aviso

The Magazine for Nova Scotia's Teaching Profession
La revue de la profession enseignante en Nouvelle-Écosse

Fall 2014

Challenging the Status Quo

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It's Not Just Blood Work!!!

Deborah McVeigh

We all know that if we have any medical issues, "blood work" is usually the first set of tests prescribed. Wendy Bryan (MLT, BBA, MED), a faculty member and Program Coordinator in the Medical Laboratory Technology program (MLT) at the Waterfront Campus of the NSCC, describes to us the delivery and skill set needed for success in this program and in industry.

Q: What is the Medical Laboratory Technology program?
A: It is a program that prepares graduates to work in clinical labs around the province and across the country. It is currently a two-year program but will be expanding to three years starting in September 2015.

Q: Wendy, why did you become interested in this field? How long have you been teaching at NSCC in the MLT program?
A: I became interested in the field when my high school guidance counsellor first told me about the profession. Then I visited a working lab and I was hooked. I have been teaching in the MLT program since it started in 2007. I was originally hired at NSCC to set up the program and I stayed on from there.

Q: What are the requirements for entry into the MLT program?
A: The entrance requirements for the program are Grade 12, with at least 80 per cent in Academic Chemistry, and at least 70 per cent in Academic Biology, Math, and English.

Q: There was a period of time when medical laboratory technology wasn't offered at NSCC. Can you give a brief history of why this took place?
A: The MLT program was suspended in 1996. I was not employed by the college when the program was cancelled but I understand that it was a decision that was made based on a downsizing in the industry. Graduates were unable to obtain employment at that time.

Q: Presently, there appears to be a demand for medical laboratory technologists (MLT)? Why is this?
A: Now there is a high demand for our profession for a couple of reasons. As previously stated, the first reason is that there weren't any MLT programs offered in Nova Scotia between the years 1996-2007. The second reason is that there are a lot of MLTs preparing to retire so the job market for future graduates of MLT programs is very good.

Q: How is the program set up?
A: The program is set up so that at the end of each year, the students have an opportunity to practice the skills they just learned at clinical sites in a live environment. Students seem to like this way of learning because it helps them cement the learning and they like being in the "real" labs seeing how the real life technologists work from day-to-day. Our program consists of school time where students have both lectures and labs and then clinical experiences each year where they practice their skills in the live environment. So it is a very hands-on program.

Q: What courses are involved in the program?
A: There are a total of 31 courses over the length of the program, plus three clinical placements and five review courses during the final clinical practicum. There are five main disciplines in laboratory medicine and we have multiple courses in each discipline. The disciplines consist of: Clinical Chemistry, Hematology, Microbiology, Histotechnology, and Transfusion Science. Students also complete courses in: Human Relations, Safety, Specimen Procurement, Immunology, Molecular Diagnostics, and Quality Management.

Q: Please describe a typical day for an MLT student.
A: Presently on most days classes start at 8:30 a.m. and run through until either 4:30 p.m. or 5:30 p.m. with

a one-hour lunch. When the three-year program starts, the students will have a typical day with six hours, or less, per day of class and lab time. During a standard day, a student could have lectures and/or labs. They might be learning about glucose metabolism in Clinical Chemistry in the morning and then working in the lab cutting tissue for histology analysis. It is a very hands-on program with lots of practice as they learn. They average 10-12 hours of lecture per week and about 20 hours of lab (in the three-year program it will be 12-15 hours of lab). It is a busy schedule with homework made up of readings, assignments, projects, etc. as well as preparing for tests and exams.

Q: I did notice that colour blindness would be a condition that would impede a student in this field. Is there any prescreening to prevent a student from making the commitment to MLT and having to withdraw?

A: Colour blindness would be an issue for a technologist working in several areas of the lab, particularly when viewing stained tissue and blood under the microscope. We tell potential students about the limitations, but ultimately we leave it up to the individual whether they want to proceed in the program.

"...there are a lot of MLTs preparing to retire so the job market for future graduates of MLT programs is very good."

Q: Do all of the graduates obtain employment and if so what types of work do they do?

A: The majority of graduates of our program get jobs in clinical labs in hospitals around Nova Scotia. We have a very high need for MLTs in Nova Scotia so most graduates have employment within weeks of finishing the program. A small number of graduates leave the province to work in other parts of Canada and a few of our graduates have taken jobs in sectors outside health care.

Q: MLT has a waiting list due to its popularity and demand. Is there a possibility of expansion of the class to shorten wait-list times?

A: Not at this time. We are looking at future opportunities and the three-year program will give us the opportunity to expand the intake if industry determines they have a need for more graduates.

Q: There are other graduation requirements for completion of the Medical Laboratory Technologists' program. What are they?

A: In order to work in Canada, all graduates must write and pass a national competency-based examination before they can work. They must also become members of the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) and also must apply for a license from the Nova Scotia College for Medical Laboratory Technologists (NSCMLT).

Q: When students are finished MLT, are they able to further their education in this field? If so, where and what would they take?

A: Students who are interested in continuing their studies once they complete our program are eligible to apply for the post-MLT program at Dalhousie University where they can complete a degree in Health Sciences after 2 more years of study. They are also eligible to apply for degree completion through other universities across Canada. These additional studies would help students prepare for work in Administration in labs or to specialize in their area of expertise in a specific area of lab medicine through degree completion, Masters program, and even through the PhD designation. They would then be eligible to apply for advanced positions in the lab depending on what their area of expertise might be as lab scientists or pathologists.

Q: Where can we get more information about the medical laboratory technology program?

A: You can obtain information by looking on the NSCC website or a print calendar at one of the many campuses throughout the province. Sometimes clinical labs in hospitals offer tours to interested candidates. You might also want to talk to working technologists who can provide detailed information on the jobs they perform or contact the NSCMLT for further information on the profession.

Deborah McVeigh is a Faculty member at NSCC, Marconi Campus.

Developing Readers:

Or why Macbeth won't be killing King Duncan in my classroom this year

Sarah Jeans

I remember the moment very clearly. I was sitting on a lawn chair with Penny Kittle's latest book, *Book Love*, propped up on my knees while my then three-year old was playing in his sandbox. I had bought the book the previous week on the recommendation of our English language arts consultant Barry Wilson while we were at the Summer Institute featuring Jim Burke. Like most teachers I know, I love spending time in the summer attending workshops, reading books and ultimately getting new ideas and making fresh plans for the next school year.

I love reading Penny's books; she speaks to me like a wise big sister and she provides me with just the right amount of nudging to encourage me to try new things in my high school English language arts classroom. But at this moment I was not feeling a sisterly connection with her. Instead something wasn't right. I had just read a passage that landed in my stomach like a small hot stone. The words were jumping off the page at me: "Reading only what is too hard and then telling [the students] what it means is not making them better readers. They parrot what they heard in class, but they don't become better readers when they don't read" (Kittle, 3) and I felt a brief twinge of recognition. I reread it, and then, because I wasn't ready to admit to myself that I might not be living up to her expectations, I reassured myself that she wasn't talking about *me* and

then promptly moved ahead to the next chapter of her book.

But the thought persisted with me throughout the school year and I found myself thinking about it from time to time. I thought about it when my students were presenting their reading histories to each other at the beginning of the semester. As they shared their titles with each other most students grumbled about the classic texts they had been assigned in previous English classes. Texts such as *Lord of the Flies* or *The Scarlet Letter*. Many exclaimed how they didn't finish them, or worse yet, never even tried. This was in sharp contrast to their exuberance when talking about their experiences with self-selected texts such as *The Fault in Our Stars* or *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

I thought about it again when I started teaching my *Macbeth* unit and so I decided to consciously keep track of how much the students were reading the text compared to how much time I spent recapping and explaining what was happening in the text. It became clear to me that I was the most engaged reader in the room. Penny had warned me about this when she wrote: "Unless we do more than parcel out truly difficult texts to nonreaders as they limp along reluctantly behind us, we've given up on their lives as readers" (Kittle, 7). Ouch. That is certainly not the message I want to be sending to my students. This was a painful moment of self-awareness about how I handle difficult texts in the classroom.

The go-to strategy of practically every English teacher I have ever known for teaching difficult texts is to approach it as a whole class. We have lots of reasons for doing this. We expect that whole class novels build a community of readers through a shared reading experience. We believe we can help students tackle stories that are too difficult for them to read independently, and in doing so we can show them what good readers actually do. And we can help them gain some cultural literacy that comes with being familiar with major texts from the canon.

While this sounds good in theory, this is often not what takes place in our classrooms. We assign books for students to read that many of them can't or won't read. These texts do not usually appeal to adolescent readers due to the time period in which the story is set, the style of the writing, the adult themes contained within, or just due to the fact that they had no say in the selection of the text. On top of that, we have the students who can't read the text due to a lack of reading skills.

So what do we as well-meaning teachers do? We break the text up into manageable chunks. We read sections aloud. We give comprehension questions to make kids accountable for their reading. We summarize and reiterate each section of the text. In a nutshell, we make it easy for students to *not* read the text. Instead of reading the text, they have listened to us talk about the text, they have used Sparknotes to get chapter summaries and character profiles, and while they may be able to write an essay based on the text, again, thanks to Sparknotes, or get a cultural allusion to Jay Gatsby, our students have not, in fact, become better readers. Additionally, we have students for whom the text will be too easy, and they will not further develop their reading skills either. We find ourselves in the unpleasant situation where, "teachers still teach books they know most kids won't read [... and] they pace the reading so it's not overwhelming for those who struggle, but they are selling the best readers short by moving so slowly" (Kittle, 15). Can you imagine anything more frustrating than taking a text you could read independently in a few days and stretching out the reading experience over several weeks or longer?

In his 2009 book *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher reminds us that we must "never lose sight that our highest priority is to raise students who become lifelong readers. What our students read in school is important; what they read the rest of their lives is more important" (Gallagher, 117). If our goal, therefore, as teachers is to create readers, then we certainly must avoid practices that create nonreaders. Another teacher, William Broz, tackles this even more emphatically. He argues that many of our classroom practices actually encourage *not reading* because "a teacher summarizing and interpreting the text makes student reading unnecessary" (Broz, 19).

Both he and Penny give anecdotal evidence that less than 20 per cent of students actually read the texts that are assigned to them. He explains the consequences of making reading unnecessary when he argues,

> *If students do not read the assigned texts, nothing important is happening in your literature classroom* - nothing very important to develop your

> students' reading and interpretative abilities is happening, no matter how many lectures you deliver, vocabulary words students 'learn', elements of fiction students define, quizzes students take, essay test answers students write, or films you show. Nothing important is happening because student development of reading and interpretive abilities requires engaged reading. (Broz, 15)

Thinking about my *Macbeth* unit while reading Broz's assertion brought that burning feeling back to the bottom of my stomach. I love teaching *Macbeth* in my Grade 12 English class. It is the unit I look forward to the most every semester. I love the language, imagery and repetition of blood, the examination of fate versus free will, the sense of impending doom throughout the entire piece, the question about the true nature of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In fact, I love it so much that my son has been able to quote passages from the play since the tender age of two. But perhaps what I have loved most of all is the fact that once I start that unit I know what the class will be doing for the next four weeks. And there's the problem. I approach *Macbeth* as something that needs to be explained to students. Yes I bring lots of enthusiasm and we pull out some Styrofoam swords to bring key scenes to life, and yes, many kids seem to get into it. But I also know that I spend a good deal of time explaining scenes, recapping what happened during our last reading, and signaling when something big is about to happen. In essence, I am doing most of the thinking. So even though I know that most seem to enjoy our Macbeth unit almost as much as I do, but given how much "work" I am doing to help them understand, for example, the dagger scene, and their lack of independence, even by Act 5, I have also come to the painful realization that this unit is not helping to further their development as readers.

Reading Broz's argument was the last nail in Macbeth's coffin for me. Louise Rosenblatt had warned about this in 1956 when she wrote, "it is much easier in the classroom to deal with ideas and information *about* literature than it is with literature itself" (Rosenblatt, 68). For many well-intentioned teachers this has become a reality in our classrooms where it has become enough for students to know *about* a text rather than actually read it. Even worse, "instead of leading students to independence, we make them dependent on us" (Kittle, xv) when we give difficult text to students and expect all students to read that same text at the same time. All of these practices contribute to the creation of nonreaders.

I have experienced first-hand the impact of encouraging self-selected reading in my classroom. Last year was the first year I moved away from a once-a-week reading day to incorporating independent reading every day for 15 minutes. The students logged the number of pages they read over the course of the semester and when we tallied the totals at the end we discovered that the average number of pages read was just over 2000 pages per student. More important than the number of pages read was the fact that the vast majority of the students were engaged with reading every day. Whenever I had a substitute teacher in for me, each one commented on how impressed he/she was with the reading engagement demonstrated by the students.

Naturally, it was not as straightforward as just providing time in our schedule for daily reading. I had spent the previous summer dragging my toddler to numerous yard sales looking for good quality used books to augment my classroom library. Before the school year started I carefully arranged the books on every bookcase and available surface so that more often than not the books would be displayed with their covers facing out. I conducted booktalks every day for the first couple of weeks and then moved the responsibility for presenting booktalks to the students. Most importantly, I talked to my students every day about what they were reading and worked with them to develop their own reading plans and goals.

This success demonstrated to me that students are more engaged when they self-select their reading materials. Since the key to developing reading skills is time spent reading, this is an important first step. But as I have since come to realize, it is not enough if I then spend the rest of the period dragging them through texts, such as *Macbeth*, in such a way that does not allow them to further develop those reading abilities.

In an attempt to figure out what to do next, I spent this past summer taking courses at the University of New Hampshire. This meant that I got to spend another summer with my fantasy big sister Penny Kittle,

except this time it was in the flesh. And not just Penny. I also got the opportunity to work with many other thoughtful and articulate teachers who were wrestling with similar concerns about the relationship between our classroom practices and the unintended development of nonreaders.

At the same time I had the opportunity to read many books and articles by many of my other teaching mentors, too. A few interesting ideas emerged. Nancie Atwell advocates an approach in *The Reading Zone* that includes whole class novels but instead of chopping the book into chapter-by-chapter reading and analysis, a practice she dubs "questionable" and which she feels "undermines the integrity of a work of art and shatters the reading zone," she encourages teachers to let the students experience the text as a whole work before beginning any discussion or analysis of it (Atwell, 114). Another way to bring challenging text into the classroom is through a read aloud. In her latest book *Read, Write, Teach*, Linda Rief explicitly asks teachers at all levels to "read at least two novels and/or play a year as a whole class, so we can engage all of our kids in the process of real reading" (Rief, 160). This is supported by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, which suggests that we limit the number of major text studies to two per year. Remembering that our provincial outcomes are all related to the development of the reader and not any specific text makes it easier to resist a reliance on whole class texts which shifts our focus away from the reader and mistakenly puts it on the text.

So this year, rather than spending weeks of precious class time labouriously going through *Macbeth* line-by-line with somewhat reluctant volunteers while the rest of the class just "looks" at the text rather than reads it, I am going to support my students through the use of shorter pieces of text such as poems, short fiction, articles, artwork, and video that we can use as mentor text to guide us in our own thinking and writing while at the same time honing our reading skills. The ability for students to engage in longer pieces of text is still important, but they will be able to accomplish this much more successfully with self-selected texts rather than texts we impose on them. That doesn't mean that I will be encouraging a steady diet of *Gossip Girls* or *Twilight*. When moving to a full workshop model, we as teachers take on more responsibility in terms of helping our students make good book choices to support each student's interests and growth.

It's not just *Macbeth* that is on the chopping block. I am carefully considering how I use other texts in my classroom as well. For example, I am going to change my approach to the Holocaust memoir *Night* from a whole class study to a mentor text read aloud to let the

Results of a Study of Exclusively Self-selected Reading Classrooms

In a study published in 2013, Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston observed four eighth grade classes in one middle school and interviewed the students about their personal engagement with reading. What made this school interesting was that the English teachers all adopted an "engaged reading curriculum" which focused on students self-selecting their reading texts and foregoing any whole class texts. The researchers noted "there were changes in students' test scores from seventh grade which retained the traditional curriculum, to eighth grade, with the engaged reading curriculum. The percentage of students passing the test went from 78 per cent in seventh grade to 85 per cent in eighth grade" and that "the shift did not simply reduce the tail of distribution but moved students out of the lowest passing category as well" (Ivey and Johnston, 11). This study reminds us that we do not need to feel obligated to teach classics as a means of increasing our students' reading competency because reading self-selected texts raised these students' test scores and even more importantly, all participants in the study, unlike those students in other classrooms who are actively not reading, reported increased engagement with their reading.

raw power of Elie Wiesel's sparse narrative style wash over the students rather than chopping it up into discrete analyzable bits for the students.

As Kelly Gallagher mentioned, creating readers, not nonreaders, is the essential goal I have as a teacher. Reading matters and this argument is further bolstered by Nancie Atwell who tells us that "every measure that looks at pleasure reading and its effects on student performance on standardized tests of reading ability - *and* science *and* math - tells us that the major predictor of academic success is the amount of time that a student spends reading" (Atwell, 107). The solution is straightforward: get kids reading. As noted scholar Stephen Krashen notes, "simply providing time to read results in more reading" (Krashen, 85) which is supported by another study conducted with the International Reading Association that shows that "high school students who regularly engaged in leisure reading scored significantly higher in reading than did peers who did not read regularly for pleasure" (Leisure Reading Board Task Force, 3).

The burning sensation in my stomach has finally gone. It has been replaced with a new awareness of the unintended impact of my teaching practices and a determination to move forward in a way that honours what I believe to be true about students and their development. I plan on devoting more time to students reading self-selected texts and talking with them about what they are independently reading. This in turn forces me to limit my use of whole class texts to just the one or two that I feel would be most beneficial to the students and handle those texts in such a way that does not enable *not reading* them. Unfortunately for Macbeth, he did not make the cut. His beheaded spirit will still linger in my room, but only as an invitation to students to meet him on their own terms.

Sarah Jeans is the English Department Head at Sir John A Macdonald High School in the Halifax Regional School Board.

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Challenging the Status Quo

David Ritchie

Education is traditionally a conservative institution that tends to resist change. Dramatic changes or revolutions can be dangerous in any circumstances. However, given certain situations the revolution can be more than justified, perhaps even be necessary. From an aging parliamentarian's memory I believe the Status Quo is the only contention that can not be vetoed (yes, can not is correct as it indicates an absolute negative rather than cannot which is a negative that allows for a debate). In modern usage the status quo (Latin) implies things as they are at this moment in time. Originally, in it a broader phrase (in statu quo res erant ante bellum), denoted things as they were before the war. Using the modern meaning, challenging it could precipitate a dramatic change. Five areas that might fall into this category are bullying, reporting, the right to fail, whistle blowing and neuroplasticity as it relates to pedagogy.

Bullying exists. Most of us find it objectionable. We as teachers universally believe it is our duty to prevent bullying in our classrooms, hallways, schools and playgrounds. A student, in fact anyone, being bullied is not tolerable. It makes no difference if bullying is student motivated or teacher initiated. Some of us have observed both instances in our careers. The first, student bullying, is relatively easy to isolate and attempt a correction. A careful intervention is possible and advisable. Usually the outcomes are satisfactory in quickly altering and correcting the unacceptable behaviour. The second, teacher initiated bullying, is more difficult but with sufficient collegial and administrative support can be dealt with successfully. Acknowledgement that it exists is essential in rectifying the problem. Sometimes it occurs without the perpetrator teacher being honestly aware of the sometimes subtle bullying. On one occasion I remember a male student being encouraged to be more masculine and less of a sissy and a tattletale. Such a comment when examined with care constitutes overt bullying. The third instance of administrators bullying teachers or other educational employees is equally as reprehensible. Some of us have also observed varying instances and severities of teachers being bullied by an administrator or another teacher.

"It makes no difference if bullying is student motivated or teacher initiated. Some of us have observed both instances in our careers."

These situations require a significant degree of tact, diplomacy and steadfastness to correct. I feel this situation of bullying also requires clear, well circulated procedures and mechanisms for safely reporting and addressing bullying. Confronting a bully can be difficult. Having a procedure for all parties involved would help. There often needs to be a need to help all parties to better understand what actually constitutes bullying. Like earlier challenges of sexist behaviour, it took enormous education for all parties to understand overt, covert and subtle sexist behaviors. A long learning curve lies ahead for bullying to cross the same divide of understanding. Like the sexist, many a bully never know they are being a bully.

Teachers are also sometimes subjected to bullying by parents or even by their students. A direct frontal response is often the only successful way to manage these attacks, manipulations and unfounded criticisms. Consultation, collective sharing, collegial support and careful, non-aggressive confrontation is often the best starting point. Remember you also have a Union that is there to support you. No one in the school environment should be bullied. We owe it to our community to provide a safe, caring and supportive environment. This also means clearly communicating the student's progress.

In recent years I have heard a growing cacophony of students, parents and teachers complaining about the format, language and content of a student's progress reporting. More often what I hear is "How is my child really doing? Is my child really progressing at a reasonable rate? Is my child really doing a good job?" As teachers we all know these questions are loaded with possible controversies and pitfalls. Education and educational practice is changing. The success in reporting student progress is struggling in a complicated scrimmage to keep up with these changes. In a communication model there is a sender, a message and a receiver. If the message is not clearly formatted and in understood diction, the probability of the communication failing is enormous. Think back to the last time you were asked to incorporate a new technique in your teaching practice. The learning curve can often be very steep. Now put yourself in the place of the student and of the parent who has not be trained and incrementally adjusted to the dramatic changes in education expectations and diction. It is a conundrum. Surely this status quo deserves to be challenged. Parents, students and indeed teachers need to feel that progress has been communicated successfully. Collectively teachers are clever enough to start a revolution to achieve this success.

> *"By removing the pain associated with failure and promoting careful reviews, schools can promote a great educational learning journey."*

A number of possible resolutions can be developed. The education system is an extremely qualified organization. I can remember seeing a calculation of the number of years ago of formal education, continuing education and experience achieved by the staff of forty five. The resulting numbers were staggering in terms of the expertise that they represented. One might promote individual schools to brainstorm and experiment with performance reporting. If two minds are better than one, imagine how powerful a staff's collective brain is. It is time for challenging the current status quo in terms of reporting. Going out on a proverbial limb. One possible dramatic change is to establish literate, numeric and investigative achievement levels. This measurable achievement can be graded to be seen as achieved levels, fourth year, seventh year, ninth and 12th year. Students may continue to be promoted but remediation would be applied to upgrade deficiencies. Focus on promoting mastery to create a solid foundation could be augmented by successful application of a wide range of teaching, learning and evaluation techniques. I cannot fathom the distress of graduating from a Nova Scotia high school and not achieving the necessary skills to go on to climb the hills to achieve a successful life. This might well require considerable changes in schools as we know it. I experienced the half grade system a number of years ago. Students leaving Grade 6 or 7 were designated at six and a half or seven and a half. The year concentrated on correcting the student's deficiencies. Literacy, numeracy and self confidence were the focus of the ½ year. I recall it as having a great deal of success. Most of the students benefited enormously from a year of concentrated specific skill development. Some students get lost and need to have considerable attention and time to re-establish their confidence and skill foundations.

Modern employment is shifting radically so the abilities to be able to be flexible, experimental and confident are desired beyond traditional achievement. If a student and parent(s) know the student has not achieved the aforementioned levels, I sense a willingness to correct the deficiencies would be welcomed. It might not be as revolutionary as was first envisioned. It would be an excellent example of the good communication of a student's achievement of those three narrow but important realities.

A revolution of a good communication may initiate another revolution: the right of children to fail. Current behaviour and brain research is reinforcing the concept that we learn far more from our failures than we do from our successes. One of the significant challenges I met in the visual arts studio, even more than my experiences teaching history, English and drama, was the catatonic condition many art students experienced. They had been preconditioned to believe that a "perfect" performance existed. This froze them from being experimental in their creativity. They had been taught making errors and failing at tasks was not to be tolerated. They saw "risk taking" as punishable if they did not succeed. The expectation and reality was in fact

the opposite. All great art breaks the rules, establishes new wonderful creative material and establishes new pathways of expression. This sanctioned students to free themselves from fear of failures and transport them into embracing creative experimentation. I discern this would benefit all students in all subjects if all teachers would abandon the frozen foolishness of giving an A for a perfect regurgitation of a process and a D for a unique flawed approach. Skills are important but creativity moves everything forward. It is a partnership.

We are hearing more and more about the enormous benefit of students experiencing failure. We have all no doubt heard the expression, "We learn more from our failures." By removing the pain associated with failure and promoting careful reviews, schools can promote a great educational learning journey. Modern learning theories are supporting the right for students to benefit from failure. This opportunity should be built into the student's journey. Losing the goal of walking the tight rope of constant success at the apex of learning would be an interesting challenge of the status quo. The ugly, misunderstood word of "standards" rises over the horizon. There are rungs (foundational standards) in any ladder. To successfully climb it is best to achieve a firm footing on each subsequent rung. Skipping rungs can lead to slips and slowed progress or to healthy insights. Most of us benefit from the well constructed ladder as a base for climbing, especially as we learn enough to construct our own ladders. Creative thoughts are constructed in the same means as ladders.

"We know that the brain is plastic enough and given certain practices we can reprogram brain patterns that will change our brains in fairly short order."

One thing that has always bothered me is the concept that it takes many positive interventions and comments to overcome a single negative one. Current brain research indicates that there are strategies that can alter this. We know that the brain is plastic enough and given certain practices we can reprogram brain patterns that will change our brains in fairly short order. The advances in the study of Neuroplasticity are opening new doors and allowing us to re-open some doors from the past. Interestingly enough, resurrecting certain traditional exercises we used to employ in education seem to provide the answers. Memory used to be a practice followed at every grade level from alphabet, to spelling, to times tables, to capitals, to punctuation rules, to grammar facts, to notation and key signatures in music, to basketball plays, to swimming strokes and to many other facts. Once learned the facts become part of our muscle and brain memory. It seems that the act of repetition builds new pathways in the brain. These new pathways can reprogram the brain and its facilities. Apparently we can develop positive pathways though positive patterns of repetition. Given these breakthroughs we can actually significantly change our brains. I can recall back in elementary school after the struggle with times tables to suddenly see that the relationship of the numeric matrix caused me to understand certain fascinating relationships among numbers. The visual metrics was the product of the rote learning of the host of relationships of the one to 12 multiplication tables. Other similar rewards grow out of other rote experiences, both physical and mental. A very difficult task in my early education was learning to write cursively. Since I was dyslectic, ambidextrous and male (with typical early male motor control issues) it was only through the sometimes excruciating repetitions that I acquired the skill of cursive writing. I am also convinced that the cursive writing skills learned transferred into other perceptual proficiencies. In the very near future we are going to see significant changes in the delivery and practice of learning and teaching. This will definitely require us to address the status quo and embrace the challenges.

The status quo often deserves to be challenged when there are deficiencies. If we are totally honest, there are always deficiencies. We have never reached perfection as we are always in the state of approaching it. It is only through challenges that the world gets better. Take the time to look around you and notice where you could and would challenge the status quo in a way that would benefit teachers and students. While changing horses mid stream can be perilous, not changing can be equally disastrous. Risk can be worth the reward so think about challenging the status quo.

David Ritchie is a retired teacher from the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.

Challenging the Status Quo

Some Days I Believe I Was Born to Challenge the Concept of Status Quo

Debra Ripley

Some days I believe I was born to challenge the concept of Status Quo. I suppose I should clarify that my actions in life never occurred with the intent of challenging this much revered concept. Retrospectively though, suggest that it was.

It is literally one year and one day ago that I retired from the classroom, students and my official role as an educator. It has been an excellent year! When people ask me how retirement is I often reply that, "I LOVE my life!" Of course that is not to imply I did not love my life in the Academic World. I did.

I am the first teacher (at least one that is able to display a B.A. and a B.Ed after their name) in my family. I am very proud of that fact. When I was taking my B.Ed degree I was interested in what had led the other students to this program. When asked, many of them told me that a family member had inspired them – of course, it was a world they grew up with, a way of life they were familiar with and knew. That is not my story.

I was actually one of those students in high school that liked school, although not an honours student, I enjoyed the environment and my teachers (most of them at least). I loved learning. But honestly, never in my wildest imagination could I have predicted I would eventually become a teacher.

I said earlier I did not have a family member who led me towards teaching, but that is not exactly correct. It was my eldest daughter – when she turned 5 and started school I was introduced to school at a different level. As a parent I became a member of the Home and School Association and within a short period of time involved in the fundraising aspects. I enjoyed my time being a part of the elementary school world. My job as the "Hot Dog Lady" on Fridays, allowed me to enter into the centre of the school's pulse – the teacher's room. Oh, what fun we had there!

As is the case everywhere and for anyone – being in the right place at the right time – helps you find yourself offered a different role. I applied and was given a position as a Teacher's Assistant (as it was titled then) in the Special Education Classroom and my life took off on another path.

I did not have the typical journey while obtaining my teaching degree and sometimes I used to wonder what my life would have been like if I had started my career at a younger age. I do not stay on that "wonder" for long as we know it never gives us an answer. I do know though that I have never regretted any experience in my life. Some I would not do again, but each experience adds something to your life.

Yesterday was graduation day for the Grade 12 students in Cumberland County. For two decades I have been attending these ceremonies to watch as my students walk across the stage. It seemed strange not to be there. Especially as the graduating class of 2014 were a favourite group of students to teach and to get to know. How I enjoyed being their teacher.

Although the journey can be different for people, the rewards and hardships of the teaching profession remains the same. I am so thankful for that job at the elementary school years ago and the opportunities it gave me to do something that I truly loved doing. Although I did not have teachers in my family in the past, I have now. I would be proud to think that because of me, and my choices, my second eldest daughter and my sister's husband have followed in MY footsteps.

As I enter into year two of retirement, I know I will always remember how I loved my life as a teacher. I also know how much I am loving my life today. And that is a good thing!

Debra Ripley is a retired teacher from the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

Creating Success In and Out of the Classroom: Empowerment

Chara Ross

If you had asked me a few years ago what the most important subjects in school were, I would have said literacy and math…of course! Right….? But wait…what about science, and social studies….art, health, physical education? This is tough!

Yes, all subjects are important in the school system, but which ones play an integral role in the development and empowerment of our youth?

I'm going to challenge the status quo and say health and physical education.

Often you see these subjects handed off to non-specialists- usually to fill in gaps in schedules. I cringe when I see this! These are specialist positions for a reason!

Within all subjects the teacher that delivers the curriculum plays a fundamental role in the development of our youth. I believe mindfulness and empowerment are the most important topics to teach. Even though I am partial to health and physical education, I would like to remind you that you can teach this in EVERY classroom.

My goal as a teacher has always been to empower my students. No matter what mixture of subjects I have taught over the years, it has always been my ultimate goal.

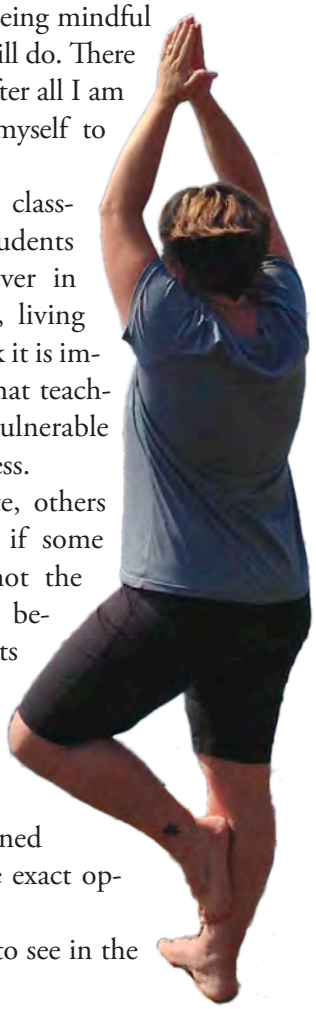
After living with depression for almost two years, I found myself being sidetracked from that goal.

About three years ago, after my son was born, I found myself almost 80 pounds overweight and in a deep depression. No one would believe me. My friends didn't believe me. They thought I was crazy. I was always outgoing and upbeat and positive.

Ever hear of the quote, "Fake it until you make it?" I most definitely was living it. No one could ever know how I felt on the inside. I hated myself. I found it hard to find anything good about my physical appearance, which in turn, changed my inner beliefs about myself. How could I teach my students to love themselves if I didn't love myself?

After having to take a short term sick leave from teaching for a couple months, I decided that I couldn't live this way anymore. I deserved more, and everyone around me did too. How could I teach my students about mental health if I was mentally unfit?

With the help of family and some great friends I started my journey back to health and happiness. It has been quite the winding road, and still is some days. Let me say, it wasn't easy. It involved lots of hard work. It's amazing what the power of being mindful and a little physical activity will do. There are still good and bad days, after all I am human. I had empowered myself to take my life back.



Once I was back in the classroom I started by telling students my story. I'm a firm believer in practicing what you preach, living your life authentically. I think it is important for students to see that teachers are human. Becoming vulnerable brought about that humanness.

Some were able to relate, others were empathetic. Not sure if some even registered. This was not the reason for sharing. I shared because I wanted the students to know that they can overcome anything, with a little self-love and mindfulness! Vulnerability rubs off…literally. My students soon learned it wasn't a weakness, but the exact opposite…a great strength.

Be the change you wish to see in the world!–Mahatma Gandhi

Our world can be harsh. Social media, music videos, movies and TV shows have set a precedence of how women and men should be. Students are looking to these socially defined values instead of within, from their own values. If we keep looking to these outer sources to live up to, we are, without a doubt, setting ourselves up for failure!

We need to teach students to accept themselves for who they truly are: The good, bad and everything else in-between. There is an immense power in discovering and accepting yourself for who you truly are.

How can we teach students to peel off all of these outer layers and make them see their true inner being? Through empowerment! This is how:

By The Power of WORDS:

You know the old saying, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me?"

This could never be so wrong! Words hurt the most, to our deepest core. If you are told you are stupid, ugly, fat etc… you start to believe it. When we believe it, is almost impossible to change those 'words' in our head. Replace the negative words with positive. Practicing the power of positive is key. We need to teach students to be kind to themselves, and others. Teach them the power of integrity in our words. Is what we are going to say truthful as well as kind?

Someone once asked me this: What words are you using in your life that are not giving life?

Do we as teachers use words that make students feel ashamed or discouraged? Or do we use words that make students feel assured and proud? Sometimes our words can be the only positive thing students hear all day. Let's make them count. We have no control of the 'negative' happenings outside of school.

By Giving Students a Voice:

Our curriculum outcomes are set in stone. As teachers we struggle to meet the demands of having such diverse students learn each outcome. To me, this is different from just 'teaching'. Teaching for learning to occur is much different. In order for learning to take place, the students must somehow relate to the material taught. My thoughts, it's all in the delivery. The minute we walk into the classroom our students can 'feel' what we do. Our energy is radiated and students will receive it, whether it is positive or negative.

Feedback is key in my classroom, not only from teacher-to-student but from student-to-teacher. Student-to-teacher feedback is equally important. As teachers we have to be able to receive all feedback from students graciously.

What kind of feedback are you reinforcing in your classroom? The negative or the positive?

Through Physical Activity:

In 2011-2012, one in four Canadian adults (6.3 million people) was obese, as defined by the body mass index (BMI), according to Statistics Canada. The Canadian average sits at 24.8 per cent. The four Atlantic provinces are higher than the Canadian average with Nova Scotia at 32.3 per cent.

With obesity on the rise it's no wonder why mental health has taken a hit.

If students are unhappy with their physical appearance, they are more than likely unhappy inside. This creates the belief in a person's mind that; I am _____, therefore I _____. *('insert negative beliefs here.')*

Studies have shown that with increased physical activity comes increased cognitive awareness. There is an increase in the ability to recall information. Short-term and long-term memory improves.

Practicing mindfulness in physical activity is scientifically shown to reduce stress and maintain well-being.

Why wait for physical education class? Incorporate DAILY physical activity in your classroom and watch the benefits. There are all sorts of ways to incorporate physical activity into your daily outcomes. It just takes some creativity.

Many of the practices in healthy living and physical education don't have to be taught in the gym. It's about taking the time to integrate some of these practices into your regular routine and curriculum: from Grade primary all the way though to Grade 12. I understand that we hardly have the time to meet our outcomes now, but trust me, almost anything can be made to fit.

Give it a try! I challenge you! You will soon begin to see the benefits in and outside your classroom!

Chara Ross teaches junior high physical education, healthy living and science at Parrsboro Regional High School, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

There are Many Little Ways…

Lisa Wilson

I introduced book club to my students in early October in a very structured and organized manner. "Getting Started: The First 20 Days of Independent Reading" from *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3-6* by Fountas and Pinnell was my anchor. To create interest, I designed a bulletin board where a wide variety of my classroom novels were put on display. I also took each of my classes to the library for a tour and reintroduction to our librarian and library services.

I needed to make sure my students were aware of the different genres of books I have in my room so we began with a discussion around genre. The categories presented were as follows: non-fiction (biography, autobiography, memoir and information), historical fiction, realistic fiction, science fiction, myths and legends, fantasy, adventure, mystery and humour. After whole class discussion and examples each class participated in a book sort.

I organized the students in small groups of three to four and gave each group a stack of books of assorted genres. Their task was to look through the books and as a group come to consensus as to which genre each book belonged. One person in each group became the recorder and wrote on the chart provided the decisions of the group. Next, each person in every group had to choose one book and present it to the class. The students stated the title and author, read the description on the back and identified the genre as decided by the group. At this time other groups could disagree with the presenting group's decision as long as they could defend their point of view.

> *"There are many little ways to enlarge your child's world. Love of books is the best of all."*
> *– Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*

To assist students with choosing their books for book club we discussed strategies for choosing just the right books, including the 5-Finger Rule, and I posted information and recommendations around the room. It took one forty minute period for students in each class to choose their books.

Next it was time to discuss how book club would function. My school runs on a six day rotary cycle and I see each of my classes for nine, forty minute, periods per cycle. When designing the book club schedule I looked at the timetable closely taking into account factors such as did they have English in the morning or afternoon, just before or after lunch, or for a double period. Many of my classes have multiple English language arts periods in one day so those seemed to be naturally good days to have a book club class. I then set up a schedule for each class so students knew which periods (three per cycle) were for book club. I believe continuity is important so this schedule does not change except on very rare occasions.

Students are now in "clubs" of three to four participants. There is scheduled time for reading, completing the rotating roles of which there are three: Word Wizard, Discussion Director and Illustrator and meeting with the group. Each student also maintains a main events log and at the end of the novel is required to write a summary of their novel.

As a summative activity, each book club group will complete and present a final project. There are nine projects from which to choose and these play to the various strengths and interests of students.

Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him. –Maya Angelou

1. ***Friendly Letter***
   The students choose two main characters from the story. In the first letter one character writes to the other to ask for advice with a problem he/she is experiencing in the novel. The second letter is the other character's response with advice.

2. ***Mobile***
   The students list eight to 10 objects/characters that are important in the story. Then a list of descriptors is made for each. Next, students create a model/representation of each and hang these as a mobile.

3. ***Newspaper Front Page***
   Students choose the most exciting event from the story and create a W5:
   - Who was there? (What characters?)
   - What happened? What were people doing?
   - Where did it happen?
   - When did it happen?
   - Why did it happen?

   Then they must write a headline and an article such as you would see in a newspaper.

4. ***Book Jacket***
   Students create a book jacket with the following features:
   - Title
   - Author's name
   - Artwork/graphics
   - A brief summary of the story (do not give away the plot)
   - Sometimes: a brief biography of the author, comments from critics

5. ***Sequel***
   Students are to think about the possibility of a sequel and write the opening pages of the first chapter of part II.

6. ***Movie Poster***
   Students will imagine their novel has been turned into a movie and will create a movie poster to advertise it. The poster will include the following features:
   - A picture/illustration connecting to the story (main characters, an important scene etc.)
   - The title of the novel/movie
   - The actors and actresses who star in the movie (main ones)
   - A caption that will encourage people to watch the movie

7. ***Songwriter***
   Students will choose a tune/score they know well and then write a song that tells the story of their novel to be set to the music.

8. ***Coat of Arms***
   - Students will create a list of the most important characters in the novel.
   - If there are more than three they may pick the three most important or do more if you wish.
   - Using a template they will create a Coat of Arms for each character.

9. ***Wish Upon a Star***
   Students will pick a main character from the novel then write down three wishes that character could make regarding something that happened in the book. They will pick one of the wishes and rewrite that part of the story with the wish coming true.

We have just finished our second cycle of book clubs and most students are well into their books. The next steps will be my individual conferences with students and book talks presented by those students who wish to present a book to their class.

Lisa Wilson teaches Grade 8 English Language Arts at E.B. Chandler Junior High, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

No One Gets Left Behind

Bev Pugsley

This is the philosophy of the Cumberland North Academy (CNA) Junior Striders Running Club.

The idea sparked in June 2014, when I joined the local running club in my hometown, the Amherst Striders. I have made many positive friendships through this group of runners. When we run together we plan times and a place to meet each week. We are accountable to each other, and the runners who may be more experienced loop to the back of the group and encourage the new runners thus, 'no one gets left behind.' We start and end our Strider runs with photos and fist bumps. We enter races together and cheer for each other. This has been my first experience to run with a club. I love the spirit so much and it has improved my speed, endurance, goal-setting, and mood. Over the summer, I began to encourage others to come out to train with me and/or join the Amherst Striders. Some of these runners are teachers and now volunteer with our school running group.

"This has been my first experience to run with a club. I love the spirit so much and it has improved my speed, endurance, goal-setting, and mood."

In early September, the idea of the CNA Jr. Striders Running Club was introduced after I asked for support from staff to help volunteer some of their time. Students received flyers from me and at our annual Open House night. The flyers were signed and returned from parents and our club was born. We meet twice a week after school, Grades 3-6 for now, over 30 members strong and eight staff members running on school property.

Our club is a **free** learn-to-run program, with some guidance by Doctors Nova Scotia, working toward running a distance of 5k. Each week, the running distance increases by a minute. The first week was walking one minute, run one minute. The second week was walking one minute, run two minutes, and so on. We begin each session gathering in a circle. Attendance is checked with a fist bump, then a brief talk of our goal for the day, followed by a warm-up of stretches or speed training. Next, weather permitting; we go outside for jogging time accompanied by upbeat music. Students and staff take turns leading the group through laps. I watch the time on my cell phone and blow my whistle to let the group know when it's walking or running time. We loop (turn around) at different times to go back and catch up for those runners who may need some encouragement so they don't get left behind. Finally, we have cool down stretches in a circle with a round of fist bumps and high fives and thanks to each other for coming out and giving their best. If we are indoors, we are permitted to exercise and jog in certain areas of the school.

One Saturday in October, the CNA Jr. Striders met the Amherst Striders Club at a park downtown for a scheduled run. This was to practice the route for the Amherst Y Pumpkin Run and also the first time for the school club to run off of CNA property. The Amherst Striders offered lots of encouragement to the CNA students through smiles and kind words and showing the 'no one gets left behind' philosophy. At the end of the practice route, there was a 'pumpkin finish line' and more fist bumps, high fives, and photos too.

The CNA Jr. Striders Running Club does not take for granted the running shoes they wear. Together, with one of the founders of the Amherst Striders, Ken Mackenzie, and the communities of CNA and Parrsboro Regional Elementary School, the request was answered for a charity we named, "Shoes for Haiti." Over a two week period, the students were able to collect previously worn shoes for families in Haiti. Mr. Mackenzie

gathered the shoes and sent them to Running Free Canada, who will then send them to Haiti on our behalf. Our two schools were able to collect 547 pairs of shoes, a wonderful gesture of empathy and responsibility in our small towns.

On October 25, the CNA Jr. Striders participated in their first running event, the Amherst Y Pumpkin Run. They were joined by siblings, parents, and CNA staff, and enjoyed dressing in costumes and running past jack-o'-lanterns through the race course. The best part of the race had to be the expressions on the faces of the students when they crossed the finish line and accepted their pumpkin-shaped medals. Community members, friends, and school staff cheered and parents took photos. Some students proudly wore their medals to school the next week. Now the children know how it feels to set a goal, meet and achieve that goal, just like I do with the Amherst Striders Running Club and in my every day teaching.

The CNA Jr. Striders are runners with big hearts and they are looking forward to their next race in February. I gave the students a writing activity to complete in their spare time last week and place in my mailbox in the office. The topic was, **"Three Things I Like About Running Club."** Here are just a few of their excerpts:

"It builds stamina." – Nic G, Grade 5

"Being with my friends." – Leslie, Grade 3

"The Pumpkin Run." – Kali, Grade 4

"I get to meet new people and kids." – Zoe, Grade 3

"Mrs. P makes it fun." – Mia, Grade 4

"Running and listening to music." – Kathryn, Grade 3

"I find it really soothing." – Karter, Grade 6

"Stretches." – Brody, Grade 4

"Fist bumping." – Nathan, Grade 4

"Pushing myself to get to different distances." – Liam, Grade 4

"Running isn't easy, but it's more fun with a group." – Mrs. Pugsley, Grade 1

Bev Pugsley teaches Grade 1 at Cumberland North Academy, Chignecto-Central Reginal School Board.

Showing Pictures in Guyana

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, in August, projecting an image of my Nova Scotia classroom onto a wall in Guyana. I had no idea it would prompt so much discussion. In the room were instructors and professors involved in a teacher education project sponsored by the government of Guyana. The project was intended to improve teacher education and my role was to offer workshops about classroom assessment. I had spent a lot of time planning these workshops and I was intrigued when simple and unceremonious photos of my day-to-day life in the classroom raised a lot of discussion and side-tracked my workshop preparation. These discussions, in turn, helped me to reflect on classroom practices and expectations that are so close to my daily experience that they might easily be overlooked or left unexamined.

I teach in a rural high school. These photos are from an Advanced English 11 class.

Photo 1

There are ten students included in this photo. They are in a class of 28. You can see about one-third of the classroom. In the foreground are five students sitting together with binders, pencils, and a critical essay about a common text (a novel) that they have all read. One student is using a pencil to point to a specific paragraph in the critical essay. Two students are looking down at the essay while the other three students are looking at each other. The student who is pointing is also speaking.

Behind this group of five is a pair of students, sitting beside each other each reading different texts. They have bookmarks with explanations and examples of various reading strategies. They stop and discuss what they are reading, sharing the reading strategies that they are using to understand their own texts. In the photo, they are not talking; they are reading intently.

In the background of the photo you can see four computers along the back of the room with two shelves of books above them. Two students are sharing one computer and they have swiveled their chairs to face each other. They each have a copy of the same text and a website open on the computer monitor. One student is talking, while the other student is looking at the text. Another student sits at a computer on his own, with a book open on the computer desk in front of him. He is researching the context of the historical fiction that he is reading.

This photo shows a blend of paper and digital resources; of focused faces and smiles; and of small groups, pairs, and individual work. It takes some time to think about the teacher planning that is involved to organize such student groupings, tasks, texts, and talk.

Photo 2

There are six students visible in this image. They are all standing. One student is standing behind a small desk, speaking to a semi-circle of four students on the other side of the desk. The students in the semi-circle all have clipboards; two of them are making notes, one is looking at an artefact on the desk, and one is looking at the boy who is speaking. In the background, you can

"The conversation—like many conversations that intrigue me—oscillated between micro and macro perspectives; it shifted back and forth from the details of the images to the larger concerns about schools in today's world."

see a student who is paying attention to someone else. In fact, there are six simultaneous student presentations occurring in the classroom, although the photo only captures one such presentation.

Photo 3

There are 16 of the 28 students in this image. Some are standing, some are seated, and some are leaning on chairs. It takes a moment to figure out that they are not positioned randomly, but rather around desks that have been clustered together so that chart paper can be placed on top of the desks. The students are configured in pairs and groups of four and they are carrying markers. I can count five smiles, four people in mid-sentence, and seven students focusing on the chart papers.

The student in the foreground has his index finger touching the chart paper on the tables in front of him. He is pointing at a bridge over a winding road that crosses the paper. It is a metaphorical journey of a character from a novel and the students are adding to the map to show the choices and decisions that this character made throughout the text. Students move about the room in pairs, adding onto the various kinds of metaphorical graphic organizers that are being developed on the chart papers.

It is not the differentiated instructional approach that catches the attention of the Guyanese instructors and professors. Nor is it the variety of physical arrangements of desks and students in the room. Nor is it the students' interactions, the print and digital resources in the room, or the obvious focus of the students in their tasks. I am asked, "Where is the teacher?"

"I am their teacher, and I was taking the photo," I replied. I couldn't help but think that much of my work is invisible. The preparation for our classes is unseen by students. When students are engaged in the activities I've designed, my role is changed from being a guide to being a supporter as well as an observer. I have to watch carefully, paying attention to who needs additional skill practice, who needs encouragement, who has mastered a skill, and how I could change or adapt the activity for other students.

Discussions about these pictures continued with the Guyanese teacher-trainers and professors. From the images, they talked about the underling assumptions about learning, about learners, about teaching, and about teachers. The glimpses into my classroom raised questions about classroom resources, class size, pedagogical stances, and the importance of collegial support and professional development. Broad notions about the aims of education came under scrutiny by looking at how I structured student interactions in my classroom. The conversation—like many conversations that intrigue me—oscillated between micro and macro perspectives; it shifted back and forth from the details of the images to the larger concerns about schools in today's world.

As I write this, I have just attended our NSTU Provincial Conference Day and it is easy to make connections between the conference conversations and the dialogues I experienced in Guyana. The workshops that teachers put together provide glimpses into Nova Scotia schools and classrooms; our NSTU Professional Associations allow us to share snapshots of our professional practices. This is an opportunity to look into other schools and classrooms and learn from our colleagues. If you had three pictures of your common classroom practices, what would they be?

Dr. Steven Van Zoost teaches for Avon View High School and Nova Scotia Virtual School in the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.

Malala!

Brian Forbes

This young Pakistani girl gained notoriety in her local region of the Swat Valley as an advocate of education for girls, an idea which was detested by the local Taliban. One day a Taliban gunman boarded the school bus she was on, asked for her by name, and shot her in the head. This despicable act, from which she nearly died but miraculously recovered, gained her instant recognition around the world. Her subsequent courageous, persistent and articulate commitment to her cause has gained her a worldwide hearing and made her an inspiring symbol of resistance to oppression.

It is not fortuitous that education was recognized as the key to freedom by both Malala and the Taliban. Innumerable regimes have used control of education, or even its denial, to buttress their tyranny. But even in political democracies there is a tendency to employ public education to inculcate conventional values, beliefs and behaviour. These are often political and religious in nature. When I was growing up in the 1950s and '60s the sun was indeed setting on the British Empire. But still we displayed the Union Jack in the classroom, saluted it every morning and pledged allegiance to it and "to the Empire for which it stands." We sang both "God Save the Queen" and the "Maple Leaf Forever" (a catchy tune, but check out the words). We were taught what most would now recognize as a biased and sanitized version of history. Also every morning we recited the Lord's Prayer. Each year a Christian organization came to distribute pocket New Testaments, and dear Miss M. showed up regularly on Friday afternoons with a flannel board to tell us a Bible story. All this was seen as perfectly acceptable and uncontroversial. Times have changed!

It is to empower them to broaden their own horizons and think thoughts which before would have been impossible.

But to teach people to read and write is to give them the means to access information which otherwise would be unavailable to them. It is to empower them to broaden their own horizons and think thoughts which before would have been impossible. Many repressive governments have found this to their cost. The same holds true for democratic societies. The "system" – the elite, the powerful – never have it their own way. The difference is that in the more enlightened and open societies, which generally regard education as the lynch pin of progress and the best bulwark to freedom, this is seen as a strength, not a weakness. Equipping citizens to think for themselves, to question authority and challenge the status quo is considered a good thing, not an evil.

One of the most attractive aspects of youth is its optimism. It is in the nature of young people to believe enthusiastically, albeit often naively, in the possibility of change and progress. With age comes experience, responsibility, realism and – sometimes – wisdom. There also comes the danger of cynicism and (alas!) an unwarranted contentment with things as they are. Obviously, given that dynamic, balance is called for. But how is the inertia of ingrained habit, entrenched power structures and vested interests to be overcome in the absence of pressure generated by youthful idealism and hope? There is no end of seemingly intractable problems facing the world. In my view it is an essential function of schools in a democratic society to foster in students awareness of issues requiring action, encouragement to challenge the ways of their elders and confidence in their own ability to contribute to a better future. After all, as Malala Yousafzai has urged, "Let us remember: One book, one pen, one child, and one teacher can change the world."

Brian Forbes is a retired teacher and former president of the NSTU.

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