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THE 1990'S HAVE NOT BEEN KIND TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MANITOBA!!

Pat Isaak
Seven Oaks Teacher's Association President

New curricula, education reform under the government's *New Directions* initiative, a full-fledged attack on the teaching profession in the government's discussion document *Enhancing Accountability, Ensuring Quality*, and society's ever-increasing expectations of public schools have all combined to make teaching, an already challenging occupation, a daunting task for even the most diligent and conscientious professional. How, then, do we, as teachers and as teacher associations, address the issues and changes that need to be addressed without being overwhelmed into inaction? How do we respond to the criticisms being levelled against teachers without becoming so defensive that we in fact become resistant to change?

The critical question that must be considered in examining the issues surrounding education reform and the teaching profession is not only, "What kind of education do we want for our children?" but also, "What kind of society do we all wish to have?" The cornerstone of public education is that **all** children are entitled to equal educational opportunity, regardless of their background, abilities, or socio-economic status. Everyday, as teachers we accept the challenge to teach and to care for children with a myriad of physical, emotional, intellectual, and social differences and to help all of these children develop a sense of their own value as people and their own place in our society. We recognize the impact of education on children, their families and the community, and we willingly accept the challenge of helping to shape a society where all children are valued. Educating children is our life's work, not merely a political and economic activity.

The current government's vision of public education is quite contrary to the one I just described. Throughout their reform documents, children are treated as "assets" who need to become "competitive" in order to survive in the "global economy". While none of these terms is, in and of itself, alarming, the concept that children are no more than the "products" of education and teaching is no more than providing them with a suitable set of marketable skills, is cause for great concern. Many of the changes that are being proposed by the government: standardized testing, a back-to-the-basics focus on core subjects and decreased resources for special needs students, to name but a few, are about measurement, competition and comparison.

The agenda becomes very clear on examination of the issue of standardized testing. According to the government, such testing is necessary to "ensure effective

measurement and reporting of student achievement" (*New Directions*). Student performance is measured to determine how they stack up against each other locally, nationally and internationally. Individual students, teachers and schools are then compared to determine which schools are the "best". Evaluation that is based on this type of competition can only lead to a two-tiered system of public education wherein have and have-not schools will evolve. It will not take long, once these schools are identified, to link funding to school performance and, in so doing, effectively exclude the have-nots from any type of quality educational opportunities. While such a statement may sound alarming, it is well in keeping with a political agenda of cutbacks, downsizing and competitiveness. Ironically, in the area of testing, cost appears to be no object!

Public school funding has been reduced in three of the last four years. Approximately \$43.5 million has been taken out of public school over the last five years. In addition to this, Manitoba is now governed by a balanced budget law that will, by its very nature, limit funds available to schools in the future. The expectation is that schools will have to do more with less. The government discussion document *Enhancing Accountability, Ensuring Quality*, which was released in January of 1996, maintains that the single biggest contributor to rising education costs is teachers' salaries. The document asserts that teacher salaries comprise approximately 64% of the total expenditures for school boards. This statement is quite accurate. However, no apology needs to be made for this statistic. Teaching is, after all, a human activity. The very essence of teaching is interaction between students and teachers. In the most utilitarian of worlds, perhaps, teaching could be reduced to a mechanical task that could be performed routinely, without thought or creativity. Indeed, with the evolution, even revolution, of technology, we may in fact be in a position to initiate "virtual education": no teachers required. Is this the kind of education we want for our children?

The idea of reducing teaching to a series of routine, repetitive tasks is probably the single largest concern for teachers. According to the government's agenda, teaching would be characterized as a prescriptive, mundane job with little responsibility and even less professional autonomy. Teachers in Manitoba are among the most highly trained and skilled professionals in the country. We take the responsibility of educating children very seriously. We do not see children as commodities. We do not see uniformity, rigidity and competition as the way to develop a well-rounded, healthy identity for children or a strong sense of community for schools. The current government has suggested that perhaps the public does not "derive sufficient benefit" from teachers' expertise and that teachers' performance should be measured in a competitive way similar to students'. In fact, the suggestion is made that teachers who accept "more difficult assignments" should be paid more than teachers who do not. The idea of establishing a hierarchy of teaching assignments is reprehensible and contradicts all of the work that teachers have done for years to establish collaboration and cooperation among their colleagues.

In the *Enhancing Accountability, Ensuring Quality* document, a statement is made that "all that any parent can expect in a particular classroom is a qualified teacher". Such a statement is an insult to teachers and to parents. As professionals, we are constantly

working to improve our craft through individual upgrading, dialogue with our colleagues and ongoing professional development. The government's agenda would see professional development as a mandated tool in which teachers would regularly be required to participate, not to improve their pedagogy or practice, but to meet some arbitrary standard set by the government. It is difficult to imagine that professional development will be anything but standardized tests for teachers.

The myth that public schools have failed children and failed society is just that - a myth. The notion that education is a finite set of information that can somehow be "given" to children is misguided and simplistic. As teachers, we are in the best position to influence, shape and direct a vision for public schools that is caring, compassionate and -- yes -- competitive. However, we can no longer assume that our professional ability and expertise will be respected in the debate about public education. The time has come for teachers to become much more assertive in the public debate and to become active players in the political arena. In Seven Oaks, teachers have been participating in this discussion both at the school level and in the community. We take great pride in the work we do with children in our community. We take great pride in our contribution to the teaching profession not only locally, but also provincially and nationally. The challenge to change and grow is not a challenge that we fear. It is our individual strength and our collective conviction that will ultimately determine the shape of our profession, of our schools and of our society.

THE 'BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION': WHERE TO NOW?

Steven Ladd
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At school 'you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge, as in making mental efforts under criticism . . . A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours you spend on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge'. (Oakeshott: 491-2, 1991)

In the last issue of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow*, I expressed my views on the conditions for the possibility of education, asserting that the ongoing human conversation that constitutes our cultural capital is the condition for such as possibility. Today, I will examine the significance of *The Blueprint for Action* from this perspective, while situating it in respect to other larger social trends.

To begin, I would like to examine the implications of the concept of a "blueprint", to ascertain its appropriateness in the context of education. The concept of a 'blueprint' is drawn from the field of engineering. It presupposes a prior scientific understanding of the materials to be manipulated, derived from experiment, in the form of law-like generalizations, which are then applied to empirical materials to achieve a predetermined result. It follows from this that the use made of the concept of a 'blueprint' in the context of education is a metaphor, whose use in this context relies on a confusion between empirical and conceptual enquiries and endeavours. Children are not like some kind of hard drive which only requires to be formatted and loaded with the appropriate software. Furthermore, such a metaphor is not innocent, for not only does it imply the scientific objectivity of what is in fact political, it further implies that our children are a resource like any other natural resource and may be treated as such. At best, this is dehumanizing, at worst, it is criminal.

Hence, to my way of thinking, there could be nothing more naive and objectionable, on the grounds of its monological orientation and putative objectivity, than a "blueprint" for "action" or any other thing which pertains to culture, governance or education. A "blueprint" precludes conversation by definition. This is not an accident. Under the auspices of objectivity, it reflects vested interests rather than actualities, and in its inflexible ignorance of these, having made the mistake that people are like any other natural resource, in the process of exploiting it, it will cause massive, and perhaps, irreparable destruction before a recalcitrant reality cannot be resisted anymore even by a willful ignorance that pretends to neutrality. By then the damage is done. Perhaps then it will be time for another blueprint. I call this the cookie cutter approach to existence; it is also sometimes called rationalism, and unfortunately, it's rife.

It came as no surprise -- and indeed there was none -- when in a recent interview in the *University of Manitoba Alumni Journal*, the Premier of our province expressed the view that a degree in engineering was excellent preparation for governance, and that general degree programs were not "relevant" to the contemporary economy, and that universities must change, "to better meet the needs of the employment community" (vol. 55, no 3, summer 1995), as though the economy were some kind of objective object that exists outside any possible control, before which we should abase ourselves. Mr. Filmon is not alone in his mistaken application of pseudo-scientific concepts and methods to historical, human, cultural, phenomena. No, these concepts, nearly globally now, have been assimilated to the concepts of "population demographic" and, even more dubiously, "rationalization" which was something, I always thought, that people dreamt up to comfort themselves or avoid taking responsibility for their actions . . . perhaps it is the right name after all.

Such black humour aside, I hardly need mention to you that none of the "concepts" I have mentioned have anything to do with democracy -- a demographic doesn't have rights. "Hold still, these cuts are going to hurt, but it's for your own good!" Who is hurting and who is holding the cookie cutter? That is what I want to know. Mr. Filmon? I am afraid not, if it were only him, we would have a lot less to worry about. No, unfortunately, like so many others amongst the leaders we elected to represent us and defend our interests, Mr. Filmon is just another ardent acolyte of a global corporate agenda, whose inroads into the infrastructure of Canadian society over the past few years have been staggering. As Mr. Filmon says himself,

As we help pilot society through a period of tremendous change, there is a technological element to what we're doing. So, we feel that attracting new investment and job creation involves a worldwide shift from a production economy to an information economy . . . (ibid.)

I never used to believe there was such a thing as a global corporate agenda. I thought at most there was a variety of vested interests, whose common goals congealed into trends -- and that was perhaps so at one time, but it is not the case now. Corporations are orchestrating government policies on a multinational scale, with a global intent, and

for the most part, outside of law, taxation or responsibility, for that matter. The goal is total privatization, and they view the remains of the public sector as a tax burden that should be turning a profit. Thus they subvert sovereignty and the democratic institutions administered by responsible government. As Maude Barlow aptly notes in *The Assault on Canada's Schools*:

. . . this is not just happening in Canada. It is happening all over the world. We are part of a global restructuring that is taking place and the most important way I can describe it is that it is a dramatic shift from the public space to private control. The fight now, everywhere in the world, is to maintain control over the remaining public space and governments and citizen have. The change is characterized by a transfer of power from nation states into the hands of large transnational corporations . . . So what is happening everywhere is that governments are losing the power to tax these corporations and this is why governments all over the world are going bankrupt.

(The Canadian Administrator October, 1996)

Rather than appeal to the numerous evidences that support this view, today I will merely draw your attention to an innocuous little article I clipped out of the *Winnipeg Sun* a couple of months ago, entitled *Global Agenda Shaped*. I quote:

DAVOS, Switzerland -- Government leaders, heads of corporations and world financial leaders arrived at this mountain resort yesterday for the opening of the annual world economic forum.

Davos -- a fashionable ski resort -- is the setting for six days of debates, private meetings and brainstorming sessions covering economic, political and cultural issues. Opening the privately organized forum late Thursday, organizer Klaus Schwab called the meeting "a chance to reflect on the state of the world and to shape the global agenda." Behind the scenes however, it is also a chance for multi-million dollar company contracts, quiet diplomacy and making contracts. The annual event has attracted about 350 politicians and some 1,000 chief executives. Coming from Canada are three provincial premiers -- Mike Harris of Ontario, Gary Filmon of Manitoba and John Savage of Nova Scotia and Bernard Landray, Deputy Premier of Quebec. The theme of this year's agenda, "Sustaining Globalization," focuses on the problems and readjustments required in a rapidly changing world. A key theme in the business sections will be information technology.

Turning from this to the "Blue Print for Action", it is not hard to see whom our government really consults when it draws up its "blueprints". A few choice quotes should make this abundantly clear. Firstly, we are told that as the "essence of new direction",

This blueprint emphasizes the need for all educational partners -- parents, students, educators, business, industry, labour, and government -- to work together in order to provide quality education for Manitoba's Kindergarten to senior 4 students that is relevant to the present and appropriate for the future. (Blueprint 3 1994)

One might well wonder whose vision of the present and future establishes the criterion for the present and future "relevance" and "appropriateness" in matters of school curricula, and just how fluid these notions might be when it comes to wooing corporate contracts. However, a little later on, we are told that this will mean that,

*A process will be established **to maintain progressive and continuously evolving curricula that are responsive to the learning requirements of individual students and consistent with the goals of the larger society.** The curricula review process will reflect the rapidly changing, social, economic, and intellectual milieu of the "information age" . . . it will also ensure that outcomes of student achievement **related to what students should know** and be able to do in each subject area in each subject level at each grade level are clearly stated. This review process will ensure that Manitobans have access to **world-class curricula.** (Blueprint 15 1994, my highlighting)*

The authors of the *Blueprint* act as though education and life were merely the assimilation and exchange of information, and as though they were merely facilitating this, rather than imposing an ideology.

Education, health and welfare remain the largest socio-economic sectors yet to be privatized. Under the guise of down-sizing, budgetary restraint and improved accountability and performance, a new set of priorities is being established in the curriculum, that constitutes a political incursion, where education comes to reflect an ideology rather than preparing children to enter into political life. Cuts to education are softening up the schools to facilitate a corporate incursion into both school infrastructure and curriculum, a goal clearly at odds with the existence of teacher associations which will further diminish the role of teachers as we move from education to training, with the new PC-CD-Rom corporate curriculum and its standardized tests.

What we have in standardized testing is an instrumentalist closure of thought, that is devoid of any real human contexts, and for which only the already established counts. The standards are preformatted. Hopefully I suppose, according to this logic, the children will soon be as well-preformatted, that is, to be indifferently inserted into a prescribed social role according to corporate demand. This is the meaning of the transition from education to training. It also means that the role of the teacher will shrink. This is no doubt the significance of the new enhanced basics of communication, problem-solving, human relations, and technology (*Blueprint 4 1994*), when considered with the emphasis which is put on distance education and technology in *New Directions*.

This is a development which will "allow a range of course choices" and whose opportunities "will be enhanced and strengthened as government, working with various other educational partners, develops the necessary infrastructure for the information highway . . . It is crucial that technology and distance education be used significantly in the Kindergarten to Senior 4 educational system" (*Blueprint 31 1994*).

Necessarily, distance education and the demands for uniformity in educational 'products' by the "various other educational partners" (with the resources to build the infrastructure for the information super-highway, and present the remote curricula) entail standardized testing, and this leads us to another real problem. With standardized testing and a restriction on special needs services, larger and larger numbers and percentages of students will be tracked into the evermore recognized and respectable "technical stream", while a smaller number and percentage than previously, will continue on for more formal university or professional certification. We may also well expect that these demographics will often reflect a disparity in class. Not only this, but the increasingly impersonal and performance-based curriculum in the public school system will see a proliferation of private schools, catering to an elite or a diminishing middle class, which will be paralleled by increasing inaccessibility to, and privatization of, the universities, drastically reducing the real possibility of class mobility, relegating the majority to competition for relatively low paying, low security jobs in the private sector -- indentured servants to corporate capital.

The symmetry of this corporate agenda is reflected in attacks on public hospitals, city workers' unions, teachers' associations, professors' unions, social services, and unemployment insurance. This government and others are autocratically presiding over a betrayal of posterity and the systematic deprivation of the children's inheritance of humanity. This planned disenfranchisement will effectively deny Manitobans the critical tools that are necessary for real advancement, productivity and community development, by imposing a monolithic -- not to say myopic or cycloptic -- vision of human excellence, which is ultimately ideological, and is a threat to the pluralistic values on which democracy is based. Our schools, our country, our values, the things that make us distinctly Canadian are under attack. Where to now? The *Blueprint* tells us,

*Educational renewal of schools and schooling in Manitoba will occur within the context of overall social and economic changes. By providing strong provincial directions for schools and schooling within Manitoba's Kindergarten to senior 4 educational system, and by enabling schools and their local communities to make decisions that directly benefit their students, the new directions presented here will change education in the Province of Manitoba in fundamental ways . . . **Only through partnerships** can we bring about the needed renewal required in Kindergarten to Senior 4 schools and schooling to ensure a better future for present and future generations. (New Directions 34, my highlighting)*

The above remark is correct in one thing, they can only succeed through partnerships. Don't help them!

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OF DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY AND BECOMING A HUMAN BEING

Coralie Bryant

One evening last week my youngest daughter, now 16, burst through the front door following her first class teaching swimming at the Y. "I can't believe it!" she said, breathless. Wide-eyed, she told me about a woman in her class who claimed she couldn't learn to swim but enjoyed coming anyway. After some dialogue about her inability to keep her bottom up in the floating position, something clicked and the woman learned to float. "I never understood what a wonderful thing it is to teach," my daughter said. Aside from feeling somewhat exonerated in the eyes of at least one of my children for my choice of such a demanding profession, I have been thinking all week for the zillionth time about what it means to be a teacher. A good one.

How does one become a good teacher . . . ? There is a range of views on this, as one might expect, and the culture of Seven Oaks, I submit, offers up its own rather unique interpretation. I realize the time is fast passing when I can still talk of being new to this division, but one of the things that has struck me since joining the staff is the sense that, here at least, becoming a good teacher is viewed as akin to becoming a human being.

I remember the day last fall, before I'd got somewhat used to this sort of thing, when a school counsellor asked me in passing if I'd read the article by Heather Jane Robertson on "kid marketing." Or the time when a phys ed teacher dashed out of a Symposium saying, "Only ten minutes til Ideas on CBC!" Or the day we invited interested persons to a meeting about a division-sponsored masters program in Teacher Research and 30 people showed up.

(There are funny stories as well, less to the point perhaps, like the day when a real policeman interrupted one of my inservices and carried out a mock investigation

concerning a present that'd gone missing during the staff Christmas luncheon!)

This is a division where 70 high school students banded together to organize a highly successful anti-racism day. A division where the president of the teacher's union is invited to participate in the administrators' meetings. Where school bus drivers, board members, administrators and teachers involved themselves in a community rally to save the local hospital. Where the Superintendent actually writes papers. The list could go on and on . . .

It didn't take too long to realize there's a deeper layer, an ethos of caring and commitment to building community that goes beyond rhetoric. It is evident in the way people personally try to sustain one another, yes, but it is to my eyes most strikingly evident in the more public ways in which people come together -- to talk, to reflect on practice, to actively search for ways to improve things, and to resist obstacles -- to use Maxine Greene's term -- which have been put in the way of schools being places where human beings can transform themselves and in turn learn to create a better world. It is not a culture in which people "unquestionably accede to the given," but one in which language is seen as the means to creating community, to transforming the self, and to reaching beyond what is (again to use Greene's terms) to create something new (*The Dialectic of Freedom*, p. 22).

We are naturally speaking here more of intention, of commitment, of activity, than of unmitigated success, for there are powerful constraints -- funding reductions and provincial mandates to name a couple -- and we are, after all, only human. But to the newcomer the preference for dialogue over, e.g., policy, is unmistakable. Early dismissals and administrators' meetings for discussion around issues, the history of Symposia with visiting scholars, the replacement of clinical supervision with dialogue about personal portfolios and statements of professional growth are manifestations of a belief in the socially transformative power of dialogue. Greene suggests how language serves to transform us, and, in turn, the education we offer to our students:

Each time he/she is with others -- in dialogue, in teaching-learning situations, in mutual pursuit of a project -- additional new perspectives open; language opens possibilities of seeing, hearing, understanding. Multiple interpretations constitute multiple realities; the "common" itself becomes multiplex and endlessly challenging, as each person reaches out from his/her own ground toward what might be, should be, is not yet.
(*The Dialectic of Freedom*, p. 21)

The examples of dialogue above are old hat by now to division personnel, but I'd like to mention three new structures that emerged this year which are contributing to this dialogue.

Twenty division teachers and administrators are involved in a new Master's of Education program in Teacher Research, the result of a unique collaboration between the division and the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education. Housed by the Department of Curriculum: Humanities and Social Sciences, the program is administered by a joint steering committee of faculty and school division personnel including three of the program's participants (Edie Wilde, Nancy Campbell and Bruce Sallee).

The cohort group expects to stay together for at least the initial dozen or so credits (offered on site in the division) after which their various research interests may necessarily take them in several directions. The group is mid-way through its first course with Dr. Judith Newman, current Dean of the Faculty, meeting Friday after school and Saturday mornings on alternate weekends at Maples Collegiate. Participants so far report that the experience of engaging in individual inquiry with supportive colleagues is unlike any previous academic -- if not professional -- experience. For the division's part, it is one more way to "create a space," as Greene would put it, for the imagination to be exercised so new things can be created in the service of teaching and learning. There is some chance, too, that it will prove to be a small breakthrough in the development of reflective communities emerging from school-university collaborations.

Seventeen students from West Kildonan, Garden City and Maples Collegiates participated this term in a High School Research Project on behalf of the division. They designed an interview format with the help of professional researcher Linda Lee and interviewed about half of all the division's Grade 11 students of three and five years ago. Lee trained the students in interviewing and in the interpretation of data and each school's team then worked to interpret the data produced from their team's interviews. They prepared presentations of their initial findings before teachers and students at the divisional High School Conference in May and are presently writing up their findings in a research report. On June 10th, a summary report on the division-wide findings will be presented at the regular meeting of the Board of Trustees with students present to respond to questions. The students undertook the project as part of their Transactional English course under the direction of their English teachers Keith Burr, Claire Weiss, and Rhonda May.

The dialogue which took place amongst the students from all three schools, between students and the adults involved, and finally between the students and former students was rich in its ability to open us all to new perspectives, new understandings, new possibilities. There were in addition the conversations among students at the schools as they worked on the data, with their teachers as they sorted out responses and report formats, and with members of their audiences at the High School Conference and more recently at each school's May staff meeting. Some parents, other teachers (e.g., Gerry Corr who taught the Maples kids how to make presentations using the latest technology), administrators and school secretaries were inevitably drawn into the conversation. The multi-dimensional nature of the dialogue provided for a rich exploration of the issues in secondary education as well as a context for inquiry that

mattered, finally, to all parties. The point was, after all, to make our schools better places for teaching and learning about which we all care.

Finally, Seven Oaks School Division was one of three divisions recently selected to be part of a Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation-sponsored Tri-Divisional High School Project along with St. Boniface and Assiniboine South School Divisions. A group of 20 parents, students, teachers and administrators met recently in preparation for a meeting with similar teams from the other two divisions on May 23rd. The discussion that day will focus on ways in which the three divisions can work together over the next three years to improve the quality of education at the nine high schools.

Many other examples serve to illustrate the efforts across the division to sustain and nourish one another as students, administrators, and teachers as well as to improve teaching and learning in our schools. The Tri-Agency Project uses dialogue among parents and professionals to improve parenting, P.A.T.H. uses talk between parents to improve parental access to schools and communication within families, the Improving the Odds multi-agency project through groups of troubled students interacting with adults addresses anger-management and other social skills. Recent meetings concerning the future of the Internet in our division explore the feasibility of interconnectivity for the purpose of enhancing communication as well as information access. Division-wide conferences this past year were held at all three levels -- elementary, middle years and senior years -- with the interaction of community members, parents, students, Board members, teachers and administrators. *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* itself testifies to the importance dialogue plays in the life of Seven Oaks.

So despite economic and policy constraints with the consequent threatened loss of autonomy, it appears to me that there is in Seven Oaks a strong sense of how we can continue to come together to renew and transform ourselves. The challenge, of course, is to extend that vision of dialogue and empowerment to the classroom, for, in Maxine Greene's words:

We need to teach in such a way as to arouse passion now and then; we need a new camaraderie, a new en masse. These are dark and shadowed times, and we need to live them, standing before one another, open to the world. ("In Search," p. 29)

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INDUSTRIAL AND HUMANISTIC DISCOURSE IN THE CLASSROOM

Matthias Meiers

I. Language and Human Existence

It is in words and language that things first come into being and are.
-- Martin Heidegger (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 13)

Speech and language constitute our understanding of being in the world and bring it into being as a space fit for human habitation. The spaces of understanding lit by words and language allow human beings "to surge up in the world" and thus to define their existence (Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 28).

Speech and discourse, like all human activity, is informed by authentic and inauthentic ways of being. Victor Frankl described an authentic existence as a life which is founded on the understanding that human beings are not fully conditioned or determined, but can determine whether they give in to conditions or stand up to them (*Man's Search for Meaning*, 130). Authentic existence views human individual fashions out of the range of possibilities offered to him in the societal discourse. Therefore, authenticity is predicated on the capacity of critical thought.

II. The Assault of the Inauthentic

Martin Heidegger spoke about the inauthentic as a force that manifests itself in the abuse of language in idle talk, slogans and conventional phrases which destroy our "authentic relation" to the world (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 14). Hannah Arendt echoed Heidegger's analysis in her discussions of the modern human condition when she wrote, ". . . everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of 'mere talk' that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence, anticipating and annihilating the sense or nonsense of everything the future may bring." (*Men in Dark Times*, iv). The fog and darkness emanating from the mere talk and conformist pressures of the public sphere obscure our understanding and therefore reduce our capacity for humanity. Thus the meaning of what is and what may yet be is lost in the discourse of inauthentic existence which uncritically constructs itself out of the prevailing trends in conventional thinking.

Why does this assault on everything authentic matter to me as a teacher? The public school is anchored in the public realm and is therefore particularly vulnerable to the

uncritical and simplistic thought which characterizes much public policy and debate about educational issues. Educators, if they value learning as a human activity, must become constructive critics and participants in this ongoing conversation and contribute to it a critical understanding of teaching and learning as it is occurring in their classrooms and of the institutional constraints which the public school system places on this activity. To understand these, we must briefly consider how this institution evolved.

Public schools are a product of the industrial age. The nineteenth century project of nation building, the advent of the machine age and the development of national mass economies necessitated a coherent effort to standardize human behaviour and to create large populations who possessed standardized skills and common belief systems.

Martin Heidegger described the impact of this project on the human condition as a gradual dimming of human understanding and creativity.

*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 Kultur-pessimismus, and of course it has nothing to do with any sort of optimism either; for 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. (Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 37)*

It is no surprise that the industrial revolution and the rise of the modern nation state occurred almost simultaneously. Indeed, they belong to the same socio-cultural phenomenon. They represent the same unconditional valuation of deference to social convention. The industrial nation state allows individual human being access to economic resources only insofar as they participate in the existing societal structures and assimilate to their social function. It follows that classroom activity may be structured to favour unthinking obedience and compliance with conditions created by teachers who are the representatives of society and whose task it is to introduce children to the ways of the world, i.e. the public sphere. When "these ways" are exclusively framed in terms of economic relationships and when compliance with the perceived demands of the economy is considered the most adaptive response to prevalent economic conditions, classrooms almost invariably take on the trappings of an industrial setting.

Under these conditions the activity of the classroom begins to resemble the activity of a factory floor. The reason for this lies perhaps in the intentions of adults who want to see children prepared for "the future economy" so that they may successfully integrate its economic conditions and participate in the economy as contributing members of society. The classroom then becomes a space for programming children for a future that does not yet exist, but is an extrapolation of the present. It is assumed that the conditions of

the future are encoded in the present and that classroom activity may be structured to let children experience this future and learn how to navigate it. Such teaching serves the function of tooling children for the future economy and is behaviourist in nature. In fact they are not taught to learn, but to conform to external stimuli.

Behaviourist teaching is informed by the following assumptions: (1) The human mind functions in a mechanistic and potentially very predictable manner. (2) The mechanics of the human mind are only worthy of interest and sustained inquiry insofar as they are manifest in observable behaviours. (3) Education is the shaping of predetermined student behaviours by external forces. The intervention which results from these behaviourist assumptions and which is but a symptom of the dehumanizing tendencies in our civilization, robs human beings of the opportunity to understand their lives as a meaningful project over which they can exercise a measure of control.

Accordingly, kindergarten becomes a child's "first day job" (Barlow, *Class Warfare*, 77). The activity of children in such a classroom is to listen, obey and give in to the conditions intended by adults. Children learn to read the intentions of the teacher and help him/her bring about the intended conditions. Consequently, classroom discourse will consist mostly of directions and explicatory remarks. Because children are only allowed to speak about the activity which adult directions are intended to generate, their speech will, as long as the adult agenda does not collapse in the face of student resistance, adapt to the intended conditions and demands. Such an educational programme is merely a disguised course in obedience training for children.

III. Standards

Educational dialogue uncritically informed by terms such as "standards" and "measurement-driven instruction" downgrades teaching to the misguided project of transforming children into a homogeneous mass. The behaviourist formulation of grade-level standards which are enforced by the threat of retention rests on the assumption that all students of an age-group must acquire and then be able to demonstrate the same knowledge at the same time. In the classroom this means that teachers become preoccupied with "covering the curriculum" and treating it as a collection of factual information to be presented to students in a prescribed order. Information is presented, students are tested for their ability to reproduce it, a grade is assigned to certify success or failure and the programme moves on to the next unit of study with little regard for the understanding or the transferable skills learners construct out of their experiences. Indeed, the only thing children can construct out of such experience is boredom. Kieran Egan writes,

*The dulling effect of routine activities or of learning that lacks imaginative engagement generates what Wordsworth has described as a "universe of death". (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, XIV, 1.160). I don't think it is a bad metaphor for boredom; it is a kind of intellectual death, it presages the*

death of something is us. We can handle some boredom, but too much can kill elements of our mental life. We see this too often in schools, where matters of the most intense fascination are unconnected with students' imaginative lives and so become merely dead ground for the students. (Romantic Understanding, 161-2)

Teachers who are merely covering the curriculum in the sense described above cannot help communicate their own boredom and indifference to learning. Because a decontextualized and irrelevant course of study does not engage students' interest, teachers, who are themselves compelled to maintain a semblance of order and to show that students have "mastered" the information, often resort to coercive or manipulative measures. Then educational dialogue tends to focus on the first and only order of business: how to make students follow instruction and meet the prescribed standards.

Behaviourist planning models for classroom activity intended to produce "target behaviours" are derived from principles of industrial productivity (Egan, *Romantic Understanding*, 250). They extend the idea of manufacture to the construction of humanity. In *Walden two*, B.F. Skinner tried to illustrate how human personality and even the dynamics of entire societies could be constructed by the purposeful application of the principles of operant conditioning. Hannah Arendt has shown that such projects rest on a confusion of acting and making. One can make, produce or manufacture inert objects. However, the construction of humanity does not lend itself to the metaphor of manufacture because human beings construct themselves out of the circumstances of language and culture into which they are "thrown" or "projected" by chance. In any human sphere, including the classroom, people act on each other, and the principal limitation of action is that it occurs in a network of relationships constituted by the actions and purposes of others. For this reason, the impact of an action on the behaviour of a person or the social dynamics of a group can never be certain (Arendt, *Penser l'évènement*, 169). The notions of "target behaviours" and "outcome-based instruction" exemplify the forgetting of this fundamental limitation of action: one cannot manufacture human beings to industrial standards. The degree to which public discussion about education has been overwhelmed by industrial metaphors such as "product testing" and "universal standards" (Barlow & Robertson, *Class Warfare*, 117) and the pervasiveness of behaviourist strategies organized to manufacture behaviour to conform to these standards define the context in which humanistic teachers must think and act.

IV. The Classroom as a Space for Inquiry, Dialogue, and Authentic Learning

The classroom teacher can throw a light on the opportunities for learning which are inherent in the coming together of human beings in a shared space. A community comes into being when people share moral purposes for their activity. Since it is in words and language that "things" come into being, I believe that classroom communities are built on the quality of the conversation and dialogue occurring within them. The children within this community are allowed to experience the teacher's vision that

humanity shares a common future and that people are better off when they face those forces, which compromise and delimit their existence, not as isolated individuals but as participants in a shared future.

The definition of learning as the acquisition of pre-determined quantities of measurable knowledge and information dehumanizes children by alienating them from authentic learning. Heidegger offers a fitting description of the man who is the product of such a pseudo-education:

The man who possesses such information and learned a few practical tricks, will still be perplexed in presence of real reality, which is always different from what the philistine means by down-to-earth; he will always be a bungler. Why? Because he has no knowledge, for to know means to be able to learn . . . And learning presupposes the ability to inquire. (Introduction to Metaphysics, 21)

The outcome of authentic learning, because it is constructed by the individual cannot be predetermined. Any attempt to force children to learn pre-determined packages of information robs them of the opportunity to inquire. The understanding of learning as a process informed by inquiry raises the question of what constitutes teaching.

Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than -- learning . . . The teacher is far less assured of his ground than those who learn are of theirs. If the relation between the teacher and the taught is genuine, therefore, there is never a place in it for the authority of the know-it-all or the authoritative sway of the official. (Heidegger, What is Called Thinking, 15)

Allowing children to learn depends on the teacher's ability to prepare the ground and set the conditions which facilitate student learning and inquiry. Authentic classroom discipline is the students' sense of purpose for engaging in their activities and not the forceful mastery or domination of one adult over a group of children. This discipline comes into being through the conversation and inquiry which the teacher privileges in the classroom space.

As a classroom teacher, I am less sure of my footing than the students because teaching calls for the facilitation of inquiry and this in turn necessitates a sensitive awareness of the possibilities for moral and intellectual action inherent in a given social context. In my practice I try to frame the ongoing classroom conversation as opportunities for inquiry in which all students and the teacher are morally obligated to participate.

I will now relate a seemingly banal but nonetheless critical incident which generated a lot of discussion in one of my classes and which illustrates the persuasive function of

classroom conversation. The incident relates to the moral and not the academic curriculum because academic issues will receive detailed treatment in a later discussion.

*Ten minutes before dismissal I reminded the children in a loud and very clear voice to clean up the room. A few of them started this chore almost immediately. Six or seven students, however, chose to "stand around" and talk. A second reminder produced no change in their behaviour. I concluded that these student had decided to wait for the bell and then leave. I raised my voice and shouted, "Everyone **STOP!**" Everyone turned to face me. I added very softly, "We have a problem here which will have to be discussed tomorrow morning. Perhaps you can guess what I am talking about and offer some solutions tomorrow. In the next sixty seconds everyone and I mean everyone will help out." They did and it took them less than a minute to finish the chore.*

The following morning the children had no difficulty guessing what the discussion topic was going to be. To me this was a critical incident because I wanted to facilitate a group dynamic in which all students would assume shared responsibilities such as "clean-up" equally without repeated or coercive reminders from me. I led the conversation of the following morning by asking them to describe what had happened. We constructed a narrative of the incident and agreed that the group had unfairly divided up a shared responsibility by letting some people stand around, chat and wait for the bell while others worked on their behalf to keep the classroom organized. We also agreed that those who cleaned would, from now on, gently remind anyone who "forgot". At the end of that school day, just before "clean-up time", I asked everyone to remember what we had discussed that morning. The students reminded each other of the shared responsibility. These verbal reminders expressed and communicated a moral demand. The "stragglers" acted under a moral compunction which came into being as a result of the ongoing conversation about "shared responsibilities". To me this apparently very innocuous incident demonstrates the advantages of dialogue and inquiry over force and coercion.

I believe that the children spoke and acted out of their moral obligations to the classroom community and that their activity was informed by the preceding and concurrent conversation about responsibility. Had I used coercive force or behaviourist manipulation, the standard of a clean classroom might have been achieved, but not the potential of a pre-requisite moral understanding which I wanted them to express in their clean-up activity. I am speaking about a potential moral understanding because as a teacher, I cannot be totally sure of the purposes which they expressed in their action. Some students acted out of moral concern, others possibly out of a sense of pragmatic necessity. These dynamics relate to the inherent complexity of any space where human beings interact.

Keeping a record of such critical incidents allows me to think about, question and fine-tune the working assumptions on which my actions in the classroom are based. Furthermore, my educational philosophy is evolving from a mere statement of democratic and humanistic values for classroom life to an understanding of the tensions and incongruities arising out of the attempt to breathe life into them at school. It is in speech and language that things come into being. Therefore, my vision of a humanistic classroom community not only needs to be articulated clearly to the children, but they also must have the opportunity to talk about it with me and each other in order to help me better understand this goal before it can be realized.

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ATTITUDE, ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A PERSPECTIVE ON POLICY GBI

Roberta Garton and Zoë Thompson

So, what's yours? No, not your sign, your attitude! Does your attitude enhance your potential? Does it expand your growth and effectiveness as a person and as a teacher?

Policy GBI has a lot of attitude: an attitude that respects teachers enough so that the primary responsibility for professional growth and development rests with each teacher; an attitude that nurtures a community of teachers who are focussed on the art of teaching; an attitude that empowers teachers to use selection and reflection for the development of personal professional portfolios and the writing of the Annual Statement of Professional Growth as an expression of understanding of practice (Stenhouse, 1988); and finally, an attitude that has enough courage to ask questions about teaching and learning.

What's the point?

Does a policy that gives primary responsibility for professional growth and development to each teacher support understandings that teachers and administrators have of their roles? How does such a policy contribute to the education of students in Seven Oaks School Division? Such are the questions that gave shape to the inquiry into the implementation process of this alternative teacher evaluation policy: questions that addressed the purpose of teaching and schooling. How can one plan a lesson, read a piece of educational research or participate in educational dialogue without asking, "What's the point? What am I trying to do? What do I want the children to learn?" This policy helps us to examine our teaching, allows us to ask questions and provides structure and opportunity for discourse.

What am I trying to do?

How do I teach about learning and learn about teaching? To whom am I going to talk about my practice? Whom can I trust?

When I need to talk to someone about my practice, not just anyone will do. I need someone who has "read the same book" (Serebrin). I want to share aspects of practice with someone I can trust to listen and respond

respectfully, with understanding and helpfulness. With someone who can get me unstuck or move me to another place in my thinking.

When writing about practice, we need the same kind of audience -- someone who will listen with care and involve herself/himself with our inquiry. This policy gives us the freedom to build trust, to talk about teaching and to share with colleagues.

When we write about our practice, at least once a year, and share with a colleague, it is a good thing to have some artifacts of our work upon which to reflect. The process of selecting artifacts for our portfolios helps us focus our reflections as teachers and learners.

My portfolio collection helps me to write about my experiences as a teacher. Of course, after I've written I realize my experiences as a learner. It is the writing, the special relationship that develops between the writer and the text, that allows me to see myself as both a teacher and a learner.
(Serebrin)

What does it all mean?

Focus on professional practice, dialogue, trust, collegiality and time, are some of the issues that have surfaced during the implementation. The questions that led us to understand Policy GBI open up these issues in a way that was not as obvious, or, for some teachers, not even possible, with clinical supervision. These questions reflect an attitude:

Our responsibility to children, to their parents, to the community . . . and indeed within the community of teachers . . . means we must give good reasons for acting, that is, for determining and doing the right things.
(Coulter, 1996)

So what's yours? No, not your sign, your attitude.

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MAKING GOOD DECISIONS: GROUPS AND GANGS

Richard Robertson

In September 1994, Louise Evaschesen asked counsellors if they would consider developing a curriculum to deal with the effects that gangs were having on communities after she received a number of calls from concerned parents. Around this time information began surfacing about gangs and gang activities in and around Winnipeg. The impact that gang and gang activity may have on students in the Seven Oaks School Division needed to be addressed.

In the summer of 1994, after a drop-in centre for youth opened in the Division, youth attending this centre experienced pressures from members of a gang house in the area that tried to infiltrate the centre. Also during the summer of 1994, information surfaced about students visiting Winnipeg Beach who were approached by gang members. Some of these activities involved students as young as nine years old. Another factor affecting the decision to develop a curriculum around gangs was increased awareness of the knowledge that our students had about gangs and gang activities. One of the biggest challenges of developing a curriculum of this type is approaching the subject in a manner that doesn't frighten students, yet provides a safe environment to talk openly about student experiences and concerns.

Louise Evaschesen felt that a curriculum about gangs would enable schools to talk about gang activity in the community in a way that wouldn't scare students. While observing Winnipeg Police presentations at Victory School, she was impressed by the amount of knowledge the students had of gangs. This information wasn't always accurate. There was a need to talk about gangs in a way that wouldn't teach about gangs, but would focus on developing refusal skills to help students resist gang pressure and bullying. Students need to develop skills that will enable them to make informed choices about gang involvement; in essence, effective response skills.

Several counsellors in the Division agreed to form a team to develop a curriculum for students in grades four, five and six that would address these concerns. It was decided at the outcome to downplay gang names, gang identification and gang activities. The intent was to provide a safe, structured environment in which students could talk about gangs and learn more about how to resist gang pressures.

The team was composed of seven counsellors. Marge Winters, Divisional Coordinator at the time, guided the activities of the team that included Rita Globa at James Nisbet, Valerie Czarnecki at Elwick, Lorraine Buth at Victory, Richard Robertson at Margaret

Park/Forest Park, and Louise Welsh at Centennial.

Work on the curriculum began in October 1994. The team met on Tuesday mornings before work each week to develop the themes. Over time the following six themes emerged:

Theme I - Belonging

The objectives of Theme I were to help students understand the concept of belonging in families and in groups and to promote awareness of the need everyone has to belong. Information is gathered during this unit on families and groups that is used in Theme II to make a comparison to gangs as families or groups.

Theme II - Awareness of Gangs: Making Good Choices

The objectives of Theme II were to promote awareness of gangs, gang activity and gang recruitment and to assist students in making good choices about group versus gang membership.

At this time students are able to talk about what they know about gangs in a non-personal way. Comparisons are drawn between groups and gangs so that students can see both similarities and differences.

Theme III - Gang Recruitment

The objective of this theme is to enable students to recognize methods and strategies of gang recruitment. The video, *What About Gangs*, is an integral part of this unit as it shows three situations where kids are being recruited for gangs with links to factors in the home, the school or the community. Many factors come into effect for youth in their decision to join a gang or refuse involvement.

Theme IV - Gang Membership: Importance of Good Decisions

Theme IV deals with the implications of gang membership and the importance of related decisions. Fringe membership, the difficulties of leaving a gang once involved and the importance of thinking ahead before becoming involved in a gang are some of the topics discussed in this unit. The skills necessary to help a peer who may be considering gang membership are introduced.

Theme V - Responding to Victimization and Exploitation

In this unit the concepts of victim, offender and exploitation are introduced and discussed. Students look at the violent behaviour common in gangs and the effects it has on people. A number of responses to victimization are introduced and discussed.

Theme VI - Planning for Protection

This last theme is designed to help students understand the need for protection and to promote self-protection planning. Protection plans already in place in the home, in the school and in the community are examined. How these protection plans help in emergency situations is reaffirmed along with the need for practise if a safety plan is to be effective. A number of potential situations centering around gangs are examined so students can begin formulating protection plans of their own.

The appendix which accompanies the curriculum contains many supplementary materials to assist teachers in preparing for class discussions.

The work by the team to compile the information and write the curriculum went on until April 1995. Several teachers were asked to pilot the draft curriculum and provide feedback to the team for revisions. Susan Babnychuk at Constable Finney School, Howard Ryant at Leila North School, Judy Finlayson at A.E. Wright School, Pat Plohman at Elwick School, Mark Koslovsky at Collicutt School, along with some of the team members, piloted the draft curriculum. Revisions were made before the curriculum was submitted for printing over the summer of 1995.

In September the curriculum was presented to the Seven Oaks School Board for adoption. Marge Winters, Rita Globa, Val Czarnecki, Pat Plohman and Howard Ryant spoke of the development of the curriculum and of the piloting process in the classroom. The curriculum was mandated to be taught in all schools at the grade four, five and six levels in 1995-1996.

In November 1995 all teachers of grades four, five and six received grade level presentations of the curriculum. Members of the development team, as well as piloting teachers, were on hand to answer questions and describe their initial experiences with the program. Implementation in classrooms began shortly after.

Teachers were asked to submit an evaluation of the program following presentation to their class. The results of the evaluations have been studied with most being very positive. Teachers found the curriculum easy to implement in its present form with integration into other curriculum areas as an option. One of the main weaknesses of the curriculum as identified by teachers is the lack of student activities. As a result four counsellors from the original team have since begun meeting to gather together a number of resources for students to use during each of the themes. This supplementary material should be ready for use with the curriculum by September 1996.

The *Making Good Decisions* curriculum has been examined by other school divisions as a basis for their own work around gang issues. Winnipeg School Division purchased copies for all elementary counsellors following a presentation to Olga Wyshnowsky, Wendy Huggins and Sargeant Melnyk last fall. In April 1996 our team met with the aforementioned people to collaborate on resources and updates prior to commencing work on our supplement. Other school divisions have also expressed an interest in our

curriculum such as Transcona-Springfield and River East. When Rubin Gonzales, an expert on gangs from California, was in Winnipeg he examined our curriculum and commended us on our efforts for dealing with such a difficult problem.

Although the implementation of a curriculum on gangs cannot make this problem go away, it is our hope that by implementing this program in our schools we can empower our students by teaching them the skills necessary to make good decisions now and in the future.