



## REFLECTIONS ON THE WINTER ISSUE

By long-standing habit, I always start at the back of a magazine. Thus, in the Winter issue of *Education Canada*, my eye fell first on Karine Duhamel's "It's Not What You Say – It's How You Say It." Duhamel ??? That rang a bell. Karine mentioned growing up in Winnipeg. That triggered more memories. When I was a young principal at the Port Arthur Collegiate Institute in the mid-1960s, my boss, Port Arthur Director of Education Gordon Dalzell, announced with a shy but triumphal grin that he had lured away from the Geraldton school board a crackercrack French teacher named Ron Duhamel to coordinate French instruction in the public elementary schools of Port Arthur. Ron came to town shortly after, overflowing with ideas for advancing the cause of bilingualism in a frontier Ontario community.

He went about his work by getting acquainted not only with teachers who were key to his success but with everybody in the city with power and influence. A couple of years later, in sync with the westward march of bi-culturalism, Ron Duhamel moved to Winnipeg, next door to his native St. Boniface. Later, he taught at the University of Manitoba. His political skills caught the eye of the local Liberals; he ran and won in the federal election of 1988 and served in the House of Commons with distinction, holding cabinet portfolios under Jean Chretien until he was struck down with cancer in the late 1990s. He died in 2002.

Karine Duhamel learned from her father the art of compromise and the need to recognize individual differences – fundamentally important in both teaching and politics. She imbibed from Ron Duhamel that the hunger for recognition and praise is at the surface of the psyche of every child and that awareness of this is the starting point for successful teaching.

Paging backwards, I was absorbed by the discussion of commercialism in our schools by Erika Shaker and Bernie Froese-Germain. (*Who's Calling the Shots in Your School?*). They pointed out that private money is now an essential part of annual school budgets. As the authors remind us, this money comes from such sources as chocolate bar sales, raffles, personal donations for a charitable receipt, student trip funding etc., as well as corporate payments for such privileges as locating drink machines in the hallways, ads in the cafeteria and rewards for collecting product labels. All of this is more or less harmless.

The harm comes from governments relying on private money to make up for measly grant support. Possibly greater harm comes from inequalities from school to school reflecting disparities in wealth and entrepreneurial zeal from one jurisdiction to the next. The poor schools just get poorer.

Backwards again. What Erika and Bernie did not say, except by implication, is that commercialism is at the heart of the testing mania discussed by Louis Volante (*Standards-Based Reform: Can We Do Better?*). Volante, in the muted language of academia, shreds the logic of universal standardized

testing, rooted as it is in the political drive for accountability in the schools, a dubious notion that hardened into policy in the 1980s-90s.

There are at least two reasons for this. Provincial politicians were reacting against unionism in the schools and, at the same time, responding to the need for competitiveness in the global economy. Both these concerns beckoned them towards objective measurement of school achievement. Teacher unions could negotiate better working conditions until the cows came home but could not escape the shackles of centralized standard tests. And neither could pleasure-seeking students and their permissive boomer parents. Knuckle down or else!

Accountability is, of course, a business concept related to success in a free market economy. Profit and loss are determined by productivity, measurable according to sound accounting principles and methods. Volante fires some powerful shots across the bow of school accountability achieved by central testing. Consider this: "... standards-based reforms ... should be based on a collective process ... and be part of a broader vision that affirms the importance of all children – regardless of their academic aptitude or achievement." Or this: "By focusing on what is easily measurable, we ensure the continued narrowing of the curriculum that inevitably follows external testing and detract from the teaching of higher-order thinking skills." Or this: "Consider two large provinces such as Ontario and Alberta; both have seen recent improvements in provincial test scores at the same time as their high school completion rate has fallen." The old saying about throwing out the baby with the bath water neatly applies.

Of 41 developed countries that participated in the OECD international tests in 2003, the good news was that Canada ranked among the top dozen. Of all the provinces and territories, Alberta was equal in reading to the top nation – that nation being Finland. Lost in the commentary was the fact that Finland has renounced standardized testing and put its faith in the professional autonomy of teachers and principals. Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, a former official in the Finnish Ministry of Education, was reported as saying that testing restricts the potential of teachers and limits their innovation. This is not rocket science, but it seems beyond the imagination of the leadership in public education in North America.

I conclude this reflection with the hope that accountability by numbers will disappear as a core idea in public education policy and be replaced by a vision of all the participants, including students and their parents, engaged in promoting more holistic education for democratic citizenship. That would be a fitting memorial to Ron Duhamel.

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