

Hopeful, Inspiring, and Tinged with Hyperbole

A REVIEW OF *BACK TO THE BASICS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING*
BY DAVID W. JARDINE; PATRICIA CLIFFORD; SHARON FRIESEN
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When visiting both England's royalty and its mill workers, Mahatma Gandhi was asked his opinion of Western democracy. He responded that he thought it would be a good idea. When educators are asked if it is time to return the basics, they might argue that we never fully got away from them in the first place. But taking Gandhi's lead, when he questioned the very idea of democracy and whether it had ever been achieved in the first place, they might also ask what the basics in education are, and whether they have ever been properly addressed at all.

In *Back To the Basics of Teaching And Learning*, Alberta educators David Jardine, Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen, pose these very questions. Refreshingly, they do so as experienced elementary teachers and teacher educators with a long record of working in successful partnership with one another, in real schools and classrooms. Drawing on their own analyses of classroom incidents and experiences that evoke stimulating portrayals of children's constructivist-like learning, the authors challenge conventional, reductionist and uninspiring ideas of what they call "basics-as-breakdown". The foundations of learning, as well as the joy and pleasure, are destroyed by systemic efforts to break down the curriculum and its learning elements into tinier and tinier components that rob learning of its interest, meaning, depth and sustainability.

Instead these three authors argue for "rich, pleasurable, difficult, interpretive work" (p. 8) that avoids rote learning on the one hand and badly conceived efforts to merely follow children's interests or develop thematic learning topics on the other. Elementary children are taught to understand rather than simply tell the time by first grappling with the physical and existential nature and relativity of all time. The bush experiences of the child recently arrived from Africa are not consigned to "show-and-tell" moments, but integrated centrally into the curriculum of the classroom. Children who wonder what has happened to the women in the legends of medieval knights are led into critical engagement with *The Lady Of Shallott*. These three inspiring teachers and teacher educators, committed to sustainable learning that matters and lasts, use flexible time structures and planning formats to improvise opportunities that stretch and challenge their students.

Though much of these authors' original writing and material precedes the resurgence of educational standardization in our schools, it undoubtedly provides a more hopeful and inspiring vision of what children's learning and achievement can be than the despairing agendas of prescribed and timed literacy programmes and the strategies of training teachers to be just "good enough" to deliver them.

Clearly, then, there is much to commend in this book. Yet there is also much that irritates – elements that emanate less from the classroom than from the esoteric and self-

indulgent enclaves of academe.

Important critiques – such as the questionable practice of subjecting children to "ceaseless" writing in the classroom – degenerate into endless over-interpretation and hyperbolic overreach, as when children's notebook writing is described as "emotional tyranny" (p. 77), thereby seriously devaluing the real tyrannies we witness on the television news.

The reasonable insight that everything has different and multiple readings and interpretations beyond the obvious does not justify an entire chapter devoted to pretentious and seemingly endless reinterpretations of the many metaphorical meanings of one principal's passing reference to the value of "new blood" in the profession: "[T]he graphic notion of 'needing new blood' suggests archaic images of fleshy vitality, regeneration, transfusion, fertility-fecundity, reproduction, blood sacrifice, menstruation, child-bearing, renewal, healing-wounding, transformation, and the whole cascade of bloody events surrounding the Christian worship of flesh and blood and its intimate coupling with crucifixion and resurrection" (p. 56). Give me a break! All he said was, "[T]he profession needs new blood!" (p. 55).

Student voice and teacher insight are too often trumped by intellectual pretension. In the authors' own terms, it is this intellectual and scholarly aspect that seems the least basic. Where is the language of the public intellectual speaking to an intelligent professional, rather than the esoteric language of a small academic subgroup? Where are the references to scholars who have laid the foundations for some of the authors' insights, beyond the two or three to whom they repeatedly pay cult-like homage? Where are the compelling critiques of poor practice in the integrated curriculum?

Back To The Basics does have a lot to offer in challenging what is conventionally basic and exemplifying constructive alternatives to practices that are basic by their own definition. But ultimately, the authors' own text and intellectual practice is itself not yet basic enough to command the widespread influence that its message fully deserves. |

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