

# AVISO

THE MAGAZINE FOR NOVA SCOTIA'S TEACHING PROFESSION  
LA REVUE DE LA PROFESSION ENSEIGNANTE DE LA NOUVELLE-ÉCOSSE  
SPRING/SUMMER 2009





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AVISO (a.v i.zo) [–L.] a collection of thoughtful ideas and advice.

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# Foundations in Drama Education

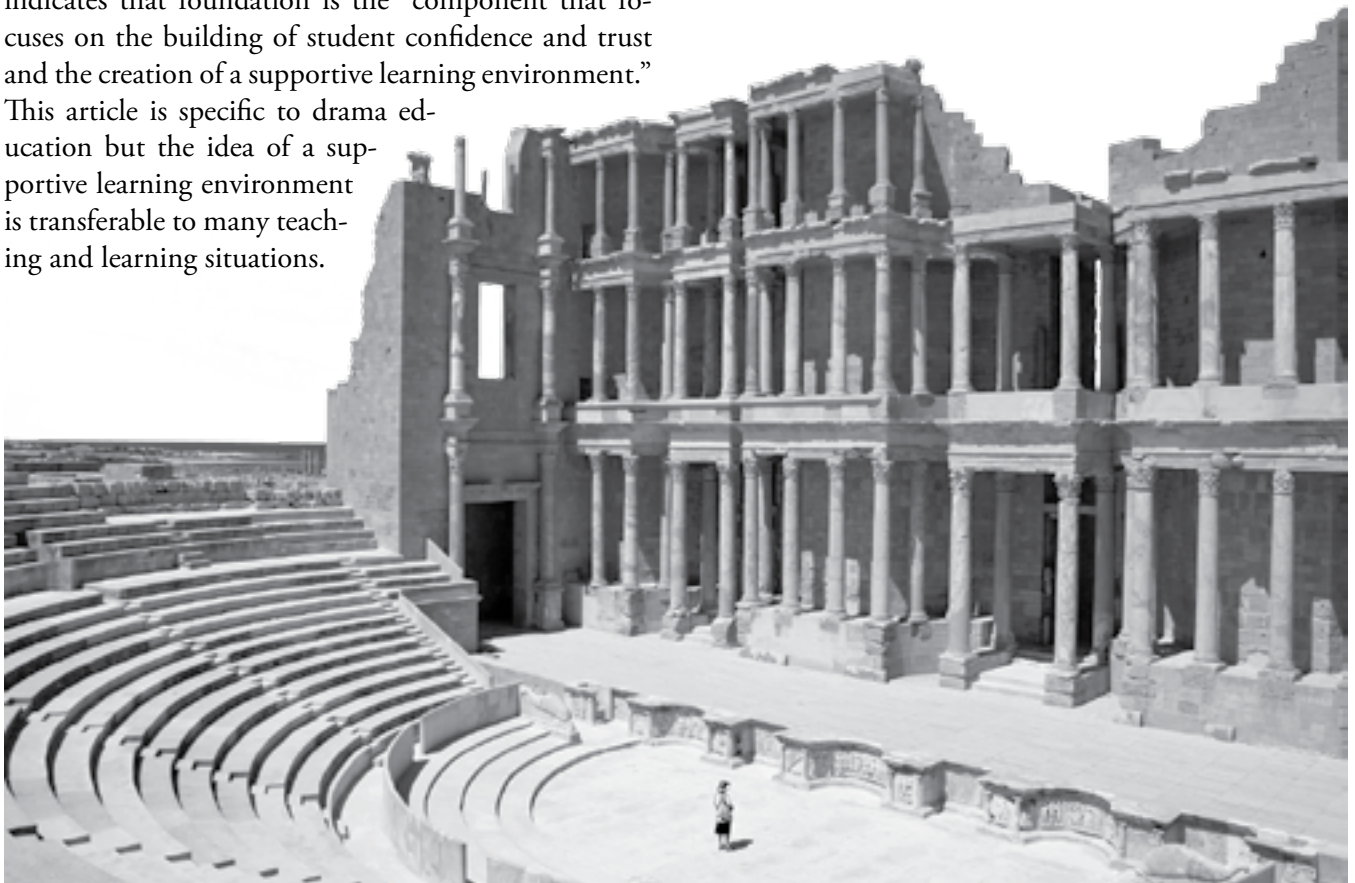
Robert Wigle

For the past few years I have been offering a workshop for Drama teachers at the *Educational Drama Association of Nova Scotia (EDANS)* annual conference entitled *Foundations in Drama Education*. The target participants for the workshop are teachers either new to the profession or those teaching drama for the first time. The theme of the *Foundations in Drama Education* workshop is how to maintain a productive learning environment for drama students.

Foundation is that part of any drama program that helps establish a sense of community. Drama teachers tend to use foundation activities to help students feel comfortable with other students. The term *foundation* is defined in the Nova Scotia Department of Education's Drama 10 and 11 Curriculum Guide. The guide indicates that foundation is the "component that focuses on the building of student confidence and trust and the creation of a supportive learning environment." This article is specific to drama education but the idea of a supportive learning environment is transferable to many teaching and learning situations.

Typically all drama courses or programs start with a series of foundation activities in the form of games to engage student in positive interactions, learn the names of other students, and start the process of creating comfort conditions for risk taking. Risk is important for growth and learning; learning occurs when students inch past their comfort zone into new territory and then reflect on that experience. The idea of expanding the student comfort zone is indeed the theme of the *Foundations in Drama Education* workshop.

I like to start the workshops and most drama courses that I teach with an activity I call *Fact Find*. Students are given a sheet with two columns and as many rows as there are students in the class. One column is labelled



*Name*, the other *Fact*. Students are instructed to have short interactions with as many students as they can and record the name and a fact about other students in the class. The goal is to record a fact from everyone. The two rules of the game are that students can't sit down and they can't share the same fact more than once. I invite students to do this in the first ten minutes of meeting a new group; it will work well even if many people know each other. While we are engaged in this game I observe the interaction. This provides my initial impression of the comfort conditions in the class.

In this game we establish a well understood but rarely discussed component of game playing: for the game to be successful everyone has to agree to the rules. Once the rules are agreed upon the authority in the group transfers to the game, away from the teacher or high status students. In this game individual status is equal. This makes it possible for each member to play as a full and equal participant. The rule that does not allow sitting in the game makes it difficult for students not to participate or to beckon others. For some students there is a lot of risk in this game, especially if there are no familiar peers in the room. This is another advantage of having the teacher play. When the *Fact Find Game* is initiated students tend to gravitate to familiar peers. The objective is to get a name and a fact from all other students so they really do have to move on to unfamiliar peers. The rule that has students share a different fact each time also raises the risk factor. Each time students encounter other students they need to dig a little deeper in their limitless reservoir of facts. It is surprising how often you hear, "I can't think of anything." Sometimes side coaching prompts are necessary, such as putting general themes like "family vacations" or "injuries" on the board.

Once students have a robust list of facts from everyone, the group is gathered in a circle. In round-robin style students are invited to share the facts on their list, not the names, that stand out to them. Other students in the class are invited to "own up" to any fact that is announced that they gave away in the game. Using the *Fact Find Game* as an example, the teacher and students discover several things that are important to building trust and establishing a supportive environment and community.

Games are crucial in developing a foundation drama classroom because fun is embedded in every game – something all students want more of in school. "Fun" is how students describe a game they like. According to Bisson and Luckner in *Fun in Learning: The Pedagogical Role of Fun in Adventure Education*, when students are having fun they are more likely to participate enthusiastically, to join groups with unfamiliar peers, and to engage in unfamiliar physical movement and vocalization. Everyone gets along better when they are having fun and they will take more risks in their learning, which really is what foundation is all about.

It is one thing to establish foundation in the drama class; it is another to maintain it or reestablish it. The need for reestablishing foundation is more evident when the safe and comfortable learning environment deteriorates. When this happens it is important for teachers to return to simple foundation activities. On occasion I've used variations on the *Musical Chairs Game* or the *Limbo Game* with surprisingly positive results. It is difficult to continue with new drama learning until foundation is reestablished. Sometimes morale needs a boost and a return to familiar games and activities is necessary. It is really worth the time and effort. Daily warm-up activities are essential for maintaining drama foundation.

In addition to the activities and the games, it is important to have students reflect on their learning. We know that learning is deeper and longer lasting when students reflect on their own experiences. One method of doing this is by using weekly one page journals with suggested topics. In this new age of data-driven decision making, the qualitative data that students readily provide is rich in substance for educators to make important decisions about their teaching.

Establishing and maintaining foundation in a drama class is critical to successful teaching and learning. The best foundation activities in my arsenal have come from other drama teachers who are always happy to be part of a professional learning community.

---

Robert Wigle is a teacher at Prince Andrew High School, Halifax Regional School Board.

# Job Sharing: Filling a Teacher's Heart with Dread?

Rita Glen



*Job sharing.* The very phrase is enough to fill a teacher's heart with dread. The more experienced teacher of the duo likely worries that a partner might be more work than help. In my case I was the junior partner. I was chiefly worried that it might be an unequal partnership, that I would have less to contribute, and that I would feel like a long-term sub in the room. This was a needless worry as it turned out. Margie King is a collaborator by nature and nothing excites her like teacher talk.

Job sharing is a strange kind of art, but when it works, I'm here to tell you – it works well. Margie and I were really lucky – it worked for us. I suppose we had all of the usual dancing-around-each-other experiences in the

early days. But around the end of that first September, I came in one day to find Margie frantically stashing stuff from the overloaded desk onto the counter behind. I said, "Oh, don't bother, it'll be just as messy tomorrow." Margie's reply was a heartfelt "Oh, thank God! I've been killing myself trying to keep it tidy for you!" This was the cosmic moment when our relationship first crystallized. We suddenly realized that we are both proponents of the "Messy Desk, Creative Mind" theory.

I don't want to come off as smug, but the Messy Desk Theory is sort of like differentiated learning, so we are completely in line with Department policy. At least we think so. Just to be safe, we urge the children to keep

their things organized. We provide them with a daily role model of how annoying it is when you can't find a piece of paper in your desk.

Differentiated learning is popular right now, which is lucky for Margie. She is the most differentiated person I've ever met. Give Margie five minutes with any child and she can think of about five categories for grouping. On the next day, with a slightly different math sub-topic, she re-groups again.

I'm a novice, of course. I started out believing that I'd think long and hard about each child and then carve their names on charts for reading grouping, math partners, etc. Margie will joyfully do this, but only as a sort of intellectual exercise. Margie does not have any "set in stone" in her soul. She re-sorts for each activity, so the charts make little difference. I have gradually converted to her system because it really does work. The children truly have no idea of where they stand in ability level, which allows them to develop flexibility.

Flexibility is both Margie's strong suit and her Waterloo. It means that a principal or co-worker can approach her at any time and suggest a sudden visit from a guest speaker or extends-into-noon-hour activity and she will instantly and cheerfully seize the opportunity. My own response to sudden change is more like "Say, what?" Margie, however, sees each visitor as a "teachable moment," an opportunity to expose the children to more things in life. It might make the afternoon "a little crunch-y" as Margie says, but "Why would we not want to do that?" If you look at it from the point of view of what's best for the child, instead of what's easiest for the teacher... well, she's absolutely right!

I can't finish without sharing some "Margie lingo." "Margie Talk" is part of my teaching tool kit now and it is useful stuff. As a teacher you can expend many words explaining delicately why a child needs to write more elaborate sentences or show their work in math.

Children often want to negotiate how much more they need to do. Margie covers all those yakky discussions by explaining "Grade 4-ness" to them. "Grade 4-ness" covers what our expectations are for a child in every field, including the social field. It places no blame and hurts no feelings.

Margie is particularly fond of the "titch." The "titch" is both noun and verb. You can ask a child to just add a "titch" more detail to a paragraph – or, just ask them to "titch" it up a bit. Margie usually administers the titch with a compliment, as in "Oh, LOVELY! What amazing colours on your flowers! Now, just a titch more detail in the petals, right there, don't you think?" The child in question beams at the compliment and walks off to do that "titchy" little bit more. Sometimes they disagree, voicing total contentment with their drawing. Margie then smiles warmly and says, "It is lovely, isn't it... but just a titch more." They get the message. The "titch" is gentle but it is non-negotiable.

It's a motto that Margie herself lives by. All year, Margie tells me that there are far too many science outcomes. One weekend she'll say that we're just going to have to leave Rocks and Minerals... well, maybe just a little "titch" more. I just smile. I know that there is no way to truly 'leave' Rocks and Minerals for Margie. You see, Margie's dad was a geologist. A rock is a rock to me but to Margie, it is a fascinating object to be lingered over.

Last June, five days before the very last day of the school year and the last day of her teaching career, Margie assured me before school that she was just going to take it easy – the kids are toast after last night's school musical, let's just go for a laid back day. But when I went into the classroom to get a child for Running Records, Margie had the chart paper covered with vocabulary words and she was intently explaining the details of the Prime Minister's apology to Aboriginal peoples to

I have gradually converted to her system because it really does work. The children truly have no idea of where they stand in ability level, which allows them to develop flexibility.

the class. They were drinking it up too. There was no outcome associated with this exercise. Of course, the discussion would come under 'character development' or RCH or something. Things that most of us don't teach enough of in the run of the day. Margie, however, will always make time to discuss a current event or something that is on that large list of Margie King things that "are important for the children to know."

Finally, a word about time management. Margie's take on time management is simple – just ignore the number of hours available in the day and write down all the things you'd like to get done. It's a complicated system of time-warp technology that's difficult to describe to the layman. I call it "Twelve Impossible Things Before Breakfast." In Alice in Wonderland the White Queen says that she sometimes believes six impossible things before breakfast. The White Queen never met Margie. Margie's goal each and every day is to do at least "twelve impossible things before breakfast." She often does them too which is the amazing thing.

So to all novice teachers out there who may be mulling over a job share with an experienced teacher: just do it! It did nothing to advance my career or get me further into the system, but I wouldn't have missed the professional development for the world. For the rest of my life, I can brag that I job-partnered with Margie King, truly a master teacher.

To Margie, it has been a pleasure to watch and learn. You are the person I will carry with me always, in the classroom. If I get a classroom, I promise to fill it with rocks and lost paperwork. I will make time for things that are important to know, and look for the teachable moment. I will try to get in at least six impossible things before breakfast.

---

Rita Glen is a teacher who job-shared during the last school year in the South Shore School Board.

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# A Learning Program for Faculty and Staff

Deborah McVeigh

**T**he Community College Education Diploma Program (CCEDP) is a uniquely innovative learning program for faculty and staff at the Nova Scotia Community College. According to the Dean of Organizational Learning, Claudine Lowry, CCEDP is structured and modeled as a learning experience for participants where the values and principles of a learning organization and learning-centered education are practiced and promoted.

The approach to learning is based on real-life situations. A combination of action learning, co-operative learning, self-directed learning and portfolio learning are advocated. The design, delivery, and structure of CCEDP celebrate learners and learning. The CCEDP is a comprehensive adult education/learning experience focused on assisting professional practitioners to gain useful skills, experiment with creative teaching techniques, and discuss Community College practices. This program is one of the requirements that faculty must complete to fulfill the conditions of their probationary status.

David Pearson, a Faculty member in the Steamfitting/Pipefitting Apprenticeship Program at the Marconi Campus, describes his impressions and experiences pertaining to his move from industry to the teaching environment with the help of CCEDP.

**When you were hired to teach in the Steamfitting/Pipefitting Apprenticeship Program, what was your initial reaction?**

David – Upon receiving confirmation that I was the successful competitor for the position, I was thrilled at the opportunity, but at the same time I felt a bit ap-

prehensive at the learning curve ahead. Coming from a job site on a Friday and reporting for a new job as a faculty member on a Monday is an overwhelming transition. With the support of the staff at Marconi Campus and my mentor, Florence Smith, I was able to overcome a number of the hurdles which at the time seemed so big, but, in reality, they were hurdles faced by all who are new to the teaching profession.

**How did you get through that first month?**

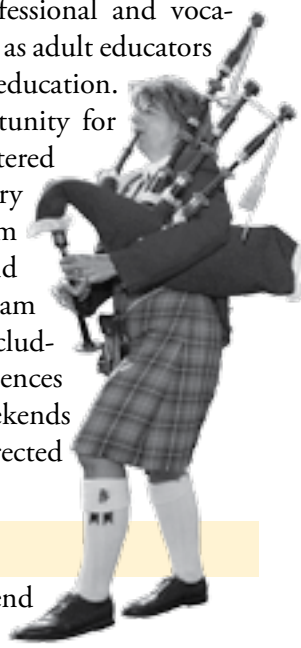
David – My initial reaction to this was to bury my head in my work. I had a lot to do and a short time to prepare before the arrival of students (less than one month), so I “hunkered down” and began reviewing material that had eluded me for a few years as well as updating curriculum to a current level. This is an ongoing process for me.

**You are a probationary faculty member now, and one of the requirements to be removed from probationary status is the completion of CCEDP. Please tell us what CCEDP is?**

David – According to the Organizational Learning Department, “CCEDP is an intensive program designed to prepare individuals with professional and vocational expertise to undertake roles as adult educators and leaders in post-secondary education. The program provides an opportunity for focussed study of a learning-centered approach to adult education, theory and practice, with colleagues from diverse program, occupational and cultural backgrounds. The program is offered in a number of venues including: week-long residential experiences in Truro; periodic residential weekends in Truro; locally through self-directed learning; and, on-line.”

**What is your view of CCEDP?**

David – Like many who attend CCEDP courses in their first two





years, I had some teaching experience that I could relate to my courses. Attending these courses helped me so much! The courses taught me new ways of delivery to appeal to all the learning styles of my students, the importance of proper assessment and evaluation techniques. The correct way to construct NSCC course outlines was taught. These courses helped me to understand adult learners and, hopefully, mould me into becoming a better teacher. CCEDP gave me an added confidence boost – had the material I could reflect on to improve my day-to-day delivery in the classroom.

**Did you find it very challenging to finish in the required two years?**

**David** – This is a very demanding schedule to complete in the two-year time frame. A new faculty member has so many other things going on during this time period and has their head in many different places. After a few courses are complete, you see the benefit of this training being put to use in your classroom. You realize it is not as overwhelming as you originally thought. You are also able to relate to the adult students who are in your classroom that have come from industry.

**What courses did you find most beneficial?**

**David** – There seemed to be a little bit of something to be had from each course; however, the ones that stand out in my mind are *Designing & Developing Programs*, *Designing Courses in a Learning-Centred College*, *Adult Learners with Disabilities*, and *Assessing and Evaluating Adult Learning*. These are courses I personally have benefited from taking and I am able to transfer my learning into my classroom.

**All new faculty members are required to attend CCEDP. How is the camaraderie in this learning experience?**

**David** – The majority of the courses are held at the Truro Campus of the NSCC and many of us take up residence in Davis Hall. This campus not only provides residence and meals but a full sportsplex, library facili-

ties and computer labs. There are, however, as demand requires, some courses offered in various parts of the province throughout the year such as Spring Break or on Friday afternoons.

Friendships are formed in the time spent together in the classroom and project work. Also the majority of my classmates are going through a lot of the same experiences I am going through as I deal with being a student again. Assistance is available from NSCC staff to facilitate the adjustment to both the classroom and living away from family.

**Tell us about NS 1005 Practicum: Professional Growth.**

**David** – The practicum aspect of the program is to be completed after 80% of the CCEDP courses are finished. This gives the learner a chance to gain some constructive criticism and, at the same time, “a pat on the back” for the things the new faculty member is doing well. The practicum consists of a peer mentor sitting in on three lessons during delivery and each time feedback is conducted. The new faculty member improves each subsequent time the lesson is delivered based on the peer mentor’s feedback. This is proof of what the learner has gained through their CCEDP experience.

**Are you enjoying the teaching experience?**

**David** – I teach mature students – those who are already employed in industry. This makes it a more relaxed atmosphere for learning because they can relate to the discussion due to their recent industry experience. Also many are eager to succeed so they can achieve remuneration upon returning to work. They also look forward to achieving their *Red Seal Journeyperson* status. For these reasons the teaching environment is very rewarding in adult education at NSCC.

---

**Deborah McVeigh is a faculty member at the Nova Scotia Community College, Marconi Campus.**

# NSTU Position Paper

## – Member Professional Development

Monica Maloney

### *Background*

Members of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union require and value needs-based, long-range, collaborative professional development throughout the course of their careers.

Traditionally, professional development has been accomplished through employer-initiated workshops, university course offerings, and association-sponsored conferences.

Over the past decade, an increasing variety of organizational structures emerged in professional development – on-line networks, professional learning communities, peer coaching and literature reflection.

Effective professional development is best characterized as participant planned and implemented in a collaborative setting; supported by all education partners for appropriate resources and time; and, evaluated to assess goals and outcomes.

The preferred vision of today's professional development is: *a community of learners meeting on a regular, on-going basis to collaborate on best teaching practices to enhance student achievement.*

### *Guiding Principles*

The foundation of quality professional development is built on the following beliefs.

- Focuses on the improvement of teaching practice.
- Utilizes a knowledge base substantiated in research.
- Involves participants in design and delivery.
- Offers cumulative and on-going activities.
- Promotes collaborative settings.
- Integrates into an overall educational improvement plan.
- Incorporates an evaluation strategy.

- Includes, but is not limited to, a job-embedded process that is seen as a regular part of the instructional day.

### *Issues and Needs*

Quality professional development includes four fundamental components – planning, implementation, sustainability and evaluation.

#### *Issue One*

A review of the literature demonstrates that professional development is generally planned and implemented by supervisory staff and site administrators. Further, sustainable, collaborative professional development is concentrated at the elementary level. Research emphasizes the importance of planning, implementing, sustaining and evaluating professional development by participants themselves. In such a model, participants articulate their needs as well as plan and implement professional development opportunities, thus ensuring the formation of a professional learning community.

#### *Need*

NSTU members need to assume a greater role in their professional growth by ensuring that professional development activities are selected for their potential to enhance teaching practice and improve student learning.

#### *Issue Two*

Concerns pertinent to professional development implementation centre around the experience level of participants. Surveys conclude that voluntary participation in professional development is greatest among experienced educators (i.e. those with more than 3 years experience). Beginning educators primarily participate in mandated professional development activities such as induction and mentoring programs.

*Need*

NSTU members require collaborative professional development as part of their jobs; professional development needs to be embedded into the educational system itself so that all educators benefit.

*Issue Three*

Regarding sustainability, concerns arise around collaboration, continuity, resources and time. Research indicates that between 10 and 20 days for quality professional learning are required on an annual basis to improve instruction. Options for provision of these days range from release time, contract-designated hours, and restructured timetables to provide flexible site schedules.

Further, research demonstrates that professional development that includes the entire educational site community achieves higher rates of change in teaching practice than does professional development where educators participate as individuals or in small groups.

*Need*

NSTU members require an appropriate allocation of professional development time to enhance collaborative professional development activities that result in a professional learning community at the educational site level.

*Issue Four*

Evaluation is critical to any initiative. With regard to professional development, most educators rate their activities as very useful. In particular, participants expressed satisfaction with in-depth professional development. The more time spent by educators on professional development the more likely they were to consider it very useful.

*Need*

The NSTU needs to promote the use of effective strategies including collaborative professional conversation among all education partners so that an accurate assessment can be made between the professional development and improved student learning.

*Organizational Position*

Under the leadership of provincial NSTU Committees; in particular, the *Comité de programmation acadienne*, the *Curriculum Committee*, the *Professional Associations Coordination Committee*, the *Professional Development Committee* and the *Teachers With Administrative Responsibilities Committee*, as well as with the assistance and guidance of the 22 *NSTU Local Professional Development Committees*, the organization performs the following roles to ensure quality professional development for its members.

*Professional Development Advocate*

As a professional development advocate, the Union promotes the need for increased resources and time allotment for its members to engage in quality professional conversation, development and learning.

*Professional Development Collaborator*

As a professional development collaborator, the Union works with education partners to plan, implement, sustain and evaluate quality professional development opportunities.

*Professional Development Provider*

As a professional development provider, the Union provides a broad spectrum of programs to members designed to enhance teaching practice, education leadership and student learning.

*Resources*

A reading list for this position paper can be obtained by contacting the NSTU Librarian, Maggie McFarlane, who was responsible for compiling relevant information for this position paper.

# EVOLVING IN THE PROFESSION



David Ritchie

I think that there are very few teachers currently active in the province who can say that their educational experience has spanned over sixty years. My educational exposure has ranged from a one room school house without plumbing or a phone to a super technologically equipped classroom with all the bells and whistles. The last thirty years have seen more significant changes than the previous two thousand years. That same thirty years has matched my career in the classrooms of Nova Scotia. Change is constant, stressful, and relentless. Thank goodness working with students keeps us young and learning!

The seats were still in rows, silence was maintained, and failure in a single subject ensured a repeated year.

As a preschooler I had the opportunity to travel with my mother on a bus from the Annapolis Valley to a one room school in Brooklyn nestled in the shadow of the North Mountain. It meant carrying a lunch, a few precious toys, and leaving my best friend, Michael the cat, at home. Circumstances had necessitated this opportunity. I spent most of the day playing at the back of the room under a table. What did I learn from this early educational exposure? Well, strangely, I learned to read, a skill that I might not have acquired as easily in the normal traditional learning model. I recently applied this lesson while working with autistic students. I taught them by doing a demonstration and talking to myself without eye contact or direct conversation with them. I had earlier accidentally recognized both students learning from indirect teaching. Amazingly it worked extremely well. Sometimes the indirect learning style is effective.

The next stage of my formal educational development was at the historical MacDonald School in Middleton. This school was the first consolidated school in Canada. It had been built by the MacDonald Tobacco Company. Unlike the Brooklyn school this school housed the primary to six grades in separate classrooms with an individual teacher assigned to each and a visiting music teacher.

The biggest hurdles of those early years was not to let on that I could read well and to devise ways of escaping notice that I did not have a clue what left and right were. In recent years I have encountered many students who have hidden personal “discrepancies” from their classmates and teachers.

The elementary school was governed by an all-female staff, mostly single, who ruled with an iron fist. The only male was the visiting music teacher. Corporal punishment was expected and approved by the community. Recently, in a conversation with an exchange student from Korea, I was surprised to learn that cor-

poral punishment is a foundation of their discipline system and used on a daily basis.

By grade six we were being actively prepared for the entrance exams to junior high school. The entrance exam tested us on reading prose, poetry, music, writing paragraphs, and clear handwriting. This was the first split for students. Some students never proceeded to junior high school. If you failed the skill and knowledge-based entrance tests you did not move on. Junior high school added team sports, French, dancing (both square and round), debating, separate subjects and subject teachers. The seats were still in rows, silence was maintained, and failure in a single subject ensured a repeated year.

By high school we had dropped even more classmates through retention, failure and employment. High school was divided into academic and general, each equally demanding. My high school was one of the schools that pioneered the General High School program. Students engaged in curricula aimed at banking, insurance, and business. Graduates of the senior matriculation were sought after in all Maritime provinces. Later in life I was constantly running into graduates who were steadily climbing the ranks in their chosen field. Academic courses included Latin, French, two English and two math courses at each grade level, history, geography, physics, and chemistry. It was a fixed program and you traveled with the same class through the day in every course. If you failed a single subject at a grade level you repeated the entire grade again. By After grade eleven you could qualify, by writing Provincial Examinations, for a Junior Matriculation and enter the first year of a four year university degree. Many left for university study or employment. Grade twelve, now significantly diminished, proceeded to prepare for the Senior Matriculation Examinations and graduation. Graduation was not the American style festival now practiced by most high schools. It was seen as a step in a process, not an achievement of a goal.

I have taught the gifted and the not so gifted and have learned in the process that we are all gifted in our own way.



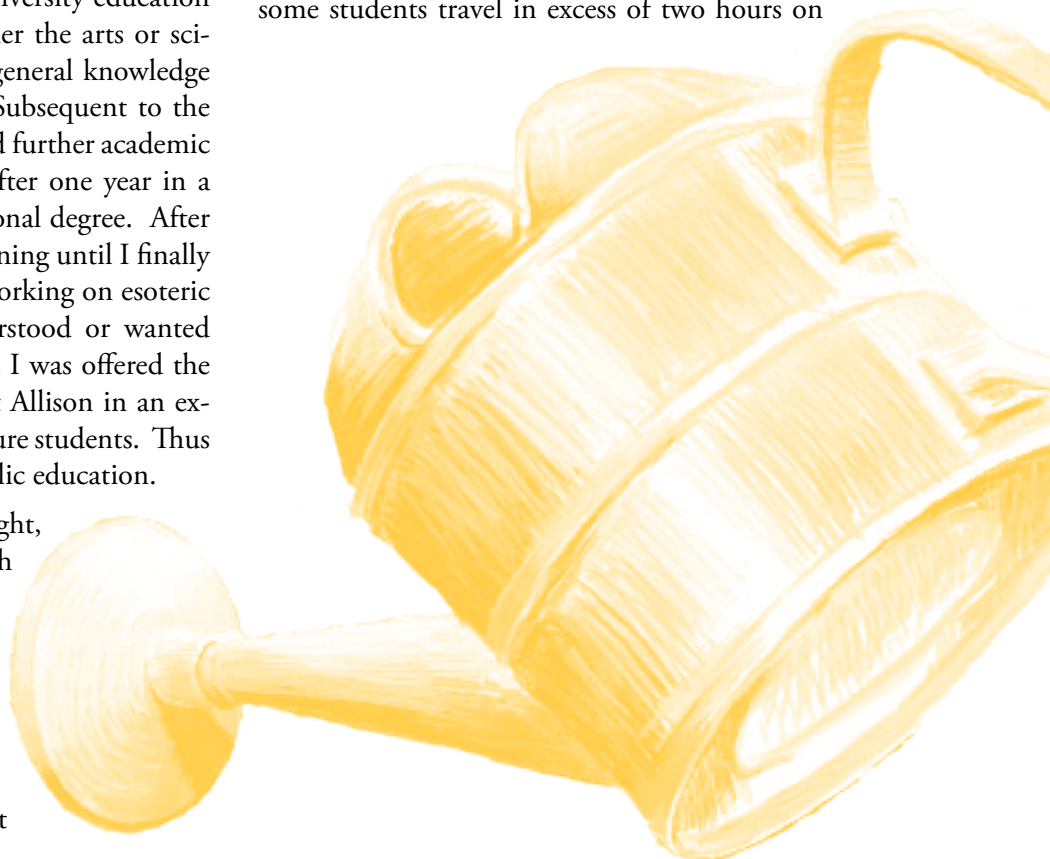
Upon graduation you could follow an academic education, a vocational training course, or technical education at an institute. After high school I took two years of architectural drafting and design.

These opportunities provided a broad range of possibility. Vocational training could be accessed at any time after grade nine through twelve and followed a preparation in the trades with immediate employment in the chosen field. The technical institutes provided specific education in a special technical undertaking and direct employment as a technologist. A university education provided a general education in either the arts or sciences and was specifically aimed at general knowledge at the undergraduate degree level. Subsequent to the degree, professional qualifications and further academic qualifications could be achieved. After one year in a planning office I undertook a vocational degree. After that I followed a career in urban planning until I finally realized I hated living in cities and working on esoteric undertakings that few people understood or wanted to understand. Fate stepped in and I was offered the chance to study education at Mount Allison in an experiment they had initiated with mature students. Thus began a most satisfying career in public education.

In the thirty plus years I have taught, I lead classes from Grade 7 through Grade 12 in English, Social Studies, Art, Geography, and Drama. I have taught the gifted and the not so gifted and have learned in the process that we are all gifted in our own way. I still marvel at the student who is mechanically able. I do not

place any academic skill above a practical one. In every class I have learned more than I have taught. To say that every moment has been a joy would be an outright lie but the great moments and good moments have far exceeded the less than wonderful times. Teaching in the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) has been as rewarding as teaching the all-boy Grade Nine class that struggled with grammar but met the challenge of parsing. Extracurricular, co-curricular, union and community involvement have enriched my life and my professional career.

Changes have been constant and go largely unnoticed until we sit quietly and look back. Demographic changes have been considerable. The depopulation of vital rural areas has meant the disappearance of local schools and the subsequent consolidation has meant some students travel in excess of two hours on



a bus every day. This has had a profound effect on issues such as school closures in winter. The decline in family size and the approach of zero population growth has resulted in a diminished school population. Expectations have changed significantly. Much greater variety in course options for individual timetables allows personal choice to govern selection. This has been at the cost of optimum curriculum contact time and the speed at which a course must unfold in this smattered system.

Social issues are becoming required content as major changes in attitude and acceptance are expected. As a child I remember my father taking a graduating class to Halifax and the class president not being allowed to eat at a well know Halifax hotel because he was black. In my lifetime we have seen gains in social equality as

we have morphed from the deep south of the North here in Nova Scotia into a somewhat kinder community. The shocker is that this has been in my lifetime. We have gone from de facto segregation to an integrated more cosmopolitan society where immigration and acceptance is a must if we are to survive.



## Lessons Learned

- 1) We all are not equally capable.
- 2) We all start out from different places in our journey.
- 3) We all proceed at different speeds: some need more time and some need less.
- 4) We all need to achieve skill foundations and build on them.
- 5) We all experience learning in different ways: sequentially, environmentally, lock-step, and randomly
- 6) We succeed when we experience genuine success and we know the difference.
- 7) We experience personal reward when we achieve honestly.
- 8) We all do not have the same gifts or goals.
- 9) We all deserve the best public education to meet our personal needs and goals.
- 10) We all travel a smoother road when we develop a genuine sense of humour.

At a time when many parts of the world are moving to the extreme right, we are moving to a kinder, more accepting way of coping with and celebrating differences. These changes are huge. Canada has led the way in promoting acceptance rather than denying human rights. Nova Scotia schools are keeping pace with this positive growth in human awareness.

Equally remarkable changes are occurring in the way material is delivered in the classroom. Technology, pedagogy, and brain research have altered the way we approach learning and teaching. Gone are the frozen aisles of desks and silent students caught "deer eyed" in the grasp of teachers. To the unseasoned eye classrooms may appear chaotic as a magnificent range of young people meet their educational objectives in an equally magnificent variety of ways.

Yes, there have been changes in my lifetime of learning both in the province and in the profession. Each of us has learned different lessons personally, collectively, and professionally. I have had an interesting overview of education in the more than sixty years I have been exposed to it. I wish all my colleagues in the profession the immense enjoyment that I have experienced in public education.

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

## Overcoming Barriers for Adult Learners

Tanya Levy



The phone rings. I answer it and I hear my student's distressed voice on the other end. She is snowed in and has car trouble. I hang up the phone and it rings again. I talk to another student who is experiencing challenges in her personal relationship while trying to juggle single parenthood and financial issues. When I hang up the phone a third student is waiting at my door. He is running late for his class and wants me to know why. We chat briefly about his challenges with his sleep habits. As a counsellor involved in adult literacy for the past seven years I have had many conversations with students about the barriers they experience when returning to school.

Think for a moment about a typical work day in your classroom. What barriers do you notice in your students? I want you also to think about what impact those barriers have on you, your classroom, and your own personal sense of equilibrium as an educator.

Let us consider for a moment what those barriers may include for a student. First, students may have a disability such as ADD, language-based learning disability, non-verbal learning disability, dyslexia, or slow processing speed; they may have a physical disability such as cerebral palsy or a mental health disability such as depression, anxiety or schizophrenia. Each disability brings with it a pattern of challenges and strengths. Second, students may have a barrier in their family environment such as family illness, family violence, involvement with the law, child abuse, alcoholism, gambling, separation and divorce, chronic unemployment, poverty, or transportation issues. Third, there are classroom issues related to various learning styles, cultures and languages. Finally, there may be community issues that impact on your students such as a traumatic accident or a local strike.

Think about how these barriers impact on your work. More importantly, recognize what is in your control and what is not. For example, a student may be chronically disorganized. He or she may produce good work at completion, but their disorganization may eat into your recess and lunch hour. You as an educator want to encourage a student's motivation, but you also need your breaks. What you may not know is that the student is a child of a single parent who is ill and in hospital. The student is distracted by their worry for their parent. You as an educator may become frustrated because all your attempts at "organizing" the student seem to fail.

Think about how these barriers impact on your work. More importantly, recognize what is in your control and what is not.

It may be helpful to accept that this student is chronically disorganized and reinforce the good work that they do. As the student builds confidence in his output, it is likely that he will develop his own focusing strategies. The student may sense that your classroom gives him “breathing space” from the stress at home and he may open up to you and tell you about his worries.

The following strategies are what I have found to work in my program. It is not an exhaustive list since each student is an individual with a pattern of strengths and weaknesses, and each of us as educators has an individual pattern of strengths and weaknesses.

1. *Determine your non-negotiable priorities.* You have curriculum outcomes you need to meet. There may be IPPs in place for some students, but ultimately the curriculum is not in your control, only how you deliver it.
2. *Identify where you can be flexible.* Create a classroom environment where students who struggle with focus can go to a different area to work. Once that is set up you can be flexible when you encourage a student to take advantage of it. For students who struggle with timeliness and organization, try to build some down time into the teaching schedule for transition and catch up. Look for ways to be flexible in how you measure success.
3. *Recognize that patterns of responses in students are not personal.* If you are working with a student who has a pattern of avoidance and they miss an after school appointment with you two or three times out of fear and anxiety that does not mean you are doing anything wrong as an educator. Students have learned various coping mechanisms to cover up their barriers. These patterns can include aggression, self-sabotage, manipulation and disorganization.

4. *Model appropriate social behaviours.* It is important in a classroom to remember that our students may have “bad mornings” before they see us. For example, a student may have a parent that calls them “stupid” everyday. This same student may see this as a self-fulfilling prophecy and not try at all or overcompensate by over-studying. The important piece is that in your office or classroom the student does not hear that label.

5. *Provide positive reinforcement.* Students remember rewards for positive behaviour. Consider what rewards you can provide when a student finishes work early, tries really hard, or accomplishes a difficult task.

6. *Support students to prioritize their own wellness.* Find ways to support students in prioritizing their own wellness. It can be as simple as emphasizing and focusing on students’ strengths in a classroom.

Reflect on what value you place on your own personal wellness. It is easier to support students to overcome personal barriers if you feel in balance yourself. Give some thought to the evidence in your personal and professional life of the value you place on your own wellness. You need to have your own energy supply in balance to support learning. Be clear about what fills you with energy and make time daily and weekly to keep that in balance.

Develop one personal wellness goal, write it down, ask a peer or friend to support you in that goal, and stick to it. Keep in mind that we live in a maximizing culture that is overfilled with technology and stimulus and sometimes you just have to turn it all off and focus on what matters to you.

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Tanya Levy is an Adult Learning Program Counsellor at the Nova Scotia Community College, Strait Area Campus.

## It's Not All About You!

Brent Jamieson and Derek Lesser

Administrators, like all educators, need to remember that in all that we do in administration students really do come first. We are here for them and we have to remember that they are at the core of our entire decision making process. What we do needs to be for the direct benefit of our students. They are multi-faceted and they carry a great deal of baggage to school. Students are not blank slates or empty vessels waiting for us to fill with knowledge.

*"Students tend to come to school with many different things on their minds. Some worry about their families, their parents' lack of jobs and communication between siblings and/or parents. They worry about staying away from gangs and drugs, being accepted by others, and safety for themselves and those around them."*

— A. Forsyth (school principal)

Therefore, being a school administrator is not about you; it's about the students, the staff and the community.

It is most important to remember that you are a cog in the wheel but you are not necessarily the driver. You are the facilitator, the peace-maker, the pacifier, the organizer, the person who is expected to know everything, yet not the person who knows it all.

You need to offer advice sparingly and, once it is given, you need to trust that it will be followed. When you must check on the progress of a task, you need to be able to encourage without adding blame or guilt, yet at the same time you need to be able to delicately increase the pressure on those who are lagging behind.

Speak to people in person whenever possible and whenever the situation is complex or could become emotional. Face to face always works best. People appreciate being spoken to up front. Candor is everything, as is total honesty. E-mail is very impersonal and easily misinterpreted. It must, therefore, be used with extreme caution.

Always consult teachers before making important decisions. Sometimes, however, you will have to make final decisions. When you do, be prepared to have people dislike you when you can't give them what they want. Although it may sound clichéd, it really is not possible to please everyone. Bill Cosby wrote: *"I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody."* We agree with this statement wholeheartedly. You should hope that, at the very least, you will be respected even if you are not liked.

Be ready to share the praise and glory for a job well done and to accept 100% of the blame for blunders. You have to have wide shoulders because it really will be "All your fault." The finger must be pointed at someone so it may as well be at you. In this way, at the very least, you have some control over the outcome.

Get to know your staff and students on more than a "surface" level. Find out their likes and dislikes, their interests, what worries they may have and what you may be able to do to make the situation better. As we mentioned before, speak directly to your teachers PSAs, and custodians. Be the peacemaker.

Be genuine and never be afraid to say you are sorry if you make a mistake. Do your best to find workable solutions. Again, be honest, and be real, be real, be real!

Treat people with respect. Listen to people. Be a shoulder to lean on. You can't fix everything. Do not even try! You can't do everything. Do not even try!

Share leadership. Allow staff to take on roles if they want to be involved and encourage those who may be hesitant (ENCOURAGE AND PRAISE). A team spirit is truly vital to a happy and healthy school.

Be practical and understanding, and have a good sense of humour. Lighten the mood, and help people to see the glass as half full. Make time for people. Expect to be not only an administrator, but also a teacher, counselor, therapist, clairvoyant, parent, paramedic,

## Working smarter, not harder, is the key to balancing the roles of the administrator.

repair-man/woman, technician and police officer (just to name a few).

An administrator must value the role of all staff in the school. Value your custodians, administrative assistants, student support workers, program support assistants, librarians, and cafeteria staff, as well as your teachers.

Teachers need the support and understanding of an administrator, and remembering what it is like to be in the classroom is important. This is why it is so important to get out of the office (and away from the computer).

Administrators need to get into the hallways and the classrooms. Of course, this is easier said than done. As much as we would like to tell you to always be proactive, you may very well spend a good part of your day being reactive, running from one situation to another putting out fires. At the very least remember that if you are not able to teach life-lessons to your students on a particular day then that at least you are sending them home safe and sound. This too, is of utmost importance to parents and should be of utmost importance to you.

Finally, make time for yourself and for your family and friends, but expect to put in very long days. Learn to push yourself away from your desk if need be. The papers will still be there in the morning and the world will not stop spinning.

Be proud of the work you are doing even if you do not hear that you are doing a great job. At the end of the day you are making a difference in the lives of those you deal with on a daily basis and when you do hear words of praise (and you will) they will reaffirm that you have chosen the best possible career in the world for you.

In many ways being an educator is a vocation more than it is a profession. You can make a difference in the life of a student and also in the life of a teacher. Be there when they need you and you will have their ongoing support, respect, and admiration.

### NOVA SCOTIA SCHOOL Record of Administrator

Subject	Daily Work
MODELLING BY EXAMPLE	✓
INTEGRITY	✓
LOYALTY TO STAFF	✓
EARNING STAFF TRUST	✓
FIRM BUT FAIR	✓
GOOD LISTENER	✓
ENCOURAGE INNOVATION	✓

Brent Jamieson is Principal and Derek Lesser is Vice Principal, Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School, Tri County Regional School Board.

## Evoking the Spirit

Helen Castonguay

**A**s often as I can, I stand in the front foyer and welcome staff and students as they enter the building. I do this because I like to see everyone and because I am reminded that every person coming through that door is hoping to have a good day. What a wonderful base from which to build my practice!

Each day of school is made up of interactions among students, teachers, support staff, administrators, and families. As we weave those interactions into the fabric of the day we have multiple opportunities to relate in ways that bring wholeness and life – ways that evoke the spirit. What does it mean to “evoke the spirit” in our lives and work? The word ‘evoke’ is intentional. It recognizes that all of us students, teachers, administrators, support staff, and families – bring our spirits to school with us every day. We do not leave our spirit at home as we go out the door to face another day. We interact amidst the joys and struggles that arise in our daily lives. To evoke the spirit means connect our learning to who we are and how we choose to act.

“It takes a village to raise a child” is a familiar saying in educational circles. Indeed, the village is raising the child and we need to look carefully and critically at the village. In her book, *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School*, Rachael Kessler illuminates the need to address what has meaning and heart for young people, stating that “there is a growing awareness among parents and educators that a spiritual void is

endangering our youth and our communities.” If the village is characterized by a spiritual void then we as teachers are compelled to evoke the spirit within ourselves and our students to create communities that experience connectedness, wholeness and safety for our children.

*Thirty years from now what will your students remember about you? I remember the lessons that were most deeply connected to heart. I remember that my Grade 8 home-room teacher loved us and loved to teach – a big broad memory – and I remember learning to love learning. I remember learning that adults are fragile too on the day that she first came in street clothes instead of her habit. Two of the boys in the class whistled in a way meant to be endearing, but in the awkwardness of adolescence and student-teacher relations it created embarrassment and hurt for her, our beloved teacher. I remember learning about the relationship between algebra and fruit salad ‘put the apples with the apples and the bananas with the bananas...’ when Mr. C made us laugh and learn all at the same time. Mr. C. loved teaching math and loved teaching us. I remember we were loved.*

It is the presence of that love for subject, student, and self that evokes the spirit. Knowing who we are is a step toward acting from love. We bring who we are to everything we do. It is in knowing intimately who we are and how that informs our ways of acting in the world that we grow. Sustainable and meaningful growth emerges from the inside out.



It is through questioning and reflecting that we develop our awareness of who we are and what we bring to teaching.

*Why did I become a teacher? What do I want my legacy as a teacher to be? When did I first realize – I am a teacher?*

These are questions that Parker Palmer asks us to explore in his book *The Courage to Teach*. It was my interaction with this book that helped me define more clearly my own *identity* and identify ways of relating in the world that bring wholeness, a concept named *integrity*. Palmer believes that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” This does not discount the need for subject knowledge and sound pedagogical practices, but we all know teachers whose work seems to flow from identity and integrity, as well as teachers who seem to be unaware of their identity and disconnected from their heart. The classrooms of these teachers are very different places.

If we want to grow as teachers we need to have the opportunity to talk to each other over time. It is through questioning and reflecting that we develop our awareness of who we are and what we bring to teaching. We need space opened so that we can express our hopes and fears, explore our strengths and challenges, and become intimately aware of our identity and of ways of being in the world that are integral to who we are. When I work with teachers my goal is to be of service in a way that opens and holds that space in which we become aware of ourselves and each other. Awareness is the first step toward growth. We need to know where we are before we start out on this journey bounded by intention, commitment, action, and reflection.

Students and teachers need community and individual time within the community to reflect and live with the “*big questions*.” They are questions that call for exploration.

When a student asks the question “*Why do people die?*” it may hold many other questions and feelings within it, questions such as: “*will I die?*”; “*does it hurt?*”; “*is there something I can do to not die?*”; “*who will take care of me if you die?*”; “*is death a punishment?*”; “*is there a heaven?*”;

“*is there life after death?*”; “*where do we go when we die?*” Questions of life and death and meaning and purpose, as well as many others, seldom lead to answers, but rather lead to exploration and the possibility of touching something beyond our immediate knowledge. Often this exploration, well tended, leads to wisdom and more questions. How often do we create space for exploration of these questions in schooling?

Teachers too have questions that merit exploration. They need the space to discuss important matters such as the purpose of education. *Is education a sorting ground, a proving ground, a learning ground or some combination of these? If it is a learning ground then how would that differ from a sorting ground? Is there a soul purpose in schooling? What are students learning about themselves, the world, and their place in the world? What do students need to know to be successful? What does it mean to be successful? Is every child a cherished child? If no, why not? How often do we create space for these questions to be explored in pre-service and in-service professional development?*

It is in discussing questions such as these that we come realize how our perspectives shape our actions. We become comfortable and even pleased that there are no pat answers to the bigger questions of meaning and purpose. We learn that the path is found in reflecting on how we live our daily lives and in coming to know ourselves and the world within and around us. As we come into this “knowing,” the next question might be one that was often asked by educator Shelley Finson. When groups needed to be brought back to purpose Shelley would ask, “And now, what do we do with what we know?” Living this question with integrity and heart will surely evoke the spirit in our students and colleagues and bring wholeness to our community.

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Helen Castonuy is Principal, Cornwallis Junior High School, Halifax Regional School Board.



## Two Perspectives on Multiage Classes



### The Benefits

Katherine Summers

As primary teachers often observe, four to five-year-old students come to school in September with a wide range of skills. Factors include birth month, and cognitive, social, and language development. Research shows that the youngest children perform at significantly lower levels of academic achievement than their peers who are six to eleven months older. At the same time we also have children who are developing quickly and need enrichment in learning.

How do we support the diversified needs of children in school at the present time? We talk about retention and advancement but as educators we know that the research about the benefits of these strategies are controversial. We move children on to their next grade

### Making the Grade

Debra Murray

Classrooms today are labeled in many ways: single, double, multi-grade, combined, split and multiage. A traditional “multiage” classroom focuses less on one grade’s curriculum and more on meeting the needs of individual students at their own level and at their own pace.

“Combined” classes have more than one grade at a time. Students have a wide variety of age levels, needs, abilities, and interests. The classrooms consistently have a combination of students well above, well below, and working at “grade” level.

In my last “combined” class, I had 24 students in “grades” four and five. Three students were on IPPs (Individual Program Plans) and there were six levels of

level and try to provide them with specialized and individualized support. In reality, however, children do not receive this kind of support until grade two or grade three. Children who are falling behind at this time are already suffering with self-esteem issues because they feel that they cannot keep up with their grade level peers. The children who require enrichment may become restless and bored in school, which may result in behavioural difficulties in class.

I would like to propose that multiage education would benefit children in the first years of school.

## What is Multiage Education?

- Children are grouped in classes that span several ages.
- Children remain with the same group and teacher for two to three years.
- Children are recognized as unique learners who develop along a continuum at their own speed. Difference and diversity of students is recognized and celebrated.
- A multiage class is a balanced group of children determined by age level and gender. It is not labeled as “a grade,” rather it is called a “grouping.”
- Teachers are aware of the developmental level of every child in terms of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.
- Multiage education focuses on fitting education to the child not on fitting the child to education.

## New Student beginning school

This child has most likely grown up in a family with siblings or cousins or has attended a daycare or nursery school where there are children who are at multiple ages and developmental stages. Being part of a multiage class would in many ways resemble the family environment from which they have come.

In the multiage classroom new children have other children in their class who are instant role models just like their older siblings. These older children already know the routines of the school and so our new little children can more easily fit into routines already

math and eight levels of language reading/comprehension. Some of my grade fours were at and beyond the grade five level and some of my grade fives were at or below the grade four level. To have always taught the grades separately would have been an organizational and emotional nightmare.

My mantra has always been “It’s not about the ‘grade’ you’re in, it’s about what you already know and what you’re willing and able to learn.” In a multiage classroom no one math book suits all learners and no subject can be taught in isolation. The best scenario is to group students according to need and ability regardless of “grade.”

In math I may have had five levels of a certain activity taking place with grades fours and fives mixed together according to their ability level. In language I may have had five different activities taking place, with grade fours and grade fives working together. My job as teacher was to do what all teachers are meant to do: to devise pertinent curriculum based activities to suit student needs; to monitor the work taking place; to continuously evaluate progress; and to raise and lower the bar of expectation when appropriate to successful learning.

To me the greatest differences between “single grade” and multiage classrooms are that multiage classroom teachers are presented with more curriculum to cover, more time needed for preparation, and a wider age range of students to challenge and to support.

My key to success was in really getting to know my students right off the bat in September. Taking the time to become familiar with their family backgrounds, interests, fears, capabilities, special needs, and expectations using co-operative games and curriculum based challenges was invaluable. By using listening, writing and speaking centers that mixed the genders and the “grades” together and by sharing their thoughts on right and wrong, why and why not, how and what if, we began to gel.

Another integral key to success was getting to know parents and guardians through consistent communication. My advice, in particular for multiage classroom teachers, is never to fear the phone, to send home frequent notes about what is happening and what is coming up, and to get those e-mail addresses. Make sure

It is well documented that children learn best when they are part of a program that focuses on their independent learning needs and allows them to grow as a learner.

in place. We do not have a class of twenty children all learning new rules and structures for the first time. Multiage grouping is often criticized because educators falsely believe that the older children in the class become dominant. In multiage classrooms, the older children show greater social responsibility and sensitivity towards their younger peers and less one-upmanship occurs than it does in a single-grade class. Children have more opportunities to interact with children of different ages instead of being locked into a class that only has children all of the same age.

Now let us consider the child's relationship with his or her teacher. As teachers we know that it can sometimes take a whole year to really know a child well and to understand their academic, social, and emotional strengths and challenges. It takes some children a long time to develop trust. Young children benefit from having a relationship with a good teacher that lasts longer than 10 months. This continuity of teacher and peer group offers stability and the chance for each child to build stronger social relationships.

The multiage classroom provides a developmentally appropriate program for each child. It is well documented that children learn best when they are part of a program that focuses on their independent learning needs and allows them to grow as a learner. Because primary students come to school with diverse needs, it would be most beneficial to focus on what they need as learners. Teachers who teach in multiage classrooms recognize and celebrate the differences in the range of performance of students across disciplines and therefore the students in a classroom also accept these differences.

## Possible barriers in creating a Multiage Classroom

The difficulty in creating a multiage classroom in our present education system is that teachers believe that they need to follow the curriculum dogmatically. However, if you consider the Nova Scotia curriculum for math and language arts, you can see that it is developed

parents and guardians know that you are teaching their children not just subjects.

Necessities for me included having a diverse range of reading choices from classic novels and poetry books to Mensa challenges and comics regardless of the "grade" combination. It meant lots of hands on activities and in-class projects to challenge the builder and the designer, lots of drama and self expression to challenge the artist, and lots of creative writing ideas to challenge the author that lives in every child. It was imperative to work co-operatively between the grades using specifically designed partner, small group, and whole class activities. It certainly meant having high expectations and clear goals. Building self-esteem and self worth were always hugely important.

Multiage classroom teachers learn to see that math and language skills develop with the child and not necessarily with the child's grade. No subject can be taught without language integration and, surprisingly, math lends itself to integration very well. The challenge that is left, is what to do about science, social studies, and health grade specific curriculums?

It seemed blatantly obvious to me after only one year in a multiage classroom that some topics just had to be minimized or left out. Seems bad but as a rule multiage classroom teachers keep their lower grade(s) classes the following year and, because of that, topics previously left out are covered at that time. In the long run no topic is left out but instead becomes an extension. Organizing the curriculum meant combining and integrating as much as possible.

The good news for me was that students who moved into my class the second year saved me time because I already knew many of them and those students were familiar with the established classroom setup, rules, and schedule.

Consistent routine in a multiage classroom is important. We learn early on that there are times for independent work and times for centres or groups, times

Needless to say, the students have always given positive feedback. They just love getting to be in a class with older and younger friends.

along a continuum leaving room for individual growth over at least three years. This is shown by statements in the curriculum such as; “By the end of grade three, students will be expected to...”

The difficulty in planning curriculum for a diverse group of learners may lay in the areas of social studies and science but these topics can easily be adapted with a long term plan so that teachers do not have to cover every topic in a single time frame. Here is where you can see the benefit of having students for more than one year. If you look closely at the General Curriculum Outcomes for science, you can see that what is important is that children learn skills of inquiry, the ability to solve problems, and to work collaboratively with their peers. The knowledge of actual content is presented as secondary to these outcomes.

Multiage education could benefit the young child entering school. It provides children with a nurturing environment that more closely resembles a well functioning family. Children enter school with a wide range of abilities. A multiage philosophy allows them to develop at their own speed. This becomes the focus rather than “catching up” with peers. The philosophy that each child can achieve contributes to positive self-image, which is probably one of the more important influences in student achievement.

for speaking and times for listening, times for the celebration of rights and times for taking on responsibility. Students should know the plan set out for each day. What should we complete before and after recess and what should we complete before the end of the day? Students love to check something off a list! The daily routine should also include time for reflection and self-evaluation by the teacher and the students.

Multiage classrooms are busy, interactive, and highly challenging places for all learners. I elected to work in multiage classrooms whenever the opportunity arose. Parents have consistently given positive feedback because the lines of communication were always open; they didn’t necessarily need a parent-teacher conference to know how their child was doing. Needless to say, the students have always given positive feedback. They just love getting to be in a class with older and younger friends.

Occasionally there was frustration and occasionally there was self-doubt. There is a great deal of curriculum to cover and a great deal of planning to do. But teaching is a great deal of work at any level with any number of “grades” when you want to do it well. Basically, whenever my heart wanted to scream I had to make it sing instead.

Successful multiage classrooms – successful classrooms period – have open doors, a welcoming environment, a flexible curriculum, and elastic walls that stretch as far as learning allows.

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## Parent Teacher Meetings: A Template for Success

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Doug Benedict

It is 6:30 pm on a Thursday at mid-semester or end of term. There is a line up of parents and two students sitting outside a classroom door. Most parents are chatting pleasantly. A couple of them are sternly staring straight ahead. One is reviewing her list of contact information for the Superintendent, the local MLA, and the Minister's office. All of them are hoping that they will not be held up too long by the parents ahead of them.

Inside the classroom is a teacher hoping the parents who really need a parent-teacher meeting will show up. The teacher is also hoping that all the meetings go well.

The vast majority of parent-teacher meetings will be pleasant and rewarding. This is the result of teacher skill as well as the love and dedication of parents to the best interests of their children. Parents are an absolutely crucial partner in what a teacher hopes to accomplish. Even parents for whom school was not a high point want a positive and successful school experience for their child. Successful parent-teacher meetings are built upon this shared interest. The possibility of conflicting interests or disagreement creates anxiety in the heart of both teacher and parent.

Disaster might be too strong a word for a parent-teacher meeting gone badly but the negative impact can be damaging and long lasting. Planning to prevent a disastrous meeting or to reduce the negative consequences of one is not that different from other emergency planning at school. It doesn't presume a disaster will happen but builds capacity to cope with one if it happens.

Mitigation is the first step. This means doing things that will reduce the impact or destructiveness of a disaster if and when it happens.

Most of the work that ensures a successful parent-teacher meeting happens long before the meeting. Teachers have established an ongoing relationship with

"their parents" from the earliest possible date. Class newsletters, parent orientation sessions, shared communication plans, communication notebooks, terrific Tuesday phone calls, and other strategies have demonstrated a commitment to the relationship. An open invitation for parent initiated contact has nurtured and supported their shared interest. Expectations have been clarified, little problems addressed early, and trust and credibility have been established.

Technology and the Internet have strengthened the teacher's tool kit. Most parents have access to the Internet at home or at work. An e-mail heads-up on the topics, assignments or tests for the coming week enables parents with a source of reliable information other than the child's response to the "Do you have any home work?" question. In some cases parents can access a regularly updated record of attendance and achievement online which makes it difficult for them to use the "I didn't know" defense.

As you see circumstances coming together that may lead to a disaster you begin putting your knowledge and resources in place to prevent the negative impact of a specific event or reduce the impact of the event. This is prevention or preparation for a foreseeable event.

For instance, some parents have an excuse (it's the teachers fault) ready for every problem their child may have at school. Prevention or preparation for a possibly negative meeting is part of the routine for successful parent-teacher meetings. A key step in prevention is to deal with problems when they are small. Every problem ignored or swept under the proverbial rug is busy getting bigger and more damaging. Prevention is letting parents know about persistent or significant problems as soon as possible. Hearing from the teacher at a parent-teacher meeting that the student has not completed any class or home assignments is going to create frustration. First, the parent wonders why their child is not putting in the effort. Second, they wonder why

## Once in the face-to-face parent-teacher meeting teacher skills and attitudes are crucial to success.

they are just finding out about a problem they might have been able to help correct eight weeks ago.

Preparation means you bring relevant documents to your parent-teacher meeting. A copy of the achievement report, class attendance, record of phone calls, all component marks and grades, notes on class work, and assignments should be available. Just as important as having information at the meeting is having it organized so that it is easily retrievable when you need it.

Once in the face-to-face parent-teacher meeting teacher skills and attitudes are crucial to success. This is when your disaster can happen and your only choice is to respond. All your interpersonal communication skills are called upon to ensure a successful meeting. Accepting and respecting parents as partners is the essential beginning. From this beginning the teacher can be assertive in his or her interactions.

Assertiveness does not mean being in control or being arrogant. Assertiveness means that you know your subject, you know your assessment scheme, you know your students, you know your rights, and you are able to control your emotional reaction to whatever is said to you. You are assertive when you can respectfully state your knowledge and feelings.

The key skill is listening to understand the parent you are meeting. If you do not listen effectively your respectfulness of the “parent as partner” is absent and the meeting will be less effective. Mentally preparing rebuttal arguments while the parent is still talking is a good sign you are not listening to understand the parent. Refocus on what the parent is saying, even if you do not agree with them.

The skill of paraphrasing is the foundation of listening. You will find this skill described in every interpersonal communication book and web site. It just means telling people what you have understood as their message or perspective. It is not simply parroting their

words, which quickly becomes annoying. It means putting their message in your words, then waiting to find out from them if you understood correctly. Hearing a response such as “No that’s not what I meant” is a step forward, as you have prevented or corrected a misunderstanding.

Every good meeting has a follow-up component. Usually it is clarification of an agreed upon plan, implementation of the plan, and monitoring progress. However, if you have had a tough parent-teacher meeting the follow-up is crucial to rebuilding or repairing a relationship with the parent. Continue to invite parents into a partnership aimed at the best interests of the student. Not only does meeting follow-up improve the odds for success in any plan to help the student, it also shares some of the responsibility for the plan with the parent. Whether they accept the responsibility or refuse it, the teacher is in a better position.

The effort of following up on a meeting often pays off in additional respect for the teacher. If the meeting was less than satisfying in tone, a more cordial conversation may be important to the success of future meetings. Recovery is the easiest step to put off and perhaps the most important to carry out. You are going to meet these people, or their friends, again.

Parent-teacher meetings are usually positive and rewarding for the well prepared teacher. That doesn’t stop teachers from worrying about the possibility that a few will involve aggressive or unpleasant situations. Preparing to deal with those types of meetings will make all parent-teacher meetings better.

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Doug Benedict is a retired teacher and administrator, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

# How Identity Contributes to Health

Peter Mullally

Every work day a number of Nova Scotia's educators come through our doors at Counselling Services seeking their better self.

When we are overwhelmed and stuck in our personal or professional lives we too get out of touch with our own better selves. We may express this as: "I'm just not myself," or "I feel lost," or "I've stopped caring about myself." Some member-clients describe themselves as living a case of mistaken identity. They feel smaller, more limited, and imprisoned in thoughts, feelings and worries that shrink this sense of self, and their very identity.

Mary is a 41 year-old woman, wife, mother of two teens, teacher, community volunteer, and primary care-giver for her parents. She vividly describes this sense of lost self: "It's like I have two selves. One consists of the roles I carry out in my life. The other is my real self that I used to know and enjoy, and yet I rarely experience anymore." I used to truly enjoy noticing my students begin to relax and to feel at ease in my classroom. Now work activities whirl so fast that I can hardly notice the students' real lives and their step-by-step achievements. My own mind races so much that I don't have time to truly take in and appreciate the life I'm living and the good work that I'm doing. I know that I live with two linked energy channels – a giving channel and a receiving channel. But it's like my receiving channel is blocked, like a clogged artery. The receiving channel re-energizes me. It's my life-line. Yet, I've cut myself off from it.

Keeping both our giving channel and our receiving channel open is the secret to re-energizing life. We need to be able to receive the beauty of a snowflake or the terror of a storm, the light of insight flashing in a student's eyes, the hugs of colleagues on returning to work following a health leave, and the cup of tea served by a friend. Awareness of these and millions

more little "receivings," energize and feed our inner beings.

To build awareness we need to stop, to breathe, to listen, to appreciate, and to receive the gifts of this day. Awareness allows us to receive. Attention through pausing and breathing gives space for awareness to happen. The smaller the gifts we notice, the larger we create our life. We can begin just by being aware of our in-breath as a gift received from the universe, and then our out-breath as a gift we give to the universe. Try taking a two-minute breathing break anytime in the day: focus on the in-breath, no need to change it, just follow it in through the nostrils, over the roof of the mouth, down the throat and into the lungs; and then follow the out-breath as the tummy and chest fall. This practice can open up our receiving channel to welcome the many appreciations in our day.

A blocked receiving channel leads to one-channel living – the giving channel only. In the classroom, with only the giving channel operating, we soon get overwhelmed, out of balance, focusing only on the needs, demands, wants, and expectations of students, parents, colleagues and the educational system as a whole. It is then that we become out of touch with our own better selves and feel like we are sinking below the waves.

Every now and then it is good to step back from the madness of "doing," to revisit our commitment to ourselves as people and ourselves as educators. A poem by Paulette Chase Whitman, an Annapolis Valley teacher, invites us to receive ourselves as "enough." Life can teach us that we are truly enough and invites us to accept the gift of self as we are.

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Peter Mullally is a Counsellor with the NSTU's Counselling Services.

## *I am Enough* by Paulette Chase Whitman

*I am enough, the mantra says,  
Reminding me to be accepting,  
Of myself, my life, and the who of me.  
It is not easy, I respond.  
I have had a life of questioning myself,  
Pushing myself to be more.  
My nature has never let me accept  
I am enough.  
A childhood of seeking, striving,  
Even needing, to be all I could be  
Has led me to become more –  
Smarter, smaller, better.  
Never before have I felt that  
I was enough.*

*At middle age, I have found a freedom  
That has grown within myself.  
A freedom that truly celebrated myself,  
The child I was, the woman I have been  
And the spirit that binds them together.  
She, I, was enough; as I continue to be.  
Knowing you are enough, and  
Knowing you can be all or as less  
As you want or need to be,  
Empowers to be the door to the future,  
And the past.*

*I am enough.  
I know it, and celebrate it,  
And that is more than enough.*

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# In Jerusalem

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, in Jerusalem in January watching Kenneth Branagh in *Conspiracy* during lunch when the air sirens all over the city went off. Looking around the Visual Centre, I noticed that others were looking up from the screens at their booths and were pulling off their headsets. Security guards ran into the room and vanished into a space behind the information desk. No information was provided.

The sirens stopped. The headsets went back on. Life continued as before, but I felt that something had changed – if not in the outside world, then in my inner world. This seemed to be more than a wake-up call about the concerns of the war in Gaza, 200km away. My experiences in Israel would change the way I see myself, the world, and my role in the world. Later (much later), after my heart-rate resumed to normal, I got to thinking; *how can we, as teachers, use our life experiences to enrich our teaching?* I had three immediate answers.

A wise teacher from my past indirectly provided me with advice: never confuse intelligence with experience. As I experience more in life, it doesn't make me any more intelligent, only more experienced. Conversely, my students are not less intelligent because of their shorter years of life experience. As teachers, we can use our life experiences not simply to model story-telling skills, but to help students understand how their own experiences are framed with particular world-views, how our experiences are increasingly becoming informed by globalization, and how some of our experiences involve struggles with knowledge.

Let me offer three passages taken directly from my journal during my studies in Israel this winter to il-

lustrate each of these three ideas. I offer them to you with minimal editing. You'll be reading my unpolished impressions of traveling in a country at war and then returning to the daily life of teaching in rural Nova Scotia. You'll see my candid struggles as I try to come to terms with such juxtaposition.

## Passage 1: How experiences are framed by world-views

Our new experiences are interpreted by our prior knowledge and experience. While this sounds simple, it is more challenging to hear how someone's prior knowledge influences their reaction or articulation to new experiences. Consider this passage from my journal and watch for assumptions that are embedded in my writing:

Evening at the hotel:  
EXPLOSION outside our window. My roommate quickly says, "That was a bomb explosion." He would know. He survived a bus-bomb and wore human body parts. My mind races, thinking back to the two convoys for dignitaries that I passed as I walked back to the hotel from my workout at the gym. Those convoys would be passing on the street in front of this hotel. Would they have been a military target? We pause, and then go out on the deck. Down below, there are two police vans parked and blocking the street. I'm relieved – they were there at the outset / before the explosion

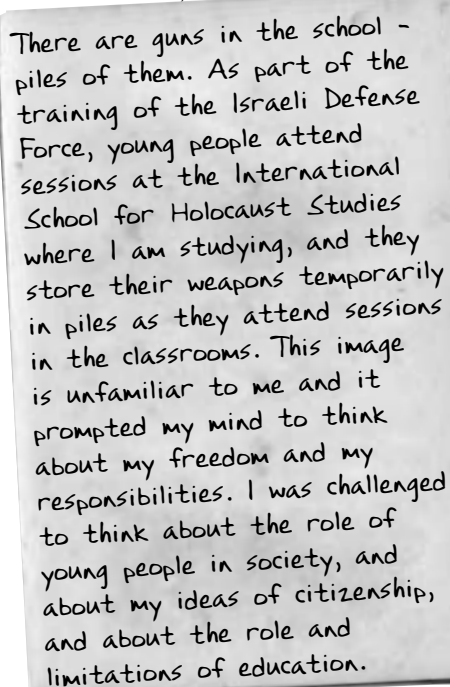
and I deduce that the explosion was not as random and unexpected as I had first imagined. My roommate looks and explains that this police unit responds to calls and explodes suspicious packages or objects. True enough, I can see police in bomb outfits. I can see the police now approaching the Blockbuster Store, six stories below. There's a backpack or something left outside the store. Should I go back inside? Move away from the glass door? Am I over-reacting? But by the time I have written this (immediately after the explosion), the traffic has returned to its normal pace. Normal: a strange word.

Were my reactions inconsistent with those of other people in this passage? How would you imagine you would respond to the incident being described? What were some of the assumptions that influenced my perspective? Can you anticipate what I have learned from this experience? Asking

such questions in the classroom encourages students to think about how perspectives are constructed, how they are different for different people, and how they are influenced by prior knowledge.

### Passage 2: How globalization informs our thinking

Our perspectives are increasingly being informed by globalization – especially cultural and social forms of globalization. Our students need to learn about the ways young people live in other places in the world. Young people understand how their world is governed, but they may not be as aware that young people could be governed differently.



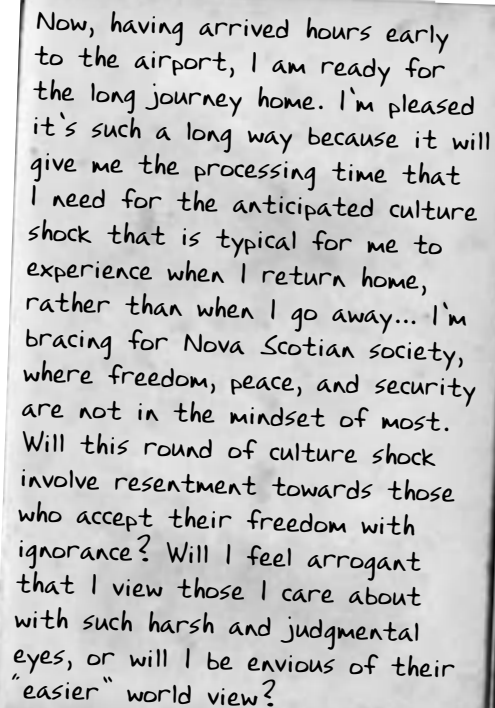
There are guns in the school - piles of them. As part of the training of the Israeli Defense Force, young people attend sessions at the International School for Holocaust Studies where I am studying, and they store their weapons temporarily in piles as they attend sessions in the classrooms. This image is unfamiliar to me and it prompted my mind to think about my freedom and my responsibilities. I was challenged to think about the role of young people in society, and about my ideas of citizenship, and about the role and limitations of education.

When presenting some lunch time mini-lectures to students and staff (okay, really it was a show-and-tell of some travel pictures), I noticed that students did not know that some countries expect their young people to serve in the military for a set period of time. This simple piece of knowledge seemed to change their perspective about their own lives although I didn't have time to explore their thinking too much at the time – the bell rang and lunch was over.

### Passage 3: How struggles with knowledge need to be validated

Students need to know that we struggle with knowledge all of our lives. By struggling, I am referring to the work that you do with new experiences that aren't congruent with what you think you already know. As Yoda

says, "You must unlearn all that you have learned." Students need to know that adulthood continues with new challenges and perceptions and that learning continues. The following excerpt reveals my struggles about new experiences in Israel.



Now, having arrived hours early to the airport, I am ready for the long journey home. I'm pleased it's such a long way because it will give me the processing time that I need for the anticipated culture shock that is typical for me to experience when I return home, rather than when I go away... I'm bracing for Nova Scotian society, where freedom, peace, and security are not in the mindset of most. Will this round of culture shock involve resentment towards those who accept their freedom with ignorance? Will I feel arrogant that I view those I care about with such harsh and judgmental eyes, or will I be envious of their "easier" world view?

When I travel I often think about what experiences will be "classroom worthy." Of course, this means that I also have to be ready to answer questions like, "What was your favorite part of your trip?" I'll have to have some quick snippets ready. People like stories – especially short ones. I'll need to have stories that honour students' intelligence and offer them ways to think through their own experiences. Offering life's experiences to students need not be deeply personal, but it can be educational. By choosing to share our own moments of learning, we enrich our teaching because we are modeling how we reflect and learn from our experiences. I must confess that I polish the stories rather than present them in the form of journal ramblings. But then again, maybe I should share my changing reactions and thought processes more openly with students. Perhaps I need to unlearn.

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

# A Season for Everything

Greg O'Keefe

**E**ducation and growth. Growth and education. In combination these words illustrate a match made in heaven. What better choice of words could be made as we rapidly approach the closing days of another school year.

These are the days when an increased spirit of excitement fills the education system at every level. It is felt by students, their parents, their loved ones, and their teachers. That spirit is felt most strongly by those about to have grade twelve, grade nine and grade six graduations.

Students can be compared to seeds; they enter the "soil" in their primary years and experience growth in the following grade levels. As seasons pass so will they.

Indeed there is a season for everything:

- A time for planning.
- A time for uprooting what has been planted.
- A time for tears.
- A time for laughter.
- A time for mourning.
- A time for dancing.
- A time for embracing.
- A time to refrain from embracing.
- A time for searching; a time for losing.
- A time for keeping; a time for throwing away.
- A time for keeping silence.
- A time for speaking.

Anyone listening to the items which fill newscasts is made well aware that there is no shortage of time for hating or of time for war. In contrast, as educators we strive to teach that there is a time for loving and a time for peace.

As another school year passes it is a special time for parents and teachers. We look back as we pause in



wonder at the changes in our students. The earliest observation is to see their growth in terms of physical maturity. The junior high years see the hormones taking centre stage in the lives and behaviour of many students. The final three years see a swing towards increasing growth in maturity. Growing and learning are dynamic changes, not static in nature. These changes affect more than the students. The parents and teachers are also a part of this time of change.

Teachers have a vital role to play during all of these stages. We know that the definition of an educated person is not one who knows all the answers but rather one who knows where and how to find the answers.

I will therefore end where I began. The end of each school year is a time for looking ahead and a time for looking back. So as a new season is about to begin, may you have the joy of knowing that you continue to make a difference in the lives of the many you influence. I urge you to use the summer days ahead to experience rest, relaxation and reflection. You have earned all three.

---

Greg O'Keefe is a retired teacher and former President of the NSTU.

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