

CRITICAL PRACTICE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
VOICE, COMMUNITY, AND A CURRICULUM OF LIFE<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the differences and similarities in approaches to community, voice and curriculum among three Canadian elementary schools with respect to their potential to enact central aspects of a critical pedagogy: to extend voice to students and community; foster participatory, democratic education; and to cultivate critical reflection. The three schools offer different conceptions and practices. In one, a deficit model of education seems to dominate; in the second, we found an individual growth model of education; and in the third, a critical practice model of education was the foundation for more democratic educational practices. We argue that not all change initiatives and approaches are equally valuable, and that the latter model provides a more profound and just educational experience for students.

This paper examines the differences and similarities in approaches to community, voice and curriculum among three Canadian elementary schools regarding their potential to enact central aspects of a critical pedagogy: to extend voice to students and community; to foster participatory, democratic education; and to cultivate critical reflection (Apple & Beanne, 1995; Beyer, 1996; Goodman, 1992; McLaren, 1994; Simon, 1992). Understanding the philosophies underlying each school's approach to student engagement permits a demonstration of the value of clearly articulated assumptions and criteria. Not all change initiatives or approaches are equally useful, and unless schools articulate their underlying value frameworks, reforms will tend to conform to the lowest common denominator.

This paper grows out of research data collected in connection with a three-year pan-Canadian research project on student engagement in learning and school life<sup>2</sup> in which the authors studied three elementary schools in different provinces.<sup>3</sup> The schools had similarities and differences in student populations: all three were small (under 350 students); two were in urban centers, one in a suburb; two served communities where average incomes were low, one a more middle class community; one served an ethnically and culturally diverse population, two a predominantly (but not exclusively) Caucasian population.



Within the confines of a paper in which predominant qualities of each school are selected in order to illustrate general approaches to pedagogy, much of the character of the school is necessarily omitted. It is impossible to capture all the complexities, tensions, and contradictions that characterize these schools and at the same time establish their general milieu in order to provide an analysis. While selection, brevity, and the necessities of argument tend to transform the schools into caricatures of themselves,<sup>4</sup> such snapshots also have their place and purpose in providing an image we recognize. Our purpose is not to develop portraits of ‘real’ schools in all their messy vitality, but to provide an analysis of (and some cautions about) various forms of progressivism as they are sometimes embodied in practice. The examples depicted here are not intended to represent so much the *actual* schools upon which they are based as the *types* of schools to which they belong.

While each of these schools would claim that it takes curriculum, voice, and community seriously by enacting a curriculum that is rooted in the life of the students, the schools have different conceptions and purposes that frame their understanding of the major concepts in question, and their practices take different and, at times conflicting, forms. In the first school, these concepts are largely derived from a ‘deficit model of education’ (Valencia, 1997); in the second school they are conceived from an ‘individual growth model of education’; in the third case, from a ‘critical practice model of education’ that provides a more profound and just educational experience for the students.

#### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Our analysis is guided by an understanding of critical pedagogy very much grounded in the ‘dailiness’ of practice in these three sample elementary schools. Competing versions of critical pedagogy – Marxist, feminist and post-structuralist – offer different social analyses and different implications for educational practice. Nonetheless, within the arena of public school pedagogy the commonalities of tenet and processes among these different versions assume more significance than their finer distinctions. The following (partial) descriptions of critical pedagogy illustrate the central tenets which influence our analysis.

Kelly (1997) articulates the methodological assumptions upon which our analysis rests:

Critical [pedagogy] is a [pedagogy] of social transformation in which the ideological foundations of knowledge, culture, schooling, and identity-making are recognized as

unavoidably political . . . Its curriculum is the everyday world . . . its pedagogy is situated, interrogative, and counter-hegemonic. (p. 10)

Simon (1992) describes the social and political ends toward which we see a critical pedagogy working:

. . . critical pedagogy is centrally concerned with the moral and analytical task of assessing whether specific social forms encourage and make possible the realization of differentiated capacities . . . critical pedagogical practice is concerned with the educational and political tasks of constructing new forms that would expand the available range of social identities and possibilities. (p. 123)

McLaren (1995), meanwhile, characterizes a broader project of critical pedagogy, highlighting the importance of recognizing, questioning, and transforming the politics of everyday life in the classroom and the culture.

Critical pedagogy commits educators to take seriously a number of concerns: the democratic purposes of schooling; the inevitability of the political dimensions of education and teaching; the importance of dealing explicitly with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and all embodiments of social difference as a concern for social justice; the centrality of the notion of 'praxis' (Freire, 1998); and the inter-connectedness of voice, community, and curriculum. Hence, the salient question we are asking of the data is to what extent and in what ways do these schools exemplify the possibilities of a critical pedagogy in practice.

## PROFILES OF SCHOOLS

### *Marco Polo Elementary School*

Marco Polo Elementary is a designated inner city school in one of the lowest per capita income areas in Canada. During two years of data collection, the student population fluctuated between 190 and 240 students, representing 26 ethnic groups; 40% of the students were First Nations. Like the students, administrators and teachers were highly transient on this 50 member staff, which included both part-time and full-time, enrolling and non-enrolling teachers.

The social, cultural, and economic diversity of the population was reflected in the decor of the school and in its special programs. First Nations art work, a totem pole, button blanket, and a large mural representing the creation myths of many cultures were prominently displayed in the foyer, where couches and chairs encouraged parents and community members to spend time in the school.

Special programs included breakfast and lunch programs, First Nations classes, parent skills training, Urgent Intervention, Learning Assistance,

and counseling. Community activities included Kidsafe after-school care, a food and clothing bank, pow-wows, family nights, and a Community Kitchen. The staff attempted to provide a safe environment for the children because they believed most students came from bleak and dysfunctional homes. They focused on creating an inviting school climate which encouraged students to come to school and which, it was hoped, would strengthen students' self-esteem. The result was a casual, welcoming atmosphere. The focus tended to be on achieving emotional well-being rather than on meeting high expectations for academic achievement.

There was a tension between creating positive and caring relationships so that the needs of students were met, and not diminishing the skills necessary for the students to live in a tough neighbourhood. We found evidence of a deficit model of instruction which tended to focus on students' needs and neediness and to overlook the resources which students and their families could contribute to their education. Thus, the school tended to concentrate on doing things *for* students and their families, rather than *with* them in order to empower them for future success.

#### *Princess Grace Elementary School*

Princess Grace Elementary served an established, upper-middle class, professional community of shared background and experience. Many parents had attended the school themselves, and most students participated in a two-year, community-run nursery school program situated in the school. Students were familiar and comfortable with the school, and proud to be students at Princess Grace Elementary.

Generally, parents were highly supportive of and actively involved in the school, from volunteering to fund-raise to sitting on committees. The School Council contributed to school life in significant ways. Parents were genuinely concerned about the quality of education and frequently questioned school practices. While staff are sometimes frustrated by these challenges, for the most part, parent-teacher relationships were very good.

During the course of the study, the student population remained stable at about 310, with nearly all students being of white ethnic backgrounds. The staff was stable, although both the principal and assistant principal had transferred to other schools by the end of the second year. The stability of the staff, combined with norms of openness and collaboration and the supportive and encouraging leadership of the administrative team, facilitated development of a common philosophy which all the teachers articulated and expressed in practice.

Parents and teachers shared high expectations for the students and a focus on academic work. While some activities involved the whole

school, life really took place within the classrooms. Although students assumed considerable responsibility for school-wide activities, there was little evidence of student initiative and leadership. The essence of student engagement for teachers at Princess Grace Elementary was active learning. Their shared philosophy emphasized student responsibility for choice in their own learning.

Princess Grace Elementary was an active, purposeful school grounded in caring relationships. The teachers modeled respect for and caring toward students, parents and one another.

#### *Emily Carr Elementary School*

Emily Carr Elementary was located in a suburban area serving a bedroom community for near-by cities. The physical and social character of the community had changed substantially in the last thirty years, growing very quickly from a small town and rural communities to a collection of diverse sub-divisions separated by strip malls, superstores, playgrounds and fast-food outlets. The school served some of the poorest areas of this community, as well as a smaller number of middle class families. Children and families here suffered the attendant ills of poverty. Although Emily Carr Elementary was located in a relatively middle class neighborhood, the majority of the children did not come from middle class families.

The average student population of the school during the duration of the study was about 350 with a staff of about 25, including program assistants.

As an arts-infused school, the regular provincial curriculum at Emily Carr Elementary was taught as extensively as possible through drawing on the creative arts. In addition to the required curriculum, the school offered a number of supplementary programs including 4-plus, peer mediation and conflict resolution, 'Family Night', breakfast program, reading buddies, choir, and reading club. A growing and explicit interest in critical practice and democratic education on the part of many staff members was embodied in the school-wide curriculum and in locally situated, on-going school and classroom discussions about the workings of power, in the 'Peaceful School' project, and in projects intended to locate the school in and for the community.

Much of the work at Emily Carr Elementary was done in an attempt to recognize and account for social conditions in the community and school, as suggested by the school motto, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' The school developed a frank and forthright accounting for social conditions attended by a pedagogy of hope. It had a strong and active parent teacher co-op, consulting on many aspects of school policy and curriculum as these affected the community. Central to Emily Carr Elementary was the

commitment to approach community and students as resource rich, rather than as deficient.

### CURRICULUM

Three different conceptions of curriculum influenced policies and practices in these schools: curriculum as fixed, curriculum as experience, and curriculum as critical practice. These conceptions emerged from constructions of the school's contexts and from broader conceptions and purposes of education held by people working in each school. Similarly, three broad conceptions of the purposes of education informed people's work in the schools: education as cultural capital, education as individual growth, and education as democratic transformation. Although each understanding of educational purpose operated simultaneously in all the schools, each school tended to enact one dominant conception which influenced the dominant conception of curriculum in that school. For example, curriculum as fixed seemed more prominent in the school functioning largely from a cultural capital conception of education; curriculum as experience in the school functioning from an individual growth conception; and curriculum as critical practice in the school attempting to realize a democratic conception of education.

While teachers at Marco Polo Elementary cared intensely about the students and worked hard at making the school a safe and inviting place, the school functioned primarily from a cultural capital conception of education, exemplifying practices emerging from belief in a given, fixed, formalized curriculum. This school, characterized by a deficit model of education, emphasized the needs or deficits of groups of students instead of focusing on their ability to achieve academic success, to take responsibility to improve their situation, or to have a voice in constructing their own future (Smith et al., 1998b, p. 80). The teachers here construed an image of students as academically and materially impoverished. In keeping with a now well-documented phenomenon (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Shannon, 1992), they lowered their academic expectations accordingly.

Teachers at Marco Polo Elementary were neither unconcerned nor uncaring; quite the opposite. Because they were daily witnesses to the shattering conditions of many of their students' lives, these teachers seemed to have decided that academic concerns must wait upon more immediate needs – safety, comfort, emotional support, and warmth. One grade five teacher told us in April that she had just now begun to teach the grade five curriculum; she had previously devoted her time to 'working on self-esteem and discipline.' Indeed, according to the teachers, work

on self-esteem necessarily preceded academic work, especially since the academic work failed to connect to the hard realities of students' lives. The new administrator and teachers new to the school maintained 'self-esteem came first.' Even when pressed by the researcher, they held that self-esteem and academics could not be addressed concurrently. Similarly, behavioral expectations for students were not always strictly enforced: when one student hit another in front of teachers and researchers, no one intervened, and teachers explained that expectations around social behavior needed to be 'revised for these children.'

The lowered expectations for academic and social performance of students at Marco Polo Elementary, and the manner in which academics were separated from self-concept and behavior; and curriculum was separated from every-day concerns of the students, point to a particular view of curriculum and educational purpose. Clearly, teachers saw the curriculum as fixed – a given series of academic skills, knowledges, and processes amounting to a form of academic and cultural capital. Self-esteem was disconnected from performance and appropriate social behavior was not seen as part of the curriculum. Central to the curriculum at Marco Polo Elementary could have been students' common social concerns, including questions like: how should we behave toward each other and what worthwhile projects could we undertake that address community concerns and require academic learning? Rather than questioning the appropriateness of a given, formal curriculum for this context, teachers took it for granted, watering it down for students whom they saw as unprepared. The possibility of constructing an alternative vision and set of practices in which the voices, concerns, and abilities of the students were taken seriously was lost. Most teachers did not seem to understand the strong inter-relatedness existing between broad social and emotional issues, social learning activities, and academic learning.

Our point here is not to critique the teachers at Marco Polo Elementary, but through this example to illustrate the consequences within this context of a particular view of curriculum. In a school like Marco Polo Elementary, the assumption of a given, formal, and traditional curriculum inevitably produces the students as incompetent, and the efforts of the school turn to the implementation of a series of 'remedial' programs intended to 'bring students up to speed,' to prepare them for entry into the given curriculum. When these programs do not work, the problem gets framed as a need for more assistance or better programs, rather than for a radical revisioning of curriculum itself. The concept of a given, pre-determined curriculum outside the community of students creates an either-or mentality (Portelli, 1996) in which discipline and self-esteem

become qualities to be developed prior to addressing the curriculum, rather than central parts of a curriculum located in the social lives of the children.

The mission statement of Princess Grace Elementary summarizes the school staff's shared vision of curriculum:

At Princes Grace Elementary we come together to learn and teach in a social context. We design an environment in which learners experience successes and challenges through purposeful activity. We work toward common understandings of teaching, learning and child development among staff, students and parents. We create links with our wider community.

Here administrators and teachers emphasized that the school focuses on active learning, providing opportunities to develop student potential as learners and contributing members of society (Smith et al., 1998b, p. 14). The teachers talked about nurturing independence, self-motivation, and reflective learning, involving self-assessment, shared goal setting and student choice. Students were given hand-held computers and taught to use rubrics for self-evaluation. Emphasis on creating an activity-based learning environment was justified on the grounds that such an environment would increase students' interest in school work, produce better quality and use greater creativity to accomplish school tasks (p. 18), resulting in happier, less stressful, more productive classrooms. The curriculum was organized around on-going project work involving student choice, visual and written presentations of students' work, and cooperative learning. In keeping with the individual growth metaphor of curriculum (McEwan, 1992; Patterson, 1992), developing personal interests, individual and group responsibility, and habits of thought that would contribute to success beyond elementary school were emphasized. 'Success' was described in terms of status quo aspirations: going to a good university, getting a good job, etc.

Teachers believed that their primary role ought to be 'facilitator' and 'guide', a role consistent with their view that students should become independent learners by making and fulfilling their choices. Teachers attempted a non-authoritarian approach, took time to get to know their students, and developed humane personal relationships with them. Consistent with liberal notions of student-centeredness, the focus in Princess Grace Elementary classrooms was on students rather than formal content, and attempts were made to connect students' previous experiences with the curriculum. For instance, in a social studies unit on Canada, grade six students chose provinces or territories they were interested in visiting, collected social, historical, and geographical information about them and presented these to the class. Students' groups assessed their own work according to a detailed evaluation scheme worked out with the teacher. These rubrics asked students to assess their work on whether it fulfilled

pre-determined criteria for content, organization and presentation, and their own responsiveness and helpfulness to other group members and other student groups.

The conception of curriculum captured in this school's mission statement and practice differs from the conception of curriculum informing Marco Polo Elementary. At Princess Grace Elementary, students were seen as capable and responsible and were encouraged to choose projects in keeping with their own interests, to engage in independent research, to make decisions about the substance and process of their projects, and to contribute to evaluating their own work. As Anyon (1981) and Willis (1981) argue, differences in class between the two schools coincide with differences in curriculum and expectations: students at Marco Polo Elementary were seen as lacking even the rudiments of 'academic capital', while students at Princess Grace Elementary were initiated into the habits of autonomy, responsibility, and team-work characteristic of the work lives of the managerial classes.

While the individual growth conception informing curriculum at Princess Grace Elementary produced more engaging and dignified classrooms, from a critical perspective questions need to be raised about the potential of this pedagogy to engage substantive critical inquiry and educational change. While students were given curriculum choices, what were the boundaries within which the choices were made and what were the criteria for delineating students' choices? The project on Canadian provinces produced a document on Nova Scotia, but nowhere did it mention the history of exploitation that erupted into the violence surrounding the native fishery nor the company town history so central to the present destruction of industrial Cape Breton. Nor would we expect it to. As Kelly (1995) has argued in the context of girls' choices in whole language classrooms, choice is always from that which is readily available.

What, then, is the political and philosophical framework within which students are actively learning? This question is begged by phrases like 'active learning' and 'taking responsibility for one's learning', if we are to judge whether such phrases fulfill their radical implications. Does student choice mean choice in procedures and processes but not substance? Examples of students engaged in active learning at Princess Grace Elementary indicate that it does. What students appeared to be actively learning were ways of being closely associated with the values, aims, and dispositions of the middle classes: that is, they learned the value of individual choice, of individual responsibility and independent work, of order and organization, of politeness, cooperation, team-work, turn-taking, productivity and good management. No evidence suggested that students

were encouraged or challenged to raise political or social justice issues; even in the context of student projects on Greece and China, questions about democracy, the role of citizens, and human rights did not arise.

Perhaps the most telling example of how a curriculum located in choice may be constrained by the available is the teachers' responses to questions about political and social issues in the curriculum. Asked how they dealt with issues of social difference, teachers told a researcher, 'We don't. There's no need. Our population is very homogenous.' In practice, active learning and student choice comprised a concern with getting tasks done without explicit teacher assistance; requiring students to evaluate themselves by applying fixed criteria to their work; developing proper working habits. None of this included critical discussions, nor discussion of political or controversial issues embedded in the topics that were the substance of the work. This interpretation of active learning and student choice in terms of curriculum as experience and individual growth in practice reproduces the content and politics of the formal/given curriculum. By failing to engage any interrogation of the available – of given versions of knowledge, of criteria of evaluation itself, of values underlying preferred ways of working – the curriculum of individual growth risks defaulting on its claim to educational change, amounting to conservatism by omission.

Like Princess Grace Elementary, Emily Carr Elementary claimed to locate curriculum in the life experiences of students; like Marco Polo Elementary, Emily Carr Elementary was located in a high poverty community; like the two other schools, Emily Carr claimed to 'do' school differently, to work from a concept of curriculum more appropriate to the lives of its students. The central difference between Emily Carr Elementary and the other two schools was that at Emily Carr Elementary, pedagogy was explicitly and self-consciously located in a conception of curriculum as critical practice (Cross, 1998). Administrators and teachers talked about critical pedagogy, exchanging ideas and debating what such a pedagogy meant for their daily practice. While the staff claimed only a 'work-in-progress', eschewing the notion that a critical practice could be finished in any sense, this school offered insight into how a democratic, transformative curriculum might look.

At Emily Carr Elementary curriculum practice was embedded in a school-wide 'curriculum of life' (Portelli & Vibert, 2001) which engaged students by developing a strong sense of communal dignity, by nurturing a sense that the school belonged to students and community, and by connecting curriculum with the lives of students and community.

Emily Carr Elementary did not operate from a traditional conception of curriculum, imagined as linear and static, implemented grade by grade.

Instead there was an over-arching, school-wide philosophy informing, modifying and directing traditional academic curriculum as represented by the province's Public Schools Program. This curriculum was similar to the 'hidden curriculum' of traditional schooling (Portelli, 1993) in addressing issues of how to be, think, and act in school, but, here, the 'hidden curriculum' was explicit.

The central concern of this school-wide curriculum was captured in the administrators' reference to Aristotle's question: "Since I cannot be entirely selfish and live a good life, what does it mean to live a good life with other people?" This concern, taken up in everyday events as well as in the official school and classroom curriculum, was rooted in the social, political, and ethical lives of the children and the community to whom the school belonged. This grounding of the school-wide curriculum in the daily lives and concerns of the children and community warranted designating it a 'curriculum of life.'

Fundamental to the curriculum of life at Emily Carr Elementary were continuing school-wide programs and activities intended to promote engagement in Aristotle's question about the good life, in terms of an engaged, inquiring, safe, and caring school community. Programs included an arts-infused curriculum, a peaceful school initiative, and a social justice curriculum. The arts-infused curriculum extended through frequent formal and informal performances such as continuously changing displays of children's art, children's dances and performances at monthly meetings of the entire school called 'Town Halls', and regular visits and seminars with local professional artists. The 'Peaceful School' initiative included a peer mediation program, regular classroom explorations of the question of what peace means in the immediate context, and a regular in-school radio program called Radio PEACE through which students presented interviews and scripts dealing with the issue of living well together. The social justice curriculum was an embedded, daily approach to questions of social issues as they arose in the school and community and was central to classroom discussions and projects.

Unlike many schools, at Emily Carr Elementary a sense of school identity was not an accident of local geography or a consequence of competition with other schools. It was deliberate, explicit, and dynamically moral and ethical, located in a sense of pride in the school community, expressed in concern and care for its members, and grounded in communal inquiry regarding the question of how to live well together. While taking into account the official provincial curriculum, emphasis was placed on the actual curriculum as lived every day in the classroom, hallways, playground, gym, on the busses, and outside of school. The formal curriculum

was placed in the students' context to the extent that distinctions between context and curriculum blurred, so that the official, formal curriculum was addressed through the larger actual curriculum. In one example of this embedding, a grade six teacher addressed percentages and graphing (the official math curriculum) when students in her class organized, conducted and graphed a survey of differences between girls' and boys' responses to sexist language, growing out of an incident in which one boy told another not to be 'such a girl' (the actual curriculum).

Contrary to the popular purpose of schooling in terms of preparing students to fit into an existing, given world, a critical conception of schooling as we saw it in practice at Emily Carr Elementary assumes that education is transformative, aimed at encouraging conscious action when change is called for. As in an individual growth conception of curriculum, attempts are made to connect curriculum with student experience. In a critical practice, the purpose of this connection is to provoke critical reflection among students, to raise questions about knowledge and experience and the connections between them. When a newspaper article on Emily Carr Elementary identified it as a high-poverty school, middle-class community members wrote letters objecting. Instead of treating the incident as a public relations issue, some administrators and teachers brought articles and letters into the classroom and undertook with students a study of the social construction of poverty. Critical teaching requires courage (Passmore, 1967; Freire, 1998).

At Princess Grace Elementary, students' interests referred to their personal and individual preferences (e.g., researching Ontario rather than Saskatchewan); at Emily Carr Elementary, individual students' interests were seen as a construction of the larger world, and students' communal concerns – the social conditions of their lives – were mediated through the curriculum (e.g., discussing how and why people tend to see poverty as the fault of poor people). In a critical conception of curriculum, the role of the teacher in provoking critical re-thinking of student experiences is quite different from the individual growth conception of the role of the teacher in connecting curriculum to student experiences. In the latter, student experience may be unexamined and unchallenged unless students themselves choose to challenge it. Hence, within a critical classroom, 'respect' comes to mean more than listening to others and responding politely. A critical curriculum explicitly raises and deals with political issues including the question 'in whose interests is this account of things?' Such a curriculum introduces the 'impolite' (in the sense of uncomfortable) into public discourse, so that 'respect' comes to mean dealing with difficult and sensitive issues openly and compassionately.

## VOICE

Notions of curriculum are configured differently across these schools, as are claims to student and/or community 'voice'. When teachers and students claimed voice, they tended to refer to one of three general conceptions.

The first conception of voice was a literalist, a conception in which voice is the right to speak, to express oneself, to represent one's views – regardless of whether one's voice is heard, taken up, or taken seriously. At Marco Polo Elementary, each morning a First Nations elder performed a drumming ritual with First Nations students; yet the social and historical meanings of the practice were never discussed with students or community. A second version of 'voice' has evolved from the literature in progressive education, referring to voice as an expression of individual and authentic self (Moffet, 1968), used as a stamp of personhood on schoolwork, so that assignments and projects were sometimes said to demonstrate an author's voice. A third conception of voice, consistent with critical and democratic pedagogies, refers to voice as representation and influence; one has voice in the sense that one's concerns, experience, and analysis of the world are heard, taken seriously, and accounted for within a given context (Lewis, 1993).

At Marco Polo Elementary, the predominant notion of voice informing most practice was the first one; here, voice was the right to speak, though not necessarily the right to a serious hearing. This conception of voice was implicit in the school-wide practice of displaying cultural diversity without engaging a pedagogy of difference (McLaren & Hammer, 1989). The school's central foyer, the scene of each morning's drumming, contained a Haida totem pole, and an enormous and colourful mural depicting images drawn from the mythologies and histories of many of the cultures represented among the students. The school logo, a double-headed serpent surrounding a child, reminded viewers to 'respect ourselves and others while valuing individual and cultural differences'; that they had 'the freedom to express who we are and what we need'; 'the right to be safe, to learn, and develop as individuals'; and the responsibility 'to do our best work and to cooperate' with others. In addition to the morning drumming ritual, school practice included opportunities for girls to study and practice Asian dances, and occasions when community members held dinners show-casing foods from the variety of cultures represented in the community.

The school took seriously its mission to recognize the cultural diversity embodied in the community and student population. Nonetheless, we saw no evidence that cultural difference entered into deliberate pedagogy. The

drumming ritual, its meanings and significance, and the substantial resistance of some non-Native students and teachers to the ritual were never taken up in either classroom or school-wide pedagogy. Students appeared unable to recognize or identify the meanings or significance of the multicultural mural intended to represent their voices. On a multicultural day in which parents from the community brought in foods of the world, parents and students ate in separate spaces; the community and cultural presence was not integrated into the life of the school but appeared parallel and separate.

Finally, although images of First Nations and Asian cultural performances decorated hallways, foyers, assemblies, and celebrations, these performances and their histories appeared absent from school-wide and classroom curriculum. We saw no instance of study of Asian or First Nations history within Canada, or of the place, culture, or politics of these communities within the present day nation. The official curriculum of the school seemed remarkably untouched by considerations of who the students and community were. Unsurprisingly then, given Canada's dominant curriculum of multi-culturalism, Marco Polo Elementary engaged what has been called the 'three-D' (dress, dance, diet) approach to culture, without any encroachment of the politics of difference into official pedagogy.

In this context, student and community voice remain frozen gestures performed for the mostly white educational audience. Apart from polite applause, apparently no response from the educators is called for. The paternalism underlying Marco Polo Elementary's approach, through which voice becomes silent gestures, is made vivid by the school's sense of entitlement to speak *for* students and community. If performances of culture call for so little response from the school staff, that is because the school staff *already know* who the students are, what they mean, and what they need. Hence, we heard teachers tell us that 'we can't teach them anything until they develop self-esteem', 'you can't superimpose structure here because the parents don't understand it', and 'most of these kids are never going to university anyway.' Student and community voice became superficial gesture that educators identified as bolstering student and community self-esteem for what teachers saw as the largely doomed project of pedagogical assimilation into an already determined curriculum.

Notions of voice at Princess Grace Elementary tended to reflect progressive or student-centred conceptions of student voice. Here voice had a great deal to do with development and expression of the authentic individual, as suggested by mission statements and teacher discourse emphasizing student ownership and choice in learning. Student voice

became a matter of student choice, a choice within the confines of a narrowly defined curricular framework.

Perhaps the most vivid metaphor for notions of voice in this school was suggested by how students were chosen for the peer mediation program. Apparently by adult fiat, grade six students were deemed the appropriate members to serve as peer mediators. Students nominated and voted for students but selection of peer mediators was ultimately made by the teachers in order to insure fair representation across social markers. The point here is not that student voice is abrogated by teacher authority, but possibly by opaque processes. Student voice is limited not by teachers' reasonable concerns, but because their process and reasoning is not clear to the students.

Notions of voice, like notions of choice in the curriculum at Princess Grace Elementary, took the form of personal preferences within clearly pre-determined frames. Children had voice in that they were provided opportunities to express personal and individual preferences and interests within a given pedagogical frame. They chose *which* province to write about and they evaluated their own progress in writing toward *given* criteria. Issues of substance, in terms of the kinds of curricular topics addressed and questions asked or in terms of decisions and procedures within the school community, were entirely the purview of teachers. One of the few times students at Princess Grace Elementary rebelled was in response to teachers' decisions to replace dangerous playground equipment – and to ask students to fund-raise for new equipment, about which they were not consulted.

These examples illustrate the anomaly at the centre of conceptions of voice within certain progressive pedagogies. In the case of Princess Grace Elementary, student voice refers to student preferences within a fairly narrow and clearly prescribed set of possibilities. This is a clear example of 'authority gone underground' for which student-centred pedagogy has been criticized (Walkerdine, 1983), in which the *appearance* of shared power and decision-making is maintained, providing students make the right choices.

Notions of voice at Emily Carr Elementary were clearly signified by the fact that students and community were continuously engaged with teachers and administrators in the making and remaking of the school. The school was unusual since it was not a school entirely created for children by adults. Students were deliberately and seriously engaged in the creation of curriculum, school policy and culture. That students felt responsibility for their school was clearly manifested in their daily demeanor. To see children act with such an unceremonious sense of right and responsibility

within a school was both surprising and revealing. One was left wondering why schools are not more generally like this.

A couple of examples illustrate our point. 'Fourteen Days in December', an annual festival in lieu of Christmas celebrations, was one of the episodes of school-wide curriculum we witnessed at this school. During 14 Days, the first two weeks of December were set aside to celebrate certain values associated with the Christmas season. The 1995 celebration focused on the theme of peace; the 1996, on 'gifts that can't be bought'. Throughout the two weeks, the school enacted a series of activities, introduced each morning during a Radio PEACE broadcast, connected to social justice and care. The pedagogical bent of 14 Days was illustrated by the nature of some of the themes: Purple Ribbon Day remarked the Montreal massacre as an example of how violence diminishes us all; Community Day asked children to think about the identity of their communities and to plan on-going projects for community development. 14 Days engaged students' voices through the concerns of the school-in-the-community, in important issues in the lives of students, locating the event in a social identity.

Town Hall, which offered an opportunity for students, community members and school staff to raise issues of concern to the school community, provided another example of student voice in school policy and practice. Students raised concerns about segregation of the play ground into 'littles' and 'bigs', drafted a policy and practice for safe integration, and debated and enacted a Children's Charter of Rights for the school. Children identified funding needs and sat on grant writing committees, identified school community concerns to be addressed through classroom curriculum, and contributed to crafting of programs for Family Night, a community development project located in the school.

To be engaged in such a pedagogical project, children need to be taken seriously. At Emily Carr Elementary, teacher relations with children were characterized by faith in the ability of even young children to think about big questions, to create, to participate in considering and resolving their own communal problems and to act. This faith, plus the assumption that they were citizens of the school, comprised students' sense of responsibility for and in the school. There was nothing permissive or easy about such a pedagogy. Students were held (and held themselves) to exacting standards, and violations were swiftly and directly addressed. The school was about participatory democracy, a serious and difficult undertaking which requires educators to resist the cultural urge to produce the child as 'other', with its attendant patronizing and romanticizing of 'The Child.'

Emily Carr Elementary offered a conception of student voice consistent with critical pedagogy, meaning more than the representation of students' cultures in the public spaces of the school and more than the play of student choices within a pre-determined curriculum. At Emily Carr Elementary, within some of the curricular, policy and procedural decisions taken concerning the day-to-day operations of school and classroom, students not only had voice but were taken seriously. At Emily Carr Elementary, unlike Princess Grace Elementary, taking students' voices seriously sometimes meant that the adults explicitly *disagreed* with students about their choices and argued with them. This notion of explicit argument – of dialogue across differences – as characteristic of a critical practice (Burbules & Rice, 1991) is further developed in our analysis of the workings of community across these schools.

### COMMUNITY

We discuss community in these schools in two different senses: school *as* a community involving teachers, staff, students, parents and guardians, and school *in* the community, or the relationship between the school and the community it serves. Although quite different aspects of community, some salient connections exist between them. All three schools claimed to be communities, but the understandings of community they embodied were very different.

At Marco Polo Elementary, staff would argue that the school was a community based on a number of criteria. They would cite the fact that the staff worked together to provide these disadvantaged children and adults with the support they need in order to survive. The curriculum of self-esteem is a striking example of this approach, and staff took pains to insure that the school felt safe and warm. Secondly, staff would point out that community was located in their attempts to fulfill the mission statement explicitly enshrining '[respect] for ourselves and others.' Respect at Marco Polo Elementary seemed largely to be comprised of strictures against obvious violence, including insulting others, disagreeing loudly, and fighting. Finally, people at Marco Polo Elementary would cite their ethic of care for each other as evidence of community. 'Care' as it was interpreted in this school, involved a warmth and politeness that mitigated against confronting students or asking too much of them.

Princess Grace Elementary staff would also claim that their school was a community, though they would mean by it quite different things from the Marco Polo Elementary staff. Like the conception of curriculum upon which the school operated, here the conception of community centred

around process and procedure. For the most part, what this meant was that people in the school worked well together. Community implied cooperation, respect, caring, and politeness. Students and staff were pleasantly interested and engaged in their work together, and central to the concept of community was a shared philosophy among the teachers in the commitment to constructivist pedagogy and alternative assessment.

Community at Princess Grace Elementary conformed to Sergiovanni's (1994) description of a 'collective we' emerging from the shared norms, beliefs, and values of a disparate group of 'I's, the dominant normative metaphor for community in the educational literature of the last decade. Students and teachers almost unanimously shared a class, race, and suburban community ethic. There was little disagreement among or between teachers and the community on issues of the purposes of schooling: schooling was about producing autonomous, self-motivated individuals who work well on their own and with others, who are interested in and conscientious about their work and who can evaluate themselves against the accepted norms of a given organization. Community within such a culture becomes a pleasant, engaged, and cooperative group working together toward shared goals. It is a vision of community very much in keeping with the statement on 'Critical Skills for the Canadian Workforce', mailed to Canadian schools by the Corporate Council on Education, identifying as essential 'the ability to understand and contribute to an organization's goals and to understand and work within the culture of a group'.

'School as community' at Emily Carr Elementary did not imply the sort of seamless working relations characteristic of Princess Grace Elementary nor the care-taking characteristic of Marco Polo Elementary. The sense of community at Emily Carr Elementary was in keeping with what Shields and Seltzer (1997), among others, have identified as communities of difference. They suggest that rather than thinking of school as a community which finds its centre in commonly held beliefs, it may be necessary to explore a conception of communities of difference or otherness, in which the centre develops through the negotiation of disparate norms, beliefs, and values. Rather than the smooth working relations grounded in shared norms and visions characteristic of Princess Grace Elementary, such a community would centre on a dialogic process through which differences, disagreements and conflicts are expressed, exchanged and negotiated.

The culture of Emily Carr Elementary was characterized by humanity, openness, and activity. The common comment of visitors was that the place 'doesn't feel like a school' and volunteers said 'the school has a kind of family feeling.' The difference is best captured in small incidents

that suggest the every day: students answered the phone, not because they were assigned to but because they happened by when it rang. In short, what happened at this school was a sort of de-institutionalizing of relations. Normal routines of in-school relations did not entirely hold, and people didn't seem to know their places in the manner we have come to expect in schools. Relations at Emily Carr Elementary appeared characterized by ordinary (and therefore extraordinary) humanity, not dictated by position and role.

Emily Carr Elementary would claim that the school was a community because of this flattening of the normal hierarchies; the de-institutionalized relationships to the extent that people were frank and open with each other in a substantive way; the degree of participation of all members of the school community; the shared projects in the world beyond the school (e.g., art gallery project, family night, Sackville River project, and 14 Days in December); the discussions and activities on issues of real concern (e.g., poverty; the peanut ban; gender and class; name calling, rumors, and shop-lifting); the focus on questions of how to live well together.

Marco Polo Elementary's approach to the community was articulated directly; a deficit approach to both students and parents or guardians, translated into simultaneously protective and dismissive practices toward them. Marco Polo Elementary's relationship with the community was based in well-intentioned paternalism. At Princess Grace Elementary, the fit between school and community was close, so that this school's relationship with the community was integrative in the sense that school and community reproduced the same culture. The community was supportive of the school, contingent upon the school's fit with the community ethos. At Emily Carr Elementary, the formal division between school and community broke down to the extent that it was difficult to speak of the school as separate from the community. The community was in the school, involved in decisions of substance (e.g., drafting discipline policies, writing funding applications, establishing and running a pre-school and after school literacy program), and the relationship between the school and community was participatory. Community participation, as one might expect of a community in which participatory values are esteemed, is not always or even often characterized by consensus; relations here included conflicts that were the subject of dialogue and negotiation. The sense of community at Emily Carr Elementary was partly produced by the openness with which conflict among members was approached. There may be a connection between a school's conception of itself as a community and school community relations, such that the sort of community the

school becomes encapsulates the sort of relations the school has with its constituent community.

### CONCLUSION

Emily Carr Elementary, Princess Grace Elementary, and Marco Polo Elementary, as pictured here, are not intended as complete representations of schools. Similarly, the schools are described in a point in time, space and character without attempting to capture their dynamic and changing characteristics.

Our discussion of notions of curriculum, voice, and community at these three elementary schools makes clear the interdependency of these aspects of pedagogy within particular contexts. At Marco Polo Elementary, a given curriculum was assumed, and approaches to voice and community were generally grounded in the school's sense of the students' limitations in relation to that curriculum. Princess Grace Elementary operated, for the most part, from a conception of curriculum rooted in the individual interests of students within the confines of a broadly assumed curriculum, so that voice and the role of community in school were circumscribed by the boundaries of this assumed curriculum. At Emily Carr Elementary, community concerns and student voice were central to the curriculum, so that the curriculum became *in part* a means of exploring, interrogating, and problematizing central issues in the lives of students and community. This was carried out amid continuing struggles over contested meanings of curriculum among both staff and community members. The latter conception of schooling offers one possible vision of a critical pedagogy in the elementary school rooted in a richer and more profound pedagogy than those offered by conservative or liberal versions of curriculum.

While all three schools had a school-wide curriculum very much suggested by the pedagogical approach each took, of the three only Emily Carr Elementary made this curriculum explicit.<sup>5</sup> Located in questions about living well together, this curriculum consistently addressed the politics of here and now, relating those politics to a larger world of political action. This approach to "curriculum of life" appeared deeply implicated in the students' sense that the school belonged to them. Curriculum of life is not solely an aspect of curriculum, of school policy, or of classroom practice, but a pedagogical approach which lends coherence to often disparate aspects of school life. It is implicit in classroom and school-wide curriculum, in school/community relations, in discipline policy and practice, in school culture.

At the heart of students' engagement with this curriculum is its focus on communal and political issues of identity and on the processes of participatory democracy. This approach to curriculum is safer and more real for students, however problematic these metaphors. At Emily Carr, schooling was connected to life in the world; sensitive and controversial issues were not hidden but openly discussed, students and community were expected to participate in fashioning the school, and the usual nervous silences on issues of difference did not pertain. It is our contention that these are both the characteristics of and the necessary ground for the possibilities of a democratic and critical education.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While this article is the result of a collaborative effort by all the authors, the primary authors are Ann B. Vibert and John P. Portelli.

<sup>2</sup> The project was coordinated out of McGill University's Office of Research on Educational Policy and sponsored by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation with the support of the Vancouver Foundation. Aimed at addressing specific research questions concerning the nature of student engagement, those policies and practices which foster it, and elements which contribute to the sustainability and transferability of successful student engagement practices and policies, the study used a qualitative research perspective to take an in-depth look at ten Canadian Schools. For details about findings, see case study reports in Smith, Donahue, and Vibert (1998a). The authors of this paper are the Atlantic and Western regional researchers working with the project. They represent a variety of educational perspectives, including backgrounds in foundations and curriculum, educational policy, administration and research methodology, and literacy education.

<sup>3</sup> This paper addresses lateral research interests growing out of the data, not the explicit topic of the larger research project.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, during our feedback process, when staff were given the opportunity to respond to the draft of the reports, all believed we had captured the essential qualities of their schools.

<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the case of Emily Carr Elementary provides evidence that critical practice may occur regardless of the SES of schools and hence stands in contrast to Anyon's findings (Anyon, 1981).

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