



# BANBURY CROSSROADS SCHOOL EST. 1979

## *A School of a Thousand Dreams*



Learning is an inevitable consequence of the human condition. We are born with innate curiosity, which is the manifestation of our intrinsic motivation to learn how to master our environment. Without it, we would not survive. We are also social beings, and we learn from each other. In centuries past, learning for the common person was essentially a family or village affair. Children learned by watching and doing, under the tutelage of persons who cared about them and about the product of their labor. Education for the masses in the western world came about during the mid-1850s, when the government acts such as the Factory Act in England, made education for all children mandatory. This happened at a time when youths, living in towns and cities rather than on farms, and being neither babes in arms, nor old enough to work in the factories, had nothing useful to do. Also, factory owners had come to realize that it would be helpful to have semi-literate workers in their

factories, and that training the children of their workers would accomplish that aim. And so, the public school system was founded upon principles conducive to the work done in factories. Teachers behaved as bosses; punctuality and conformity were honoured; instruction focussed upon a curriculum that was utilitarian and respectful of the past, and problem-solving focussed on specific tasks assigned to individual students. This was a stroke of genius by the factory

owners, as the students who graduated from this system were particularly trained for factory life. However, many of the criticisms that have been levelled at our current system of schooling over the past fifty years derive from the basic structure it inherited from those old days. Primary among modern concerns is the recognition that the conformity-seeking factory approach struggles with the modern mandate of meeting the needs of individuals. In addition, it does not promote creative or big-picture thinking. A third concern is that it leads to a competitive struggle for recognition and acknowledgment by the teacher and peer group, which both eats away at individual self-esteem and prevents true cooperative behaviour.

Our society has chosen certain ideals to pursue in its establishment of schools. We may think of these as the ideologies of education concepts that we honour because we assume they are accurate and inspirational descriptors of the world. The significance of these values is that they predict and colour what we will see around us. In effect, we see what we believe. Moreover, our beliefs drive the practical machinery that puts schools in place, and they dictate how we solve the problems that subsequently arise in the systems we create. Since we tend to assume that these ideologies are true, and that their practical manifestations are reasonable, it is difficult to objectively assess them. However, when signals of undeniable dissatisfaction start arising, we may find it wise to reexamine our basic premises. So, in order to change schools, we must first scrutinize and revise the ideals that drove the process that created them. I would suggest that, among more laudable values, the following troublesome concepts currently exist in the popular culture:

- Bigger is both better and more efficient;
- Education is a process done by teachers to students;
- Rewards and punishment are in the natural order of things;
- Academic motivation needs to be extrinsic;
- Although we acknowledge that in infants and toddlers developmental milestones are achieved at individually appropriate rates, once children reach Grade One, academic standards become one-size-fits-all;
- It is fair to provide consistency of program delivery to all students, to group students by age, and to expect consistent academic output from those students;
- Competition creates character, and promotes survival of the fittest both personally and economically;

Into this mix, children, as innocents, are added. In the past thirty years, particularly after Piaget and other developmental psychologists conducted research into the nature of childhood and learning processes, we have come to understand better what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice. In many ways, children are not well-served to be placed within environments wherein they are dependent upon others for their activity, they are organized for the convenience of adults, and the factors that are necessary for learning exploration, movement, creative expression and discussion are limited. In turn, schools link families with the larger society. Personal dissatisfaction, alienation, selfishness, vindictiveness, violence, and other evidences of dysfunction sadly exist within our Banburys, schools, and public places. Every criminal came through the school system. Every poor communicator, every abusive parent, every tyrant, every morally corrupt businessperson, every thief all of these grew up in a school, and left there without receiving the input necessary to heal their pain and to help them develop into the best that they could be. We are starting to see that dealing with people en masse seems to lead to problems from those who fall by the wayside, and even from those whom we did not notice. We have become aware of the plight of these casualties, and in turn, of those they affect. We have also started noticing the stifling of potential that occurs when activities are directed at the - average student. Educational and psychological research has progressed to the point that we now know too much to value the operation of schools like factories. The old ideologies of education need revision.

Fortunately, within the educational landscape in Alberta, one reformist ideology of education has existed for a while, and that is that diversity is good. It has spoken with a tiny voice, yet it has created the opportunity for a small number of progressive educators to establish a school other than those mandated by the government. I am one of them. My name is Diane Swiatek, and, in addition to being a parent of three children, I have also owned and operated a private school, Banbury Crossroads, for 23 years. It is the only one of its kind in Alberta. Due to the opportunity to explore, independently and responsibly, other possibilities for schooling, I have been able to coordinate a community effort to create a school that is perched on the edge of educational reform. I am very proud of it. My experience revolves around this school, as a Principal and as a parent within it, and it is of this that I now speak.

My school is based upon the institution of the family. These are ideologies that inspire the type of education operating within our walls, and which our strategies serve:

- Self-esteem is the cornerstone of a child's ability to savour life, and to demonstrate empathy and respect toward others.
- Mutual respect is the basic principle underlying constructive relationships and collaborative problem solving;
- Education is a process that adults pursue with children within a supportive community;

- Although information input is typical of academic learning, relationships with mentors are crucial in developing effective logical and moral reasoning skills to process this information;
- Children need to feel secure that they are acknowledged and celebrated as individuals, and that they belong to their social group; therefore, smaller class sizes assist in the formation of healthy emotional development and social relationships;
- To be respectful and efficient, academic progress must be student-paced; Self-responsibility and autonomy are necessary for personal emotional health, and for providing citizens with the means to create a healthy democracy;
- Intrinsic motivation is to be promoted, over extrinsic motivation;
- It is preferable to create change by exerting one's influence through logic and empathy, rather than by manipulating and controlling others by rewards and punishment;
- The world requires people of different ages to function together. Multi-age grouping provides a natural setting for our youth to develop compassionate and nurturing attitudes, to offer peer instruction, and to develop personal confidence;
- Children are holistic individuals, and all aspects of their growth matter and deserve attention;
- The development of individual potential is the focus of our efforts;
- Competitiveness is harmful to self-esteem, creates performance anxiety and distorts cooperative action;
- Urban and rural community resources are available and preferable for cultural, musical, artistic, sportive and scientific exploration;
- Developing within our students the ability to cooperate in the pursuit of common goals, to communicate effectively and solve problems creatively in a win-win fashion, and to be empathetic and socially responsive is useful for ensuring their constructive participation in our culture, in every aspect of it.

These concepts are what I know to be good, and true in the search for learning. From these ideals, we create strategies to pursue them. The word education comes from the Latin words to lead and out, which implies the existence of a relationship between learner and mentor. In the pursuit of knowledge and the transference of understanding to new situations, both learner and mentor are involved, and both are changed. It is not enough to merely gather information; information must be digested, evaluated for usefulness, reliability and accuracy, used to make decisions, and combined with old information to refine one's awareness of the fine details of the subject. Creating a comfortable and respectful connection with mentors is essential to this process, and connection occurs more effectively if the group is small enough to allow for discussion by all present. Relationships are very important in our school. All students and staff

are addressed by their first name. This sets a tone that we are all equally important. We have a staff of 17 and a student body of approximately 85 students. Class ratios are around 10 or 12 students per teacher. This allows for more knowledgeable academic contact between students and teachers, and for flexibility in type of instruction offered. Individual instruction, mini lectures, group projects and discussions all are used when appropriate.

Relationships between teachers are cooperative and constructive since they have personal and professional attributes that match the goals and atmosphere of the school. Quality of teacher performance is a bonus for everyone, since it enhances the effectiveness of the school, and we all share in that success.

Relationships with parents are cultivated with the idea that parents and teachers are partners in children's education. This effort is easier to accomplish when the class size is small. Parents have more potential for communicating with staff and administration when there are fewer of them in the group. As an independent school, we do not get caught up in an over-abundance of red tape. Since we all depend upon one another intensely for accomplishing our mutual goals of facilitating learning in children, we need to be responsive to each other's needs, and red tape would not help. Parents and teachers alike enjoy this lack of bureaucracy.

Fostering positive relationships between students is another area of primary focus. We believe that in order to bring peacefulness to our society, children must experience positive, nurturing relationships with significant adults and peers during their childhood. They need to learn to communicate effectively, to negotiate and resolve problematic issues, to defuse negative emotional exchanges with intellectual understanding and a wider repertoire of behavioural options, to celebrate positive emotional connections, and to develop compassion for others. In this way, they will grow to expect respect from others, and also to trust. If children continually spend their time with a small number of consistent others, then they are able to develop caring for them as individuals. Children need to live in an environment where it is possible to connect meaningfully with others, and this can only happen when the environment is small enough. This is the missing link in the bullying issue that confronts us daily in our society.

One of our greatest discoveries is that being a small school is very effective for creating vibrant, participatory, democratic individuals. Here, we value autonomy and self-responsibility, two other conditions necessary in our view to the development of good citizens. This is not to be confused with obedience in fulfilling solitary tasks assigned by others. Instead, this refers to self-determination the ability to predict consequences, set goals and make practical decisions to carry out those goals, to organize their time and materials, to accept accountability for their actions, and to alter their behaviour and make amends when their previous decisions misfired. In order for children to learn how to be autonomous and self-directed, they need practice. They need chances to make decisions, complete with the freedom to analyze the resultant consequences and to make adjustments in their behaviour in response to this new understanding. Young people need to be allowed to engage with dignity in this process of failure. We learn from experiences that cause pain as well as those that cause comfort. At our

school, we keep this in mind in our daily interactions with each other being gentle and understanding throughout. I, along with each teacher, spend a great deal of time in conference with students who are in confusion or crisis. We are proud to say that this process of discussion is so common at our school that students book themselves in for meetings with the Principal even in regard to their difficulties with their teachers! This shows the level of trust operating within our walls. Meaningful relationships with adults, once again, are critical here, because the understanding and input they receive help young people to handle the autonomy and power they truly do possess over their own lives.



In addition, we provide all of our students with time to make decisions autonomously regarding their academic progress. We call it choice work time. During the morning session, students choose the subject they will work on, how long they will be occupied by the task, where within the space allotted they will pursue it, and with whom they will work. This allows children to adjust their activity to their concentration, to work independently, with a peer or with direct instruction from a teacher, whichever is appropriate for the task at hand. The only adjustment we would like to see here is to build more open-ended flexibility into the curriculum, so that students would have more time to pursue interests that lead off on tangents. This would enhance their interest in academic work, and would produce more lateral thinking, collaboration and organizational skill development. Even as it is, students see teachers as guides and assistants in their daily activities. Decision making

generally is a dual process requiring teacher and student input. Conflicts of opinion are resolved by having the best reason win. This teaches children to present their case confidently, as well as to listen to others' opinions and presentations of information. We all must reserve the right to change our minds, given new information.

We also operate according to a non-behaviourist model, and do not stress inter-student comparisons or competition. We do not have marks for students until high school. We provide feedback and examples of quality work, but we do not distract our children with conditions that produce performance anxiety. Students who attend our school for some time are noticeable for their unselfconscious academic effort and satisfaction, their self-confidence, their eager responsiveness to intellectual debate and critical thinking, their respectfulness toward others, their expectation that problems are challenges meant to be resolved, their opposition to being

rewarded and punished by manipulative and controlling others, and their dedication to the idea that they are meant to be happy. To me, this is success, and it bodes more success in their future lives.

We do not have artificial standards for accepting students into our school. If we have the practical resources to deal with particular students, they may join us. We have an open entry policy, which is possible because of our student-paced approach. Once students have entered the school, we focus on helping them to achieve their dreams, and even to extend their dreams beyond their former extent. Our school is a school of a thousand dreams. We dare to dream. We encourage our youth to dream. Everyone who is associated with the school knows that through its very existence, the school is living proof that dreams come true. This school is a real incorporation of the philosophical dreams I devised over 34 years of my adult life. They also know that through a collaborative process that required the dreams of many others as well, the school has evolved into its present state. The idea that this engenders is that, just as my dreams have spread, so will theirs. The dreams of students who have begun their lifetime learning about the world that surrounds them, and about the immense worlds of possibilities that exist within each of them, will spill out into the greater community. There, by direct action and by providing role models of kindly, logical, ethical, socially responsive and intelligent behaviour, they will inspire dreams in others. A school is a crossroads of activity and learning involving all adults and all children. We learn from each other, we connect within an extended familial community, and then we proceed outward into our own spheres of influence. We appreciate the autonomy that we have had to create crucial, meaningful decisions regarding the existence and operation of our school. We appreciate the opportunity to devise dreams to guide us. We need dreams to fulfill a vision of what we want to make of ourselves. For our learning is, after all, our own responsibility.

We gratefully acknowledge the opportunity this committee has given me to participate in your own search for vision for the future. We see the provision of diversity in educational delivery systems as an essential element in the survival of schooling as we know it for the children of the future. There are many diverse needs among the youth of this province. We live in a multi-cultural and philosophically diverse environment, wherein there are many variations in the expectations and hopes of parents, and teachers as well. One standardized delivery system cannot meet all of these needs. I will emphasize that, even more than creating tolerance for diversity in pedagogy, we need to celebrate systems that explore and extend the options open to those who would be educators. For a department of education to encourage and assist this process, it would be wise to encourage the development of a variety of delivery systems, equally valuing all of them.

It may be helpful to provide all children in this province with an equal share of educational funding, so that economic concerns do not hamper the resources of certain children. In Holland, I have been told, private schools have been funded equally with public schools. Doing so in this Province would soften the elitist label that many people confusedly associate with private schools. It would also provide an equal playing field with other alternatives, such as charter

schools and alternative programs within public schools, in which parents do not have to pay extra beyond their educational taxes for making an educational choice. Education tax dollars actually are collected on behalf of the children of Alberta, to ensure their access to an education.

Moreover, celebrating diversity in educational formats is wise for the same reason that it is necessary in ecological terms. In nature, from diversity come those crucial opportune elements that protect the system from the failures of monocultures if an environmental aberration occurs. Diversity provides evolutionary flexibility. Similarly, in education, diversity in delivery method and philosophy provides ideas for educational reform, because those ideas are already in successful practice. As I have been showing you, new ideas are possible to implement!

We must remember what all of this debate is about. We are here because of children and our hopes for them, because they are the future. We well know that who they become is intimately associated with what they experience when they are young. All children deserve a chance to approach their adulthood with hope, support, guidance, health, creative courage and intellectual stimulation. It is a suitable aim to open bridges for young people to gain knowledge and skill, critical and creative thinking, and social and environmental responsiveness. We need to help young people learn how to negotiate, how to solve differences, how to innovate, how to forgive, how to recognize success according to their own definitions, and how to belong. In this way, everyone may find some opening to growth, and each of us may contribute positively within our society, choosing work within the world that is constructive, satisfying, and challenging. We, adults, need to be dedicated to the learning and success of these vulnerable others who need our protection and our care. We need to be altruistic, in truth. We need to be careful with this responsibility that is ours. I have seen within my professional life, that all of these needs are met admirably in the small extended familial community that is Banbury Crossroads. I am thankful to share my learning with you.