Standards, Equity, and the Curriculum of Life

John P. Portelli and Ann B. Vilbert

In the last decade or so there has been a fervent public interest in educational issues, practices and beliefs. Public debates in Canadian media have focused on such issues as mainstreaming, whole language vs. phonics, separate schools, multiculturalism and anti-racism in schools, accountability, standardized testing, teacher testing, and concern about educational standards. The call for common national standards, the arguments to evaluate more thoroughly students' achievements, as well as the complaints about the lowering of standards in schools, demonstrate the need to seriously examine the issue of standards which has become so predominant in educational debate.

In this paper we first clarify the notion of standards. We claim that common yet serious misinterpretations arise from confusions about the meaning of the concept of standards in popular discourse. Second, we offer a critical examination of the assumptions underlying popular discourse about standards; and finally, we offer alternative perspectives on educational standards and justification for these perspectives. These alternative perspectives rest on the conception of the «curriculum of life» – a curriculum that is grounded in the immediate daily world of students as well as in the larger social political contexts of their lives. It will be argued that it would be more worthwhile to direct the efforts spent on establishing and monitoring common standards on support needed to enact a curriculum of life. Such a re-direction would provide better opportunities for creating equity in schools.

We want to make it very clear at the outset that although our focus is on the issue of standards, we do not see this issue as discrete from other current and important educational, social, and ultimately, political debates, including, for example social justice and issues of difference. In other words, we believe that the issue of standards, like any other educational issue, is not merely an educational issue but that it is also ethical and political in nature. Ultimately, there are no purely educational concerns.[1]

One of the major popular concerns is the claim that we don't have high standards in education (Nikiforuk, 1993; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). There seems to be a widespread

public concern that educational standards in Canada are slipping in comparison to the «good old days» when education, it is claimed, was more rigorous. Another equally pervasive concern is the fear that we do not have a common set of standards throughout the country which is an echo of the larger plea for common, global, universal standards (Eisner, 1995). The argument seems to be that if we had common universal standards then our quality of education would not be deteriorating, and students historically marginalized as «at-risk» would have a better chance at completing schooling. And hence the sense of urgency for schools to develop mission statements with which everyone can agree or pretend to agree. This argument is also presented as a plea for practicality: if we do not have a common set of standards, then we cannot proceed or operate well in practice; it is not practical to operate with different criteria. Moreover it is claimed that having diverse criteria does not make the standards clear.

WHAT ARE STANDARDS?

Before we move to some critical analysis of these concerns about educational standards, it is crucial to make some clarifying remarks about the nature of standards. The term «standards» has different meanings and is used in different contexts. For example, we refer to «the standard point or complaint made,» namely the typical or popular point made. But then we also say «these are the standards that we use,» namely the criteria that we use to evaluate something, or in a sense, the policies that direct our actions. And we also have the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) that develops and monitors standards for commodities and production of materials. The CSA makes sure that the standards are met and that they are at least of acceptable quality. And we also use standard in another context when we refer to standard as a flag or emblem, as in «standard-bearer» in the case of the military. The term is also used as a verb when, for example, we try to «standardize equipment» or even «standardize replies». In these instances what we mean is to try to conform to an established or uniform position or specifications. Surely, in the educational context we do not mean to use all these different meanings at the same time. But the confusion about the issue of standards arises partly because of the lack of clarity.

In an educational context, as Eisner (1993) warns us, we need to distinguish between «standard as a measurement» and «standard as a value.» An example of the first meaning would be the meter: the fact that we have conveniently agreed that a meter is 100 centimetres and that we use it as a tool to measure. In this context not many controversies arise. But there is another meaning to the word standard, as when we say we have high educational standards. The second meaning involves values and criteria, not just an agreed upon measurement, as in the metric example. Moreover, these criteria are value-laden and will therefore probably involve differences simply because people consider different things to be worthwhile.

It is crucial not to confuse these two very different meanings of standards, but, unfortunately, the notion of *standard as a measurement* and of a *standard as a value* are confused in the public discourse about standardized testing in Canada. The assumption is that standardized tests (the measurement) will improve educational standards (the value). Literacy and reading, for example, are treated as if they were objective facts measurable by a yardstick and not as contested, value-laden ground. We thus move to a discussion about the popular concerns raised about educational standards in order to raise the values issues that need to be clarified and discussed.

FALLING STANDARDS

The first concern is that of a lack of high standards. There is no doubt that this is a very loaded and serious charge for no one really wants to promote mediocrity. But are educational standards really low? Of course, the reply will depend on the criteria and underlying values that one is using to assess the quality of education. If two people are using different and possibly conflicting criteria, then it should be no surprise that the evaluations and outcomes will be very different. The claim that standards are low is debatable. A quick glance at a high school curriculum, for example certainly contradicts the view that the standards have decreased from «the good old days» of educational rigour: the academic high school curriculum of today is decidedly advanced over our curricula 25 years ago both in terms of the quantity and quality of curriculum content particularly in mathematics and science. On this point, Sobol (1997) contends that «of course there was no Golden Age - just the memory of our golden youth. All times are the best of times and the worst of times, because the present is always the only time we have.» (p.631). And Barlow and Robertson (1994) have argued convincingly that the popular discrediting of public education in Canada is part of a larger hidden agenda. They demonstrate how recent media reports have carefully selected and distorted evaluative data in order to support a view of a failing public education - a tactic designed in part to garner support for cuts to education, they argue. For example, Barlow and Robertson clearly show, by using Stats Can figures, that contrary to popular mythology, the drop out rate today is lower than that in 1956 and 1971, and that the Economic Council of Canada information on illiteracy is mischievously distorted and inflated. The same point is made by Shannon (1996) and Berliner and Biddle (1995) for the U.S. context.

We are not suggesting here that there are no compelling problems facing public education in Canada. Quite the opposite, in fact. We are suggesting that the issues facing education presently are far more complex than the standards movement would allow. It may be that the cacophony about standards serves as a convenient distraction from far larger social, educational, and political issues facing us. As Apple (1996) puts it with regard to the issue of establishing a national curriculum in the U.S., the national curriculum (and in our context the establishing of common standards) could be seen as «a mechanism for the political control of knowledge» (p. 35). Moreover, as Kohn (1999) has convincingly argued, the «Tougher Standards Movement» has not given rise to higher quality, since in practice, this has amounted to «a little bit of everything and a thoughtful treatment of nothing» (p. 59). Kohn also points out that the plea for rigour or tougher standards has in fact resulted in narrowness for «such objectives as wanting students to learn how to write persuasively or solve problems effectively are dismissed as `mushy»' (p. 48). The emphasis has been on «long lists of facts and skills that students must acquire» (p.49). From our perspective, this perpetuates the predominance of a dangerous and limited conception of knowledge - one that focuses exclusively on the given rather than the critical and controversial.

LACK OF COMMON, UNIVERSAL STANDARDS

As mentioned earlier, there seem to be three reasons for the view that holds that there should be common, universal standards: (i) common standards will secure high quality; (ii) they will address equity and access issues for students historically marginalized as «at-risk»; (iii) they will

make practice more efficient and less confusing. We have to be very cautious about these seductive arguments.

Although there is no necessary nor intrinsic connection between common standards and high quality, some (Adler, 1982; Hirsch, 1987) have proceeded from assuming such a connection to arguing that common standards therefore address equity and access issues. In the American contexts, for instance, Hirsch (1987) has argued that lack of a shared, common cultural curriculum - a curriculum he defines in quite traditional, eurocentric terms - has contributed to inequities of acccess to educational capital for many of America's marginalized students. But Hirsch's argument hinges on a number of questionable assumptions concerning both curricula in American schools and teaching/learning processes. Specifically, Hirsch assumes that the reasons American students do not know «what every American needs to know» is because they haven't been taught it; in other words, he mistakenly assumes a one-to-one correspondence between the formal and actual curriculum (Portelli, 1993).[2] While we would certainly acknowledge that students marginalized as «at-risk» in America experience a second-rate curriculum (See, for example, Anyon, 1981, Apple, 1992, Haberman, 1991), the *content* of that curriculum is, by many accounts, precisely the sort of content for which Hirsch argues (Shannon, 1992; Connell, 1994; Haberman, 1991). The problem, as Hirsch sees it, of students failing to master what he believes every American needs to know would appear not to be so much rooted in their not having been taught it as in their not having learned it.

Oversimplification of the workings of standards in this manner has given rise to movements like «outcomes-based education,» which assumes agreement on issues upon which there may be little real agreement. We may agree that public schools ought to support people's ability to read critically, write clearly, and to think for themselves; however, we may mean very different things by these phrases. Agreement on «outcomes» desired does not guarantee that the outcomes will be achieved. Unfortunately, popular education documents have fallen victim to these kinds of problems. The most obvious case is that of the language used in these documents, including slogans like excellence, cooperative learning, critical thinking, high quality, and good and productive citizens. This kind of rhetoric gives the impression of universality or homogeneity and hides the possibility of differences (Shannon, 1995). The language of forced consensus gives the illusion that there are no differences or that there ought to be no differences, while in fact, there are disagreements and differences among educational «experts» on what amounts to quality education (see Popkewitz, 1991,
pp. 191-4).

The argument based on practicality is also deceptive for even if we were to agree on a commonly held set of standards, in reality we still have to face the diversity and multiplicity that the application and interpretation of standards require. Standards are by nature subject to interpretation. For example, as teachers even when we espouse identical standards for writing, rarely do we evaluate the same writing identically. In practice standards are always negotiated. And hence, in this sense, claims to common standards are artificial and enforced. Standards, given their interpretive nature, are not naturally-given unquestionable facts (Shannon, 1995).

As illustration of the points we have been making, we will offer some quotes from teachers, who have been involved in national and provincial assessment scoring.[3] These quotes are taken from interviews we have conducted with teachers on issues of assessment including alternative

assessments. The first two quotes are from two teachers who participated in the marking of an alternative literacy assessment in a Canadian province. The markers were given a common set of standards, and they had sessions to clarify the standards and make sure they were interpreting the standards in a uniform manner. Notwithstanding all these precautions, disagreements in application arose:

> *We were given the direction to focus on the piece and not the children. That was very difficult to do. ... The male evaluators, in all fairness, did not get as tied up in knots over the messy handwriting. ... The administrators ... female administrators seemed to be extremely compassionate, ... so excited about looking at children's work. ... Male administrators were into the numbers game ... as if the statistics suddenly became very important. ...People were trying their very best at being objective as possible, as fair, but in many instances when conflicts arose you could see that the lines were definitely developed.*

> *... probably the greatest areas of conflict arose when people seemed to get caught up on grammar. ... From my perspective I was looking for the content. My argument was that depending on the technology in the schools, a child could work that on the computer and apply a spell Check, and it would be perfect. I also felt that some teachers got caught up with handwriting. I have a tendency to look way past that. If it was a neat polished pretty piece some teachers tended automatically to give it a five. ... There were times when we could not agree on controversial pieces.*

The third quote is from a high school English teacher who was a marker of the School Achievement Indicators Project (SAIP) English assessment. Once again this quote provides evidence that although the markers were working with a commonly agreed upon criteria, disagreements ensued in the application of the criteria.

> *There were a number of pieces that speak to this, ... a piece called 'super guy': It was hard to tell if the piece was ironic or if it was written by a student who had a very poor command of English. ... Without bringing the student before us it was very difficult to tell. ... So people were divided on this one right down the line. ... I read it as being ironic and definitely a four.'... Other people said 'what are you saying?' This is s two. ... Another difference was how people rated VOICE. ... A lot of people coming from Nova Scotia voice was a very big thing for us. ... If I could hear the individual in the piece my mark went up. ... [By voice I mean] who that person was; ... the writing was really alive. ... Other people from other places in Canada if there was an obvious misspelling in the first sentence then immediately [they dismissed it]. ... People from Alberta and Ontario are very strong on spelling; ... people from Nova Scotia and British Columbia were strong on voice and some of the people from Quebec were strong on voice.*

The call for common, universal standards is problematic on other counts too. Whose standards are we going to follow? And who decides what is going to amount to common standards? If we were to arrive at a set of common standards that would mean that some people's standards may be left out and, if so, for what reasons? Whose standards count the most and why? Who benefits from common standards? These are vital questions that the movement for common standards does not address for these questions are deemed to be the kind of questions that lead to ineffi-

ciency. In reality, however, these are the crucial questions that challenge the inequities of the status quo.

A similar critique to the one we are raising is made by Apple in relation to the call to revert to a «common culture». According to Apple (1996), «such an approach hardly scratches the surface of the political and educational issues involved. A common culture can never be the general extension to everyone of what a minority mean and believe. Rather, and crucially, it requires ... the creation of the conditions necessary for all people to participate in the creation and re-creation of meanings and values» (p. 39). We are claiming it is exactly such conditions which are missing in the consideration and plea for common standards. Moreover, forceful emphasis on common standards contradicts popular notions of democracy which, by definition, rule out emphasis on conformity. This is ironic as only twelve years ago the popular western criticism of the Soviet block and China was that these people did not allow diversity. We used to complain about their emphasis on uniformity (same clothes, same jackets, same ties, same hairstyle.) which was associated with communism and totalitarianism. The West was seen as the bastion of democracy precisely because of its encouragement of diversity. [4] So now we need to ask: how can we explain the contemporary emphasis on uniformity (as exemplified in the harsh call for common, universal standards) and still claim that we embrace democracy?

In response to our rhetorical question one may retort that insisting on common standards will ensure that all teachers will have high expectations for all students irrespective of their cultural and/or socio-economic background. In other words, one may argue that common standards will ensure that no students will be viewed from a «deficit mentality» (Valencia, 1997). And, we may be reminded, that promoting high expectations for all and diminishing a negative deficit mentality are consistent with the democratic principle of equity. While we definitely agree that having high expectations for all and eliminating deficit mentality are worthwhile educational and democratic aims, the counter argument to our stance fails to demonstrate the unique and necessary connection between common standards and maintaining high expectations for all or reducing a deficit mentality. Will it be really profitable if we focus on high expectations while the standards that guide our practices are not suitable ones? What matters is not that we have common standards but that we have appropriate and fair standards. Moreover, it has been argued that higher and common standards are «used as selection devices to privilege some over others» (Kohn, 1999, p.102). In other words, what is promoted officially as a way of securing quality for all, in fact, by implication, amounts to a hidden way of sorting out people. Linda McNeil's recent empirical study has established that «standardization creates inequities, widening the gap between the quality of education for poor and minority youth and that of more privileged students» (2000, p.3).

Contrary to the evidence of major work on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality by sociologists of education in this century (Rist, 1970; Bourdieu,1973, 1974; Willis,1977; Persell (1979); Anyon,1981, 1997; Weis, 1990; Simon, 1992), the erroneous view that having common, essential standards will translate into being able to apply them commonly assumes meritocracy or the belief that people advance on the basis of their inherent abilities. It assumes that if we have common standards, then we can apply them fairly and in the same way to all contexts. There are at least two problems with this. First, there is a difference between having a meritocracy and assuming a meritocracy. The fact that we assume it is not the same as having it. Second, even if we had a

meritocracy, evaluating fairly may need to or imply holding different standards (Martin, 1985). As even Plato argued a long time ago, fairness is not always identical to sameness. To be fair, sometimes we need to account for and acknowledge differences which do not necessarily lead to a common standard or a common solution. In other words, there is a difference between equity and equality (Martin, 1985, especially Ch. 2). As Shannon (1995) argues: «Set in this context, equality does not seem to be the ideal toward which we should strive; in fact, it leaves previous inequalities intact while at the same time frustrating any attempts to alter those inequalities by characterizing them as attacks on the ideal of equality. Requirements that we ignore the past and treat unequal equally mean that we can never approach true equality - that is, fairness among human beings» (p. 230).

WHERE DO WE STAND?

In a nutshell we are arguing that the public discourse around defining and maintaining common standards is ill-conceived, misleading, and fundamentally dishonest. Let us be very clear. We are not saying that we do not care about the quality of education. Criticizing common standards does not imply a lack of concern about quality or standards themselves. As Eisner (1995) puts it: «To give up the idea that there needs to be one standard for all students in each field of study is not to give up the aspiration to seek high levels of educational quality in both pedagogical practices and educational outcomes» (p. 760). We are concerned about quality and what it involves, for example, taking difference seriously. We urge teachers, parents and guardians to ask the questions concerning quality that are left out by the common standards movement: Whose standards? How are these standards to be arrived at? Who is included and who is excluded from defining these standards? (Kelly, 1993; Christensen, 1995; Apple, 1996; Swartz, 1996). Why is there a real resistance to looking at these kinds of questions? Who benefits from not raising and discussing these questions?

The popular view pushed by the corporate and neo-conservative world rests on the fallacy that unless standards are clear and commonly held then we have no standards. The assumption is that unless we have commonly agreed upon standards set up and advertised, there will be no real change; mediocrity will flourish. We are arguing that it's not the agreement on standards but the discussion of them that will help bring about change. As Shannon (1995) recommends:

> *... we should begin with the clarification of our starting points for thinking about literacy and assessment that the standards processes seem to paper over. Just what do various groups have in mind when they use terms such as interests of the students, fair, and equitable? We must display these differences in public. It is not our dirty laundry; rather, it is our reasoned way to air the issues.* (p.232)

The media and corporate discourse about standards seems to be based on a belief that standards are very easy to define, that we have common agreement on them, and that all we need to do to improve public education is to measure students against these standards, as though measurement itself somehow improves learning (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Shannon, 1995; 1996) . As Margaret Meek Spencer (1993) reminds us, the pig will not gain weight the more often we weigh it. We need to feed the pig as well as consider the quality of the food! Our conclusions is that we need

to stop the, rhetoric and the unnecessary diagnosing and measuring. There is massive evidence that shows that those who are well-off have a bigger chance of surviving the system (Willis, 1977; Apple, 1979, 1996; Anyon, 1981, 1997; Shannon, 1992; Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992; McLaren, 1998;). Funds need to be spent on supporting teachers' work and improving the quality and climate in schools rather than on unnecessary and expensive standardized testing.

Contrary to popular belief, we are arguing that educational standards are not absolute, fixed, and naturally-given facts. They are socially constructed. Even Richard Weaver (1970), a conservative rhetorician, objected to the way we continuously treat rhetorical socially contested issues as though they were physical facts about which there can be no disagreement. In other words, we are not dealing with so-called scientific laws that are expected to apply universally by definition. We cannot expect that kind of exactitude when we are dealing with the human predicament. And hence we need to ask who constructed these standards, for what reasons, and whose values are included and excluded from them. The public discussion on standards will continue to reproduce inequities and injustices unless these questions are dealt with seriously and differences are recognized.

This last point may give the impression that we are urging an «anything goes mentality.» We are not. We do, however, maintain that insistence on commonality and uniformity will discredit important differences which is ultimately contrary to one of the basic values or principles of the democratic spirit, namely, the acknowledgment of differences. In a democracy, for example, people should not be concerned that we have different accents, that we express ourselves differently. The urge for uniformity, on the other hand, can be seen as a fear of dealing with differences, of losing power, of change, ambiguity and uncertainty. Yet, to be honest, we have to ask another question: Are all differences of equal worth? Is the view that people as human beings ought to be respected, of equal worth to a view that promotes hatred towards certain people? We need to distinguish between (1) accepting that there are different values and (ii) holding that all these different values have equal worth. Democracy implies the acceptance that there are different values; it does not imply that all values are of equal worth. Acknowledging difference does not rule out the possibility of recognizing and valuing basic human rights

Ultimately our view rests on the belief that the either-or mentality is problematic (Dewey, 1938). We object to the view that maintains that either all values are absolute or anything goes; or that we either take an extreme conservative position or an extreme liberal position. There are other positions that go beyond this simplistic either-or way of thinking, and account more fully for questions of educational equality in a pluralistic society.

Exactly 100 years ago, John Dewey, the American philosopher of education, wrote:

> *We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent. That which interests us most is naturally the progress made by the individual child of our acquaintance, his [her] normal physical development, his [her] advance in ability to read, write, and figure, his [her] growth in the knowledge of geography and history, improvement in manners, habits* of *promptness, order, and industry - it is from such standards as these that we judge the work of the school. And rightly so. Yet the range of the outlook needs*

> *to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his [her] child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. ... Only by being true to the* full *growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.* (1900, p. 6)

It would be very hard, if not impossible, for anyone to disagree that attempting to achieve the «full growth of all the individuals» who make up society, is worthwhile and needed. The questions about which disagreements arise include those dealing with how we are going to achieve this and which standards should we be aiming at. In response to the latter Dewey offers an answer in the above quote: «what the best and wisest parent wants.» We believe that this simple answer is rather dangerous. First, we are not in agreement who is the best and wisest parent. Second, it assumes that there is only one best possible reply. In other words, it does not allow for the possibility to have different, yet equally valuable ways and standards. Although we do agree on several things, it is a fact of life, that human beings have different values which will be reflected in different standards.

What are some of our options when we are faced with different standards? We could try to create situations in which one set of standards will dominate or be imposed on all irrespective of contexts and needs and values. Or we could try to understand differences that exist and allow for different set of standards to operate at the same time, admitting that there are differences, but acknowledging that standards although different may be equally valuable. We argue that the latter is the option that is most conducive to sustaining, developing and reconstructing democracy (for democracy, by nature, is never stable). Of course, acknowledging and respecting differences, does not mean that everything is acceptable. The Keegstra case in Alberta clearly demonstrates this (Hare, 1996)[5] However, in a democracy decisions about what is acceptable require serious and engaged discussions from the citizenry- not just the few. And hence, conditions need to be created that encourage discussion rather than restrict it by threats or authoritarian decisions (some of which may be very subtle yet very dangerous).

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH TEACHING?

The debate about standards - the attempt to define and enforce appropriate academic standards in Canadian schools - is for teachers in classrooms simultaneously critically important and something of an irrelevant luxury. How the debate comes out, whatever «outcomes» we decide upon, will have immediate and substantial consequences for curricula, determining issues like whether an educated Canadian can continue to be defined solely by her or his knowledge of western European traditions, or whether we might justifiably expect an educated Canadian to know something of the cultural traditions of, for instance, aboriginal peoples. In that sense, the debate has everything to do with classroom teaching, however absent teachers' voices have been from that debate (at least at public levels). But, in another important sense, the exercise of defining common standards is very far removed from the «dailyness» of teaching of actual people in actual classrooms. As one teacher put it, «They can define whatever outcomes they like; unless those outcomes are possible and sensible and purposeful for the real children in my real grade three classroom, the whole exercise will remain just an exercise.»

We have argued that the rhetoric within the standards movement is misleading in a number of ways, including the assumption (based on little evidence) that «standards are slipping» in Canadian schools, the assumptions that standards can be easily and justly defined and interpreted,

and the slipshod logic that confuses measuring quality with improving quality. From the point of view of teaching, however, the standards debate poses a further problem in that it serves as a distraction from conversations in teaching and schooling which we, as a society, urgently need to engage ourselves - a conversation and support for a curriculum of life.

Let us illustrate this with an example. In one of the schools we worked in, a grade four child who was a beginning reader was coded by his school as having a reading disorder. Talking to the child, his teacher discovered that for his entire school career the child had spent no more than six months in any one classroom because his father, a construction worker, had been moving all over the country in search of work. In the context of working with the child, the teacher learned that the child's «reading problem» had little to do with reading or academic ability at all, and everything to do with a level of anxiety and disruption in his life that made learning to read difficult and, apparently, irrelevant. Like many educational problems, this child's learning problem was in fact a consequence of a much larger social problem (underemployment and the creation of surplus labour markets) manifested in schooling.

Hence, the act of teaching in Canada's increasingly diverse and increasingly underfunded classrooms graphically illustrates the manner in which education is embedded in complex social and political realities. From this vantage point, the debate about standards - the campaign to define a set of common standards that can only serve to further sanction the official knowledges of the already privileged - is entirely beside the point. Moreover, the debate, perhaps deliberately, distracts us from asking the kinds of pressing questions that teaching presently raises, questions like: Why is it that we appear unable to create just and viable schooling for all Canada's peoples? Are teachers being prepared and supported to be able to respond to the many different and conflicting perspectives they encounter in their students? Do they have the time and the support they need to address and come to terms with the kinds of changes happening in their classrooms? The standards debate, by reducing these complexities to a simple matter of defining common standards and measuring student achievement against them, conveniently allows us to blame the individual (the student and/or the teacher) and ignore the larger social and political realities in which teachers, students, and schools are immersed! And as Maxine Greene (1995) warns us:

> *... a return to a single standard of achievement and a one dimensional definition of the common will not only result in severe injustices to the children of the poor and the dislocated, the children at risk, but will also thin out our cultural life and make it increasingly difficult to bring into existence and keep alive an authentically common world. (pp. 172-173)*

ALTERNATIVE VISION

What, then, are the alternatives we propose? Our critique of the pervasive current discourse about educational standards in Canada clearly implies an alternative vision for educational policy. Let us, then, be explicit about the alternatives for which we have argued above. As a conclusion, we will identify four alternatives.

1. We have claimed that the public discourse of slipping standards in education in this country is misleading and misinformed. The alternative we are proposing here is an open and balanced

public debate - a debate acknowledging educational standards as necessarily provisional, dynamic, located, interpretive, and informed by issues of politics and power. Such debate is, after all, far from new within the confines of academic and educational literature. That the central political debate is missing from our pubic discourse on standards in education is, at the very best, curious.

We are suggesting that a number of questions need to be asked, publicly, of the slipping standards claim - questions like, «Is this true?» «To what extent is this true?» «What standards are slipping and whose standards are they?» «What new standards are emerging?» «Why is this happening?»

2. We have argued that broad-based standard-ized testing confuses and over-simplifies a number of issues of quality in education, thereby perpetu-ating the status quo. We have suggested that the public discourse around standardized testing and test scores fails to acknowledge thoroughly docu-mented social inequities reproduced through such testing; and, further, that this discourse confuses «standard» as a value with «standard» as a meas-urement, resulting in the rather magical notion that we can improve quality by measuring it. We have also argued that such an approach to assess-ment fails to acknowledge central features of stan-dards themselves - namely, that in practice, standards are irredeemably local and interpretive.

The alternative we are suggesting here is, of course, the development of local assessments - or, perhaps more accurately, the development of educational policy acknowledging the reality of local assessment (Eisner, 2000). We need to redeploy the enormous resources spent in developing national and regional assessments («bigger and better mousetraps,» as Jerome Harste (1992) has called them) in helping teachers to develop and engage thoughtful local assessment that acknowledges and accounts for the realities of social difference.

3. The flurry of activity to define and measure common standards seems to us to have overlooked the obvious and essential step. If we are genuinely interested in improving the quality of education for all in Canada, surely we need to do more than define what we want and test whether we are getting it. We need to put resources into actually improving the decaying conditions in the nation's classrooms. Teachers are besieged: they lack classroom resources, they lack time for professional development, they lack social and educational support networks, they lack support for real initiative and innovation, their class sizes are rising everywhere just as diversity multiplies and social supports for children and families erode. In short, they struggle just to do their jobs in the face of enormous cutbacks and escalating demands. We are arguing that the time, money, and resources spent on defining common standards and measuring our achievement of them would be much better spent on supporting teachers, classrooms, and schools - IF we were serious about changing schooling and improving education.

4. The general tendency of common standards and standardized testing movements is, for complex reasons, towards the production and reproduction of a mechanistic, technocratic vision of curriculum - a vision which ultimately is based on a conception of education which «may be appropriate for totalitarian societies but is incompatible with democratic ideals» (Eisner, 1995, p. 763). As Beyer and tagano (1998) argue, such a vision of curriculum is only appropriate to industrial models of education which; as they remind us, «have been thoroughly criticized over the last three decades, and teachers, curriculum designers and principals have increasingly eschewed such models...» (p. 381). Defining common stan-

dards and testing against them simply leaves the flesh and blood reality of actual classrooms outside the issue. We are told that violence, for instance, is increasing in schools, and we don't deny this claim. Teachers and schools, however, where violence is an issue may be discouraged from making it central to the curriculum if official sanction is placed on, for instance, students' ability to commute fractions by the end of grade six. The standards movement in its present form appears to mitigate against what we call the curriculum of life.

By «curriculum of life» we mean a central, organizing stance that seems to inform pedagogy. Curriculum of life 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 approach are not «managed», but «engaged»; that is, the aim is to actively involve them in the life of the school. Curriculum of life is an approach to pedagogy which informs and gives coherence to often disparate aspects of school life. It is implicit in curriculum, in school organization and policy, in discipline, in school/community relations, in classroom and school-wide pedagogy, in school culture. In other words, the curriculum of life is a conception of curriculum that breaks down the walls between the school and the world. Social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, and art become «disciplines» in the original sense of the word: that is, they are disciplined ways of thinking through important questions and concerns. The curriculum of life is rooted in the school and community world to which the students belong, addressing questions of who we are and how we live well together; it extends into the larger world of possibilities beyond school and community bounds; and it addresses directly questions about the larger social and political contexts in which these worlds are embedded.

The curriculum of life is grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives. As such students' worlds and lives are not addressed as factors that need to be excused, pitied, mediated, or fixed in order to get on with the curriculum, but as the vital ground of/for learning. This is an approach to curriculum that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience - without romanticizing either. The connection between the curriculum of life and students is essentially an ethical one, for as Freire (1998) argued: «It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that arise in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school.» (p.62).

Teachers are telling us that the curriculum of life - the actual, immediate and urgent experiences, issues, and questions of children in schools - is becoming more and more the irresistible content of the classroom. By failing to recognize this situation, the common standards movement cuts educators off from the very questions they most need to engage with each other, just at a time when they have no choice but to engage these questions in their daily life practice in classrooms. Maxine Greene (1984) has captured the gist of our thinking here:

> *We need ... spaces for expression, spaces for freedom, yes, and a public space. By that I mean, as Hannah Arendt did, a space where living persons can come together in speech and action, each one free to articulate a distinctive perspective. ... It must be a space of dialogue, a space where a web of relationships can be woven, and where a common world can be brought into being and continually renewed. (p.* 295-6)

NOTES

1. For an elaboration of this point, see: Shor (1992), Giroux (1994), Portelli (1996), and Freire (1996).

2. As teachers all know there is a big difference between lesson plans and actual practice. Likewise, just saying in a document is no guarantee that the proposed will actually take place. For example, several education documents have told us that diversity will be respected and supported. However, for example in Halifax, when

the first cuts in education were made, ESL teachers were among the first to be reduced and, in some instances, even eliminated.

3. These quotes are from a research on alternative literacy assessment conducted by the authors in 1996. 4. In reality one could argue that in the West we actually encourage individualism rather than genuine diversity; that is, while individual differences are accepted, that is not the case with social differences such as race and gender. One has to be careful not to conflate a sort of a political individualism with democracy.

5. Jim Keegstra was a public school teacher in Alberta from 1968 to 1983 when his teaching license was revoked by the Alberta Minister of Education and he was expelled from the Alberta Teachers' Association. In 1985 he was convicted on the charge of promoting hatred against Jews through his teaching.

REFERENCES

Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry, 11 (1),* 3-42.

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Apple, M.W. (1979). *Ideology and curriculum.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Apple, M.W. (1992). *Teachers in text.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Apple, M.W. (1996). *Cultural Politics and Education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Barlow, Maude and Robertson, Heather Jane (1994). *Class war fare: The assault on Canada's schools.* Toronto: Key Porter Books.

Berliner, David. and Biddle, B (1995). *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud and the Attack on America's Public Schools.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Beyer, Landon E. and Apple, Michael. (eds.) (1998) *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics and Possibilities* (2nd ed.). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Beyer, Landon E. and Pagano, Jo Anne (1998). Democratic evaluation: Aesthetic, ethical stories in schools. In L.E. Beyer and M. Apple (eds.)The *Curriculum: Problems, Politics and Possibilities* (2 nd ed.). Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 380-396.

Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction, and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, education, and social change.* London: Tavistock.

Bourdieu, P. (1974). The school as a conservation force: Scholastic and cultural inequalities. In J. Eggleston (Ed.), *Contemporary research in the socioloav ofeducation.* London: Methuen.

Christensen, L. (1995) Whose standard? Teaching standard English in our schools. In D. Levine, R. Lowe, B. Peterson, & R. Tenerio (Eds.) *Rethinking schools. An agenda for change.* New York, NY: The New Press, 128-135.

Connell, R.W. (1994). *Poverty and education.* Harvard Educational Review, 64, 2: 125-149.

Curtis, B., Livingstone, D. & Smaller, H. (1992). Stacking the deck: *The straming of working class kids in Ontario schools.* Toronto, ON: Our Schools/Our Selves. Dewey, John (1900, 1974). *The School and Society.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, John (1938). *Experience and Education.* New York: MacMillan.

Eisner, Elliot W. (1993). Why Standards May Not Improve Schools? *Educational Leadership,* Feb. 1993: 22-3.

Eisner, Elliot W. (1995). Standards for American schools: Help or hindrance? *Phi Delta Kappan,* 76, 10: 758-765.

Eisner, E.W. (2000). Those who ignore the past ...? 12 'easy' lessons for the next millenium. *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 32, 2, 343-357.

Freire, Paulo (1996). Reading the World and Reading the Word: An Interview with Paulo Freire. In

William Hare and John P. Portelli (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings* (2nd, revised edition). Calgary, Alt.: Detselig Ent. Ltd., 185-192.

Freire, Paulo (1998). *Pedagogy* of *freedom. Ethics, democracy, and civic courage.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefleld Publishers.

Giroux, Henry A. (1994). «Teachers, Public Life, and Curriculum Reform,» *Peabody Journal of Education,* 69,3:35-47.

Greene, Maxine(1984). «'Excellence, Meanings, and Multiplicity,» *Teachers College Record,* 86, 2: 283297. Greene, Maxine (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Haberman, M.(1 991). The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan,* December: 290-294.

Hare, William(1996). Propaganda in the classroom: The Keegstra case. In W.Hare and J.P.Portelli (eds.) *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings* (2nd, revised edition). Calgary, Alt.: Detselig Ent. Ltd.,149-64.

Harste, J. (1992). Evaluation and Standards. Keynote Address, Nova Scotia Reading Association Annual Conference. Halifax, N.S.: Mount St. Vincent University.

Hirsch Jr., E. D. (1987). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Kelly, Ursula (1993) Teaching English: Who's subject to what? In Deanne Bogdan and Stan Straw (eds.). *Constructive reading: Teaching beyond communication.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook.

Kohn, A. (1999). *The schools our children deserve: Moving beyond traditional classrooms and «tougher standards. «* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Martin, Jane R. (198 5). *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

McLaren, P. (1998). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundation ofeducation.* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

McNeil, L.M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Nikiforuk, Andrew (1993). *School's out: The catastrophe in public education and what we can do about it.* Toronto: MacFarlane Walter & Ross.

Ontario Ministry of Education (2000). *Learning for life.* Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education.

Persell, C. (1979). *Education and inequality.* New York, NY: Longman.

Popkewitz, T. (1991). *A political sociology ofeducational*
reform: Power/knowledge in teaching, teacher education, and research. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. Portelli, J.P. (1993). Dare we expose the hidden curriculum. In J.P. Portelli and S. Bailin (Eds.), *Reason and Values.* Calgary, AB: Detselig Ent., 171-197. Portelli, John P. (1 996). The Challenge of Teaching for Critical Thinking. In W. Hire and J.P. Portelli (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings* (2nd, revised edition). Calgary, Alt.: Detselig Etn. Ltd.,1996, 5 5-72.

Rist, R.C. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review,* 40 (3), 41 1-451.

Shannon, P. (1992). Reading instruction and social class. In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political. Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Shannon, Patrick (1995). Can Reading Standards Really Help? *The Clearing House*, March/April 1995: 229-232.

Shannon, Patrick (1996). Mad as Hell. *Language Arts*, 73, Jan., 1996: 14-19.

Shor, Ira (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching fo r Social Change.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Simon, R. (1992). *Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility.* Toronto, ON: OISE Press.
Sobol, T. (1997). Beyond standards: The rest of the agenda. *Teachers College Record*, 98, 4: 629-636.
Spencer Margaret Meek(1993). Memorial Lecture for Patricia S. Barnes. Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S. (March 27).

Swartz, Ellen (1996). Emancipatory Pedagogy: A Postcritical Response to 'Standard' School Knowledge. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38, 4, 1996: 397-418.

Valencia, R.R. (Ed.) (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: The Falmer Press.

Weaver, Richard(1970). *Concealed rhetoric in scientistic sociology. In Weaver, Language is sermonic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University.

Weis, L. (1990). *Working class without work: High school students in a deindustrializing society.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Willis, P. E. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs.* Westmead, England: Saxon House.

Address correspondence to:
John Portelli
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor St., West Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6
Canada

Back to current electronic table of contents