

Challenging Our “Nice Little” Stereotypes

Comments made by Dr. Carolyn Shields on the occasion of the 27th Annual BCPVPA/ UBC Short Course, 2004

First let me say how happy I am to be able to attend this banquet and to bring greetings and congratulations on behalf of the Faculty of Education and the Department of Educational Studies on the occasion of the 27th annual Short Course. Since the days when I was involved more directly with the Short Course, I have watched with interest and delight to see it grow and develop into the multi-faceted program that exists today.

I am convinced that now—as never before, the role of educational leaders—both in formal administrative positions and informal teacher leader positions—has never been more critical. Our communities are changing; our country and province are undergoing changes; the world is changing in significant ways—and our schools and the education we offer our students must change to keep pace. Moreover, as many of us are facing changed personal responsibilities in the coming year, now is the time for us—as educators and educational leaders to revisit our own goals, to reflect on why we chose the profession of education in the first place and to recommit to the moral purposes of an education that is socially just and academically excellent.

I am reminded of the true story of Dr Lee, a researcher, who was talking to Mr. Engen, a teacher in charge of a computer program, who was “bubbling over with praise” for the achievement of his Asian-American students. As Dr. Lee started to raise a question, the teacher stopped him and said, “Please don’t ruin my stereotype. It’s such a nice one.”

We cannot afford to perpetuate myths and stereotypes about educational issues today—stereotypes (like those perpetuated by the rankings of the Fraser Institute about which schools are performing well and which are not). We cannot afford to make assumptions about groups of students based on physical characteristics, home language, or ethnic affiliation. We cannot continue to assume, for example, that all Asian students are good in math, that Indigenous children are good with their hands, that poor children have less academic ability than those from more wealthy homes, or that all people who look a certain way believe similar things. I was working with a school principal once to develop a conversation with a Navajo parent group about what they meant by success and how schools could help their children to be successful, when he mused, “I wonder if they will all think the same thing.” I immediately responded, “Why should they? Do we?” To his credit, Conrad quickly realized how he had stereotyped the Navajo parents and took pains to debunk the stereotype on several subsequent occasions in my hearing.

Some of you will have heard me cite, on other occasions, Madeleine Grumet’s definition of curriculum as “the conversation that makes sense of things.” I am firmly

convinced that educational leaders must help teachers, parents, & students together to understand that schools must be places in which people can come together to make sense of our world—whether we are studying or talking about beheadings and senseless killings, Greece winning the Euro 2004, or the micropolitics of a BC lumber town influenced by tariff disputes.

We saw a clear need for sense making conversations in the case of Itrath Syed, the devout Muslim woman who ran for the NDP in Delta-East Richmond in the recent federal election. When she received a barrage of queries, including hate mail, about her acceptance of the NDP platform regarding gay marriage despite her Muslim convictions, she responded, (in part):

I am a Canadian because this is my home. My Canada includes everyone in Canada. I believe that my ability to be Muslim in my country is completely and absolutely connected to the abilities of everyone else in Canada to live according to their beliefs. That is how equality works, that is how a country as wide and diverse as Canada continues to be home for everyone in it. That is how we can all be safe here.

In my opinion, educational leaders must take Syed's words seriously; we must facilitate the conversations that will help to ensure that schools are safe places for children—not only physically safe, but safe for them to express their deepest convictions—related to who they are and what they hold important. We must ensure that our schools become spaces in which students may explore alternative perspectives, encounter those who are different from themselves, learn to develop sound criteria and make judgments about the type of Canada—and global community—they want to create and live in, in the coming decades.

Educational leaders, as I have said so often in the past, must not view social justice as separate from academic outcomes. We can perpetuate our nice little stereotypes about Muslims (or fundamentalist Christians, for that matter) being opposed to gay rights in ways that marginalize them and put them in a box. Or we can understand that while holding firm convictions for oneself, it is also possible to show deep and absolute regard for others who hold different views.

Of course, I am arguing that one of the fundamental roles of the educational leader is to ensure that dialogue occurs—dialogue that leads to deep understanding, and deep and meaningful interpersonal relationships within our schools—understandings and relationships that permit safe and reflective explorations of deeply held and contested meanings—dialogue that leads to change. We must not shy away from controversial or contentious issues, but address them head on.

On Friday June 25, a Vancouver Sun reporter wrote, “Evil is a word usually reserved for serial killers, Austin Powers villains, and kids who tear the legs off baby spiders,

But a new poll shows a significant number of young Canadians would use “evil” to describe something far different: their US neighbours.”

Of course many of us disagree with some of the political decisions and acts of our neighbour to the South, but it causes me great concern to learn that over 40% of our youth consider the US to be an “evil global force.” Where is this coming from? What are we teaching our students for this to be the case? What “nice little stereotypes” are being perpetuated that permit us to label over 300 million people as “evil”? We know, for example, that on both sides of the border, many teachers were instructed not to discuss emotional political issues related to the now infamous 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. But at what cost do we fail to permit students to discuss and explore the varying realities that underlie such events and at what cost do we fail to make sense of the most profound events and realities of their lives?

I recognize that the work of educational leaders is very complex and that educators have multiple tasks to perform. I acknowledge that personnel issues, supervision, budgets, test scores, school closures, overcrowded facilities, parent advisory groups, school planning councils – are all important parts of the job. Please don’t get me wrong – I am not in any way suggesting that these duties are unimportant. But I am increasingly concerned about some of the more politically sensitive aspects of the role which we are too often reluctant to engage.

Parker Palmer, in his wonderful book, *The Courage to Teach*, calls for educators to create what he calls *communities of truth* – and he defines truth as “the eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline[d inquiry] (p. 104). And he goes on to say:

when I remind myself to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced - than I need to spend less time filling the space with data and my own thoughts and more time opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other ... (p. 120)

The highest and most important calling of the educator, the creation of a community of truth, requires that we open ourselves to the sacred, to the profane, to wonder, to surprise, to commonly held beliefs and to deep wounds and conflicts. Palmer (citing Buechner) says that a vocation is “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (p. 30)

My hope for you as educators as you conclude your reflections this week at the Short Course and move back to your places of work is that you will recognize that you are world leaders – helping others to make sense of the world in which we live; that you will be willing to identify and to let go of your “nice little stereotypes – and especially ...

that you will take time to reflect upon why you chose the vocation of *educator* – to reflect on those things that cause you deep gladness and those things that represent the world’s deep hunger – and find ways to take these critically important conversations back into the staff rooms, board rooms, and classrooms in which you live and lead.

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