

Education as Public Place and Inclusive Space



Education represents one of Canada's most fulfilling, but simultaneously highly confining, public institutions. Education, at its best, is enlightening, enlivening, and engaging. As a social space, it is unique for its ability to encourage universal participation, mobilize resources that contribute to personal development, and deliver options and credentials acknowledged by other agencies as requirements for social and economic advancement. Educational success is defined, most crucially, by the growth and accomplishments of educational participants. Education, though, can also be debilitating and disillusioning. Educational horizons are marked by endless growth possibilities, whereas education in practice is marked by significant boundaries and limitations. Public faith in education as a pathway to personal advancement and a lever for social and economic development is accompanied by personal and public frustrations, often posed in terms of education's purported contributions to, or failure to alleviate, numerous social ills.

Educational research shares the same blend of exhilaration and frustration as the phenomena it examines. Education is contradictory in character, embodying a complex array of tangible and elusive properties that bestow on the findings of educational research a practical, but often contested, significance. Educational institutions are rich in social relationships, both as workplaces and as sites for the learning and social interaction that are central to the lives of children, youth, and many adults. Schools and other educational institutions are public places insofar as they seek to encourage, and benefit

from, the engagement of diverse participants and the communities they represent. Educational success, in this respect, often depends on the ability to create within the educational process an inclusive space that nurtures, educates and fosters well-being among children, youth and other participants through an environment that is secure and safe.

My own research, emerging through a lifelong involvement with education in different capacities at various levels, has reflected a particular interest in questions related to educational contradictions and contestation, especially within public schooling. In this work, the educational ambitions and frustrations experienced by diverse participants are framed within four inter-related thematic areas: the nature of the educational experience for diverse children and youth; the impact of educational policies and practices on educational experiences and social and economic outcomes for learners differentiated by class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other crucial social factors; the inter-relationships among social, political and economic contexts and educational developments; and the nature of teaching as a specific type of work. The comments

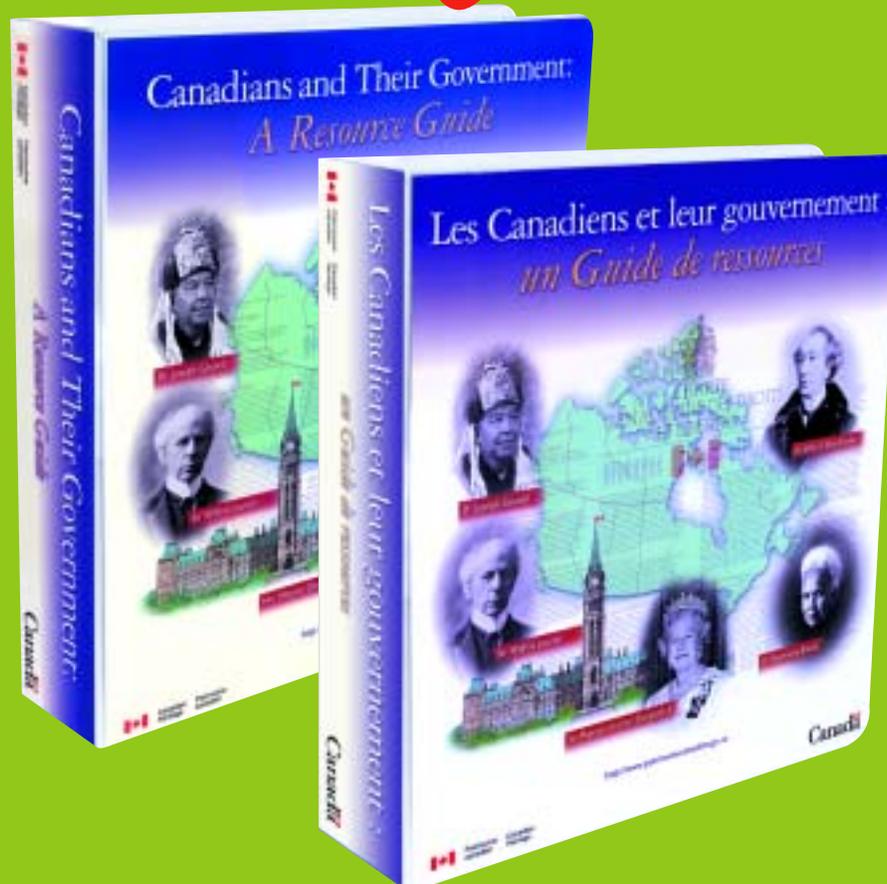
Education is contradictory in character, embodying a complex array of tangible and elusive properties that bestow on the findings of educational research a practical, but often contested, significance.

Learn about:

- a) when Canadian women officially became "persons"
- b) the *Declaration of the First Nations*
- c) who was the only person to sign the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
- d) all of the above and MORE!

Apprenez :

- a) quand les Canadiennes sont officiellement devenues des « personnes »
- b) ce qu'est la *Déclaration des Premières Nations*
- c) qui a été la seule personne à signer la *Charte canadienne des droits et libertés*
- d) tout ça et PLUS encore!



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posed with the difficult challenge of embracing alternative conceptions and forms of knowledge while they seek to ensure, at the same time, that the programs and credentials they offer and the work they do retain their legitimacy and adhere to recognized standards of quality.

Engagement with students' lives and communities

Individuals and social groups with the lowest levels of educational attainment and involvement frequently attribute their educational difficulties to the lack of connection between their education and their daily life concerns. Many groups, including Aboriginal people, visible minority immigrants, and residents in rural and remote regions of the nation, attribute their mounting alienation and frustration to a persistent gap between their immediate experiences and preoccupations and the expectations, knowledge and procedures that prevail within educational settings. For substantial segments of the student population, schooling is compounded by – and at times subordinate to – issues related to poverty, family difficulties, violence and safety, substance abuse, discrimination or racial tensions, domestic and work responsibilities, or movement from one residence, community or nation to another.

Although such issues have been addressed through several exemplary measures in various jurisdictions, educational programs typically give limited attention to pressing social issues, either as subjects of focus or as factors to which institutional programs and procedures respond and accommodate systematically. While high educational aspirations and assessments of education's value are shared widely across social groups, education's failure to bridge current circumstances and future orientations is a source of substantial disaffection and disengagement for many groups. These circumstances pose significant challenges to educators, who are expected to meet rising educational expectations while simultaneously attending to increasingly diverse student bodies and communities with diminished or constrained resources.

A more general and recurrent expression of these concerns is the tension between education for 'place' and education dictated by global forces. Residents in most locales assess the presence and contributions of schools and other educational institutions as core elements that define, sustain, and advance their communities. Ironically, the focus and driving forces of education are more often oriented to global pressures and expectations *outside* the communities it serves. Educational participants and outside groups, such as employers who look to education to prepare workers and citizens, hold in common a desire for training and education relevant to emerging labour markets and globally based concerns. Paradoxically, educators often find guidance from the communities they live in more difficult to integrate into their activities than directives from more distant influences. Yet the most vital educational institutions are often those that can simultaneously contribute to a sense of 'place' in significant ways, providing a grounding for people in their own cultural and social environments, celebrating the unique characteristics of localities and the

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Au mieux, l'éducation est une activité qui est enrichissante, revitalisante et engageante; mais malheureusement, elle peut également être débilante et décevante. La recherche en éducation connaît également cette alternance entre grandes joies et frustrations qui caractérise le phénomène qu'elle étudie. Le présent article examine comment ces contradictions se manifestent dans le contexte des problématiques suivantes : le milieu de la recherche en éducation, la reconnaissance des diverses formes de connaissance et d'aptitude, l'engagement dans la vie des élèves et de leurs communautés, et le dilemme du choix et de la participation en éducation. Les chercheurs en éducation ont donc pour défi de créer une solide base de connaissances qui tienne compte de la nature multidimensionnelle des réalités de l'éducation.

capacities within them, and providing a focal point for community interaction that can complement and enrich relations on a broader level, without sacrificing the development of critical understanding and social action.

The dilemmas of educational choice and participation

Contemporary educational landscapes are marked by an increasing array of alternatives, accompanied in many instances by accelerated demands for further choice, openness, and

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accountability. Recent educational initiatives and alternatives sometimes provide much needed resources for communities or groups that have often been poorly served by education, such as the reclamation of control over schooling by First Nations, programs to reach students in inner cities or remote areas, or initiatives for children and youth designated 'at risk.' Along with a growing array of parallel education programs targeted to specific groups, public education systems sometimes encounter declining enrollments as parents withdraw or divert students to home-based learning, private schools and programs, and other options. Although proponents of market-based models of schooling tend to locate the source of these trends in the fundamental limitations of public education, specific decisions to seek alternatives outside the public school system are usually grounded in practical reasons, such as concern for children's safety or emotional or cognitive development, cultural factors, or dissatisfaction with specific schools or school personnel. Nonetheless, education systems have begun to regard these trends as cautionary signals to which they must respond in order to reinforce perceptions that they deliver quality educational programs within an environment that is oriented to adequate social, physical and emotional development of all students.

More damaging are notions of an educational marketplace regulated by narrowly framed measures of performance, accountability, quality, participation, and achievement. These issues are of particular concern in a context in which funding constraints on public education, or the reframing of priorities to orient resources to strategic areas without considering their impact on more fundamental needs, have reinforced or expanded inequities in educational participation and achievement. A growing body of research evidence demonstrates that, amidst rising expectations about educational attainment, persons from relatively disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds are finding it

increasingly difficult to participate in the kinds and levels of education to which they aspire. The availability – or illusion – of choice in education is only one component in the broader challenge to ensure that all learners have access to quality education that, in turn, is associated with meaningful social and economic opportunities in other areas of life.

The encouraging news is that many educational institutions and governments have begun to develop educational policies, and implement educational programs and mechanisms for resource allocation, informed by a wide range of indicators and understandings that encompass several diverse dimensions of educational processes and contextual factors. These initiatives require greater attention in order to counteract the serious risks that accompany pressures to reduce education to a commodity in the competitive marketplace. The challenge for educators and educational researchers is to ensure a strong, vital knowledge

base that will contribute to policy and practice oriented to the multidimensional nature of educational realities. ☺

Terry Wotherspoon is Professor of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan. In addition to several years of teaching experience at elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels, he has engaged in research and published widely on issues related to education, social policy, indigenous peoples, and social inequality in Canada. His recent books include *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People: Education, Oppression, and Emancipation* (with Bernard Schissel); *The Sociology of Education in Canada: Critical Perspectives*; *First Nations: Race, Class and Gender Relations* (with Vic Satzewich); and *Multicultural Education in a Changing Global Economy: Canada and the Netherlands* (edited with Paul Jungbluth). He is a winner of the 2002 CEA-Whitworth Award for Educational Research.

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