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W/righting schools: A plan for action

By Carlo Ricci

Abstract

In this paper I appeal to my personal lived experience as it relates to democratic education. As well, I coin the word w/right: It plays on the meaning of both write as in write the world by being an active participating citizen, and right as in right the wrongs of the world. I look at the roles standardized curriculum; standardized testing and Pathways; tests, exams, grading, and learning from textbooks rather than life; rows, silence, and forcing students to remain seated can play in creating a less democratic environment for all students, especially those labeled “at risk.” And finally, I share my preliminary experiences and thoughts on an alternative school that I am trying to set up within the public system in my community.

In the November 2004 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Alphonse Kohn writes about challenging students and how to get more of them. We need to teach and encourage our students to challenge injustices. In our schools we need to encourage our students to participate in our democracy with the aim of creating a more just society. Toward this goal, our schools need to be run in line with democratic principles. It is not enough to preach democracy to our students. We need to have them embody democracy. I will argue that our schools are undemocratic and therefore need to be transformed to reflect democratic principles.

For this revolution to work we need to convince teachers of the importance of creating democratic spaces. Noam Chomsky (2000) writes about his frustration with teachers. He calls them commissars to the status quo. Chomsky (2000) says that, “Commissars are the intellectuals who work primarily to reproduce, legitimate, and maintain the dominant social order from which they reap benefits” (p.27). Teachers are interested in promoting the obedient, and those who challenge the system are considered “at risk” and are correspondingly punished. As a high school student, I felt this punishment first hand. I was a poor high school student. I resisted and I was punished with poor marks. I refused to play their game the way they wanted it to be played, and so they punished me. I now have a Master’s and a PhD, which took me one year each to complete, while I was working full time as a teacher. I share this as evidence that my high school teachers had me all wrong. Their assessment of me did not reflect my “capabilities,” but my level of obedience: I challenged their system and did not accept and do everything they said and wanted in the way that they said and wanted it done, for this I was punished. This type of schooling is not conducive to creating a democratic citizenry who are willing to participate and challenge the injustices with our society.

Clearly, we are experiencing, to borrow the title of John Portelli’s and Patrick Solomon’s book, an erosion of democracy and we are in desperate need to fight for its revitalization. Our schools are the right place to start and we need to w/right how we school. The word w/right is one that I have coined to play on the meaning of both write as in write the world by being an active participating citizen, and right as in right the wrongs of the world. In what follows I will look at the roles standardized curriculum; standardized testing and Pathways; tests, exams, grading, and learning from textbooks

rather than life; rows, silence, and forcing students to remain seated can play in creating a less democratic environment for all students, especially those labeled “at risk.”

Standardized Curriculum

In Ontario we do not have an education system, but a training system. Those within our current system of training consider students to be at risk. Instead, what they should come to realize is that it is the system that is at risk not the students. Currently, what students learn in school is dictated by “experts” who have the authority to determine what students should learn in schools. Those who are most interested (students, parents, and teachers) have less and less input in what students are expected to learn. We have a one size fits all curriculum that lauds standardization. What we should have is a system that values and encourages diversity and flexibility.

We are led to believe that what students are expected to learn in schools is essential material for them to be successful in life out of school. Yet, if we are honest, how many of us (who are living life outside of schooling) would pass a grade 12, for example, high school exam in a subject outside of our area of specialization or interest? How many of us would pass a grade 12 high school exam within our area of interest and specialization? Even those with PhDs that I have talked to (who have reached the highest level of schooling) readily admit their unlikelihood of scoring well on a grade 12 exam. If virtually all of us living outside of schools cannot pass grade 12 high school exams, then it is time that we stopped punishing students for not being able to do what virtually none of us can do. We need to rethink our curriculum. We need to ask ourselves if what

students are asked to do in schools is worth doing. It's time that we challenge the expert-driven curriculum, and place it back where it belongs: in the hands of students, parents, teachers and local communities.

Standardized Testing and Pathways

Increasingly, with the use of technology being used to track and monitor student performance, those who are at risk are being imprisoned in schools and programs that will ensure them a future of turmoil and hopelessness. Currently, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests students. Many see the test scores as objective, neutral measures for what an individual is capable of achieving. This is a flawed and dangerous assumption. Even if we ignore that the scoring is flawed and that the tests are not valid (Ricci, 2003; Ricci and Taylor, 2004), the truth is that nobody can determine another person's future potential. Not even EQAO.

With the new Pathways initiative being introduced in Ontario the situation is getting worse. Many of the boards are using the EQAO scores as a justification for placing students into their "appropriate" pathway. The Pathways program is the worst kind of streaming imaginable. Essentially, there are four pathways (university, college, apprenticeship and workplace), and depending on how well students are deemed to be doing, they are expected to go into their appropriate pathway. Students who have been deemed at risk are now placed in a training system/pathway that will deem them to be "successful." The word "successful" here is used euphemistically because, according to pathways, everyone will be successful, even those that we previously considered to be

unsuccessful. In short, EQAO measures and determines who is at risk and Pathways streams these students in their “rightful” place.

Testing, Examining, Grading and Learning From Textbooks Rather Than Life

Within our current education system in Ontario, testing, examining and grading contributes to the overall poisoning of classroom environments and to the erosion of democracy. These technologies create a space where teachers and students are in an undemocratic relationship. The teachers are the omnipotent overseers who decide the fate of the children entrusted in their care. Like standardized tests, these technologies are mistakenly viewed to be accurate, objective, and neutral indicators that determine a student’s present and future capability. In reality, these technologies are biased, arbitrary, and unreliable. Teachers arbitrarily decide what questions they are going to ask based on what they believe to be important. These technologies reward those that think like “us” and those that are willing to play the game, and punish those who do not think like us and who are not willing to play the game.

The connection between grades and individuals future success is connected to a tautological process. By this I mean that to succeed students need to have high grades, and so those that get high grades are promoted and those that do not are prevented from being promoted because of their poor grades. In other words, it does not mean that they are not capable of doing the job at hand but that they are prevented from doing it because of their low grades. For example, I received a call from a distraught mother whose daughter was interested in entering a trade. The mother read about my work on

standardized testing in the newspapers and decided to call me. In order for her daughter to be licensed into the trade, the mother told me, that all her daughter had left to do is to pass a standardized test. The passing grade was 70% and her daughter scored just under on two separate tries. Her daughter has a learning disability that makes writing tests difficult for her. They appealed the marks and the daughter was denied a passing grade. The daughter is going to lose her temporary license and her livelihood because she cannot pass the test. The trade the daughter is seeking entrance into is hairdressing. She has testimonies from her teachers that she is a competent hairdresser, as well as from clients that are ready to vow for her competency. Despite all of this testimony, she will lose her future not because she is a poor hairdresser, but because she cannot pass a paper pencil test. Personally, I would rather have someone cut my hair that can prove that she can cut hair by doing it, than from someone who has scored 100% on a written test, but is not as skilled practically. This example shows how convoluted and unfair these technologies are.

Rows, Silence and Forcing Students to Remain Seated

Students learn best when they are interacting with others, and their environment. As part of my duties I supervise teacher candidates while they are out during their practicum. As a result, I visit dozens of classrooms a year. While in these classrooms I see many students forced to sit silently in rows. There are so many children that go all day long barely speaking a word. I consider this to be a form a child abuse. Students are imprisoned in their classrooms and silenced. Although, this is typically the

case, it does not have to be. We can easily create democratic learning environments where students feel supported, cared for, and respected.

I am currently trying to set up an alternative school within the public education system that is more democratic, holistic and critical. Some of the key components of this alternative system that I am hoping to setup within the public system will include the following:

Democratic education

Small class sizes (15 Students)

Field trips

No/little homework

Experiential learning

Community teachers/ expert guests

Community involvement

Holist curriculum

Critical pedagogy

Cooperation not competition

No marks

Multiage class

Daily exercise

Hands on learning

Cooking

Sewing building

Environmentalism

Repetition of curriculum to promote depth of understanding

Siblings in same class

Music/Arts

The power and value of touch/human contact (appropriate displays of affection between teachers and students)

Full day care (Partly, students from a local high school will run a before and after school program for a nominal fee)

Slow Schooling

Play and children interaction

Social Responsibility

When I first thought of this, I thought I would meet a lot of resistance and that it would ultimately lead to failure. I am pleased to report that so far I have met many supporters at many levels. I now feel that this dream of mine will be realized within my community.

As an academic I can spend my time documenting history as I see it passing me by, or I can choose to participate in its making. I choose the latter and so can we all. For example, as well as my alternative schools initiative described above, I have been involved in a lawsuit seeking an injunction against the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. This is a high stakes standardized test that all students need to pass in order to earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Now, students have several other options, one of which the Minister of Education admitted was a direct result of the

lawsuit. All students need to believe that they to can make a difference and they need to have opportunities and be encouraged to act in the world. One important component in this process is the creating of democratic schools that will help students learn how they too can w/right the world.

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