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ABSTRACT

From the approximately three dozen reports that describe the crisis in American education, the president of the Canadian Educational Researchers Association brie ly describes four: "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education); "High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America" (Ernest L. Boyer); "Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School" (Theodore R. Sizer); and "A Place Called School" (John Goodlad). Canada is not yet "a nation at risk," because education is strongly entrenched as a provincial responsibility; a conservative noninterventionist Supreme Court influences the direction of education; and the timelag between the creation of educational ideas in the United States and their movement to Canada gives Canadians space to evaluate and select the best of the ideas. However, embedded in these reports are statements and ideas that indicate a need for investigation in the Canadian context: two particular areas of need are good qualitative research on the adolescent in high school, and a general education curriculum that combines both the idea of education for citizenship and education for eventual on-the-job skill development. Finally, the American experience suggests the desirability of research in the Canadian setting on the influence that standardized testing programs have on educational practice, and on how to assess or describe higher order cognitive achievements. (MLF)

Is Canada a "Nation at Risk"? What Reports on U.S. Education Signify for Us

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Montreal - May 30, 1985

The President's Invited address to the Canadian Educational Researchers Association

"Our Nation is at risk, our once unchallenged preeminance in commerce industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world", is the opening statement of a report prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in the United States. The report has created more controversy than any other educational event since the Russians launched sputnik. Two questions jump to the mind of any red-blooded Canadian researcher: is the diagnosis valid? and if so, what are the implications for the Canadian educational scene?

With respect to the first question I have some rigorous qualitative data. It is based on a two hour phenomenological assessment of American minds at work. On Good Friday I was involved in an informal seminar on educational research at the University of Illinois. The seminar was really part of a reunion, and after the meeting, I got into a game of Trivial Pursuit with a bunch of people who had been at University of Illinois when I was a student there. Many of these had since gone on to become movers and shakers in the American Education scene. Their names would be well known to you, so I won't embarass them by publicly exposing their feet of clay. In the course of the game, the question, "Who was the first defenseman to lead the National Hockey League in points?" was posed. Not one of these significant experts had the answer at the tip of the tongue. It was at that point I realized that America may be a nation at risk. Indeed it could be said that the educational system is operating with only one oar in the water.

There have been about 3 dozen reports which describe the crisis in American education. Each contributes to the complexity of the picture, and each is deserving of comment in its own right. At the risk of oversimplication, and at the risk of going over ground that some of you will

be familiar with, I would like to briefly describe 4 of the reports. They are chosen because they seem to capture the range of thoughtful opinion that is prompting school reform in the states. Also, each of them gives some recognition of the complexity of the issue. Many of the less prominant documents see educational problems simply a question of standards. They are prescriptions calling for what Cross (1984) has described as... "simple corrections of perceived excesses of the past. Not enough homework? Assign more. Not enough testing? Require more. Too many electives? Insist on more required courses."

After describing the reports I'll discuss some of the things that Canadian Educational Researchers could be doing.

The first report is A Nation at Risk - The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The National Commission was made up of educators, college presidents, former state educational officials, captains of industry, a Noble laureate and a former state governor. As the title suggests, their report is a call to arms. They base their call on several "dimensions at risk" - indicators if you will. It is worthwhile to mention some of these so that you can get an idea of the kind of evidence that prompts a significant educational movement.

Examples:

* In international studies on 19 academic tests, American students were never first or second among industrialized nations. They were last 7 times.

* 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest test of reading and writing.

* 13% of all 17 year olds are functionally illiterate. Among minority youths the rate might be 40%.

* Average achievement of high school students is lower now than 25 years ago.

* Half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement.

* The SAT results have shown an almost unbroken decline since 1963.

* The number and proportion of students with superior achievement on the SAT has declined.

* The National assessment scores among 17 year olds in science have declined since 1969.

The commission conducted their investigation using several sources: commissioned papers, testimony from teachers, students, adminstrators, public groups, business, etc., existing analyses of educational problems, letters from concerned professionals and public descriptions of notable programs and approaches. They concentrated their attention on the high school, but some of their findings have implications to the elementary grades as well. In many ways they were like a royal commission.

The National Commission made several general recommendations based on their investigation. The most important were:

1. All students seeking a high school diploma should take 4 years of English, 3 years of science, 3 years of mathematics, 3 years of social studies, and a half year of computer science. For college-bound students two years of

foreign language were recommended.

2. High schools, colleges and universities should develop rigorous and measureable standards and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct.

3. Significantly more time should be devoted to learning the basics, either through more effective use of the present time, longer days, or longer years.

4. Standards for selection and education for teachers should be raised as should teacher pay.

Each of the recommendations is accompanied by suggestions for implementation which are characterized by a demand for excellence tempered by a desire for equity. For the Commission the definition of excellence seemed to be higher graduation standards, elimination of soft courses, lengthening the school day and year, increasing requirements in core subjects, and generally getting tough with students, teachers and administrators.

Ernest Boyer's High School

This report on the American high school was prepared through funding from the Carnegie Foundation. It was a 5 year study carried out in 15 public high schools across the U.S. A team of 25 educators visited the schools talking to teachers, students and administrators, observing classes, counsellors at work, pta meetings, and faculty meetings.

The tone of the report is less flamboyant than that of the National Commission. In addition the dependence on second hand data is not so great,

although we do get the same description of declining SAT scores accompanied this time by graphs.

According to Boyer, for a small percentage of students, (perhaps 10 to 15%) the American high school provides an outstanding education, perhaps the finest in the world. A larger percentage - 20 to 30% marks time or drops out. The majority of children are in the vast middle ground where there are pockets of excellence, but generally there is little intellectual challenge. Throughout the report there appears to be an empathy with the plight of all the players in the educational enterprise. For example, in talking about students, Boyer says "high school is home for many students. It is also the one institution in our culture where it is all right to be young. Here teenagers meet each other, share hopes and fears, start love afairs and experiment with growing up."

The report concludes with an agenda for obtaining excellence. There must be a clearly defined set of goals. Language (writing, reading, speaking) has a central place in education, around which there should be a small core curriculum. Teaching should be made into a task that has some likelihood of success - better teachers, more preparation time, better salaries, higher entrance requirements, etc. The most intriguing suggestion is for a new unit of curriculum which is a community service unit where students are required to do volunteer work for school credit.

Horace's Compromise by Theodore Sizer

Sponsored by the National Association of Secondary Principals, and the National Association of Independent Schools, Sizer and others visited about a dozen schools throughout the states. The findings which derive from

observations and interviews, are crisply summarized by the statement, "the current design of school and schooling is clearly unproductive."

Sizer recommends that the high school curriculum should consist of four subjects - inquiry and expression, mathematics and science, literature and the arts, philosophy and history. No physical education, no vocational education, no foreign languages and no electives. Schools must give teachers anbd students room to work. They must insist that students clearly exhibit mastery. Structure must be kept simple and flexible. The incentives must be appropriate for students and teachers. If students don't want to be in school, let them leave with the promise that they can return when they are prepared to work. Expell kids who are disruptive - their misbehavior should not be allowed to effect the learning of others.

A Place Called School by John Goodlad

This 8 year study of 38 schools in 13 districts was to me the most satisfying work. The data include results from questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The balance between qualitative and quantitative analyses is both impressive and instructive. Most pleasing is the tone of the report which combines a respect for the participants with an integrity of conclusion. The book is worthy of the awards which it has received.

The study puts some of the current myths about education in jeopardy. For example, we are often told that there is a grass roots demand for change back to the basics in educiaton. Yet according to Goodlad's data, most of what goes on in schools is already highly congruent with "back to basics". Far from being unhappy, parents seem generally satisfied with what goes on in schools. There seems to be no popular mandate for change.

Not all was perfect however. Goodlad detected an underlying sameness in what goes on in schools that transcends the oft described diversity. Control is important. Teachers dominate classrooms. The affect if flat - there is very little overt joy just as there is very little overt anger. Objectives involving convergent thinking are stressed far more than divergent thought. Most of what happens in classes is either teacher talk, or students working on highly specified assignments.

For Goodlad, the time for reform is now. The recommendations are spread out through the book in a frank attempt to prevent their being summarized and perhaps trivialized. Two chapters provide suggestions for improving schooling. The first entitled, Improving the Schools We Have, makes suggestions that can be immediately implemented. For example, greater decision making capability should rest at the school level. Schools should work on ways to allocate time more productively. There should be balance in the program: the five fingers of curriculum suggested by Goodlad are math and science, literature and language, society and social studies, the arts, and the vocations.

In the other chapter, Beyond the Schools We Have, he suggests some more audacious (and intriguing ideas). For example, start compulsory school at 4 years of age and continue until the child is 16. This means that school leaving age corresponds more closely with some of the other rites of passage -- driver's license, compulsory attendence laws. Make schools smaller, or divide large schools into houses so that the students have a sense of belonging. Make progress truly continuous, -- begin by allowing children to enter school on the day that they turn 4. These are a few of the suggestions that might tempt you to read the book if you haven't already done so.

What Does the Nation at Risk Literature have to Say to CERA?

Accepting for the sake of argument that my Trivial Pursuit National Educational Risk Test has some validity, the question that pops to mind is, Is Canada a Nation at Risk? The precursive signs are there. One of the most popular books in academic circles last year was The Great Brain Robbery by Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein (1984). Their thesis is that the standards of our universities are slipping badly. While the text is long on polemics and short on data, its publication does give us some standing as a risky nation. Further signs of possible infection are the motivations prompting the standardized examinations which are being felt in most provinces.

Is Canada a Nation at Risk? -- I don't know...but I do know that we do need more penetrating examinations of our educational systems. Before expanding on this, I think that we should give thanks for three things:

1. Education is strongly entrenched as a provincial responsibility. Even though there are federal contributions to education, most of these are cleansed through the general provincial coffers before they appear in education budgets. So long as there is a Quebec, and so long as there is a federal deficit, there seems to be little likelihood of there being much movement of authority to Ottawa. I think that this is a good thing. Ten jurisdictions searching for better solutions are much more likely to produce something of merit than one central agency.

2. The tradition of a conservative non-interventionist supreme court allows common sense and the will of people to influence the direction of education. The decision that schools should bear the burden of bringing about changes in racial attitudes turned out to spell the end of neighbourhood schools in some American jurisdictions. While this seems to be a fact of life now, it could be argued that the fundamental need was to

change the economic system so that people could live in integrated neighbourhoods and attend local schools where they had a sense of ownership. Hopefully we can avoid short-sighted court mandated solutions and develop rational approaches to problems.

3. There is a time lag beween the creation of educational ideas in the U.S., and their movement to Canada. This gives us enough space to evaluate and select the best of the ideas. However, we will need to hone our crap detectors so that we can separate the applicable ideas from the rest.

Areas in Need of Investigation in Canada

Embedded in the reports are statements and ideas that cry out for investigation in the Canadian context. I have chosen three of these to talk about.

1. Adolesence and schools

I have a sense that most of what we know about adolescence comes from four sources: our own memories of experiences, our own teenagers, the fictional accounts of television and novels, and the haphazard observations made in shopping centres, football games or driving past schools. Each of the reports talks about the problems of the teenage years. Often they describe situations that prompt insight. I don't know if we have good studies about Canadian adolescents, but there are a few paragraphs from Sizer that struck me as a thought provoking portrayal.

> Seeing adolescents in classrooms reminds me that, in substantial measure, school is their castle, and they have to want to build it.
>
> I arrived by car at the school at 7:15 a.m. thirty minutes before the first bell. It was a cool day, and the first arrivals to the large high school I was visiting were gathered in clots in the sun

outside, around the low meandering structures that housed their classrooms. Parking lots and hard-used lawns encircled the buildings. There were no sidewalks in this neighbourhood, even though it was quite built up; the school property was ringed by small houses and business establishments. Everyone came to school by bus or by private car.

I turned into one of the driveways leading toward what appeared to be the school's central building and was immediately bounced out of the seat of my rented Datsun by the first of a series of bumps on the road. These barriers, it was painfully obvious were there to slow down the dozens of vehicles that used the driveway and were already lined up in the lots next to the school, row on row of loyal steel beasts tethered by this pedagogical water hole. I found a place and parked.

It was immediately clear from the stares I received from nearby students that I had picked a student lot, not one for staff or for visitors. Since it seemed to me to be large enough to accomodate one more little car, I left the Datsun where it was. It was ridiculously out of place, surrounded by pickup trucks high on their springs and mud spattered, and by jalopies, late sixties chevrolets, old Ford Mustrangs, Plymouth Satellites, each curiously settled upon great oversize rear tires. While all appeared poised, snouts down, to roar purposefully off to God knows where, for the moment they simply cowered here, submissive. Their masters and mistresses leaned against them or sat on them, chatting. Many drank coffee out of paper cups. Some smoked furtively as I drew near; though unfamiliar to them, I was wearing the drab-coat-tie-slacks uniform of the school administrator who might admonish them.

My first instinct was to snicker at the parking lot scene. It wan an eighties version of an American Graffiti strip, indeed an overdrawn one because the dusty trucks and drag equipped cars were grotesquely numerous. My condescension disappeared, however, when I paid more attention to the students gathered around these vehicles, kids observing the visitor who had taken a space on their turf. Their attitude was in no way menacing but it was freighted with an absence of interest. I was an object to be observed and, if they were smoking, to be mildly reacted to. Beyond that, I might have been a bird in the vast aviary of a boring zoo; I was a piece of the scenery, glimpsed as part of hanging out before school. None of these kids was playing principal's pet by coming up and asking me whether I needed help or directions to the office, but no one hastled me, either. The human confrontation was neutral nearly nonexistent.

These were older students, drivers. In their easy chatting among themselves, in their self-absorption and nonchalance, they showed self assurance bordering on truculence. They had their own world.

My reaction was nervousness. I tried to smile a sorry-fellas-but-I-didn't-know-where-the-visitors-parking-lot-was message, but it did not come off. I felt the awkward outsider, at distance from these composed young people. Even as I knew that at the bell they would enter the buildings and engage in the rituals of

> dutiful school-going and that they would get more boisterous and engaging as the early morning mist over their spirits parted, I also knew that these were considerable people, ones who would play the game that adult educators asked them to play only when and how they wanted to. The fact that many of them, for a host of reasons, chose to go along with the structures of the school did not lessen the force of the observation: they possessed the autonomous power not to.
>
> In this sense, kids run schools. Their apparent acquiescence to what their elders want them to do is always provisional. Their ability to undermine even the illusions of certain adult authority and of an expectation of deference was admirably if benignly displayed by the students on that parking lot. A less benign challenge can be made by students in any classroom when, for whatever reason, they collectively, quietly, but assuredly decide to say no. The fact that most go along with the system masks the nascent power that students hold. Few adults outside the teaching profession understand this. (Sizer 1984 pages 138-140)

As I read this, a lot of questions came to mind. Why do kids put up with school the way that they do? Is it because there is an implicity trade-off between going along with the boredom of education and having a place to congregate, to hang out? Do they swap 5 hours of sitting still for the opportunity to interact before school, at lunch, and between classes? How do they decide when the breaking point is reached and drop out? What kinds of kids are genuinely enthusiastic about their education? How many of them are there? What stimulates them? Why can't we integrate educational experiences more closely with social experiences? Are adolescents so egocentric to make this impossible? I think that we need some good qualitative research on the adolescent in high school. Not only would it be interesting in its own right but they might just stimulate changes in the way we carry-out high school programs.

The nature of non-school adolescent life has changed dramatically. Many teenagers no longer live with their biological fathers. How has this influenced their outlook? A very large number of urban and suburban teenagers

hold down part-time jobs. With the change in Sunday closing laws, this is going to become even more prevalent. The economic downturn has meant that department stores are moving toward more part-time salespeople. Fast food chains make huge profits on the underpaid skills of adolescent peons.

What influence does economic independence have on teenagers. When cars, clothes and tapes hold more interest than valences, participles and constitutional amendments, does it make sense to talk about core curriculum? Schools behave as though every child had all evening to do homework. In what proporiton of cases is this a realistic assumption? If working teenagers are learning skills of entrepreneurship, responsibility, and critical consumption can we design high school programs that fit rather than fight the trend?

2. Curriculum and Instruction

Many of the reports recommend curriculum reform. Generally, although not always, writers opt for leaner programs offering fewer choices and insisting that standards or expectations be raised. There is little evidence to suggest that this is based on widespread public demand, rather there is a pervasive sense that general education for all is the best preparation for an uncertain vocational future.

There seems to be two rationales advanced in support of general education. The first is based on the notion that an effective democracy requires enlightened, educated citizens. Common general education for all, allows citizens to participate in an informed way. Streaming or specialized education works against this.

The second rationale is somewhat backhanded. If present trends continue, the jobs that exist now may disappear within the next few decades. To pretend

that students can train now for specific positions is largely indefensible. The best that we can do is to give them a foundation for the training that they will receive on the job.

Almost immediately we have work for researchers in curriculum and in educational foundations. What does a defensible general education curriculum look like that combines both the idea of education for citizenship, and education for eventual on-the-job skill development? In most reports there is an implicit assumption that individual differences in ability should be accomodated through instruction not through content. Was Bruner, right? What time adjustments must be made if we are to teach everyone the same core concepts? What must be sacrificed? According to Goodlad (1983), there have been three roles for vocational education in schools.

* teach job oriented skills such as secretarial training, mechnanics, hairdressing, etc.

* develop career awareness and attitudes that lead to effective participation in economic life

* encourage hand-oriented problem solving, i.e. the development of intellectual capabilities through the use of physical manipulation.

Our experts in vocational education have been slow in involving themselves in the discussion of the future of vocational education in high schools. In the academic areas, researchers in science, mathematics, art and

social studies appear to disregard the third role altogether. Attention is paid to the importance of physical manipulations in elementary school, but soon after the primary grades this is forgotten. For some children the potential for manipulative aides in cognitive development may extend well beyond grade 3. Educational psychologists should investigate the use of concrete models in the teaching of adolescents.

There is a current drive to place computer applications on the high school agenda. Many of the reports make special note of this. I suspect that this suggestion has not been well thought out. In my own institution, there are various pressures to place courses such as computer applications in.....(fill in science, mathematics, music, etc.), introduction to programming, LOGO, computer literacy, etc., into the teacher training curriculum. Such suggestions are seldom preceeded by careful study of the implications. There is a crying need for curriculum theorists to rationalize or integrate the role of computer in education. Otherwise I fear that it will simply be an add on like driver education or health and personal development.

More generally, according to the reports, in the taught curriculum there is a lot of attention paid to facts and details, but little concern paid to integrating notions. Little attempt is made to raise issues, to have students engage in research and debate. Why is this? What happens in Canadian classes? The American experience suggests a flat interaction occurring between teacher and students. There is little excitment, little controversy. Order and passivity are the characterizations. Have we good Canadian studies? A few years ago there was a lot of work being done on classroom interactions. Is it still being done?

Goodland notes that his research shows that teachers are preoccupied with trying to teach children "the basics". That is. they are doing precisely what they are blamed for not doing. When we put them under the standardized testing microscope, we are disappointed with what we see, and prescribe more of the same. Does this work against the notion of education as an emancipating activity? Should we encourage generality, integration and application? Should we really try to make aware citizens, or are we too timid? What happens if abortion, starwars, capital punishment, linguistic integration, and outrageous claims made by revisionist historians are brought into the classroom? Educational philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and the great thinkers on curriculum have no time to be idle.

3. Measurement and Evaluation

You knew that I would get to this. The American experience suggests two places for research in the Canadian setting. The first has to do with the influence that standardized testing programs have on practice. We might assume that because the evidence cited for the need for reform is test results, that these programs must have prompted the recommendations. I am not sure if that is the case. It seems equally likely to me that anecdotal data, personal and second hand experiences and opinion bolstered by imperfectly remembered long past high school days may be the main prompts. Test data may have been sought to support the position already taken. This would account for some of the selective use that is made of results. For example, the Commission gives the impression that achievement is dropping in all of the high school areas, that illiteracy is rampant, and that college graduates are not as sharp, as they used to be. Yet National Assessment says that in reading, 17 year olds did about as well in 1980 as they did in 1971. There was little change in writing

between 1969 and 1979, and in other areas some of the targeted high school groups actually improved.

What this says to me is that we don't have a good idea about how achievement data are used in policy making. For the past several years, CERA has had symposiums on testing in the provinces. We document the increased administration of the test, but I have not seen a study which traces the data in use. Perhaps the measurement people are too enamoured with their models to be concerned about policy, and perhaps the administrators don't feel comfortable in the world of stanines, percentiles, and logits. In any event we need answers to three questions. How do administrators use test results in their policy and planning work, how should they use them, and what can we as measurement people do to make sure that appropriate data are collected and then organized in ways that promote valid use?

This brings us to the second line of research that I think is necessary. The basis of the standardized test is the multiple choice item. If we evaluate the success of our schools in terms of scores on standardized tests, and if we set our standards using these tests, is it not likely that we will continue to value convergant knowledge and comprehension at the expense of higher order achievements? Most of what teachers do now (according to Goodlad) consists of telling, questioning, and quizzing. Students listen, respond, and write out answers. At a time when adolescents should be taking charge of their own education the system seems to work against it. It seems to me that if we spent some time in figuring out how to assess or describe higher order cognitive achievements, we might remove one of the factors that stands in the way of genuine educational reform. Can we use the technology of computers to rid ourselves of the straight jacket of the multiple choice item?

We do no know what the educational and social impacts of province-wide assessment programs are. Perhaps they lead to more pedagogical disruption in classes, more passivity, more dropouts, less analysis, synthesis and evaluation, more tracking and streaming, and poorer understanding of the big issues that influence the human commmunity. Or maybe they lead to a clearer understanding of the tasks of public education, to a sense of confidence in students in a challenge well met, to a trust on the part of the public that our schools are doing a good job, and to a sense of accomplishment on the part of teachers that they have succeeded in their work. Research is needed here, and superficial approaches won't be sufficient.

Conclusion

Let us remember that education and schooling occur in a context. Much of the American educational environment is unlike our own. Thus we are cautioned to be careful when reading the pop. ed. literature. For example, language and affirmative ethnicity are more likely to be educational issues here than in the U.S. Since provinces dominate education, genuine reform might occur sooner here than there. Remember that the revolutionary installation of medicare was brought about in one province and even the red necks of Alberta eventually fell in line. Perhaps the broad axe of educational reform is already being felt in British Columbia. If so, we can only hope that it drifts westward. Inspite of the differences there is much in the American reports that fits our circumstances. Let Boyer have the final word to show what I mean.

> It is the end of the lunch hour on a warm fall day at Ridgefield High. Students lounge on the front steps of the building, chatting easily in groups. Near the steps a young girl, a junior, talks about her reactions to school:
>
> The classes are okay, I guess. Most of the time I find them pretty boring, but then I suppose that's the way school classes are supposed to be. What I like most about the place is the chance to be

with my friends. It's nice to be part of a group. I don't mean one of the clubs or groups the school runs. They're for the grinds. But an informal gorup of your own friends is great.

Usually we don't do too much. I mean we just hang around together, sit together when we can in class and at lunch, and sometimes meet after school, though most of us work.....This year I've been working at McDonald's so I can buy some new clothes and a stereo set. The work ins't all that hard or exciting, but it still makes me feel on my own and that I'm an adult person, that I am doing something useful. In school you never feel that way. Not ever! (Boyer, 1983, p. 202)

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