PEI Home and School Federation

"Workshopping Different Models of Education"

April 9, 2016

Facilitated by Gerry Hopkirk

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Workshopping Different Models for Education

In his article *Taking back our schools: moving beyond shame, blame and more of the same*, Gerry Hopkirk declared that "activities in our schools are not always based on what we know about how children learn." At the 63rd Annual PEI Home and School Federation Meeting last week, Gerry Hopkirk led a workshop designed to be an informal discussion of different ways of organizing teaching learning and assessment. As homework, we were asked to read three articles that were designed to challenge us to think differently about schooling. They provided a foundation for thinking about children as unique individuals who have an innate love of learning and schools where curiosity is fostered and imagination is encouraged to run free. He asked us to participate in roundtable discussions that were guided toward a vision for education in PEI that is about hope for children and for the future. The following is a summary of those discussions.

How do children learn?

Participants wondered how schools might instil enjoyment in learning and ensure that every kid is excited to go to school and to learn. They asked how we can inspire and help kids explore curiosity. They called for more creativity and innovation to bring awareness to other educational activities outside of the curriculum.

Many participants stressed the fact that children learn in different ways and that each child should have the opportunity to reach their own potential. Suggestions include increasing focus on self-directed or independent learning and individual experience, identifying "ways of learning" early on, matching student needs to teacher skills, teaching to individual potential and focussing on strengths rather than weaknesses. Participants noted that students are more aware of all the things they can do. They suggested that schooling focus on the outcome or foundational learnings. This would allow students to explore in their own way and learn at a pace that allows them to maintain confidence, empowering them to be partners in their learning and taking the mystery out of what they need to do next. "Ownership equals learning."

One participant suggested that "play-based" curriculum could serve as a model for the entire K-12 path and another suggested including teaching life skills in the curriculum. Others recommended that mistakes be viewed as learning opportunities. Some participants argued that multi-age classrooms would offer opportunities for older students to teach younger students, and vice versa. "There shouldn't be a boring class."

What would school look like if it were structured to reflect how children learn?

Participants discussed the necessity of reorganizing the structure of schools in order to respond to how students really learn. One participant insisted that "school structure influences our parenting practice."

Many participants suggested that schools be more accepting of the various ways to learn and more flexible in various models for schools. One participant suggested that we "Blow up grades!" Participants suggested that students could be grouped according to their needs, perhaps to form "flexible 'teams' of learners based on personality, learning style, inclinations, passions" or that they could be grouped by learning goals. It was noted that core courses are needed for flexibility to pursue talents and interests.

Many participants agreed that class sizes would need to be smaller to accommodate individual learning and one participant recommended an ideal size of 12 students. Another one participant noted that it may not be a bad idea to have larger sized classes for High School in order to prepare for a university setting. Some participants suggested getting rid of junior high schools altogether. Other suggestions included shortening the school day, lengthening the school day, using classrooms in the evening and in the summer, starting the day later for adolescents, and having different or flexible schedules for different people – teachers, students, and resource providers.

Some people noted that the physical space could be adjusted to reflect student needs including reducing the number of walls, learning outside the classroom and allowing for movement away from desks. Technology was mentioned as a tool to manage individualized learning and multi-level classrooms. The *Connected Classroom* currently running at Colonel Gray High School was given as a model and it was suggested that technology could fill in gaps in resources, for example, "if a school needs a French teacher, they could teach via online."

There was discussion of opening school buildings to the whole community for learning (intergenerational, multi-lingual, multicultural). It was suggested that parents be included as team members in education and that they be engaged in a more mindful way. Some participants suggested that there be no school based fundraising. Others recommended that tools be developed to better connect with students and one participant suggested a tool where parents could "link in and monitor a class being taught and offer feedback."

One participant proposed "infecting the system with the 'connectedness' virus." There was an awareness of the importance of the community around the school, the potential of

public and community-based learning through internships and co-operative education programs or work-studies, and community programs like 4H, Junior Achievement and Scouts. "Students learn to care about others through community service." How can we mix this with school?

What would educators need to know?

Jill MacCormack described teachers as "facilitators encouraging exploration, questioning, the process of trial and error." The workshop discussions made it clear that teachers would need to have a better understanding of how children learn. Authentic learning, project based learning, outcomes-based learning and independent learning were mentioned many times and it was recognized teacher education would need to respond to these alternative models of teaching. One participant noted that teachers would need to understand children's aptitudes and to recognize "where they naturally thrive and for it to be OK for children to not thrive in some areas."

Professional development of teachers was discussed as an ongoing and daily sharing of strategies and methods. Participants noted some specific changes to teacher requirements, such as that specialists should be required at all levels, that PD days focus on public teaching strategies, and that students should be involved in PD days.

Teachers would know to celebrate all types of learning, and help students explore their curiosity. They would be empowered and have more freedom to be creative in their teaching methods and take risks. One participant asserted that teachers would "let children shine and excel with their strengths" and another made a reference to the Tinkerbell movies where "every fairy gets their talent." "Teachers can be anyone willing to inspire."

Is testing important?

Participants noted the incongruity between the concepts of individual learning and standardized testing. Participants questioned who should perform assessments and evaluations and what the purpose was for this kind of testing. The distinction was drawn between assessment for the purposes of improving individual learning and assessment for the purpose of measuring standardized curriculum quality. Some suggested that traditional tests be reduced or removed entirely, while others noted that testing was necessary and that various testing methods could be used, including written, oral, and hands-on. Some participants discussed different evaluation methods, including "fantastic formative assessment". Some participants noted that different ways of measuring learning should be used that take the focus off grades and numbers and put the focus on improving

learning. "Children can demonstrate what they've learned in a variety of ways." How do we acknowledge students strengths?

How would schools address student wellness?

There was a considerable amount of discussion about the availability of interagency services for wellness either in the school or in nearby community centres, and on building connections between health and education. It was suggested that psycho-educational assessments should be more easily accessed and that resources (health care, nutrition, childcare, speech/language pathology) should be available to children from birth to grade twelve in their community.

One participant suggested that schools could have "safe landing" classrooms and others called for outdoor classrooms and more focus on wellness in general, as opposed to a focus on competitive sports. There was some discussion of the importance of the arts for learning and music in particular was mentioned several times. Participants discussed the importance of creating emotionally healthy schools and communities (interconnected, caring, interacting). Some participants suggested that the school day could be reorganized to allow for more physical activity and movement that is more integrated, rather than structured periods of physical education.

What is the purpose?

Building on foundation of "how do children learn" it is also important to consider what we believe is the purpose of education. Participants want to know what is the answer when students ask "Why do I have to learn this?" The Montessori philosophy focuses on social emotional development and teaching children to be kind and peaceful, for example. There was discussion around teaching children to recognize their own strengths, to be nice, to be resilient and to manage day-to-day issues. One participant said to "let children shine and excel with their strengths." Jill MacCormack affirmed that "the greatest reward is learning itself" and presented a vision of a "learning environment that teaches life skills, and values kindness, sharing and gentleness over competition." Participants expressed hope for a future where students were engaged, happy, and hopeful.

There was some discussion about the relationship between K-12 schooling and post-secondary education and the workforce. Participants suggested that career finding should be introduced earlier, but others suggested that it was too much for young people to decide and the focus on the "end point" should be reduced. Some argued that it is important to show models of success that are multiple and varied and that we should value the paths that children choose. Several people noted the value of cooperative education programs, trades and non-academic career paths. Others noted that there are many options that aren't always apparent (i.e. the field of philosophy).

It was suggested that university entrance criteria and degree requirements should be more flexible and innovative. Some participants hope to see more kids able to go on to post-secondary education and not be held back by financial, social or academic barriers. Is job exploration and training the job of the public school system?

Imagination, creativity, and independence were mentioned as important characteristics to foster in schools. Participants also emphasized the value of social skills, life skills, emotional intelligence and being a good citizen. It was noted that schooling should help each child gain new perspectives, increase confidence and grow as a person.

How can it be done?

Participants agreed that we need individuals who are plugged in to new ideas and fresh resources. "We need innovators; a willingness to change."

"It starts with a gathering of all those who care about children, and are willing to embrace new possibilities. We are capable of doing this."

Appendix A:

Work shopping Different Models for Education facilitated by Gerry Hopkirk

Agenda
1. Introduction
2. Schooling in P.E.I. - challenge and opportunity
3. Process and format
4. Small group interaction
5. Sharing visions, dreams, ideas and questions
6. Distribution of results
7. Next steps

> Systems work the way they do because of how people think and interact...and if there aren't changes at that level, then the system can't change.
>
> ~Abernathy 1999

Some questions about children:

1. What do we know about how children learn?
2. Do all children learn in same way and at the same rate?
3. Do children have a variety of strengths?
4. Do all children need to learn the same skills?
5. Other questions?

Some questions about schools:

1. Do all schools need to be organized in the same way?
2. Do all schools need to teach the same things?
3. How can students, teachers and parents be supported to collaboratively determine learning goals?
4. How can a community influence what happens in a school?
5. Why are children grouped by age for learning?

Some questions about curriculum:

1. Do all students need to learn the same things?
2. Do all students need to reach the same outcomes?
3. What are the most effective ways to assess student success?
4. How can content and processes be matched to students' interests, learning styles and strengths?

Some questions about organizational structure:

1. What structure best supports students, teachers and schools?
2. How can we organize so that expertise is as close to schools and classrooms as possible?
3. How can we reduce hierarchical levels to improve trust, collaboration and effectiveness?
4. Where should the primary oversight of learning be situated?

Table Group Process:

1. The facilitator will insure that everyone is heard
2. There is no need to debate or reach agreement
3. As dreams, ideas and questions arise record them on post it notes and bring them to the *Wall of Wisdom*
4. Periodically the results of other table groups will be shared

Appendix B

Guest REDitorial
Gerry Hopkirk

Taking back our schools: moving beyond shame, blame and more of the same.

Prince Edward Island has everything we need to have one of the most enlightened, vibrant and successful school systems anywhere. The human and financial resources are sufficient. There are creative, qualified people at all levels from the classroom to the legislature. Our size is also in our favour. However, our school system needs more than changes here and there; it requires transformation!

Public education on P.E.I. is based on many obsolete assumptions, and the biggest problem is that many activities in our schools are not based on what we know about how children learn. This problem is not unique to P.E.I., but is so critical, that unless we acknowledge it and make major adjustments, no amount of tinkering, testing, curriculum reform, blaming, or increased expenditures will make a difference in the long run.

I have watched the growth of my children, and more recently my grandchildren. Like all children, they have an innate love of learning. When do they lose this? It's when we put them in rooms with other children their own age, (no role models) and proceed to teach them as though they all had the same gifts and aptitudes. It's unnatural and ineffectual. Then, when they don't "achieve" according to our preconceived notions it is assumed that they, or their teachers, are not trying hard enough. "Put your nose to the grindstone," we say. "Try harder, try longer, get extra help, and get those test scores up!"

Transformation, on the other hand, requires that we look together at the fundamental issue of how children learn. Because children have different abilities and strengths, and learn at different rates, we need to respect those differences, and build on them. Our "curriculum reform" approach to school improvement ignores this. It is an outdated, copycat version of what most other North American jurisdictions have done, again and again.

Imagine, for example, Sydney Crosby getting a report card from his hockey coach. He received A+ in skating, shooting, passing, scoring, defence, and leadership, but C- in goaltending. Now, if Sidney were in many schools he would be required to concentrate on goaltending. Metaphorically this happens every day in our public schools. Teachers are required to follow a curriculum which prescribes a one-size- fits-all approach, and parents feel compelled to focus on the C-, rather than on their children's natural strengths.

Children also learn at different rates. Given the opportunity all of them will learn what they need, but some take more time and will not be ready for the test by Friday. Others

know the content on Monday but have to wait until Friday to move on. The villain in all of this is called "grade level," an imaginary construct that continues to drive educational decisions. It forces children to flounder in learning situations for which they are not ready. Frustration is the outcome rather than appropriate learning based on the child's readiness and ability to experience success.

Readiness to learn certain concepts differs by at least 2 ½ years in every single-age classroom, yet in those classes the expectation is the same for all. Such classes are not the norm in all countries, and in much of New Zealand, for example, every class is multi-age by choice. P.E.I.'s former one room schools and its present split-grade classes are examples of the kind of multi-age setting that provides a more natural learning environment.

And what about testing? The type, timing and nature of a test should provide supportive feedback to help the student continue progressing. It should not be a measure of success versus failure. Authentic assessment increases confidence, love of learning and success. On the other hand, grades, marks, year-end exams and most forms of standardized testing often result in more fear than learning. PEI showed leadership by being one of the last educational jurisdictions to adopt standardized testing. We could lead again by being one of the first to drop it.

There are at least nine different ways people learn; through music, art, movement, numbers, words, nature, relationships, pictures, self-analysis and wondering. Why not let students become self-motivated lifelong learners in ways that work best for them? Why not acknowledge that because people learn different things, in different ways, at different rates, our schools and classrooms need to be different from one another.

Transforming the school experience requires us to think differently. It requires a move across old boundaries to a new vision where our children, and their natural ways of learning, are respected. It is as simple and complex as that.

Our challenge is to have the confidence to create an approach to learning that is truly innovative, and allows all the partners to collaborate in open and creative ways. Such an unconventional approach should be supported, but not led, by government. It starts with a gathering of all those who care about children, and are willing to embrace new possibilities. We are capable of doing this.

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Appendix C

IMAGINE by Jill M. MacCormack

Imagine learning that has not been institutionalized—imagination running free, curiosity encouraged, smiling, chatting, motion and doodling allowed. Imagine facilitators encouraging exploration, questioning, the process of trial and error, figuring things out for yourself combined with learning from the mistakes and wisdom of our elders.

Imagine an environment that allows you to take your time with things, to mull things over, to move away from something when you are stuck and come back to it after a healthy break. One in which there is room for mental sorting, space to learn at your own pace, allowing each to learn in the way best suited to their own personal learning style. Imagine heart centred learning; training our children in paying attention to their intuitiveness and cultivating their own wisdom. Imagine how highly respectful of children such an environment could be; respectful of children's keen need to move their bodies, to dance, to sing, to be quiet, to spend time outdoors by themselves or in small groups.

Imagine an education system that grants children exposure to the many wonderful things of this world and lets them choose to pursue learning in areas where their own interest lies. Imagine a learning environment that allows kids to honour the curiosities and enthusiasm innate to childhood: their deep sense of wonder, their insatiable need to know, their desire to run and scream when the first snowflake falls or the first butterfly of spring flutters by.

Imagine a learning environment that teaches life skills, and values kindness, sharing and gentleness over competition. One which naturally encourages a holistic approach to well being and reverence for life!

Imagine a culture that recognizes that we are all learners and teachers both at any given point in our life. Imagine a world in which pursuing your innate desire to learn about those things in which you are keenly interested and which are meaningful to you is prized! Imagine a system where no one is graded but instead all recognize that the greatest reward is learning itself! Imagine the possibilities! Imagine if…

Jill M. MacCormack has homeschooled her three children for the past three years.