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SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS
David MacKinnon
School of Education
Acadia University

Blye W. Frank
Department of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University

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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Ann Vibert
Mount St. Vincent University

John Portelli
OISE/UT

Abstract

This paper offers a brief description and analysis of the elements of critical practice as exhibited in 1 public elementary school. We draw on 3 central themes—education for social justice, school leadership, and student engagement—to argue that critical practice at this school offered a concrete and unusual example of educational possibilities that can emerge in a school informed by the principles of a critical pedagogy. By examining specific examples of classroom and school-wide pedagogy, we argue for a view of critical practice as a "curriculum of life," located in the daily life-worlds of students and the community. Finally, we discuss how the case of NS1 also illustrates the limits of such possibilities when a school operates within a system that does not concretely support either innovative leadership or a critical theoretical stance.

Introduction

This paper offers a brief description and analysis of the elements of critical practice exhibited in one Nova Scotia public elementary school code-named "NS1." We draw on three central themes—education for social justice, school leadership, and student engagement—to argue that critical practice at NS1 offers a concrete and unusual example of educational possibilities that can emerge in a school informed by the principles of a critical pedagogy.[1]

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[1] All names, including the school's, administrators', teachers', and students' are, of course, pseudonyms.

Further, we discuss how the case of NS1 also illustrates the limits of such possibilities when a school operates within a system that does not concretely support either innovative leadership or a critical theoretical stance.

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of a 3-year (1995-98) pan-Canadian research project on student engagement in learning and school life.[2] Using a qualitative research methodology informed by institutional ethnography, the project included data from 2 years of selected school-wide and classroom observations in the form of field-notes, interviews with students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents, and documentary artifacts including school newspapers and public correspondence, policy documents, and samples of student work. Data were analyzed using broad preliminary codes developed by the pan-Canadian team, and more refined descriptive codes for data analysis using Folio Views were developed locally. While the larger project describes and analyzes characteristics of engaging schools (see Smith et al, 1998), in this paper we draw on one case study (Vibert & Portelli, 1998) from the larger project for in order to examine one school that attempted to enact a social justice curriculum and pedagogy as an explicit and lived school policy, and to suggest some of the struggles that arise out of such work.

The School

The average student population of NS1 during the research study was about 350, with two classes for each grade level. The school had a full-time principal, a teaching vice-principal, fourteen classroom teachers, 1.8 resource teachers, a 70% music/choir teacher, 1/3 French teacher, 65% gym teacher, six program assistants, a part-time secretary, two custodians, and three bus drivers. The school did not have an official art teacher, a librarian, or any learning support staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, speech therapists) besides the resource teachers.

NS1 was an arts-infused curriculum school. Briefly, this meant the regular provincial curriculum was taught as extensively as possible through drawing on the creative arts, including visual arts, performance arts, music, and crafts. In addition to the required curriculum, NS1 offered a number of supplementary programs including 4plus (a pre-school program for interested four-year-olds), peer mediation and conflict resolution (a student-lead conflict resolution program), "Family Night" (a community development project jointly organized by staff and community members), a community- run breakfast program, reading buddies, choir, and reading club.

The lives of many of the children and families at NS1 were far from easy. Most of the school population did not enjoy the automatic access and ease conferred by economic privilege; too many children and families here suffered the attendant ills of poverty. In our 3-year study of the school, we were sometimes accidental party to incidents that taught us the extent of the daily struggle for safety and survival imposed by poverty. We witnessed graphic illustrations of the effects of class on legal, medical, and educational —in short, institutional and social—access and power. Suffice to say that extended work in sites like NS1 is more than enough to destroy any illusions of social equality to which our official nation pretends.

Much of the sort of work done at NS1 was done in an attempt to recognize and account for social conditions in the community and school. A growing and explicit interest in critical practice and democratic education on the part of many staff members was embodied in aspects of the school-wide curriculum, in locally situated, on-going school and classroom discussions on the workings of power, in the peaceful school project, and in a variety of projects intended to locate the school as in and for the community. In other words, what seemed to have developed at NS1 was not the curriculum of excuses and diminished expectations too common in marginalized community schools (Valencia, 1997; Yeo & Kanpol, 1999), but a frank and forthright accounting for social conditions attended by a "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 1997).

The school had a strong and active parent-teacher co-op, which in addition to fund-raising and organizing programs, also consulted on many aspects of school policy and curriculum as these affected the community. Community involvement in the parent-teacher co-op had broadened over the previous 4 or 5 years, as teachers and staff made a conscious effort to include in the school a wider and more representative membership from the community. The extent and nature of community involvement and voice in the school, and the thoughtful and intentional quality of both policy and practice indicated to us that NS1 was a viable example of a community-school collaboration.

Social Justice and Critical Practice

The school-wide curriculum at NS1 was rooted in teachers' and administrators' understandings of issues of social justice and the politics of difference. The peace initiative and the arts infused curriculum, the peer mediation and conflict resolution programs, the pedagogy of care (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Noddings, 1994), were all, of themselves, embodiments of a broader concern for social justice within the school community. But such a curriculum, uninformed by an understanding of the social and political roots of violence and marginalization in the communities the school serves, might well have remained individualistic, apolitical, and therefore ineffective. This was not the case here:

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[2] 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. For more details see William J. Smith et al (1998).

> We are educators and it is 1995...we delude ourselves if we consider schools as separate entities in this society, which is fraught with social inequity, despair, and violence. In contemplating the issues surrounding the education of our children, our most important resource, it would be so simple to retreat and hide from everything that is too overwhelming and complex, and to claim that we are not trained to deal with the considerable baggage that children bring with them to school each day...We must, firstly, think about who we are in terms of our own class structure, where we came from, the kinds of family support we had and the opportunities which were available to us before we can possibly begin to listen to what children and parents are saying to us....I say all this because I believe we are missing the point if we have neither the basis to understand nor the capacity to be empathetic toward the people we serve."—Joey Kyle (principal pseudonym), Address to Phi Delta Kappan: Dalhousie University, November 28, 1995 (Artifact 16).

What was unusual about NS1, as the principal illustrated in this address, was not that the school had a peer mediation program or an arts infused curriculum or practiced a pedagogy of care; it was the fact that these programs were framed within the context of a critical practice, a practice which explicitly took into account the political nature of education—the centrality of issues of power, difference, and marginality to all educational projects. A few examples from the data illustrate the manner in which social justice concerns and critical issues informed daily practice at NS1.

In response to a local newspaper article on innovative curriculum at the school, an article which had identified many of the school's families as living in poverty, the school had had calls from a few of the more affluent community members objecting to this depiction of their neighbourhoods. In response to the article, the Grade 6 class held a philosophical discussion about the social construction of poverty. During these discussions, students spoke to each other, the teacher transcribing each of their points on chart paper, intervening (at this point) only to ask for clarification of a point. The Grade Sixes were well-versed in holding "philosophical discussions" (Portelli & Reed, 1995) when they engaged the one excerpted here:

> ...J: I don't know if we should talk about violence in our community to the paper.
>
> D: Are we saying poverty and violence are both things we shouldn't talk about? I'm just asking.
>
> M: That reminds me of the discussion about truth and lies. Not saying something that's true can be as dishonest as saying something that isn't.
>
> V: And violence and poverty are things we have to talk about if we want them to go away. The thing is, the article isn't personal...and people taking it that way makes it worse, sort of. Like there's some shame in being poor...
>
> ...T: but the article says "many" and "many" sort of sounds bad somehow...like shame or blame...I don't know.
>
> K: But, Teddy, poverty is not poor people's fault—and not having everything you need shouldn't make you feel like less of a person..

In this example, students began to explore social justice in terms of their own social positions as (largely) underclass children, questioning the fairness —and, implicitly, the purpose—of dominant discourses of poverty in our culture.

A school-wide example of a critical practice arose out of "14 Days in December," a yearly celebration that included school-wide and classroom projects dedicated to the peaceful schools initiative. Radio PEACE, scripted by the peer mediators and performed daily during 14 Days, included an on-going radio play that provides an example of the "critical edge" of curriculum at NS1. In the excerpt that follows, two students (code named Emma and Scottie) have welcomed the NS1 citizens and explained that this year's play revolves around the theme of "gifts that can't be bought." An interloper (code named Mark) interrupts the broadcast:

> Emma: ...as Christmas gets closer every year, the media all around us —radio, TV, magazines, fliers—all tell us that what Christmas is all about is getting lots of stuff that costs lots of money...so, we were thinking it would be good to take our fourteen days to think about all the things that can't be bought: love, friendship, peace, kindness, tolerance, patience—
>
> Mark: Gift Certificates?!?!
>
> Scottie: NO! NO! That's totally the WRONG idea! Who are you and where did you come from?

> M: Good morning out there in Radio land! My name is Enormous Profit and all you [NSI] folks, you need to know that Christmas is spend, spend, spend! None of that "best things in life are free" stuff. Humbug! How could business ever stay afloat if every school in Canada encouraged kids to think about gifts that can't be bought?...People like me are getting mighty frustrated with all you do-gooders and I demand on behalf of companies everywhere that you cut this stuff out!
>
> S: Emma – do you know anything about him?
>
> E: No, but I think we need to work with him a little. His attitude is just a little negative, don't you think?—Mr. Profit, when was the last time someone gave you a hug or went for a walk with you or watched a sunset with you?
>
> M: Now why in the name of money would I want to waste my time like that? Total waste of time! I have bankbooks to keep and millions to go before I sleep...
>
> S: Let's ask the audience to help us. Over the next two weeks, we'll all be thinking about gifts that can't be bought. Many different classes will be in charge of the radio broadcasts and lots of us will have a chance to teach Mr. Enormous Profit a little about love and compassion.
>
> E: I think he needs to learn something about good thinking, too, Scottie!
>
> S: I agree! Mr. Profit, you stay tuned for the next two weeks and pay attention to what we have to say. On the last day, you come back and tell us what you've learned and if you haven't learned anything...
>
> Mark: I'll just buy up your little Radio P-E-A-C-E and turn it into Radio C-A-S-H!
>
> (Excerpted from Artifact AV, Dec. 6, 1996)

Here students took on received notions of commercialism in Christmas, pointing out in the process how this view is constructed in the world around them. Through Mr. Enormous Profit, they both represented (in parody) the position they were questioning, and answered it. This kind of questioning of the status quo, of the apparently accepted order of things, and the invitation to entertain alternative views and positions, is central to a critical practice. So, of course, is the sort of thinking about thinking inherent in Emma's observation about Mr. Profit's thinking.

In a conversation with a researcher, the vice principal explained how she saw this sort of reflexive thinking and addressing issues of social justice as interdependent and as definitive of critical practice:

> [critical practice is] "whatever the curriculum needs to be at the time—that becomes the curriculum." She offers a racist, sexist example as a teaching moment. "I deconstruct what's been said—I explain what deconstruction is—no dominant discourse without a subordinate somewhere." She explains how she might question the student who made the comment: "Is this a comment you understood as humiliating?" This is what she calls "critical thinking about talk with children."..she tries to teach [children] "to think well, in critical compassionate ways, teaching them to participate profoundly ...It's standard practice in her class to say "I've rethought that." She recalls an example where one student called another a "faggot" and this took the discussion to the question of why it is still acceptable to use that word. Eventually the issues raised left the name caller realizing he really needed to think that through. "The understanding," she says, "is what's absolutely essential. So whatever we're doing, if something like that [sarcasm, disrespect] happens, it has to be put on the table." (Excerpted from log 23:2)

During this discussion, the vice principal touched on several themes that illustrate the inter-connectedness of curriculum of life, social justice issues, critical and reflexive thinking, and discipline in this school. She engaged the children in "deconstructing" (rethinking critically and reflexively) social justice concerns (racism, classism, sexism, homophobia) in terms of their relation to power ("why is it still okay to say "faggot"?) and to respect and compassion ("do you understand this as humiliating?"). It was not enough, simply, to legislate against offensive behaviours in this school.

Another classroom example concerned gender issues as they arose in a Grade 6 class when one boy said to another "Don't be such a girl." When several of the girls—and the teacher—took offense, the comment was taken up by the class. All words used to refer to males and females were written on the board, analyzed, and categorized according to connotations. The children were amazed at the sheer number of negative connotations used to refer to females by comparison to males but, unconvinced that the way in which language is used can be a serious gender issue, and uncertain about whether language reflected or constructed reality, the class launched a study of gendered language, including a school-based research project. They took a survey of girls and boys to see how many found the male terms used in common sayings inclusive. The children tabulated their results and charted them in percentages and percentiles (thus also addressing the Grade 6 math curriculum), and presented their findings at Town Hall, a monthly meeting of school and community. Those who had argued that the language included girls and women learned through the research that the majority of boys and the vast majority of girls they surveyed did not feel this way.

The data contain moments of classroom critical practice too numerous to specify here. Children in various classrooms created a just ocean society, drafted a Children's Bill of Rights, studied indigenous Black Nova Scotian history, confronted and expand their definitions of love and family; created a Rainforest Mural. Concern for social justice and critical practice also went well beyond the planned curriculum at NS1, pervading the pedagogy of the every day. Administrators and teachers—and increasingly students and parents—addressed gender exclusion on the playground, raised issues about boys demanding too much attention, took up a community assumption that an auto-racing event would include only boys. Critical pedagogy at NS1 was not located only in the classroom, only in the policy, only in the official classroom and school curriculum. It was the ground on which relations were conducted every day; it was the informing view from which policy, pedagogical, and relational decisions were made. Because critical pedagogy was located in the day-by-day and moment-by-moment lived experience of the children—because it was located in questions and issues most immediate and pressing to them—it formed a central aspect of student engagement at NS1.

School Leadership

In order to understand the approach to administration at NS1, it is important to understand that while the administrators provided educational leadership, they were not exclusively the leaders in the school. NS1 evolved a shared approach to leadership, whereby teachers and staff were encouraged to take leadership roles in connection to activities or programs in which they have expertise (Corson, 2000). For example, different teachers developed monthly Town Hall meetings, coordinated art, drama and music events, acted as advisors to peer mediators and the peaceful school initiative, and all staff shared in community out-reach of various sorts. Neither did the administrators confine themselves to administrative duties; they were continuously and actively involved in teaching and other pedagogical aspects in the school.

Community involvement in the school grew stronger after Joey Kyle (pseudonym) became principal. Her first few years at the school were difficult due partly to struggles she faced with a few "inflexible attitudes" on the part of staff members. When asked why she stayed in such a context, she said: "Rage"—rage at the way the children were perceived, by the way the children treated each other, by the levels of violence in the school, and the general despair pervading everything." The principal and vice principal described change in the school as a result of deliberate policy of "going out into the community, meeting parents and bringing them into the school...it never occurred to [us] that you wouldn't go into the community and go into the homes." Similarly, both remarked on the importance of "going into classrooms and celebrating what people were doing, trying to encourage a sense of pride, a sense of worth, a sense of participation... It's about valuing people."

There was no question that the leadership provided by the administration at NS1 was a central strength of the school. The energy, passion, and vision these administrators brought to their work was extraordinary and infectious. Nevertheless, none of them were operating under the illusion that strong leadership is a *sufficient* quality for the development of an engaging and dynamic school. They explicitly told us that "it takes more than one person to do it, neither of us could do it alone, without the constant support of the teachers...we all do it together, many people behind the scenes, quietly contributing big things." For the administrators at NS1, the key to good leadership was the recognition and nurturing of peoples' strengths, so that leadership itself becomes a community endeavor, each member contributing according to her strengths (Marshall et al., 1996). Similarly, decisions concerning communal school policy and practice were made not by administrators for teachers, but negotiated through meetings of the staff, community members, and students. Only decisions concerning confidential matters were taken by administrators alone.

The administrators at NS1 practiced the sort of humane pedagogy characteristic of the school as a whole. Their emphasis on the human aspects of leadership was exhibited in their relationships with colleagues, other employees in the school, parents, guardians, volunteers, and children. They demonstrated care for the well-being of the teachers, handled "discipline problems" calmly and directly as opportunities for learning, encouraged responsible behaviour among the children, demonstrated engagement by being directly involved in school activities, and practiced democratic leadership (Maxcy, 1991). In short, they did not operate from an ideology of school leadership as corporate management, but from a vision of educational leadership which centred human and educational concerns over institutional management (Foster, 1986; 1989).

The approach of these administrators was a matter of deliberate ethical choice. Based on a critique of the cult of efficiency that has evolved from techno-rational models of education, this is a vision of school administrators as pedagogical leaders rather than business managers (Foster, 1986; 1989). But while the openness to innovation, the responsiveness to urgent social concerns, and the consequent lack of tight control of administrative detail may seem unnerving to some people, the principal and vice-principal had a clear understanding of what needed to be done, and organized their daily work accordingly. As one of the research assistants noted: "I discern nothing in their attitude which even hints at the stereotypical 'at-arms-length' model of management. And yet, the important things get done, and only too well..."

The philosophy of leadership established at NS1 is exceedingly demanding of both time and psychic energy. In one interview with the administrators, we raised Martin's (1992) notion of "the school-home" as an apt metaphor for this school, a school in which relations have more in common with home than with a traditional institution. The administrators pointed out that "even if all the support factors were in place, you would still have to commit completely to this job" and, seizing on Martin's metaphor, they quipped "not much wonder we don't have home lives... [NS1] is home." It was a not entirely funny observation concerning the viability of administration as pedagogical leadership, at least under present conditions.

Critical Practice and Curriculum of Life: Analysis and Warnings

In response to an early draft of the report we wrote about this school, teachers and administrators at NS1 told us that, while they thought we had done very well at capturing the spirit and direction of the school, we had not done so well on suggesting the struggle that had gone into the making of it. It is a fair criticism; perhaps in part an artifact of writing a school description: the school comes off as oddly fixed in time and place, a two-dimensional sum of its major themes. But this school did not spring effortlessly and fully formed into being in the way our outline may make it seem. It was a collaborative work, evolving across a history that has moved on again by now, formed and reformed through the passion, labour, vision, and sometimes the anguish of a number of people.

Critical practice at NS1 was most clearly signified by the fact that students and staff were continuously engaged in the making and re-making of the school. It was not a school created entirely by adults; students in the school were deliberately and seriously involved in the creation of curriculum, of school policy, and school culture. That students felt responsibility for their school was most immediately manifested in small, daily acts—answering the school phone when it rings as they walked by, for instance. To see children act with such an unceremonious sense of right and responsibility was both surprising and revealing; one is made strikingly aware that it is a fitting way for children to be in their own school, and one is also left wondering why schools are not more generally like this.

NS1 engaged an approach to pedagogy we have come to call "curriculum of life" (Vibert & Portelli, forthcoming), an approach illustrated in the curriculum and leadership examples above. By curriculum of life, we mean a central, organizing stance that informed pedagogy here. Curriculum of life, as we are using it here, is not solely an aspect of curriculum, of the teachers' pedagogy, or of school and classroom management. In fact, the normally accepted meaning of the term "management" contradicts the spirit of a curriculum of life. Students and curriculum in this school were not "managed," but "engaged"; that is, the aim was to actively involve them in the life of the school. At NS1 curriculum of life was implicit in curriculum, in school organization and policy, in discipline, in school/community relations, in classroom and school-wide pedagogy, in school culture.

A curriculum of life is a consequence of three abiding and dynamic concerns underlying pedagogical choices at the school. There was a pervasive, continuing focus on who and how to be in the world, on the questions of how we might live well together, as the organizing principle for pedagogy and relations. Curriculum, in the sense of the subjects and processes of inquiry in the classroom and the school, was deeply informed by actual and immediate events and concerns in the social lives of the children. And finally, the usual silences were not observed, and both immediate and larger questions of justice and politics were named and discussed. In this school, one was hearteningly reminded of a too-often forgotten cardinal purpose of education: to consider seriously difficult, sensitive, and often controversial questions of how we are to live as a community, a polis, and a society.

The humanity of the school, the culture of thoughtfulness and care, the democratic spirit of the place, was not and could not be solely a creation of the administrators. But certainly they were central to establishing an ethos in which these values flourished. They were a markedly powerful and ubiquitous presence in this school, as successive research assistants, teachers, parents and visitors remarked. They had in common a shared insistence on human values and they placed their emphasis on the social, educational, and curricular functions of their jobs. They were articulate, theoretically informed, and deeply reflective about their pedagogical choices; and they were lucid and explicit about the politics of their work. And they were doing very dangerous work.

Part of what we learned at NS1 is that social justice work in schooling is supported by a critically theorized curriculum of life; that is, a curriculum that goes well beyond the official curriculum to theorize the pedagogy of everyday practice and policy in schools—the pedagogy of school communications, of the hallways, the schoolyard, the bus—the daily routines of practice and priority. Furthermore, practices which potentially support a social justice curriculum (in this case, we argue that the arts-infused curriculum and peer mediation program represent such practices) do not in and of themselves necessarily promote a social justice agenda. Unless these practices are grounded in an analysis of ways in which violence and illiteracy are socially and politically produced, they are as vulnerable to individualizing and de-politicizing schooling as any other practice. Central, then, to social justice work is informed, thoughtful, and located critical theory.

We also learned in this school that particular forms of school leadership are a necessary but not sufficient condition for social justice work. The work done at NS1 was supported by an administration that placed the curricular, community, and relational work of leadership well above the administrative demands of maintaining a smooth operation. Yet, the direction of school reform in Canada at present places a premium on the principal as manager, an efficiency model that is structurally conservative and stifling. This strikes us as just one example of the ways in which social justice work in schools, embedded as they are in a larger socio-political and cultural context, may be countermanded by the temper of the times.

Finally, we learned that too little work is being done around the demands, delicacies, and dangers of attempting social justice work in schools in present socio-political contexts. What happens, for instance, to teachers and principals who attempt this kind of work in the context of systems that don't support it? Our case study is not hopeful on this point. NS1 is no more; as is documented in the history of hopeful and innovative schooling, it was a shining moment unsustainable outside of extraordinary effort. Within 2 years of the conclusion of the research project out of which these data were collected, both administrators had left the school. Working in the context of a system that neither in policy nor practice recognized the increased demands of teaching in and administering high poverty schools and that paid lip-service to a social justice curriculum without offering concrete support, both administrators were eventually compelled to leave the school in order to protect their own health.

The story of NS1 illustrates to us that the philosophy of leadership upon which social justice work in schools depends is not viable over the long term within a system assuming leaders as managers; similarly, curriculum that takes seriously its social and political implications requires particular forms of systemic support. While we are interested in examining and supporting social justice work in schools, NS1 has taught us that as educators we need to hear many more of the stories and struggles of school-based educators attempting this work in order to engage a much fuller analysis of the sorts of conditions and contexts under which such work is possible and sustainable.

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