appraise it as such. This simple observation has nothing to do with Kulturpessimismus, and of course it has nothing to do with any sort of optimism either; for the darkening of the world...the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, the hatred and suspicion of everything free and creative, have assumed such proportions throughout the earth that such childish categories as pessimism and optimism have long since become absurd. (p. 38).

In his analysis of the human condition Heidegger says that humanity is stumbling and not walking consciously through history because human beings are living their lives as a series of disconnected episodes. There is no coherent sense of the life story of the culture or of the individual and therefore no sense of the future or the past. The average human being is disoriented and turns to blind conformity to the predominant societal values of the moment, a way of being Heidegger calls "theyness". This alienated self which defines its purposes purely in terms of the accepted values of the moment is "fatally disburdened" of moral autonomy and moral responsibility (Steiner p. 93).

The moral of Heidegger's analysis of life in our time is that the basis for a coherent culture in our schools and classrooms has to be the search for authentic existence. To Heidegger, "existence" means knowledge and understanding of the self. To exist means to stand outside of oneself and to look at one's being from that vantage point. A stone "is" but it cannot be said to "exist" because it has no self-awareness. Authentic existence means to stand outside one's being truthfully and to recognize the fundamentals of one's human condition. These fundamentals are "thrownness" and "temporality". Our being is thrown into a historical and cultural context which is not of our choosing. The meaning of our life will be determined by how we relate to the society and the culture into which we are "thrown". Temporality or "being-towards-death" describes and the finitude of our existence and our attitude towards the inevitable end of our life project. Authentic existence necessitates understanding one's life as a narrative with the potential for coherence and goal-directedness. (Guignon p. 226 ff) In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Victor Frankl describes this struggle for an authentic existence, the redemption from the existential vacuum of "theyness" and disorientation, as the project which is the basis of our humanity.

How are existential understandings expressed in classrooms, and for that matter anywhere else? I believe that teachers have to focus on language and how it is used in order to grasp children's existential thought. Children describe their human conditions to us through language. In speech we can stand in relation to each other and understand one another. Language and the manner in which it is used set the tone and the climate of the group. Caring speech, i.e. attentiveness to the manner, the meaning and the implications of language, is a characteristic of responsible teaching practice and also a goal teachers should have in mind for their students. Listening to the language and the speech of a group can help us appraise its human condition, modus operandi and culture. As a classroom teacher I ask myself these basic questions when appraising the evolving culture of the class:

- What are the recurring themes of student speech?
- In what manner and to what purpose(s) are these themes expressed? (Answering this question involves perspective taking, empathy and some sensitivity).
- How do my purposes as an educator relate to the children's meanings and purposes?
- What is my contribution to the meaning and manner of the children's speech?

The assumptions underlying this quasi-anthropological method is that children tell about their view of the narrative structure of life in the group and that without an understanding of this view teachers can have no meaningful relationship to the classroom culture.

Speech in classrooms generally focuses on two concerns. Children wonder: "Who am I in relation to others?" and "What is the meaning or purpose of my being and my activity here?". Frequently these questions are formulated as statements meant to elicit a response. Grammatically, the sentence "No one in this class likes me." is a statement but it may also be a question, the probing opening line of a dialogue. The quality of teacher-student dialogue depends greatly on the manner and content of the teacher's response. The first concern (Who am I in relation to others?) is always in the back of children's minds and thus always asked silently. Destructive, hurtful remarks answer this question in a manner which leave marks of destruction on the child's self-concept and on his or her relationship to the classroom narrative. Constructive teacher talk concretizes the meaning of the narrative in the form of structured activity, rules and behavioral guidelines. The teacher structures the activity of the group to impart meaning. Classroom activity is a means to a moral, constructive end, if children emerge from this activity as culturally more empowered and more competent. Children take constructive as well as destructive teacher talk very seriously. It helps determine who they are and who they become in the narrative.

The second concern "What is the meaning or purpose of my being and my activity here?" is another way of asking "Who am I in relation to others?". Children understand themselves in relation to their behaviour, their work and their projects. Their work is an extension of their person(hood). Children understand themselves in terms of the activity adults expect of them. Reasonably difficult challenges and purposeful continuity to structured activity help children understand that they are engaged in a continuous project of actualizing their human potential. Decontextualized busy-work and tedious humdrum may keep a class quiet but also destructively alienated from any meaningful understanding of learning. Children believe they are what they do and they usually react with scepticism to such adult notions as "I like you a lot as a person. It's your behaviour I don't like." or "I didn't call you stupid. I just called your behaviour stupid."

A meaningful understanding of classroom behaviour has to relate to the behaviour's significance to the group narrative. The child displays practised or "engrained" behaviour patterns and takes on a personal role in the unfolding story of the group. Teachers need to be very attentive to talk about role assignment and the meaning of these roles to help children fashion a classroom life that is lived as a coherent, educationally purposeful story by all participants. Effective teachers build the narrative framework that outlines the operative system of values, i.e. the shared sense of what really matters in human terms. The teacher's moral and academic paradigm for a good classroom life helps children define purposes and understand ways of being which may serve as sign posts in their personal life story after the classroom community has ceased to be. Setting up sign posts for a good life is the teacher's purpose because the teacher-student relationship and the classroom community are not ends in and of themselves but a means to an improved human condition that children can construct in themselves and in society.

Now we shift our focus to the teacher's understanding of the teaching role. How is the teacher's authentic existence situated in a classroom community? A community needs

an informed will to give it meaning and purposeful continuity. In the classroom a laissez-faire attitude (which implies the absence of a moral structure) usually results in chaotic power struggles. Individual participants in the classroom react to the existential vacuum experienced in the group by acting out their personal agendas. Since there are other people with personal agendas sharing the same space, power struggles and open conflict will likely shape the experience of the group. The effective teacher understands that human beings construct themselves in their relationships with others. Some children will bring immoral and destructive attitudes into the classroom because life has not offered them the consistent opportunity to construct a moral and caring attitude towards themselves or others. These children are careless and uncaring and, as a rule, they elicit a similar uncaring carelessness from adults who have not developed an authentic moral structure in their own existence.

To explain what I consider an authentic moral paradigm for teachers I want to turn to the narrator of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux. In his narrative Rieux is faced with a riddle. How should human beings relate to a task that appears crucially important and at the same time overwhelmingly difficult? Rieux's vocation is to heal suffering people. However, he is impotent in the face of the epidemic that is decimating the population of his community.

The theme of storytelling lies at the heart of *The Plague* which abounds in discussions of language and in narrators. First come the official storytellers like the town government and the newspapers. The government hides the reality behind bureaucratic jargon while newspapers console; they keep forecasting that the plague will soon end. Men in authority make bold, ridiculous pronouncements: "There are no rats in the building", says the janitor while rats die all around him. (Bloom p. 109)

What matters is the stand these narrators take towards the disarray and the suffering in their community. Rieux knows that the epidemic will run its course and that he cannot arrest it. The apparent futility of the task renders his role as a physician absurd. However, the moral structure of his existence compels him to understand the plague as part of the human condition and as suffering which can befall anyone, including himself. He must therefore act out of solidarity with the victims of the plague, fight against the destructive epidemic and in his narrative give meaning to his existence, as it comes face to face with finitude. The essential meaning of Rieux's narrative is that "health, integrity and purity" are the outcome of a human will to exist and to construct meaning out of one's "thrownness" into being. When this will falters in the face of a difficult and absurd human condition life falls into disarray and destructive chaos. The official story tellers of *The Plague* seek to assure themselves and their listeners by trivializing the gravity of the crisis. This flight into "theyness" and untruth robs them of any opportunity to achieve integrity and purpose in the face of a dehumanizing force.

In our school communities "violent" children are usually regarded as dehumanized and dehumanizing. They pose a challenge to our integrity and sense of ease. They bring us "dis-ease" because they live in chaos and speak the language of pain. The efforts

teachers made to humanize all children and to teach them the meaning of human solidarity define the authenticity of our commitment to community in the school.

The question of how to facilitate community in the classroom, even when it includes children existing in chaos, demands a specific understanding of "community". This understanding requires some clarification here. Community is a constructive network of purposeful human relationships. In the classroom the fundamental reason for these relationships is the human (academic, social and moral) development of the child. The teacher must have this single, overriding will and communicate it to the children. To return to the narrativist perspective, the teacher's behaviour must play a coherent and pivotal role in the story of the classroom. With a clear sense of purpose and the decisive behaviour to match it a teacher can encounter even troubled children constructively. When troubled children face existential chaos the teacher must show them ways of constructing meaning out of their experience at school.

Particularly in light of Carl Rogers' work the words "encounter" and "child-centered education" are charged with meaning. The latter term is derived from Rogers' client-centered therapy. Rogers insisted that all "helping relationships" possessed three fundamental characteristics: empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. (*Way of Being*, p. 150) The fundamental error in judgement that Rogers commits by generalizing his findings in psychotherapy to education is two-fold. First, he arbitrarily assumes that adults seeking psychotherapy and children in schools are involved in the same project. Second, he forgets that schools are built with very specific purposes in mind. The extent of his forgetting is evident in the following excerpt from Rogers' list of "questions" the helper needs to reflect on:

Am I secure enough within myself to permit him his separateness? Can I permit him to be what he is--honest or deceitful, infantile or adult, despairing or overconfident? Can I give him the freedom to be? Or do I feel that he should follow my advice, or remain somewhat dependent on me, or mold himself after me? ...

Can I let myself enter fully into the world of his feelings and personal meanings and see these as he does? Can I step into his private world so completely that I lose all desire to evaluate or judge it? Can I enter it so sensitively that I can move about in it freely, without trampling on meanings which are so precious to him? (The Carl Rogers Reader, p. 121)

Both series of questions (which are really intended as trains of thought) would not make much sense to students and teachers who are engaged in a coherent project. The first series advocates absolute permissiveness and implicit acquiescence to the child's behaviour. The second series wrongly assumes that the teacher must not affirm a moral structure in the classroom for fear of trampling on the "precious, personal meanings" of the children. This is not a good paradigm for encountering irresponsible, immoral or destructive behaviour. How can a Rogerian teacher face a child who subscribes to the

tyrannical motto "To mine own whim all other causes shall give way"? The classroom tyrant, given "the freedom to be", lays waste to the social structure of the group by tearing down its rules. Inevitably the outcome of this blind will to power is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". In the face of a destructive will to power the Rogerian teacher may easily fall into the trap of being a helpless bystander or feeling guilty after deconstructing or questioning the "precious personal meanings" of an offending child.

The teacher needs to understand that not all personal meanings are of equal value. Dr. Dysart who exemplifies a Rogerian psychotherapist in the play *Equus* believes that his intervention in the life of a violent boy will cripple the child's feelings and therefore his soul.

DYSART (crying out):...He'll be delivered from madness. What then? He'll feel himself acceptable! What then? Do you think feelings like his can be simple re-attached, like plasters? ... Look at him! ... My desire might be to make this boy an ardent husband - a caring citizen - a worshipper of abstract and unifying God. My achievement, however, is more likely to make him a ghost! ... Let me tell you exactly what I'm going to do to him! I'll heal the rash on his body ... when that is done, I'll set him on a nice mini-scooter and send him pattering off into the Normal world where animals are treated properly: made extinct, or put into servitude ... I'll give him the good Normal world where we're tethered beside them - blinking our nights away in a non-stop drench of cathode-ray over our shrivelling heads!

Rogers and Dysart recognize two ways of being: blind conformity to the societal norms which Dysart unwillingly endorses in his practice, and existence with reference primarily to one's feelings. Heidegger would refer to the first mode as "theyness" and the second as "making present", the absence of a unifying purposeful self-awareness.

The child-centered educator can assert a sense of purpose through empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. These terms, however, have to be redefined. What Rogers calls empathy has to include an understanding of how feelings are related to thought. In fact, feelings are transitory, incoherent and often contradictory thoughts. When the unexamined feelings of a child are the guiding principle of his/her behaviour they can only make for incoherent action. Such children exist in a series of moments and disconnected events. They react to external stimuli and act on unexamined impulses. In essence, the notion of empathy needs to be expanded to include the cognitive patterns and the quality of the child's thinking. Inadvertently, Rogers validates only the most uncritical and immature aspect of human cognition. In order to facilitate progress in the quality of the child's thought it is important to tell the story of his/her behaviour truthfully. Such truth telling has to focus on the meaning of this behaviour to others in the class community and on the relationship of the behaviour to the community's purposes. Then the child can begin to relate to the teacher's constructive framework of purposeful being in community. Congruence, therefore, is the

truthful and concerned communication of information which will guide the student's progress and serve as milestones on his/her path. A concerned teacher will ignore Rogers' advice and not appear to acquiesce to deceitful behaviour or any other way of being that is "fatally disburdened" of moral responsibility. The only useful notion of unconditional positive regard rests on the teacher's will to be creatively and wholeheartedly involved in structuring classroom activities relevant to the children's progress. It requires consistent, effort, critical reflection and human engagement (caring) to help children function in a coherent framework of purposeful activity.

The life story of an authentic community occurs in a network of human relationships based on clear rules. These rules should reflect an honest work ethic and a sense of human solidarity. The learner committed to realizing his potential has developed a vision of his personal best and does not let himself be guided by the peculiar illusion "that the road to excellence is straight and pleasant" or "that the violin does not make scratching noises" (Fromm p. 47). In order to construct the framework of community in the classroom the teacher has to envision this community. What would it look like? How would people in it behave toward each other? What goals would they be striving to achieve? The creation of a clear and moral vision requires critical reflection and the realization of that vision necessitates unceasing effort. The teacher communicates a paradigm for authentic existence and authentic learning and in this act of sharing facilitates a community of learners. Simply put, "We must be the change that we want to see in the world." In the classroom where the teacher provides such a vision and a corresponding framework, students orient themselves on known territory. An unstructured, chaotic classroom culture by contrast is like a desert. The student moves in an unknown, vast open space "where the will of the tyrant occasionally befalls one like the sandstorm overtaking the desert traveller" (Calhoun p. 107).

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