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

Spring 2012

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Hiver – Comment appuyer nos garcons et nos filles dans notre système d'éducation

Printemps – Bien-être/Gestion de soi pour un Âme en bonne santé

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Optimizing Conditions of Teachers' Professional Practice to Support Students with Special Educational Needs

Bernie Froese-Germain and Bob McGahey

In his article *Making Canadian Schools inclusive: A Call to Action*, Gordon Porter refers to the question of how to provide services to students with special needs as a "flash point issue for education systems in Canada"[1]. While this description may be somewhat overstated, certainly education systems, schools and teachers struggle daily to meet the varied needs of students. Teachers are called to adapt their lessons to meet the learning needs of all of their students – a task that becomes more complex for students with identified exceptionalities.

Across the country, teachers are working to provide individualized instruction to the students in their classes. Teachers use their professional judgement to modify teaching to suit the learning needs of students. Occasionally, this modification is required as a result of students being formally identified as having a learning exceptionality. As classrooms become more diverse, the teacher's task becomes more difficult.

A recent article in the Ontario College of Teachers' magazine, *Professionally Speaking*, calls for a change to the pre-service training in Ontario. This change would involve all teachers studying the content currently in part one of a three-part certification in special education. The call is the result of a consultation conducted by the College prior to revising the Special Education Additional Qualification course. According to the College's Manager of Standards of Practice and Education Déirdre Smith, OCT:

"Parents made it clear that they want teachers to have a depth and breadth of expertise related to all exceptionalities. It is essential to parents that the principles underlying differentiated instruction and universal design permeate the professional practices of all teachers." [2]

The challenges associated with teachers adapting to meet individual student needs can be made more difficult given the trend toward standardization in education. It is counterintuitive to be focussing on individualized instruction while at the same time hoping for standardized outputs on a standardized assessment. In a recent article on inclusive education, researchers Kathleen Hulgin and Bob Drake conclude:

The aim of inclusive education – democratic membership and rich learning opportunities for all students – is at risk in the current policy context. Though the [No Child Left Behind] Act is framed as advancing the needs of students with disabilities, it may be planting discrimination deeper and more unconscious. As educators fear losing jobs, rely on standardized curriculum, emphasise basic skills and pull increasing numbers of students out of the regular classroom for intervention, the goals and practices of inclusive education seem increasingly unreasonable.[3]

Similarly, one of the themes that emerged from a 2009 study of the Alberta teaching profession's views on the future of special education was "the incompatibility between the province's avowed support for inclusive education, on the one hand, and its dogged

pursuit of a standards-based approach to accountability, on the other." Among the recommendations from the report is that "Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers, redesign the accountability policies and practices related to students with special needs."[4]

While it may be argued that Canadian teachers do not face the same level of fear as their American counterparts, certainly the pressure to succeed on standardized testing is ever-present. As a result, Canadian teachers are subject to similar pressures in terms of ensuring that their classes perform up to standards.

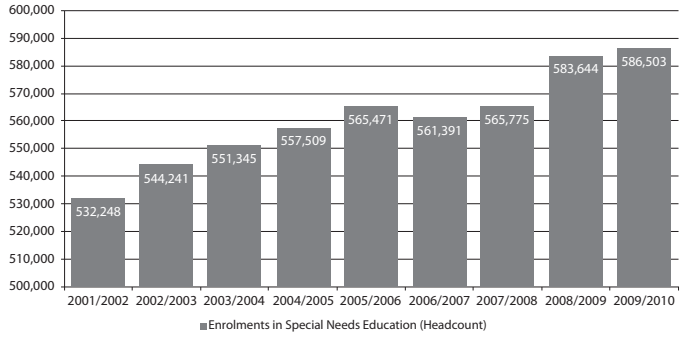

Chart 1: Student Enrolments in Special Needs Education, Canada 2001–2010

Beyond the challenges created by the current political ideology, there are other issues impacting on special education. For example, recent research by People for Education found that in 2009-2010 most of Ontario's school boards (67 of 72) spent more on special education than they received from the province – in total, school boards spent $174 million more on special education than the province provided. Regarding students with special needs who have been identified but are not receiving the recommended support, while there have been improvements since 2005-2006, 23 per cent of elementary schools and 21 per cent of secondary schools report having identified students who are not receiving support.[5]

Inequities related to waiting lists and access to programs and services are another concern. People for Education reports that "the average number of children on special education waiting lists in high poverty schools (10) is more than double the average number of children (4) per low poverty school. And 28 per cent of high poverty schools report they have identified students who are not receiving recommended support, again, double the percentage of low poverty schools."[6]

Another significant challenge revolves around sheer numbers – teachers appear to be facing a greater number of students with identified exceptionalities in their classrooms. Data from Statistics Canada show that, nationally, since 2001 there has been a 10.2 per cent increase in the number of special needs students in elementary and secondary schools, representing over 50,000 students[7] [Chart 1].

Statistics Canada also reports[8] an increase from 2005-06 to 2009-10 in the number of students with identified exceptionalities[9] as a percentage of total school enrolment from 10.85 per cent to 11.55 per cent [Chart 2].

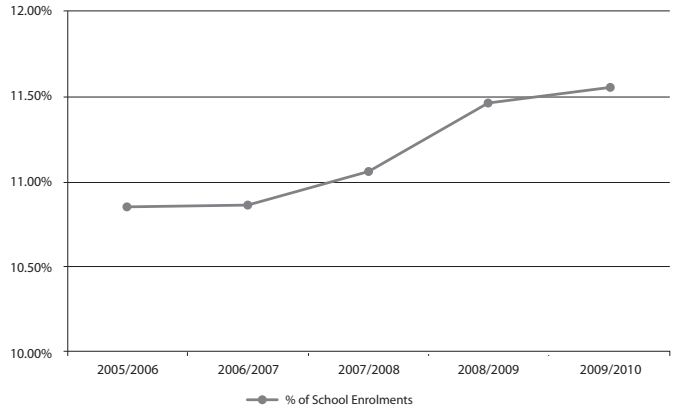

Chart 2: Enrolments in Special Needs Education (headcount) as a Percentage of Total Enrolments (headcount), Canada 2005–2010

Most provinces and territories also reported increases over the same period. The greatest increase was identified in Prince Edward Island. Students with identified exceptionalities made up 22.88 per cent of the school population in 2005-06, rising to 30.88 per cent in 2009-10. In Saskatchewan students with IE made up 28.2 per cent of school enrolment in 2009-10 (up from 24.5 per cent in 2005-06), and in Quebec the percentage of students with IE increased to nearly 14 per cent from 12.56 per cent. Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Alberta were the only jurisdictions reporting no increase or small decreases over the specified time period. The largest decrease was found in Alberta reporting that 12.28 per cent of the school population had identified exceptionalities in 2005-06

and 11.51 per cent had identified exceptionalities in 2009-10.

Key to these findings is the fact that, despite the decline in school enrolments in most jurisdictions between 2005-06 and 2009-10, the number of students with identified exceptionalities as a percentage of school enrolment is generally increasing across the country [Chart 3]. Further, these statistics tell us that, on average, approximately one in every 10 students in a school will have an identified exceptionality.

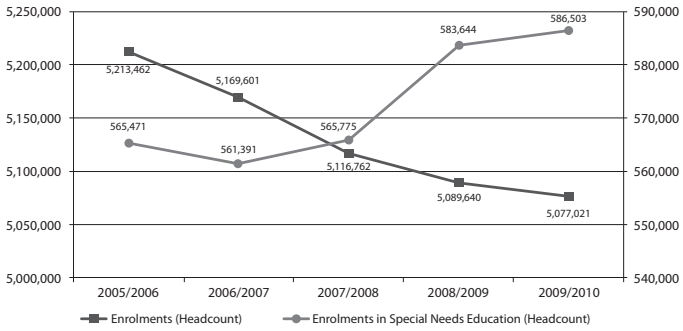

Chart 3: Enrolments in Special Needs Education (headcount, right axis) and Total Enrolments (headcount, left axis), Canada 2005–2010

The number of students with identified exceptionalities was also examined in a recent teacher survey of class size and student diversity conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation. In this survey, data was gathered from nearly 3,800 teachers reporting on 9,894 classrooms across the country. Our results showed a slightly different picture than that shown by Statistics Canada. Teachers responding to the CTF survey reported that about 16 per cent of the students have identified exceptionalities (IE). When considering the average number, and the Statistics Canada data, this would mean that in a "typical" classroom of 25 students one might expect to find between 2 and 4 students with IE.

Unfortunately, averages do not always tell the full story. Chart 4 depicts the percentage distribution of identified students

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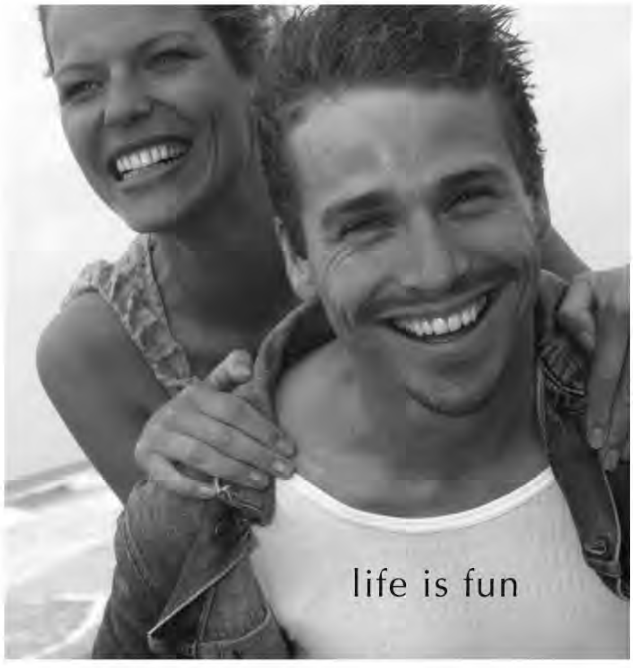

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per classroom. The survey found that 81 per cent of classes reported had at least one student with a formally identified exceptionality and over 13 per cent of the classrooms reported contained 7 or more students with identified exceptionalities (IE).

Chart 4 also contains a number of other interesting findings:

- Nearly 28 per cent of all classrooms reported contained 5 or more students with IE, and 38 per cent had 4 or more students with IE.
- 18.6 per cent of classrooms in grades 1-3 had 5 or more students with IE, and over 29 per cent had 4 or more students with IE.
- 15 per cent of classrooms in grades 4-8 had 7 or more students with IE, with nearly 45 per cent of classrooms in grades 4-8 having 4 or more students with IE.
- Nearly 16 per cent of secondary classrooms (grades 9 and up) had 7 or more students with IE; 29 per cent of classrooms in grades 9 or higher reported 5 or more students with EI.
- Even at the JK-K level, over 18 per cent of classes reported contained 4 or more students with IE, with 28.5 per cent of classrooms containing 3 or more students with IE.

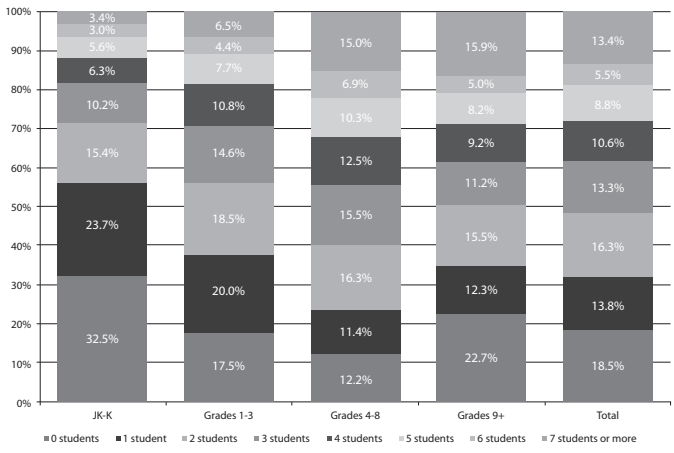

Chart 4: Percentage Distribution by Number of Included Students with Identified Exceptionalities, by Grade Level

Additionally, when the number of identified students in a class was compared to the size of the class, almost one-third (31.7 per cent) of all classes reported in the survey had at least 20 per cent of their students with IE. In 9.1 per cent of the classes reported on in the study, at least 40 per cent of the students in the class had an identified exceptionality [Chart 5].

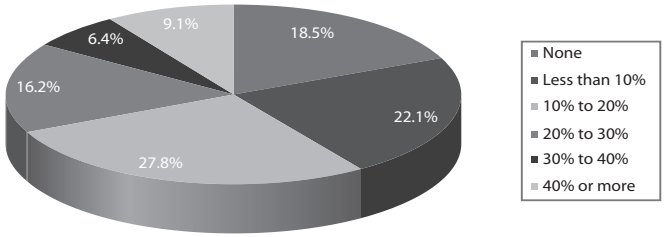

Chart 5: Percentage Distribution of Reported Classes, by Percentage of Students per Class with Identified Exceptionalities

As noted in a previous article analysing the CTF survey findings, this data does not include those students who may have exceptionalities but have yet to be identified, nor does it include students with other important educational needs.[10]

The survey findings clearly demonstrate that the relationship between class size and diversity is a major issue in our schools. When we talk about class size, we also need to be thinking about the number of students with a variety of individual learning needs in those classes. In order to enhance quality and equity in our public schools, these two issues need to be addressed together.

While teachers generally support the principle of inclusive education they have concerns about its implementation in practice. One of the findings from CTF's national survey of teachers on the theme of the "Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning" conducted in 2011 was that only a minority of teachers felt "very" satisfied with their ability to meet the needs of students with special educational needs.[11]

Building the necessary optimal conditions of practice for teachers in order to meet the diverse learning needs of their students is a priority. So what are some of the specific conditions of practice necessary for teachers to properly support inclusive schools and classrooms?

In this regard these lessons from the Canadian Council on Learning's review of the literature on the academic outcomes of students with special educational needs (SEN) are informative.[12] These lessons

focus on three areas: professional development, proper implementation of inclusion, and class size:

- Building capacity in teachers to educate students with SEN is likely the most important step toward ensuring their academic success. While most teachers support the philosophy of inclusion, they often feel unprepared to instruct students with special needs in their regular classroom. Systematic and frequent professional development opportunities may be the best way to ensure teachers are ready to work in inclusive environments, beginning at the pre-service level.
- Thoughtful implementation of inclusion is critically important to its success. The studies of initiatives where students with SEN in inclusive settings were successful were characterized by adequate support above and beyond that available to general education students. Often this involved team teaching and/or extensive collaboration with a qualified special education teacher.
- Teachers are more likely able to provide effective and individualized instruction when they have a manageable number of special needs students in their classrooms. For similar reasons, reasonable class size may also be a crucial factor in making an inclusive approach successful. Teachers will have more time to serve students with SEN individually in smaller classes. In addition, boards and schools may do well to ensure a range of services are available to support students with differing needs.

Class size and composition is one of five key elements necessary for successful inclusion identified in a position paper by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.[13] The paper states that,

Class size and composition affect the amount of attention an educator can provide to all students in the classroom, in particular, to students with special needs. The larger the total number of students in a classroom coupled with the number and nature of the special needs of students dramatically influences the time an educator can devote to each individual.

The other key elements are funding (for barrier-free buildings; specialized equipment; medical and other health services; assistive technology; trained support personnel; teacher-student ratio stipulations; and designated preparation time for planning, implementation and assessment of programs), professional development (in various areas including program planning and implementation; curriculum modification and adaptations; team building; working with support personnel; information on special needs; and teaching skills), resources, and time.

These factors are generally consistent with what teachers surveyed in Alberta said about the necessary conditions for learning to occur effectively in highly diverse classrooms.[14]

- Class sizes should be small and inversely related to the number of students with special needs.
- Teachers and students must have uninterrupted time for instruction.
- School boards should have the latitude to exclude from regular classes students who are highly disruptive and/or who pose a physical risk to other students.

Teachers also said they need:

- adequate time to prepare and to collaborate with other teachers.
- access to professional development, workshops and courses to help them acquire the knowledge and skills to work with students with disabilities.
- access to site-based special education/resource teachers.
- access to the services of well-trained education/teaching assistants.
- access to material resources that would help them to tailor their instructional strategies to the needs of their students.
- access to assistive technology to help students learn more quickly.
- access to an electronic template to help them prepare IPPs [individualized program plans].
- coordinated support from principals, school board personnel, Alberta Education and other agencies that provide services to students.

Funding is a priority for teachers in New Brunswick, according to a survey of New Brunswick Teachers' Federation members conducted in September 2011. Among the findings was that the vast majority

For similar reasons, reasonable class size may also be a crucial factor in making an inclusive approach successful.

of those surveyed believe additional funding to support inclusion is required. In terms of government funding priorities regarding education, concern about heavy teacher workloads topped the list followed by specialized services for students with special needs. When asked to propose one recommendation to improve the quality of education for New Brunswick students, the most frequent response was more educational assistants, support staff, and special needs and inclusion funding.[15]

The teaching profession has always been quick to adapt to serve the diverse needs of students. As budgets become tighter and the number of varied classroom needs increases, teachers' work becomes more difficult. The OECD has identified Canada as a top performer in equalizing the educational opportunities for a diverse range of students. In order to maintain this high standard, the necessary conditions of professional practice must be put in place and sufficient resources must be allocated to fully enable teachers to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of learners.

Endnotes

[1] Porter, G. L. (2010). "Making Canadian schools inclusive: A call to action." *Education Canada*, 48(2). Retrieved from the internet January 6, 2012. www.cea-ace.ca.

[2] "Special Education knowledge key for all teachers." *Professionally Speaking*. December 2011. Retrieved from the Internet January 6, 2012. http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december_2011/go/additional_qualifications.aspx.

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[4] Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2011). *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*. Ottawa.

[5] People for Education. *The Measure of Success: What Really Counts. Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011*. Toronto.

[6] Ibid., p. 22.

[7] Statistics Canada. (2011). Elementary-Secondary Education Survey (ESES).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Statistics Canada defines students with special educational needs as "those for whom additional public and/or private resources are provided to support their education. Additional resources are resources made available over and above those generally available to regular students. They are resources provided to support students who have difficulties following the regular curriculum. They can be personnel resources (a more favourable teacher/student ratio, additional teachers, assistants or other personnel), material resources (aids or supports of various types, modification or adaptation to classroom, specialised teaching materials), or financial resources (modified funding formulae, money set aside within the regular budget allocation or additional payments)."

[10] Froese-Germain, B., Riel, R., & McGahey, B. (Feb. 2012). "Class size and student diversity: Two sides of the same coin." *Perspectives* (Canadian Teachers' Federation).

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Bernie Froese-Germain is a researcher and Bob McGahey is the Acting Director, Research and Information, both at the Canadian Teachers' Federation.

Shipbuilding and the Nova Scotia Community College

Deborah McVeigh

Don Bureaux, president of the Nova Scotia Community College, was one of many Nova Scotians who was elated with the news that the Halifax Shipyard had won the $25-billion contract for shipbuilding. With this announcement, NSCC is set to train many individuals to help meet the demand for skilled workers that will be required. Don Bureaux was asked how the College will ready itself to provide skilled labourers required both in the near future and the long term.

***Q:** What do you see as the role of NSCC in the shipbuilding announcement?*

A: October 19, 2011, brought with it one of the most exciting announcements Nova Scotia has experienced for some time. The Halifax Shipyard had won the largest peace-time procurement contract in Canada's history. The $25-billion contract is set to keep Irving Shipbuilding and its employees and affected communities busy for three decades.

Like the rest of the province, Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) is excited about the tremendous potential this has for the people of our province.

NSCC actively supported the proposal submitted by Irving by describing the wide range of training options the College could provide over the length of this contract.

That was Phase One.

Now, three months later, Phase Two is underway with the signed umbrella agreement in place.

The announcement from the Prime Minister in January 2012 on this overarching agreement with Irving offers additional information on next steps for the shipbuilder around the first set of vessels – the six arctic offshore patrol ships. While this step is significant, it will still be some time before the specific construction details will be known around design, construction schedules and infrastructure improvements. These are all still in the planning stages.

The contract for the surface combat vessels is another piece of the process to be determined further down the road.

It is predicted the Irving Shipbuilding contract win will add some 4,000 jobs to the provincial workforce; $7 billion in direct payroll (doesn't include indirect and induced); $2.7 billion in tax revenue and some $6.7 billion in consumer spending in Nova Scotia. With those numbers, it is no wonder many cannot help but see this as a potential boon project for the province's economic future.

NSCC will play a key part in the development of skills needed over the life of the Irving Shipbuilding contract, assisting all industries which will benefit from the announcement to help ensure Nova Scotia has the workforce that is required to be successful. However, there remains a great deal of planning involved before we know exactly what will be expected.

Of course, the resources of NSCC are just one piece of the equation. Many parties will have to continue to work together to meet the labour needs that this 30-year contract will require and, given our demographic and fiscal realities, the broader demands of the provincial economy.

***Q**: How will the demand for training be met? Are you and the College involved in discussions to plan for the demand for training that this will create? Do you envision all academic schools and Campuses taking part in the training and when will these programs be started?*

A: NSCC will continue to work with its industry partners to identify specific labour needs and begin to map out the specific types of training that will be needed at various stages of the contract.

While there is still so much to learn, NSCC will be a key training partner for skilled tradespersons and apprentices. A broad scope of highly-skilled professions will be in demand – not just in Metro or just in the School of Trades and Technology but across all academic schools and all of NSCC's 13 campuses.

Throughout the programming of its five schools of learning, NSCC works to instill the entrepreneurial spirit which will inspire its learners to see the opportunities before them as the contract and the work entailed unfolds.

***Q**: How many more students will the college accommodate at the various campuses within the province and in what time frame? Will there be any accelerated programs offered such as in specialty trade areas? How do you see the process unfolding for increased training at NSCC?*

A: NSCC is a nimble and flexible College and helping the province meet its labour market needs is what we do on a regular basis. We will work with our partners in industry and in government to ensure the training Nova Scotians need to take advantage of the opportunities to work "at home" and contribute to the economy and quality of life in our province is available.

NSCC works hard to balance student demand for programs with employer demand for certain skills. That balance helps set NSCC graduates on a course for career success. According to NSCC's 2010 Graduate Follow-up

Study, 87 per cent of NSCC graduates are employed, most in their field of choice. Of those, 94 per cent live and work in Nova Scotia.

***Q:** What can someone who is interested in this exciting opportunity do while the planning continues?*

A: This is the time for Nova Scotians to take stock of their interests, passions and experience and understand how, with the right training, this can lead to a rewarding career in Nova Scotia. It is especially important for the business community to look at its role in both the apprenticeship and journeyperson processes to ensure Nova Scotia is doing everything it can to build the skilled workforce we need now and in the future.

***Q:** Will there be a direct link with our graduates and the shipyard with regard to hiring of our students? Will our students obtain work terms on site at the shipyard? Will these extra programs be customized for the shipyard?*

A: Again, Irving Shipbuilding is responsible for ensuring that it successfully completes the commitments within the contract. To do so, it has a great deal of planning to complete before we have all the answers as to how this will take shape. It will involve a great deal of work throughout the business and education communities to ensure its success.

Henry Ford said, "If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself." While we all await further detail as the planning process evolves, at NSCC, we will do our part to make the most of this opportunity. We will continue to work with Irving Shipbuilding and all our partners to help ensure the success of the project, an outcome which will mean positive benefits for all of Nova Scotia.

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

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The Makings of a Summit

Cindy Tully and Daniel D. Demers

In 2010, the Nova Scotia Department of Education's guide entitled *Gifted Education and Talent Development*, a replacement for the popular 1999 *Challenge for Excellence: Enrichment and Gifted Education Resource Guide*, was nearing completion. *Challenge for Excellence* was being rewritten to incorporate a framework for inclusion of options and strategies that support gifted education and talent development and it was renamed to clearly reflect its purpose. The revision committee decided the release of the guide would require creativity to reach the maximum number of teachers during times of fiscal restraint. A three-phase rollout was developed.

Phase one was the official launch of the new 225-plus page resource, a composite of theoretical and practical information supporting Nova Scotia's program planning process for students with gifts and talents. The launch occurred simultaneously in some 40 workshops across 13 professional associations during the NSTU's October 2010 Provincial Conference Day. In preparation for this event, workshop facilitators received two days of professional development. More than 500 teachers attended PD sessions on Section Three: Definition and Identification; Section Four: Programming Options, School-Wide; Section Five: Programming Options, Classroom; and Section Six: Program Planning Process. The document was translated into French as *L'éducation des élèves doués et le développement des talents.*

Phase two of the rollout was developed to reach teachers who had not been able to attend the Provincial Conference Day sessions or those wishing to revisit the same four sections of the document. A series of six sessions was recorded and is posted on the Student Services Division website (www.studentservices.ednet.ns.ca). These sessions are available to all schools and are an excellent support for professional learning communities, teachers, administrators and school-based enrichment teams.

Phase three, the Summit on Gifted Education and Talent Development, was designed to provide educators with an overview of strategies, resources and evidence-based practices in the field of gifted education and talent development, and in education in general, through differentiated instruction. A

The diversity within school populations challenges us to organize a system of program planning and support to meet the needs of all learners, including students with gifts and talents, and provide a stimulating and supportive environment that assists individuals in reaching their full potential.

steering committee with representatives from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium, Mount Saint Vincent University and the Nova Scotia Department of Education began planning for the summit more than two years ago. The schedule offered an incredible program of 13 keynotes and 36 breakout sessions including presentations by six internationally renowned speakers from Confratuate, a summer institute on enrichment-based differentiated teaching held yearly at the University of Connecticut. (It is a combined CONFerence, instiTUTE and FRATernity.) Dr. Joseph Renzulli, who consulted on two different drafts of our guide, set the tone for the summit with his keynote address. He was joined by Dr. Sally Reis, Dr. Rachel McAnallan, Dr. Rebecca Eckert, Dr. Brian Housand and Dr. Angela Housand. They each donated their fees which helped to make our Nova Scotia Summit on Gifted Education and Talent Development possible.

Identifying strategies to recognize and program for the enrichment of *all* learners was the primary mandate of this summit's steering committee. The broad offerings in the summit's program were aimed at providing Nova Scotian teachers with the tools and resources to encourage and celebrate the many gifts and talents of our student population.

The summit also included an incredible opportunity for eight Nova Scotian students to attend a double retreat where they were mentored for five days by four artists-in-residence from the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts and the Department of Education's arts education consultant. After their retreat at Ross Creek, the students stayed at Mount Saint Vincent University for the duration of the summit and provided three workshops and a closing ceremony performance.

The makings of a summit include collaboration by invested stakeholders in public education, an omnipresent mandate to Nova Scotia teachers and learners and a steering committee membership representing those interests. This event would have been impossible to plan without the financial support and full participation of the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium who include a representation of all the stakeholders in their membership.

The diversity within school populations challenges us to organize a system of program planning and support to meet the needs of all learners, including students with gifts and talents, and provide a stimulating and supportive environment that assists individuals in reaching their full potential. In the words of Dr. Joseph Renzulli, "A rising tide lifts all ships," it is hoped the three phases of the guide rollout on gifted education and talent development have highlighted your flotilla of ships, as well as your local tide schedules.

Cindy Tully is the facilitator for alternative programming for the Halifax Regional School Board. Daniel D. Demers is a special education consultant in the Student Services Division of the Department of Education.

Let Them *All* Eat Cupcakes!

David Ritchie

More than 30 years ago when I was near the beginning of my career as an educator I was under the distinct impression that "enrichment" was for "the brightest and the best." It was the elaborate icing we added to a few top students' educational cupcakes. I can distinctly remember sitting on committees at my school, and at both the county and provincial levels, that were concerned with challenging our most gifted students through a process of enrichment to become even better educated. One of the outcomes was the adoption of the IB program in some public schools and the development of specific enrichment plans for identified students at individual schools. Some boards actually had special streams and classes for the students being benefited. As I have matured as a teacher, I have become increasingly aware that "enrichment" is something we need to provide every student. Every student deserves the icing and other delicious trappings on their personal educational cupcakes. But before the icing and decoration metaphor becomes too elaborate and wickedly saccharine, I am really talking about educational nutrition; not just empty calories and frivolous ornamentation that a narrow interpretation of the metaphor would suggest.

Ultimately the very act of teaching should be all about enrichment. Perhaps too often we think enrichment can only result by adding educational icing and a multitude of edifying opportunities in the guise of sprinkles to crown extra special cupcakes. Many of us know the most meaningful and rewarding educational experiences come from the actual acts of conceiving the inspiration, reading and researching, planning, gathering materials, following or adjusting the recipe, developing and practicing skills, producing a new creation, and finally consuming and sharing it with others.

As teachers, many of us have had the wonderful experience of a former student approaching us and rejoicing in some special instant deep in their past when we created a significant moment that somehow magically transformed the teller in a very positive way. Many times we do not recall the episode and were certainly unaware of its crucial impact. By definition, enrichment is simply attempting to make our teaching and those teaching moments fuller, more meaningful and more rewarding. All too often these positive significant moments pass by without us, as the instigators, even knowing they have happened. Conversely and unfortunately, the negative significant moments are also often lurking in the past.

"The very act of teaching should be all about enrichment."

If we build individual enrichment opportunities into our planning then we increase the likelihood of students experiencing personal significant moments in their educations. This is not as difficult as it might seem at first blush. Some careful early surveying, record keeping and the creation of open-ended, multi-opportunity, laterally and vertically constructed exercises can easily result in options of choice and interest for the involved active learner. Rather than passively, and maybe even drudgingly plodding away at common defined tasks, students can be encouraged to strike out on an exciting personal educational adventure within the constraints of reasonable flexibility.

In my curriculum for my Grade 10 art course, I start with the presumption that the students have not had any formal art instruction. This is true for the vast majority of my students. A second reality is that because of course offerings and semester timetable constraints my Grade 10 course is populated by students in their first, second and graduating year taking the required fine arts course – a condition that ultimately adds positively to the climate of the studio. Because of its introductory nature we cover drawing, coloured pencil, collage, two kinds of painting (pastel and watercolour), and three-dimensional construction. One of my great satisfactions is that by exploring this range, most students develop a favourite medium and usually a personal style. For some it establishes the foundation for a lifetime pursuit of an enjoyable hobby; for others the gateway to a passionate and fulfilling lifetime vocation.

Within each of the units there are opportunities for individual choice in terms of how they deal with content, concepts, skill development and eventual evaluation. They all have the same destination and the same number of tasks but there is flexibility built into the personal process. As the semester progresses the constraints become less stringent and the opportunities more apparent. This allows for each student at their own level of maturity, art comfort and interest to achieve a certain level of personal control and often enrichment. The level of motivation in the students' active involvement is critical. They must be committed.

Just like any other course where practice is essential to the development of a skill

"The quest to find ways to enrich everyone should be easier in this new enlightened environment."

or series of incremental skills, another joy comes with students recognizing that through repeated genuine efforts they cannot only improve but also have significant breakthroughs that transfer to other courses, their self image and life in general. Thus the experience is both personal and universal in the areas of positive development, self worth and accomplishment.

As a direct result of the tremendous developments in brain research and education in the last 30 years, we know we have had to adjust our definition of enrichment education. When I think of the way that our understanding of learning and intelligence has been altered, it only makes sense that the models that were developed for "gifted" education, which focused on personal exploration of interests, challenges and ability, should logically transfer to the general school population and the curriculum. The changes in the number of course offerings, the dramatic broadening of the structure of the school curriculum and a general move to retain students until graduation have extensively altered the school population. The traditional academic expectations and measurements have given way to a much broader scope of outcomes and opportunities for wider knowledge that is not so tightly tied to traditional academic pursuits. The quest to find ways to enrich everyone should be easier in this new enlightened environment.

The structural restrictions that previously prevented everyone learning to their personal best have disappeared for the most part. Learning and curriculum are becoming very much personalized so that the somewhat elitist traditional goals of "gifted" enrichment are being equalized in the system. Not only are the desks not in rows, but the work and learning environments have become highly personalized and geared to specific, reasonable and often very individual educational goals. If, with our help, all students are able to define their own Everest cupcake, then their journey's success toward their own summit will be more achievable. Let's bring on the icing and the learning style and diverse intelligence decorative paraphernalia and facilitate all students eating cupcakes!

David Ritchie is a visual arts teacher at Avon View School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.

Rise and Shine, and Make a Difference

Donalda Westcott

Picture a typical Nova Scotia classroom, filled with books, posters, desks, backpacks, discarded pencils, misplaced gym clothes and 26 pairs of bright, shining eyes staring expectantly at you, the teacher. As we look closer at this picture, we notice the sign on the door, "Welcome to Grade 3." We see two desks littered with huge, hard-covered Harry Potter novels at various stages of being read, and a table where every colour marker, crayon and pencil look as though they have exploded from their packages with the joy of creativity.

Gifts and talents are everywhere in our classrooms and it is our job to celebrate, support and nurture them. In 2010, the Nova Scotia Department of Education introduced the newest *Gifted Education and Talent Development* document that speaks to the potential of every single one of our students. It acknowledges the importance of school-wide and classroom programming that benefits not only students who have been officially identified as being gifted, but it serves to further the talent development of all students, offering educational challenges and experiences that some may not otherwise have.

Statistically, three to five per cent of any given student population may be gifted. In the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board alone, this translates into 500 to 700 students – enough to fill a large school. How do we support these students and ensure they are challenged by their educational experiences? The opportunities are endless and as teachers, we offer many of them already, without even thinking, in the name of best practices. The *Gifted Education and Talent Development* (2010) document includes a number of hands-on examples from all grade levels including the following:

1. Interest Inventories: Use these to discover your students' interests and learn how you can challenge them using those interests as motivation. Primary students can use interest inventories with pictures and faces to denote what they like, slightly like or dislike.
2. Think Tic-Tac-Toe: By placing a central theme or concept in the middle of the tic-tac-toe board, students can be given choices as to which assignments to complete in order to make a row.
3. Exploratories (referred to in the document as School-wide Enrichment: Levels I, II & III): This model of exploring different activities in multi-grade situations has been wildly successful in a number of school boards across the province. It provides increased opportunities for all students to experience "outside the classroom" learning

in a fun environment and often leads students to deeper exploration of these activities as a further means of talent and skill development. Exploratories, while popular in the middle years and upper elementary, have also been used within the high school setting under the name of "academies."

4. Learning Stations (referred to in the document as Learning Centres): While popular in the early elementary grades, the document suggests that learning stations can be used throughout the entire spectrum of teaching (P-12) to increase students' abilities to problem-solve and think creatively "outside the box."
5. Mentorship: Something that many teachers already do, mentorship allows the students to look outside the classroom setting and see valued members of the community sharing their experiences, especially in school cultures where the community plays a large role. It serves as a bringing together of the school environment and "real life."

Other publications support these ideas and go even further in the support of students with gifts and talents. In the book, *Practical Ideas that Really Work for Students who are Gifted* (2003), Gail Ryser and Kathleen McConnell outline many important strategies to aid the classroom teacher in their everyday teaching. They include pages of product possibilities that can be placed in jars for students to choose, contracts for independent studies that can help in the guiding of the process, and even group work ideas that allow students to become experts in their own field and teachers of their peers.

Joseph Renzuli, the reigning guru of school-wide enrichment and gifted education has been quoted as saying, "A rising tide lifts all ships." This is the underlying principle behind the Department of Education *Gifted Education and Talent Development* (2010) document, and it suggests that all students, not just those who are considered gifted have the potential to challenge themselves to excellence as they are challenged by teachers. Given these opportunities within the school system to explore the world around them in different ways and question what and how they understand that world, all students can rise and shine, and make a difference.

"Gifts and talents are everywhere in our classroom and it is our job to celebrate, support and nurture them."

As we look back on our Grade 3 classroom we can always see the potential in our students, but maybe now we look at it through a slightly different lens; those students who flock to the table bursting with art supplies, those children who are reading and writing far above their grade level, those who have the ability to do advanced mental math, those who know everything there is to know about the solar systems and all of those eyes who are eager to experience whatever the day may bring. Our students are the next generation of leaders, and it is our job to challenge each and every one of them to their highest potential.

Donalda Westcott is an itinerant P-6 music specialist who works at Shipyard Elementary and Mira Road Elementary, Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board.

Inquiry-based Learning

Warren Dobson

South Queens Junior High in Liverpool is a place where teachers collaboratively design and manage authentic inquiry-based learning experiences and where students are purposefully engaged in examining powerful driving questions, meeting curriculum outcomes, and honing 21st century skills.

Since September 2011, teachers at South Queens Junior High have been piloting inquiry-based learning (IBL) as a method of teaching Grade 9 students. Every morning, students have one hour of English and one hour of math followed by an hour of science or social studies on alternate days. In the afternoons, two one-hour IBL modules are offered in a variety of subjects. Initially viewed as an opportunity to reach teens whose engagement in the traditional classroom bottoms out at the ninth grade, IBL has also provided enrichment opportunities for high achievers. It encourages the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills while allowing students to experience deep learning at their own pace.

What is inquiry-based learning?

In essence, IBL is characterized by authentic learning experiences structured around powerful driving questions. It sounds simple, but it requires a fundamental shift in teacher perspective to make it work. The teacher must be willing to give up the spotlight in the classroom, to step back and let the students take responsibility for their own learning. This is as much a challenge for students as it is for teachers. We all seem to have a default mode that reflects our comfort level as members of a traditional school community. Students are used to being "spoon fed" information and regurgitating it on demand. Teachers are accustomed to being the source of knowledge in the classroom and being able to consistently predict the outcomes of learning activities. IBL challenges these assumptions and encourages both teachers and learners to venture beyond their comfort zones.

Authentic learning experiences bring the world into the classroom – or the classroom into the world – enabling students to connect with real life issues that matter. Students in Liverpool recently spent 31 hours learning how architects think and work as part of an IBL module called *School for the Future*. Staff of Connor Architects and Planners, as well as the director of facilities management and the regional director of the Nova Scotia Department of Education visited South Queens Junior High regularly for three months. They collaborated with staff and worked with a group of ninth grade students as part of their mentorship through the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI).

In the *School for the Future* module, students confronted the design challenge of how to create a green school that would meet the needs of 21st century learners. The students used the same design parameters as the architects. They were given a list of educational spaces that had to be included in the final design of the new school and a 50,000 square foot maximum area into which everything had to fit.

Effective driving questions for IBL are open-ended and they provide a framework for using higher-order thinking skills to achieve deep learning. Creating the driving question is often the most thoughtful and time-consuming task in designing IBL experiences. As a general rule, if students can "Google" the answer, it is not a good question. A powerful driving question often addresses multiple curriculum outcomes across traditional subject boundaries. For example, our budding architects found they had to wrestle with mathematics, geometry, visual art, history, environmental science, technology and issues of education reform in designing the *School for the Future*.

A key element of IBL is a final product or artifact. This should be seen as something worth doing, a product that students and parents are proud of and ideally, something the broader community views as an example of excellence or innovation. In the *School for the Future*, a three-dimensional model of the students' concept was rendered using Google SketchUp, the same 21st century tool that many architects use. Some of the other 21st century skills practiced by the ninth graders included collaboration, communication and project management.

What are the benefits?

Student engagement is the obvious payoff. At South Queens, discipline issues among Grade 9 students have dropped to record lows, as measured by office referrals. Attendance, another good indicator of student engagement, has been consistently high this year and ninth graders who are absent in the morning are often present in the afternoon because they don't want to miss their modules. In addition, comments from students indicate that they enjoy the IBL modules: they find them challenging, yet fun. In the video students made to document their experience in the *School for the Future* module, 100 per cent of the class said they enjoyed it, and 70 per cent of the class said they would consider a career in architecture or interior design after completing the course. This compares to only 20 per cent who had expressed an interest in those fields before taking the course.

Inquiry-based learning has definite benefits for teachers as well. Some have commented that they love the challenge of designing their own IBL module and collaborating with other teachers, and that they see steady improvement each term in their ability to design and manage authentic IBL experiences. They are enjoying the sense of purpose and the pride in their work that students are displaying.

Looking to the future, the South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB) and the Department of Education are very interested in the potential of the inquiry-based learning initiative and are providing the supports to bring this 21st century learning model into practice. South Queens Junior High received, from Apple (Canada), iPads, a Mac mini server, on-demand technical support, and a PD session with Canadian IBL expert Neil Stephenson of the Calgary Science School. The SSRSB Assistive Technology Centre supported the initiative by supplying iPod Touch mobile devices, and training sessions for staff with an assistive technology specialist and Apple distinguished educator.

The SSRSB has provided improvements to wireless infrastructure and increased technical support at South Queens. They have increased PD opportunities for staff, and created a 50 per cent on-site IBL facilitator position. Finally, the Department of Education has assigned a social studies consultant and advocate of project-based learning, to assist in designing and developing IBL modules that target curriculum outcomes.

As a general rule, if students can "Google" the answer, it is not a good question.

However, the biggest support of all is the actual *School for the Future* – a new facility that has been designed specifically to support inquiry-based learning. It will open in Liverpool in September 2013, to help Nova Scotia students prepare to confidently meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Warren Dobson is a teacher and inquiry-based learning facilitator at South Queens Junior High School, South Shore Regional School Board.

Standards, Tests and the Death of the Gifted Student

Grant Frost

As Nova Scotia continues to blindly follow the American catastrophe begot by "No Child Left Behind," opportunities for teachers to enrich curriculum become harder to find. As more initiatives are rolled out in the name of such things as standardizing assessment, less attention is being paid by the drivers of our educational school bus to their passengers. Despite countless studies that show the negative effects of such things as teaching towards a standardized external assessment tool, policy makers continue to push the standardization agenda which abolishes creativity from the classroom and penalizes independent thought. So, in the midst of all these pressures, where are those exceptional children who think outside of any of our collective boxes? How does current standardization practice serve the gifted learner? Well, the answer is quite simple: it doesn't.

Anyone who doubts this need only examine what has happened in English classrooms since the Department of Education introduced the provincial exam for English language arts at the end of the 1990s to measure the progress of students towards achieving "the standard." In the first inception of this test, students were given a series of reading and viewing tasks, as well as two writing tasks; one a persuasive letter, the other, prose, for which they could write an essay or offer up a creative writing piece, such as a short story. The teachers were given an answer guide but had some latitude in marking. If a student provided an answer that was insightful, but not one of the suggested answers, then teachers could often still award points.

It wasn't long before problems arose. Marking creative prose was too subjective. What was a provincial standard of "good" short-story writing? When you opened up the answers to interpretation, teachers used their professional judgment, reducing the validity of the data. This made those who create such tools nervous. The response to this "flaw" in the system was to limit prose to a formalized essay, and to limit "answer autonomy." Teachers were repeatedly urged to accept only answers from the answer key. This message was repeated to teachers over the next several years, when hundreds of them gathered in Halifax to correct thousands of exams from all across the province. If a student offered something that was creative and amazing, yet not a suggested correct answer, teachers were told to give a mark of zero.

Now on the surface it might be hard to argue that students writing essays is a bad thing. Indeed essay writing is a well-used practice in the post-secondary world and is arguably a valuable literary skill. However, this focus on formal essay writing and the exam itself had another effect. Hundreds of Grade 12 English teachers returned to their classrooms from the marking sessions under new pressures. They started using the exam in their classrooms as a teaching tool. This was, after all, the measure of success for their students. If their students did not do well on the exam, then they, the teacher, had failed to do their job. They started to develop tests that mirrored the provincial exam. They started to tell the bright students not to "overthink" the question. Most importantly, many began to focus on the formal essay as the paramount form of prose in the classroom, at the expense of other creative writing genres, such as short story, because they were not on the exam.

English teachers are a courageous lot, and consistently work to inspire young people, developing programs that encourage creativity in young minds. However, little of this phenomenal classroom prac-

tice is happening *because* of standardized educational practices. It is happening in spite of them.

With the incorporation of the student information system, this "creativity quashing" has been exacerbated. Teachers are now being expected to not just mark "to" the outcomes, but rather mark "only" the outcomes. This is an extension of the standardization mindset, and represents a fairly significant shift for some educators, particularly at the secondary level. Marks can only be given for items that exist in the curriculum guide, with no greater value being awarded for demonstrations of amazing talent and imagination unless a specialized plan is in place. Despite the fact that curriculum guides preach the value of such things as aesthetic expression, teachers are being told that these may not be marked unless explicitly stated in the outcomes of the course they are teaching.

If a teacher is mandated to only teach their outcomes, and then only mark these outcomes, how can we recognize, nurture and reward the gifted students in our classrooms and offer them truly exceptional learning experiences? The new document from the Department of Education *Gifted Education and Talent Development* recognizes that there are students who need such opportunities. It also identifies that one indicator of a gifted student is creativity. It does not recognize how current policy is hamstringing teachers in their ability to encourage that very trait. It certainly does not consider that creativity should not be only an indicator of the gifted student; it should be an avenue for all students.

Those who support standardization will often defend teaching to the test as sound educational practice. They would say that teaching to a test is teaching to the curriculum, and is exactly what teachers are supposed to be doing. The idea that externally developed tests are somehow reflective of all the learning that takes place within a classroom is, at best, a myopic view of education. Tests can only measure the measureable. Thus, teaching to the test means teaching only concepts that can be quantified and measured. Teaching beyond that is, according to some, poor teaching practice.

In 2000, Alfie Kohn wrote that the very things we purport to value in all learners, gifted or not, like self questioning and making connections are actually skills that do not need to be applied to standardized test taking. In fact, he revealed that students who demonstrated a *lack* of depth in their approach to education scored well on standardized tests. Daniel Pink (2010) reports that focusing on such things as taking a standardized test can cause people to become one dimensional in their approach to thinking, concerning themselves only with the goal in front of them, in this case, passing the test. Pink writes extensively about motivation, and he has discovered that working towards external standards often negatively impacts motivation and creativity.

So we know that teaching to standardized tests results in teaching to only what is measurable, that standardized tests often require only shallow educational approaches and myopic thinking for success, and that working towards someone else's standards of excellence reduces creativity. Yet policy makers and politicians alike continue to concern themselves with tasking teachers with collecting data and supporting standardization. They tout standardized test scores as evidence of quality educational practice. Enriching the educational experiences of our students should be our primary focus in public education, not assessing standards.

Standardization does not value creativity. Standardized tests must, by their very nature, reduce education to what is measurable. The average child is being encouraged to reach only the middle. The gifted child punished for exceeding it. As long as we continue to use large-scale standardized assessment, and use the results of data collection to drive change, then the passengers on this school bus will remain ignored.

In his book *Drive,* Pink writes that to be truly motivated to do amazing things, people need autonomy, mastery and purpose. There is no autonomy in standardization, mastery comes by rote, and there is no purpose beyond the test. There is certainly no room for the gifted child to exceed expectations. Get off the public education bus, kid. We can't stop on your street.

Grant Frost is the department head of fine arts and personal development at Millwood High School, Halifax Regional School Board.

Spice Up the Classroom

Susan Linfield

Ice tinkled in our water glasses. The room was filled with animated voices discussing anecdotal comment reporting. It was a day of energy and ideas. On that February afternoon, I mingled with colleagues from the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB) listening, contributing to the discussion and generally feeling appreciative for this professional development opportunity. My students were undoubtedly delighted to have the 'day off' doing what teenagers do when they are freed from their school routines. However, four students as part of their learning in the Career Educational Program (CEP) at the Cobequid Educational Centre (CEC) were in the same building as I was that day. They were hard at work in the kitchen with Chef Wayne Parkington, training for a skills competition organized by Skills Canada–Nova Scotia. This group organizes events and competitions sponsored by the government, trades colleges, the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC), and hundreds of companies in the skilled trades.

Executive chef (Holiday Inn)
Wayne Parkington and Leslie Munroe

Some might find it surprising that students would work without pay on an in-service day. But when I thought about our program, its dedicated teachers and the opportunities that are made available to our amazing students, it didn't surprise me all that much. We are no different from many schools throughout this province, where exciting learning is taking place – learning that extends far beyond the scope of curriculum and outcomes; learning that is real for students. At CEC, the CEP department offers a specialized program with practical skills components.

The young people enrolled in "Dining, Guest Services and Commercial Food Preparation" are immersed in hands-on learning on a daily basis, relating to their course of studies. They are learning so much more than recipe costing or basic cooking techniques. Training with a classroom teacher (who loves to cook), a chef at our local Holiday Inn, and a local baker, who come to the school, students receive one-on-one guidance, as they practice all kinds of skills. They have honed precision cuts in zucchini, carrots, and celery; mastered stock and sauces; piped icing on cookies; baked many different kinds of golden muffins; and have perfected cream soups, breads and more.

These students, and others in the program, have catered to groups as small as 10 and as large as 500. For the latter, a Blue Grass Awards function, three students worked with their cooking instructor until 1 a.m.! They have also come to school early in the morning, and worked steadily through recess times and noon breaks. These same "kids" whose bedrooms may be unkempt or who may contradict the adults in their out-of-school lives, have lugged groceries into the building, carted ready-made meals next door, swept floors, washed equipment and scrubbed countless pots.

They have worked under pressure, meeting strict deadlines. Some mornings they start before *O Canada* is sung, with one hour to cater to 25 people for morning break. This might be followed by less than two hours to produce a noon luncheon for others. Our students have worked independently,

These same "kids" whose bedrooms may be unkempt or who may contradict the adults in their out-of-school lives, have lugged groceries into the building, carted ready-made meals next door, swept floors, washed equipment and scrubbed countless pots.

and co-operatively. They are blossoming as individuals, happy to do "real" work, pleased not to be sitting.

If we consider enrichment to be student exposure to new experiences which develop new knowledge and skills, then these students' lives are being enriched in the classroom every day. The school setting has provided opportunities for gifts, talents and abilities that might not have been discovered, to appear and flourish. Students are genuinely happy to be at school. They are growing in confidence and pride. One student said her patience has improved. "I've learned how to take criticism and turn it into a good thing," she told me, and this is major improvement from the student I taught two years ago! Another student said she loves the visual learning, and the fact that she must give, in her words, "110 per cent!"

I often consider the Conference Board of Canada's "Employability Skills" in my teaching. Academics (their number one) has always mattered, but in addition, the Conference Board of Canada identifies two other areas that are important for success in the workplace: personal management skills (positive attitude and behaviours; and responsibility) and teamwork skills. My students attain these attributes almost naturally. It is not an "inductive" sort of thing, but one which develops if they are to reach their target. Positive attitudes, initiative, energy, persistence to get the job done, exercising "give and take," and leading, when appropriate, all occurs as part of the experience.

In this age of Twitter and tweets, cell phones and texts, it is exciting to witness students who are engaged in their learning, and developing skills, practical and personal, that will assist them throughout their lives. It is an exciting time to teach and learn.

Anthony Vasquez-Snively

On this Sunday afternoon as I write, two Grade 12 students and their teacher are in the commercial foods kitchen at CEC, getting the jumpstart on tomorrow's catering!

Note: Subsequent to writing this article, CEC's entrants placed first, second and third in the Skills Canada–Nova Scotia Competition held at NSCC Akerley Campus. The first-place winner will participate at nationals in Alberta this June.

Susan Linfield is an English teacher in the Career Exploration Program at Cobequid Educational Centre, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

Enrichment Experiences: An Experiential Learning Perspective

Beth Woodford Collins

As individuals, we all share common milestones in our lives. As high school teachers, one of the privileges and responsibilities we have is the role we play in the facilitation of our students into their post-secondary lives; an important milestone. Today's student must navigate a complicated host of choices available to them in a significantly more competitive world. This alone would be troubling enough; however, coupled with increasing academic requirements of high school, some students fall behind. As a result, in order to help students, classrooms are changing. The value of experiential learning is helping bridge the gap for many of our students, helping them direct their career pathways and post-secondary educational decisions with concrete experiences.

What is experiential education? We are fortunate in Nova Scotia to offer a variety of opportunities where the community becomes the classroom. Options and Opportunities (O2), COOP, job shadowing and mentorship are now playing significant roles in the lives of our students; helping them explore job options before their high school education is complete. Unique partnerships with the Construction Association of Nova Scotia, Skills Nova Scotia, Workit NS (Department of Labour and Advanced Education), Youth Apprenticeship programs, the Nova Scotia Community College, St. John Ambulance, Passport to Safety, Nova Scotia Construction Safety Association (NSCSA) and a wide variety of community host employers provide funding and job experiences. This enables teachers and students alike to broaden the walls of the classroom, providing hands-on work experience for our youth.

The benefits of these partnerships are clear: our students excel, thrive and grow. We begin to see the adults they will become. School suddenly provides a service they need; math has an application, English a purpose, when they can place a subject in the context of their future career. Self advocacy, pride and confi-

O2 Students giving back to the Queen's County Food Bank and Salvation Army from proceeds earned at Christmas Craft Fair.

O2 Students giving back to the Queen's County Food Bank and Salvation Army from proceeds earned at Christmas Craft Fair.

dence grow in all students who are ready to take on the challenge of a service learning opportunity. The stereotypes which plague many teens are dispelled when employers work with our youth and they see beyond the stereotype to the individual. The networking benefits for our students also continue to produce dividends well into their futures as they continue to foster these relationships they would not have made had they not been involved in a community-based experiential learning situation such as COOP or O2.

Our community benefits as well. Teens learn "the ropes" when they work with successful members of our business community while simultaneously providing a service for their host employer. Our students begin to see the value of volunteerism; the giving of personal time is no longer such a chore.

As well, Options and Opportunities offers unique course options specifically designed to help students develop a deeper understanding of their natural abilities, provides places to hone and develop many transferable skills and builds camaraderie and team work. Classroom activities in all O2 classrooms across the province include LifeWork Portfolio work (showcasing the student's accomplishments), workplace health and safety, a variety of certifications from widely recognized industry leaders (including St. John Ambulance, NSCSA and Passport to Safety), resume and interview skills and 110 hours of community-based learning experiences (including a NSCC Test Drive to job shadowing and mentorship experiences). Technology provides students access to virtual career exploration. Sites such as Career Cruising and Career Options NS allow students to learn about the academic requirements, salary expectations and related fields of many careers, highlighting the high demand careers. Students have unprecedented access to information. Critical consumption and proper processing of this information is necessary for it to be useful. Reflection, discussion and hands-on experience ensure the students are well equipped to use the resources at their disposal to maximize their future opportunities.

Many O2 classrooms engage in project-based learning opportunities from greenhouse design and construction to volunteer work with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. Again, as a result of the excellent community and government partnerships, some schools may fund projects via Workit grants. Many rural Nova Scotia communities are in transition, encountering difficult economic times, so projects such as builds for Habitat for Humanity and fundraisers for food banks and local agencies are a great way for students to give back at the grassroots level.

With technological advancements and employer demands, the classroom is changing. Experiential learning is helping us bridge the gap for many of our students into post-secondary and beyond. Without the collaborative efforts of many stakeholders in our community, our students would not be prepared for the world of tomorrow. The skills and confidence attained will serve Nova Scotia very well in the future.

Beth Woodford Collins is an Options and Opportunities teacher at Liverpool Regional High School, South Shore Regional School Board.

Gazebo build by O2 students at LRHS, funding provided by Workit NS.

Bowls and cutting boards made by O2 students and sold at craft fair.

Habitat for Humanity fence, built by LRHS O2 students, funding provided by Workit NS.

Choice Words

The Wisdom of Choosing our Classroom Dialogue

Betsy Jardine

To live is to stand in a sea of language. The overarching purpose of our classroom dialogue is not so much to pass on content but to develop a community of learners that can take meaningful action in their daily lives. The construction of classroom politics is a product of teacher language well within our autonomy as teachers to control. The habits of age-old scripts may limit our purpose of creating collaborative communities of learners more than any other aspect of our classroom practice. By reflecting on our "teacher talk" we have one of the most powerful tools for transformative change available to our teaching.

Our postmodern classrooms are sites of learning. However, the incidental curriculum is often more powerful than the intended curriculum in that it positions our relationship with other learners in the classroom. Assuming that the teacher is also a learner in the classroom, this impacts the relationship that each learner has to one another. To change the world, we must first change our language.

A critical approach to classroom language examines the kind of relationships we construct for our community of learners. As teachers we can either build a competitive environment, ranking student efforts, or building a collaborative community and a team approach in which there is room for contributions from all learners. If we respond, "That was an excellent answer!" to one student and then simply say, "Good." to another we have differentiated the two responses. Students perceive this differentiation whether consciously or subconsciously allowing themselves to see where they stand in the pecking order of that learning community. The unstated curriculum is enacted when we reward those who fit the mould. Teaching students to become agents of change comes through the relationships that we develop with them. From the earliest point on, students must understand that their actions can and do make a difference in the world.

Our introduction to politics begins in infancy. A baby's attunement to primary caregivers develops both the child's intimacy and future autonomy at the same time. Unless the child develops a secure base, they will not be able to branch out and become independent later in life. We require security to separate ourselves and become autonomous individuals. Babies understand that they get a response from their environment and in doing so, they change it. This initiates a sense of agency. By responding to the child's needs, the parents let them know that their efforts to communicate result in attention and change. Children who do not form the attachment bond through attunement with their caregiver can become detached and lose that sense of engagement. We see the same in the classroom. Passive students set low goals for themselves. They disengage and don't persist in their learning.

By the time a child arrives at school, they can be predisposed to see themselves as agents of change – or not. Passive learners become active learners when they are in a secure environment of the known. The teacher gains a child's confidence by allowing the child to demonstrate what they know. The teacher assesses where the child is, in order to identify when to move ahead with new learning.

Once the teacher moves into what Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky called "the zone of proximal development," the teacher must choose their words carefully using wise prompts to "scaffold" or support the child's new learning. The child must learn to be a problem solver and the specific prompts the teacher uses must encourage these active searching behaviours. Some of the best prompts for teaching children to read are in the teacher manual that accompanies Nova Scotia's early literacy program. "That makes sense, does it look right?" prompts a child to cross-check between two different cueing systems while reading. When teaching children to read, they must learn to draw information from the systems of meaning, syntax, phonological awareness and pragmat-

ics. Teachers encourage students to become active problem solvers through this process.

Later in schooling, when children are already readers, encouragement for problem solving continues. "What problems did you encounter?" This question tells students that problems are not only present, they are expected. There is also the implication that problems are something with which we deal. Developing a strategic response to problems will become a valuable life skill. Dealing with problems is an expectation of normal living. Coming up with creative response strategies is expected. By cooperatively sharing response strategies with other learners, we live collaboratively and help the collective succeed.

When a teacher says, "You were a great listener," it shows the student the teacher values the ability to listen. Listening is a very important goal of a collaborative learning environment as it shows respect for others. In his book, *Choice Words*, Peter Johnson describes how a statement like, "You are so smart!" positions the child in relation to others differently than a comment that refers to an action. "I like the way that you developed your character in your story." When overheard by other students, this comment gives useful information to the community of learners. Similarly, if a teacher tells a student, "You are so thoughtful," it tells other students that the teacher values behaviours that show respect to other members of the learning community.

Teachers demonstrate the value of dialogue amongst students, developing a strong, caring and supportive community of learners. The variety of voices and perspectives that are overheard in the classroom may be stratified in other ways due to interactions that a teacher may have with individual students. For example, if a teacher tells Jane – in front of others in the classroom – that she has been rude and inconsiderate, the teacher should not be surprised if by Friday, the other students have marginalized Jane on the playground. The teacher has taken away cultural capital and provided the initial role model for exclusion from the group. However, if the teacher remarks on something positive Jane did – in front of others – Jane instantly gains cultural capital in the eyes of her classmates increasing the likelihood that they will see Jane in a more positive light. They may look for the same positive aspects in Jane's behaviour and perhaps even try to emulate these characteristics in themselves.

From the time of our birth, we learn that our actions make a difference in the world around us or we learn that no matter what we do, nothing will change. Once we get to school there are lots of opportunities to nurture an active position as a learner. In order to encourage our students to become active learners they must develop their sense of agency. They must see that there is a reason for their actions. They must know that their actions in the world do make a difference.

"To change the world, we must first change our language."

Some teachers believe that they have no power to change things. This belief is helpful in maintaining the status quo. If you believe that you can't make a difference then you will be unlikely to try. Our actions do have consequences. We don't always see all the consequences of our actions, but if a butterfly flapping its wings in South America can change a weather pattern in Britain, a teacher uttering a statement to a class full of students can expect both intended and unintended consequences. Understanding speech as action will make us all the more mindful of possible outcomes. Many age-old scripts of power inequities have been replaced by collaborative dialogue. As our language changes – becoming kinder and indicative of more equal power relations – so does our world.

Betsy Jardine is a Resource and Early Literacy teacher at Whycocomagh Education Centre, Strait Regional School Board.

In a Heartbeat

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, looking at a painting of the heart created by a local heart surgeon, listening to an improvised saxophone melody by one of my students, accompanied by an interpretive dance performed by a professional dancer. I was not alone. I was with my students and they, like me, were trying to find the words to describe this interdisciplinary experience. The art inspired the music, and the music inspired the dance, and all together this inspired us into reflection and grappling with language. In a strange way I felt as though I was called to write the libretto for an opera—it already had visual art, music, and dance but not yet the words. All this spontaneity occurred, like most things in my life, with plenty of planning.

The students were enrolled in a course called "Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies for Talented and Gifted Students: Enrichment and Independent Studies 11/12" or "AIS" as we called it. This course was developed by Dr. Meredith Greene at Bridgetown Regional High School as a locally developed course for the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board. Later, when Dr. Greene assumed a consultancy position at the school board, I continued the course at my school. One of my students claimed that, "This is the most enriching, engaging, and diverse course I've ever taken!"

Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies met the educational needs of selected gifted and/or talented high school students. These students from Grades 11 and 12 were clustered together for interdisciplinary studies. Students did not need an Honours status to enrol in the course. They needed to demonstrate task commitment, above average ability, and creativity in a field of interest. Their talent could have been in performance arts, visual arts, leadership, or in a specific academic field. Students in Grades 10-12 were nominated in the spring for enrolment in the next year's class. I had students who were talented in playing the saxophone, environmental action, sign language, photography, writing, as well as talents in leadership and change. As one student put it, "This course allows me to focus my energy on things I'm passionate about."

AIS was a chance for students to take control of their own learning. Much responsibility was placed upon the learner to assume leadership roles, work with mentors, and volunteer their services to the school and community. The responsibility for an interesting and fulfilling course rested with each AIS student. A commitment to excellence and personal success, a curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, a cooperative and creative spirit, along with a desire for personal growth, were the essential elements for a great year in Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies.

The result was that students organized guest speakers with expertise in the topics of global and local agricultural issues, macrobiotics, social justice and human rights, local theatre, Thai culture, introduction to psychology, depression, the creative process, volunteerism, entrepreneurship, equestrian enterprise, DJ-ing as a career, the benefits of yoga, neurobiology, and establishing internet companies. These were topics that were of interest not to me as their teacher, but to the students as individual learners. One student reflected, "I liked how we saw different perspectives and learned about a wide variety of topics and how everyday was never the same."

Students created and facilitated seminars for each other based on their particular learning interests. These topics included an introduction to Hinduism, media violence, rodeos, rhythm in music and math, post-high school cooking, martial arts, phi and the golden ratio, topology, ballroom dancing, Shakespeare, reading music, the effects of clear cutting, and environmental action. Again, it was student interest that determined the focus of these seminars. As one student explained, "I love this course because it encourages curiosity! It allows me to research anything I want, however I want to, and then share it with the class however I choose." Importantly, the role of the

teacher was one of a facilitator who encouraged individual learning while creating a collaborative learning culture, made obvious by this student comment: "I liked how everyone was open to everything and you felt that no matter what you were presenting, the people in your class were always eager to learn."

Beyond the classroom, students planned class trips; first to visit other classes within our school (such as Vocal Music, another course I was teaching at the time), and then to meet with Dr. Greene's AIS class from Bridgetown Regional High School at Acadia University. There, we attended a psychology lecture, visited the art gallery, toured the Atlantic Theatre Festival and the university campus, and attended a performance of Handel's "Messiah." Later in the year, we visited Mermaid Theatre in Windsor, a horse farm, a sheep farm, and a llama farm. One student noted, "I learned that learning can happen outside the classroom."

Students in AIS were also expected to participate in school and/or community service, conduct and present research, and complete an Independent Project. The Independent Project was the main work of the second semester, although it was started early in the first semester. The project reflected in-depth and long-term study, advanced research, and originality of product/performance. A mere research paper was not sufficient. Students were expected to plan an appropriate type of original product/performance for an appropriate audience. For example, one student created an all-day environmental conference for local elementary students. Three students combined their talents to create an artistic showcase one evening at our school. This involved the display of original jewellery, a dramatic presentation, as well as a musical performance. Another student, who was interested in leadership and the role of the individual instigating change, created a public speaking game-and-competition. These events were the means of showcasing students' talents in ways that students found engaging and meaningful. One student told me that, "The best thing about AIS is the utter flexibility, the total originality, the way it comes together to create something that is all your own, but, at the same time, something you can share with this class that is more than a class."

I like to think that my best professional work is yet to come and I acknowledge that we are largely unaware of our influence on students. Yet, when I encounter previous graduates who were part of AIS, there is this "knowing twinkle" in their eyes; we participated in something special. Being a steward of students' talents is important and challenging work for educators, especially in times of educational cuts and increased demands. When I think of how inspiring these students were (not only to each other but also to me), I become re-energized to support enrichment opportunities for our students. In some ways, the memories of AIS have become a professional heartbeat to me, carrying me forward in my career.

The role of the teacher was one of a facilitator who encouraged individual learning while creating a collaborative learning culture.

The memories reaffirm the value of education not only in students' current lives, but also in their future lives. This year, one AIS graduate was a guest speaker in my classroom. She had just returned from serving in Afghanistan. While she offered my students insight and compassion about her experiences in Afghanistan, she also advised them to take advantage of their current educational opportunities. It was apparent to me, that her memories of AIS remained vivid and as I listened to her address my current students, I was transported back to that AIS experience in the art gallery seven years ago.

Dr. Steven Van Zoost is a teacher at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.

Enrichment for Life in School Libraries

Brian Forbes

There's a lot to be said for school libraries. Trouble is, not many people are saying it.

In Nova Scotia, and indeed across Canada, school libraries are in difficulty. As in so many areas of public education, the problem libraries face can be stated simply: poorly funded and poorly staffed. Add to that under-appreciated and under-used. In this province, qualified teacher librarians are a thing of the past, having been replaced by non-teacher library technicians long ago.

There's not much need or space to go into the details here. Many professionals are well aware of the problem, living with it every day. Nor do I need to rant on about the importance of what celebrated Canadian writer and former national librarian Roch Carrier has called "the heart of a school." I simply want to offer some personal observations, drawing largely on my own experiences, concerning just one (albeit very important) aspect of the school library as a source of enrichment to student learning.

I am an incurable bibliophile, almost a "book-aholic." My reading habits are eclectic, extending across many genres and wide-ranging subject matter. I am a haunter of libraries (mostly university libraries these days) and bookstores. In both settings I can happily spend hours browsing like a king in his treasure house, before selecting two or three items to take home as temporary guests or permanent residents. I revel in an author's ability to carry me along in a stream of well chosen words – informing, persuading, entertaining, provoking, moving and enlightening me to a better understanding and appreciation of some aspect of life and the cosmos than I previously possessed. I also love some books (especially older ones) for the quality of their binding, the feel of the paper on which they are printed, the distinctiveness of their fonts and layouts, the way they lie in my hands as I read them, even their smell; the whole tactile experience of reading. I am not a literary Luddite however. My Amazon Kindle is my constant companion wherever I go. In fact I am on my third one, because I keep losing them, but that's another story.

Where did it all start? In the Barrington Municipal High School library. I was too young to benefit much from the miscellany of books in the small glass-doored cabinet at the back of the Forbes Point one-roomed schoolhouse I attended until Grade 3. Even less was on offer in the classrooms at Woods Harbour Consolidated, where there was no library at all. But when I reached BMHS there was a library students could visit during any noon hour, with a teacher attending the desk to sign books in and out. For me at the time, what a library! Like a famished guest at a gourmet buffet I sampled authors as varied as Robert Louis Stevenson, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Boswell, Dickens and even Cicero – not all of them in Grade 7! I borrowed anthologies of Victorian and modern poetry, learning in the process that I preferred Tennyson and Frost to Swinburne and Marianne Moore. History, drama, science, philosophy, politics – I fervently followed my shifting interests with little regard to either curricular or utilitarian considerations. I continue to do so and in the process I have become a self-directed lifelong learner.

Not all students need to become the same kind of manic reader that I am. But I would suggest that all students need ready access to a reasonably well stocked library *in the school* as an avenue not only for research or complementing the prescribed curriculum – that is, not only to facilitate goals determined by the school – but as an essential resource for recreation and self-discovery. I hope someone can capture the attention of the public and government on this issue soon.

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

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