Mountains Aren’t Blue: Re-conceptualizing Schooling to Welcome Diversity

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Abstract

Students come to school with different aims, different interests, different skills, and different ways of looking at things. Yet, as educators, we sometimes act as if we believe that individual differences are problems that reside within particular children, to be fixed with remediation. Throughout history, students’ differences – their failure to fit the system – have been used as a rationale for imposing schooling practices that are bureaucratic rather than educational in intent. A production model of education, designed by experts, requiring compliance with standards, and producing conforming end-products, continues to have a tenacious hold on how we think and what we do. A view of individuals as units of production within an organization stands in contrast with a view of individuals as social collaborators and initiators of action. This production model of schooling yields a depersonalized, exclusive environment where individual talents are stifled and students fear to take risks. In this article, I offer some thoughts about where this production model came from, what its implications are, and why we continue to operate in accordance with it, even while giving lip-service to constructivist and inclusive philosophies.

People are different from one another. They have different aims, different interests, different skills, and different ways of looking at things. Students, being young people, also differ from one another. They have particular interests and aims that guide their construction of knowledge; they go about their learning in different ways and at different rates. To me, as a parent, a university teacher, and an educator who has worked with learners with special needs, this seems obvious. It is a perspective also widely supported by current research (Bruner, 1996; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1999; Wells, 2001). Eisner (1995) puts it this way: “Variability, not uniformity, is the hallmark of the human condition” (p. 764).

Yet, in practice, it is problematic for many educators. Master teachers doing graduate work at our Canadian university comment in frustration that instructional aims that are learner-centered and that honor diversity often are back-grounded because of the importance assigned to large-scale tests administered by the district or province. “The final exams are our reality,” they say. “To be accountable, we are forced to teach to the test.” Others have commented on the lack of time and support for them to develop alternatives to traditional, transmission-oriented approaches that continue to predominate in schools (Lapadat, 2003). It is tempting to point fingers at administrators and policy-makers. Yet, I will argue in this paper that a more intractable source of resistance to school change is located within ourselves – the fundamental belief systems that we, as educators, hold about the nature of education and what is possible.

Same For All

I will share a personal story. Some years ago, a teacher told me that, despite having already mastered the year’s math curriculum by mid-October, my daughter would have to continue to work through that grade’s prescribed math exercises all year. Why? The answer was that the teacher did not have time to plan something different for just one student. One implication of her remark is that she believed it was up to my daughter to fit into the system. But another implication is that, somehow, that teacher must have thought all the other students were the same and should do the same work.

As a parent, I was worried about the implications this would have for my daughter’s interest in math, so I met with an administrator at the school to discuss alternatives. His view was that my daughter did not deserve “special consideration” in her math program. He seemed to see this judgment as non-
negotiable, as a prerogative of his authority. As I recall, he said, “Don’t you sit there and tell me what’s True!”

What I heard these two educators saying was that it was appropriate for them within the school system to act as if all the students in a grade are the same. They were also saying that they knew best; they had a corner on the Truth. Only they had, and should have, the power to decide what kind of schooling a student may have. They could choose to dole out or withhold educational tidbits for covert moral reasons, depending on whether they had designated a student or family as deserving or not (Cedersund & Svensson, 1996).

When adaptive education is construed as a privilege to be awarded by educational authorities to a designated few, then instruction is not learner-centered, and many students will be denied access to learning opportunities that are matched to their individual needs (Contenta, 1993). Furthermore, the criteria by which students are judged deserving warrant consideration. If educators view ethnic background, skin color, the language the family speaks, socio-economic class, gender, or a disability as indicators that a student is not worthy of consideration (and this has happened many times throughout history, with the residential schooling of Aboriginal students, the segregation of black students, and the establishment of a separate special education system, for example), then students’ differences – their failure to fit the system – become the justification for schooling practices that are not educational in intent (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Ball & Harry, 1993; Haig-Brown, 1988; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986).

This view of individual differences as exceptions to which educators need not respond is not limited to one teacher and one principal, or to one school and one town. I encountered a similar point of view when I was working with some colleagues to plan a new first year university course. The planning process came to grief over the issues of whether the course should be compulsory for all first year students or an elective; whether the course should include options from which the students could select; and whether the course should have a modular or a more traditional linear format.

As I believe that students come to university with different aims, different interests, different skills, and different ways of looking at things, I favored options, flexibility, and student choice. I said that if students could choose whether to take the course in the first place, and then could choose from modules that fit their aims, interests, skills, and perspectives, they would be more likely to find the course meaningful and to learn something. Several colleagues shared this view.

However, many arguments were trotted out in opposition to this plan. We heard that first year university students could not possibly know what was good for them, and so all students should be forced to take the course. We, the “experts,” should pre-determine the content and standardize it across all sections and instructors rather than allowing students to select from options, in order to protect them from making poor choices out of ignorance. Repeatedly, the point was made that providing for differences was inconvenient for those who administer the system. It was messy for the registrar to schedule this type of course and keep track of credits. People said, in various words, “If students can choose from options, other post-secondary institutions and future employers will not know what students learned in the course. Different students might learn different things.”

Did these educators believe that we really could make course content the same across all students, sections, and instructors, over time? Or, even if we could, that every student would construct the same understandings by taking the course? Or, finally, that it would be desirable for every student to do the same things and come to the same end?

Some people would answer these questions, “Yes, yes, and yes.” They would not question that education is about experts establishing content and processes that are the same for everyone, and then applying them to students to create the same end products.

An important question to ask, however, is, “Same as what?” Howe (1994) points out that the accountability movement, which has moved to establish rigorous educational standards and mandated testing, has consequences for the equality of educational opportunity. He describes such movements towards accountability as “simply articulating and further entrenching the status quo” (p. 30). He remarks: “the status quo has not been particularly congenial to marginalized groups. Assessing all children in terms of it is thus liable to the charge of a form of bias implicit in the very standards that are to serve as the anchor of assessment” (p. 30).

A Production Model of Education

What we are talking about here is a production model of education (Franklin, 1992). We put unformed blobs of clay onto a conveyer belt, crank them through our educational treatments, and out the other end come identical well-formed citizens, engineers, accountants, poets, or whatever. We spend a
lot of time arguing about which processes are the right ones to make the product: Whole language or phonics? Discovery learning or direct instruction? Retention or promotion? But we do not spend enough time thinking about where this production model came from, what the consequences of it are, and why we are so committed to continue believing in it even while giving lip-service to notions like “learner-centered,” “construction of knowledge,” and “inclusion.”

Franklin (1992), writing on technology, has traced how production models have become so dominant in our society. She shows how the development of prescriptive technologies, in which work is divided into many steps completed by different workers to meet externally applied standards, yields the production model, in which output of conforming end-products at a rapid rate becomes paramount. Characteristics of the production model include a master plan designed by external experts and the requirement of internal compliance with standards. Both are needed to assure product control, and have created, in turn, a culture of compliance. She says that “we live in a culture of compliance, that we are ever more conditioned to accept orthodoxy as normal, and to accept that there is only one way of doing ‘it’” (Franklin, 1992, p. 24). Now production models have become “so deeply rooted in our social and emotional fabric that it becomes almost sacrilege to question them” (p. 31). Although Franklin is speaking of the pervasiveness of production models in North American culture in the broad sense, what she says certainly rings true for education.

Mumford (1934) makes the connection between our society’s production models and the historical roots of our schools. He provides a chilling description of the characteristics of schools introduced in the mid-nineteenth century in England to train child laborers for their work as operatives in factories:

The characteristic limitations of the House of Terror were introduced as far as possible into the school: silence, absence of motion, complete passivity, response only upon the application of an outer stimulus, rote learning, verbal parroting, piece-work acquisition of knowledge – these gave the school the happy attributes of jail and factory combined. (Mumford, 1934, p. 176)

Mumford notes that the House of Terror, “a place where paupers would be confined at work for fourteen hours a day and kept in hand by a starvation diet” (1934, p. 175), had been proposed in the eighteenth century as a scheme for managing the poor, and was realized the following century in the factories of the industrial revolution.

Little Bear (2000), reflecting on the philosophical gulf between Aboriginal worldviews and dominant worldview of Eurocentric culture, comments on the impact of colonialism. “One of the problems with colonialism is that it tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of worldviews” (p. 77). Educational policy, along with force and terror, were (and are) the tools used by colonizers to suppress Aboriginal worldviews, he points out.

Raise your hand if you wish to speak or to request permission to leave your desk. Answer the question. Speak when you’re spoken to. Memorize the times tables. Repeat it after me. Put your readers away: It’s time to complete our math worksheets now. I learned these lessons about how to behave when I was in school, and many of the classrooms in which I have observed are not so very different today. Callan (1988) offers the following definition of a school:

An institution is a school if and only if its primary purpose is to foster learning of some kind, the learning is largely directed through the enterprise of teaching, and finally, those who teach have a right to direct the learning of students, and students have a corresponding obligation to comply. (p. 93)

The way we structure schooling is incongruent with our oft-stated goal of educating students to become autonomous adults. Callan identifies autonomy as “an essential feature of the good life” (1988, p. 55), and explains the connection between individual differences and autonomy:

The varying natural predilections of different persons will give rise to diverse and sometimes eccentric loyalties and aspirations; and if the autonomy of the individual is to be protected, freedom has to be safeguarded here as far as possible. It is for this reason that social diversity and individuality are so closely associated with freedom and autonomy in liberal political thought. (1988, p. 54)

He states that our schools are structured instead to enforce uniformity: “To the extent that all children are compelled to attend the same institution, each must submit to more or less the same experiences, the same rules, the same criteria of success and failure” (p. 97). The implication that can be drawn is that in our very idea of schooling, optimum individual development is sacrificed to conformity with the common good, however that has been defined by experts (Eisner, 1995).
Clark and Astuto (1994), writing on the topic of the popular assumptions driving education reform, argue that the view of individuals as units of production within an organization stands in contrast with the view of individuals as initiators of action. While the latter shape their environment to promote both collective and individual achievement, people who see themselves as cogs in the machine feel unable to direct their own work, and ultimately respond by disengaging from the organization. Clark and Astuto suggest that schools are dominated by “this bureaucratic mindset” (p. 519), which impacts the contributions of teachers and educational administrators. A production model of schooling results in a depersonalized, rigid environment where individual talents are stifled. They remark, “When the structures and processes of work are standardized, no room exists for difference” (p. 519). Although Clark and Astuto are describing the effect on administrators, similar consequences are also seen with students in their disaffection from school, their decreased motivation to achieve, and in the drop-out rate (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1994; Lapadat, 2000; Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995).

Franklin’s (1992) and Mumford’s (1934) historical perspectives suggest why a production model was applied to education, and how increasing compliance has enabled the production model to become a dominant educational metaphor and practice. Howe’s (1994), Callan’s (1988), and Clark and Astuto’s (1994) remarks suggest the negative implications the characteristic uniformity of production model education has for individual differences and individual autonomy. But how do we explain why we continue to believe in and support the use of a production model of education?

The Motives that Sustain the Production Model

One way of getting at this question is to ask: “Whose interests are served by promoting a same-path-for-all, same-end-for-all approach to schooling?” When I have asked this question of people, I have heard two sorts of answers. Some respond that students benefit from this system of having others, “experts,” make decisions for them because they are too stupid, weak, or bad to make decisions for themselves. (The notions of “stupid,” “weak,” and “bad” are implied, rather than stated explicitly). The other answer is that there is some powerful “They” – Industry, or Administration, or Government, for example – who stand to gain by taking the power of choice away from others. What “They” gain is money, status, or position, which, in turn, increases their power over others.

Coming at this question another way, I think about the conveyer belt and about how many students never make it to the end into comfortable, labeled, professional categories. A lot of little blobs of clay fall off the belt before they’re fully formed. In fact, whole educational industries are mobilized to meet the twin responsibilities of repairing, remediating, and rehabilitating the fallen blobs so as to get them back into the production line, and testing and evaluating the students and educational treatments to ensure a conforming, consistent end product (Ball & Harry, 1993; Raffini, 1993; Schmidt, 2000). The recent movement to dismantle the dual special and regular education systems in favor of a more inclusive approach to education has initiated widespread re-examination of educators’ beliefs about diversity and their own roles as practitioners (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Van Dyke, Stallings, & Colley, 1995).

The production model produces a great number of fairly comfortable, fairly important, middle class jobs for educators. It produces conforming citizens to fill those and other middle class jobs (Schmidt, 2000). And as for those students who fall off the belt? Well, they fill Plato’s ranks of workers and artisans, as well as becoming lifelong clients of middle class physicians, lawyers, social workers, and physiotherapists. There it is, staring us unpleasantly in the face. Maybe we are “Them.”

Mountains Aren’t Blue

Now I know that this idea is simplistic, not to mention a little shrill and dogmatic. So I want to set it aside for a minute and tell you a story about my younger brother. When my brother was in grade three, he was kind of odd, stubborn, and artistic. In fact, he still is kind of odd, stubborn, and artistic. He was the type of boy of whom people would say, “He marches to the beat of a different drummer.” It seems his grade three teacher did not like him very much. There were phone-calls home to my parents, detentions, and extra homework assignments. But two incidents stand out in my memory.

Our town sat at the foot of a tall mountain. The mountain was visible from the windows of our house. It presided over our lives from the day we were born. Anyways, one day in art, my brother drew a mountain. Faithful to our mountain, he colored it blue. If you have ever looked at our mountain or one like it, you will know that it really does look blue on many days.

His teacher looked at his picture. She said, “Mountains aren’t blue; they’re green and brown.” She showed him a picture of some green and brown upside-down ice-cream cone mountains drawn by another student. Then she ripped his picture up. She had a corner on the Truth. Her perspective was the
One that counted.

Another time, while doing his homework, my brother drew a picture of his pet rabbit to illustrate a school project. Somehow, he really captured the essence of Frisky in his picture. We sat around the kitchen table and watched him draw, then praised his wonderful picture of the rabbit. He took it to school, glowing with pride. His teacher accused him of tracing it from a book. He denied it. Then someone older must have drawn it for him, she said. No, he insisted that he had drawn it himself. “You’re lying,” she said, and ripped that one up too. She had a corner on the Truth. Her perspective was the one that counted. Not only that, but she could force him to conform.

This comes around to the issue of power and authority. My brother’s teacher had the power to enforce her own point of view. She believed that she had the right to do so because she knew what was True. She knew that she knew the Truth because she was older and more educated, and because her position as teacher conferred on her the authority to judge students and their work. If she began to doubt for a minute that she had that power or authority, all she needed to do was to look around. Society legitimizes the teacher’s Truth. Society legitimizes the teacher’s power. “Don’t you sit there and tell me what’s True!” Aha, the reader thinks. What you are saying is that teacher was one of “Them.” She sought to consolidate her power. She squelched eight-year-olds who did not echo her view of things.

The Authority Paradox

Well then, how do we explain the pervasiveness of teachers’ burn-out, their feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the system? Why are teachers, who feel like cogs in the machine, perceived by their students to be rigid autocrats? It is tempting, but too easy, to say that there is one set of bad teachers who flaunt their power over children, and another set of good teachers who mean well but who ultimately are victimized and rendered helpless by the true holders of power who run the system.

Most teachers mean well, at least when they start out. Teacher candidates, new to our teacher education program, when asked about their motives to become teachers, write about caring, their desire to help students with learning difficulties, and the joy of seeing a child’s delight in learning. Teachers want students to learn and to enjoy learning. They want to do what is best. Yet, somehow, a few years into their career, these ideals crash against some hard rocks. For many teachers, the central challenge of teaching becomes making it through the day, then another day, then another. These teachers begin to see students as a faceless mass to be herded along through a series of worksheets, or readers, or a core curriculum (Juska, 1994). What is it that goes so very wrong?

We can see a parallel in what happens to children. For the most part, they start school as eager learners, confident in their own capabilities and thrilled with the potential of discovery. Within a few years, many of these same students come to see themselves as failures, and say they hate school (Contenta, 1993; Raffini, 1993).

This phenomenon is not limited to the field of education. Health care professionals, such as nurses and speech-language pathologists, leave their professions in droves a few years into their careers. Or they job hop, or cling bitterly to jobs they hate, waiting for retirement. They might attribute their difficulties to their own personal inadequacies (“I guess I’m just not cut out for this kind of work”), or to particularities of their setting (a bad co-worker, boss, structure, or system), or to inequities in the wider social system (“If nurses only had as much say in things as physicians do”).

The fascinating paradox is that the teachers, nurses, or speech-language pathologists who rail against those in the system who take away their power to choose, often at the same time impose their own perspectives on the children they teach or the patients in their charge, without ever recognizing the parallel. Teachers argue against teaching evaluations while continuing to evaluate their students. They argue for the right to choose what to teach and how to teach it while failing to give their students an opportunity to choose what to learn and how to learn it. They say that their situation is unique, so standard ways of doing things should not be imposed from above, but then they act is if all students are the same and impose same-for-all approaches in the classroom.

It is only a small step for teachers to set aside concerns about teaching and learning altogether, and re-define their mission as a battle for more power (money, status, or position), either in their institution, or in the wider society. For those who see the failure as personal, the battle is within themselves.

What I am trying to say here is, maybe we are “Them.” There might well be particular people or organizations at which we can point that seem to be constraining our choices and denying our individuality. But if we talked to those people, we would find that they would point to someone else or some system
constraining them, just as our students, or patients, or clients, or children point to us and say, “They made me...”. I am not exempting myself. I worked with learners with special needs for many years, and only towards the end of that time did it occur to me that maybe I should ask my students what they thought they needed to practice or learn, rather than prescribing and then imposing. Because of my position in the system relative to theirs, I thought that I knew best and could decide for them better than they could decide for themselves.

I recently went into the hospital for an operation and discovered the tables were turned. I walked into the hospital a capable, knowledgeable individual, and within a few hours became a piece of meat, dependent on a nurse’s good will to turn me over or bring a glass of water. People talked about me rather than to me, and made decisions about me rather than in discussion with me. To “Them” I was just a body like any other body; I wasn’t me. I felt helpless to heal myself until I escaped from the “help” at the hospital to my own home.

In schools, we have children labeled as having learning disabilities, behavior problems, low motivation, English as a Second Language, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. And then we have the “normal” children, who, if you ask them, will tell you that they’re no good at math, no good at phys-ed, and they wish they didn’t have to go to school (Lapadat, 1998; 2000). We act as if we believe that individual differences are problems that reside within particular children, to be fixed with remediation. No matter how obvious it is that students are different from one another, with different aims, different interests, different skills, and different ways of looking at things, we treat them as if they are all the same, or as if their differences are deficits. We collude in sustaining a production model of education despite evidence of its negative consequences for both students and teachers.

Dixon (1994) jolts me with a description of what we adults and our schools do to children, whom he identifies as “the last visible minority without human rights” (p. 362):

Our model of childhood dictates that children be passive instead of active, incapable instead of capable, directed instead of self-directed, acquiescent instead of assertive, dependent rather than independent. We have Mickey Moused the lives of children in schools by denying them control, the very thing we should be teaching them so that they can find meaning in life and learn to survive in the real world of childhood. (p. 362)

Conformity, authority, control. Perhaps we hold on to the production model because relinquishing it has frightening implications. What do we teach? How do we decide what is True? What role will there be for teachers and nurses and lawyers if we step away from the view that there is a class of helpless children and clients, and another knowledgeable class who ministers to them? And, more unpleasantly, we worked hard to get where we are, for our positions in the system, for our power and privilege. No-one is going to take it away by questioning our view of things, especially not some eight-year-old boy who draws blue mountains, some junior faculty member, or some demanding patient.

Telling a New Story

Change is hard. And for those individuals in our educational institutions who stand out as different and also choose to act “against the grain,” change can be both hard and dangerous, as de Castell (1993) points out. But the alternatives to actively promoting change are to perpetuate the system, to withdraw from the system, or to overthrow the system. To me, those alternatives seem worse than working to change things.

Horne (1999) and King (2003) explore the role of the stories that we tell ourselves and each other. Through our stories, we establish a shared cultural narrative, or worldview. Through our stories, we also have the potential to disrupt the dominant narrative and create openings for other ways of looking at things. A fundamental step in the process of change is learning to listen to and tell ourselves different stories (Goddard, Lehr, & Lapadat, 2000; Horne, 1999; King, 2003).

One place to start is to acknowledge that people, including our students, are different, and then act accordingly. We can welcome diversity, rather than trying to ignore or eliminate it (hooks, 1994). This doesn’t mean that a teacher’s knowledge and ways of making sense of the world become irrelevant and that “anything goes.” It does mean that teachers need to try to understand each student, and respect each one as a person capable of making choices. I am not talking about choosing between this worksheet or that worksheet, but about the core, important choices about their own learning.

Howe (1994) proposes that a democratic framework is needed to provide equality of educational opportunity. This goes beyond eliminating or compensating for barriers to access. He calls for democratically re-defining “what educational practices and curriculum are to count as the educational
goods to be distributed” (p. 30). This process is necessarily uncertain and open-ended, and defies precise measurement. He insists that we must not put “the quest for accurate measurement – and control – above the quest for educationally and morally defensible policies” (p. 31).

Teaching and learning, among groups of individuals, becomes more mutual and collegial, a negotiation, a conversation (Wells, 2001). In relinquishing control, teachers will lose a degree of certainty, but will gain a chance to recover their moral centre, and also to be taken in surprising directions. Students will not plod through a standard curriculum in lockstep; in fact, they might not even “cover” the traditional discipline-based curriculum. Different students might do different things (Dixon, 1994; Schwartz, 1992).

Theorists have argued that expository instruction of a same-for-all curriculum is an efficient approach because it ensures that all the curriculum is covered, and covered most quickly. But, all of whose curriculum, I ask again? And of what use is quick coverage if the material is not meaningful, understood, or remembered by a student? Purveyors of this view seldom acknowledge the energy that is wasted and time that is lost dragging horses to water and trying to force them to drink, not to mention the long-term consequences for students’ attitudes and behaviors.

In contrast, the time “wasted” in mutual construction of a learning conversation, the fits and starts and dead-ends, are made up for in enthusiasm and the amount of real learning that takes place (Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997). Certainly, in most classrooms, little of students’ time is spent engaged in academic learning (Rosenshine, 1980). Students who learn and love to learn will grow into different adults than those who equate learning with schooling, and schooling with the experience of being powerless.

Teachers who have learned to converse and mutually construct in their own classrooms will be more sure of their right to do this in their institutions and the wider society. Just as teachers come to respect the individuality of each student and be respected, they will begin to respect each administrator, parent, or school board trustee as an individual. Maybe they will begin to be respected in return, maybe not. This is not a final solution but a starting place for discussion and negotiation. And perhaps instead of losing power, teachers will gain it because they will no longer have to fight the “Them” within themselves.
References


