

**TOWARD NEW THINKING AND ACTION**

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Scale. Our world and its history is all about scale. By scale I mean “any relative proportion, progressive or graded classification, degree or scope (Canadian School Dictionary, Fitzhenry and Whiteside)”. The economy of scale, the scale of democracy, the scale of the individual and the organization, who determines these scales and where one sits upon them? What happens if one does not abide by it? Can it be changed? Does it change of its own accord? Is it controllable, adaptable, malleable? If so, who controls it and how did they come by such power? Is such power on the local scale as or is it at the global? I initially saw power on the very local, that is personal, scale but as I observed more, investigated and learned more it became ever more global in scale and centralised into someone else’s hands and control. And so what are the features and effects? Exasperatingly, tackling these questions leads to ever more questions than there are answers.

In the context of my continuing education the following (selected from among many) questions have been posed: “What do the terms, globalization and education mean and how does our preliminary understanding of these terms change as we read and think about the course books and other sources?” And “What role can I, as an educator, play locally, regionally, nationally and internationally to promote a more fair and just world?” Reading the writings of Ariel Dorfman (2005) has shown me that to describe on a personal level things that also apply at the national and global level can be a useful form of explanation of what we feel when we examine more closely those things that happen to ourselves and others. Though less technical perhaps, this essay discusses a profound personal journey towards the global from the local in my own thinking and beliefs regarding my chosen profession as a teacher of young adults.

What earlier was a vague suspicion now is suddenly obvious. I have noticed it’s stealthy growth in my students and their parents, my classroom, my school and in the attitude of my

employer, the Calgary Board of Education, under the roof of Alberta Education and the neoliberal Conservative government we have had for some decades now. For many years there has been a disturbing increase in the degree of commercialization of, and within, education and alarm grew as understanding of its pervasiveness could begin to be seen. But what was the direction of it all? It wasn't only happening to the public education system as it was also happening to public health care. Determining what it was that I was 'feeling' was very confusing as it was easy to see the overt things that were happening, for example Coca-Cola 'donating' a scoreboard for the gymnasium, presumably for whole school use, in return for a monopoly of soft drink machines within the building and the school retaining a portion of the earnings, again, presumably to buy things for whole school needs. This initially somewhat embarrassing cap-in-hand deal between a publicly funded institution and a corporation has today become a blur of activity emblazoned with corporate logos, exactly as described in Naomi Klein's(2003) video documentary "*No Logo*", aimed at hitting student/consumers, ideally between, but often during, classes where refrigerated confections (ie. Nestle iced cream products) are in the hallway for student purchase (tax?) for the monetary benefit of only one department within the school. This is a little more than fund raising by bake sale. As well there are donated red coloured plastic periodical dust jackets emblazoned with the donator's logo (Pizza Hut) in the school's Library where each time a student picks up a magazine they are first struck with unsolicited advertising influencing them on their decision about lunch options. In the school there is only one brand of computer hardware (Compaq) and one software system (MicroSoft Windows) found within the building with all the privileges of connectivity with the school board system although many other devices such as printers, scanners, removable memory all of many brands, run by these computers and their single system, are allowed. A change making machine is in the hallway to make it easier for students to make change of their bills into coins for the vending machines and

there is talk of the money that can be made if a banking machine were to be installed in the main foyer. To further illustrate the scale of this commercialization we, the teaching staff, are only allowed to purchase, with public funds, classroom supplies from one supplier (Grande and Toy) even though the same supplies at substantial savings are to be had just across the street. More and more I was realizing that what I had read in Murray Dobbin's (1998) book "The Myth of the Good Corporate Citizen - Democracy Under The Rule Of Big Business" was actually coming to pass. "As budgets are slashed, "good corporate citizens" arrive on the school doorstep offering assistance that inevitably involves hooking the school into product lines or trading materials or cash for the exclusive right to peddle or advertise their products in the school (Dobbin, 1998, p. 240)." There is much in my philosophy that finds wrong with all this, most of it obvious; an educational institution is not a place to create good little consumers regardless of their age, that students should not be indirectly taxed for the funding of their schools and public funds should not be directed to only one source of products supporting corporate monopolies and their deals.

As my career progressed I found my philosophy of the education of our youth uncomprehendingly and profoundly at variance with the prevailing philosophy within the institution of education. For one, the continual use of the phrase "the business of education" bothered me immensely. For the more covert, more individually inconspicuous and collectively powerful linkages such as partnerships of businesses to schools (of which I skeptically became directly involved within my school) and the Conference Board of Canada as well as the linkages within neoliberalism, Alberta Education and participation rates and universal achievement testing (again involved as a Curriculum Leader as overseer of teacher success rates in these areas), much more was needed to illuminate what was really going on. Who, or what, was driving these initiatives? Where was all the protest? I was not the only one who recognised the danger signs,

there were others, many others, but their voices were drowned out. It was at this time I read the book “The Reengineering Revolution - A Handbook”, by Michael Hammer and Steven A. Stanton (1995), in it they describe their view of the employed and their involvement in any decision making process regardless of level of education, certification or even their basic humanity.<sup>1</sup> I became very alarmed when explanations within this book of processes of how to deal with staff dissent was recognised during whole school and administrative meetings where the antagonism of leadership was evident toward discussions of concerns regarding decisions and decision making. Many tables within the book explain such things as “Principles for Overcoming Resistance to Change (Hammer, 1998, p. 128)”, “The Key Mechanisms for Overcoming Resistance (p. 131)” and “Counterrevolutionary Arguments and Responses (p. 182)” read like a reactionary terrorist handbook and I began to get worried if this business model for change by forced consent by directed debate was perhaps being put in place for change within education and by extrapolation perhaps would also be implemented within society. But I misread what was happening. I thought we were in an era of political change, both large and small in scale, and had no concrete idea the power of the economic philosophy of neoliberalism as the true provocateur of events.

While I knew that education was a vehicle of socialization as a means of imparting the values of society, citizenship, sharing of history and culture I had no concept that our social welfare system was under attack nor to what lengths the global corporate world was affecting my school, my department, my classes and my students. I still did not recognize, or perhaps could not yet believe, what Dobbin later suggested , “The transformation of citizens into consumers logically begins with transforming the schools whose original purpose included citizenship training (Dobbin, 1998, p. 242).” There continued cutbacks through the latter 1990’s, and then stabilization through 2000-2004, in the amount of public funding, despite public knowledge of

much higher than expected (for some perhaps) earnings earlier on, followed by ballooning earnings during the past four years, from Alberta resource sector royalties. Then the move towards ever more strict observance and publication, particularly in the print media and now on individual schools' and Alberta Education web sites, of the statistics of success (rather than actual human, that is student, experience and learning) namely education participation rates (the degree of assimilation into the system or what I like to call the non-drop-out rate) and standardized evaluation requiring teachers, schools and their boards to do more to increase these numbers with less dollars of support. There was talk of an effort to dismantle public education in favour of private schools, Charter schools or any other alternative efforts at schooling our young. Alternates to public education grew as parents scrambled for what they believed would be of best interest to them and their children, it was absurdly, yet disturbingly, similar to deciding what was for dinner or what car to buy- these were consumer driven, that is economic, decisions. And so "client choice" was a new word added to the lexicon of educators and education became available for consumer consumption. These all led school boards to think of streamlining, making more efficient, their choices of how and what to offer to students in order to capture, recapture and increase the roll of their "clientele". This, in my experience, has generally led to the ever growing withdrawal of individual school autonomy by the Board and Alberta Education (although they would say the opposite) to where, within the school, the role of the business manager today is equal to, if not greater than, that of the role of the supposed master teacher, the Principal. The Principal as master teacher is gone and is now reassigned as the site manager of a plant that reproduces the needs of the economic society, educated and resourceful worker/consumers already enculturated into the economy of consumerism and willing to adapt to whatever situation of employment eventuality they may come across, or may be dictated to them by corporate entities during times of restructuring (Wallerstein, 2005).<sup>2</sup> The global scale of what I was

witnessing, and my ever increasing sense of alarm, was further developed when I read Benjamin Barber's (2001) "Jihad vs McWorld - Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy." <sup>3</sup>

It seemed obvious, with site based management, that if we had to cut back in our school we would cut back in option course choices as schools would consolidate their staff around the considered more important core required courses; Math, the Sciences, English and Social Studies. Instead we were told by the Board we had to maintain, preferably increase, enrollment, as Alberta Education funding was now tied to the student through Credit Equivalent Units, more students equals more money and I now know this to be "just in time" Toyotism means of production (Schugurensky (2003) p. 294). This effectively negated any school autonomy within site based management, by mandating the offering of increased choices on a 'as needed' basis depending on student demand, which had the effect of small class sizes for the complimentary (a seemingly better more politically balanced soft term than 'option') courses and dramatically increasing them for the required core subjects. Today more options than ever before are entertained, some still, as before, as 'basket weaving" holding cells for those students who remain unprepared to accommodate to the system. Still, newly created, soft 'clean hands' (other than the trades) subjects made popular again by the student's parents and older teachers, such as Sociology, because they took it way back when and it was interesting and earned them easy credits, or subjects made popular by television, namely Forensic Science, or Comparative Religions, all mainly taught by interested, well intentioned but not subject qualified teachers.

Add to that the desire of some students and many parents for the 'enriching' and 'more challenging' International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses (with irrelevant curriculums determined by interests other than the home society) where parents and students are seeking the competitive advantage of a higher standing in overall grades after the senior year to get automatic placements over other students in post secondary institutions through the value of

more is better. And these courses are in addition to those required by Alberta Education further limiting the time spent on those and therefore presumably limiting the students success and therefore access to post secondary institutions. This has always been a point of contention - while the curriculum sponsored by Alberta Education espouses to a great degree the value of tolerance, citizenship and cooperation, old welfare state values, the very nature of neoliberal society leads education to become amoral, independent and competitive. How is it possible to formalize these two very different and opposing sets of values within the classroom?

All of this has left, over the years, a personal ever more consuming fear that as we moved further and further toward unbridled consumerism we would also lose control of ourselves, our cultures and our future. We would further lose our citizenship, our citizenship in anything other than the neoliberal corporate view of life. The cultural notion of citizenship would no longer be required, it is an impediment to the corporate system and that what was essentially required was brand loyalty. As in Marxist communism there would be no need for nations, no states - useless they would wither away, except here, rather than we collectively owning it all and transform into a classless society, it all belongs to, and is controlled by, someone else, say Walmart, Disney, Nike, or MicroSoft.

Very recently I have come to understand, by reaching first out to the global scale, so much more and paradoxically have so many, many more questions. Through Ariel Dorfman's (2004) illuminating writings, though some of it difficult to take as a person wealthy by world standards and living in a core society (Wallerstein, 2005), I can 'feel' what it is he is saying about the community of humanity and how what I have felt for the past two decades here in my safe little world has been minimal when compared to the lives of untold numbers of people, often at the end of a gun, all around the world. Dorfman's deft use of language shows how the powerful all too often do not care about the weak and that it is as he surmises when he speaks of the spirits

called *duendes*,

... that the accelerated modernization of Latin America has been done without the real and active participation of the vast population of the hemisphere, without taking into account their beliefs and culture and solidarity and suffering, and by exalting a greed and competitiveness that directly contradicts the value system that *duendes* having been trying to teach humans ever since the dawn of time.

(Dorfman, 2004, p.134)

His explanations of cause and effect being global further struck me as I had recently read two articles regarding the deportation of Latino street gang members, most of whom are born in America and know nothing of their heritage, from the United States to Latin America where of course they do the only thing they know - operating street gangs.<sup>4</sup>

In trying to understand the powerful forces that would forsake the once embraced democratic principles of widening citizenship and participation and their impact on humanity and cultures Ronald Wright's "A Short History Of Progress" was of great help as he described the evolution of civilizations, their broad goals through time, each succeeding the other, being born and then dying because of environmental short sightedness and ultimately outliving their "natural capital" means. "If civilization is to survive, it must live on the interest, not the capital, of nature." And "The idea that the world must be run by the stock market is as mad as any other fundamentalist delusion, Islamic, Christian, or Marxist (Wright, 2004, p. 129)." Wright (2004) further describes his imperative for the present day need for social reform as, "The most compelling reason for reforming our system is that the system is in no one's interest. It is a suicide machine (p. 131)." But Wright had earlier explained how we allowed ourselves to get to this point, "John Steinbeck once said that socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires (p.

124).” People have always looked more with hope than despair. He concludes, his book with this dark phrase, “Now is our last chance to get the future right (p.132).” That what he was speaking of was on a global level was obvious and true, but it lacked a local angle.

The idea of a world system hinted at as “market extremism ”(Wright, 2004, p. 129) in Wright’s work is thoroughly examined and explained from its derivation, through evolution to potential future in Immanuel Wallerstein’s(2005) book “World-Systems Analysis - An Introduction”. The idea of scale within the definition of the relationships between core, semiperipheral and peripheral production and the resulting return of the flow of wealth to the ever accumulating core can relate to the scale of the large, say the capitalist world-system, historically and in the present, as well as the scale of the small such as my school. In the conclusion he finally states,

The key element of the debate is the degree to which any social system, but in this case the future one we are constructing, will lean in one direction or the other on two long-standing issues of social organization - liberty and equality - issues that are more closely intertwined than social thought in the modern world-system has been willing to assert. (Wallerstein, 2005, p. 88)

Many larger questions were now answered for me, but how did this truly relate to my classroom and other classrooms around the world as I had now been sensitized, or dare I say conscientized, to? Here the editors, and contributors, Arnove and Torres’ (2003) book “Comparative Education - The Dialectic of the Global and the Local” has been important. Certain passages within articles have definitely helped me to answer some of the issues I had been struggling with in my teaching career. First, “... using a political economy of education approach, we link the discussion of the neoliberal state to the globalization of capitalism. (Morrow and Torres, 2003, p95)” has not only helped me to see the connection between the

reduction of public funding, expansion of corporations into the schools and the shrinking of local school autonomy in spite of site based management that I had been witnessing over the past years. The federal government had a hand in this and they handed the document in to UNESCO outlining the 1996 status of education within Canada and where they would like it to go.<sup>5</sup> While I couldn't really find an appropriate set of statistics that would help me sort out my own dilemmas I did manage to find the Fraser Institute's findings regarding Education Freedom Index chart and was not surprised to find Alberta tops the list in Canada especially considering the Institute's definition of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

While I may feel vexed by my educational quandaries I can only imagine the crushing weight that less developed countries must feel when the capitalist world-system comes around to lend their helping hand. Couple that with this second idea,

In many countries, rich and poor, the relationship between higher education and labor markets shows less-than-perfect correlations. Enrollment expansion and economic slowdown have led to significant numbers of educated unemployed and underemployed, and to an escalation in credentialism. This situation has provided fertile soil for the vocationalisation of higher education. (Schugurensky, 2003, p.304)

and many of the problems within our schools locally and certainly globally begin to be apparent.

In the face of all this exciting exploring, learning and personal development, a yet seemingly hopeless feeling was beginning to build within me. I had to find some hope, some reason not to knuckle under the ponderous weight of the global and the local, a reason to be like Ariel Dorfman, a reason to carry on for my students, my school and beyond. I found it in this passage,

Although education can be used to legitimate a political system, it can also serve

to interrogate it; although an education system may function to perpetuate the social division of labor, it also can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to humanize the workplace and change the class structure of a society. (Arnové, Franz, Mollis, Torres, 2003, p. 314)

And finally I come to a place where I must further ponder what I have learned, consider what I can do both locally and globally as a teacher. What can I do in my classroom to make a difference to my students and my colleagues and how they envision and interact with the world? There must be many examples from other parts of the world that would also apply here. There is much to consider in trying to make some small part of the world that I can touch more just and humane.

There is, however, one final fly in the ointment of all this contemplation and that is the inescapable notion that a very, very tight meritocracy does in fact exist within the system, although everything says it can not. Its all about scale isn't it? The truly exceptional can attain success by thinking 'outside the box' of their socio-economic class as long as it is 'within the box' of the capitalist world-system. Or one could win the lottery. In any case, there *is* a chance to be a millionaire.

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## Appendix

<sup>1</sup> This is absolutely frightening and shouts a loud warning for democracy, “It is an unalterable axiom of reengineering that it only succeeds when driven from the topmost levels of an organization. No matter how hard they try, people on or near the front lines are in no position to launch and sustain such a major venture. First, they lack the breadth of perspective needed to see entire processes from start to finish rather than from their own narrow expertise and purview (Hammer and Stanton, p. 34).”

<sup>2</sup> Today the World Bank is continuing the assault by sponsoring a conference entitled *Mobilizing the Private Sector for Public Education* A PEPG - World Bank Conference, October 5-6, 2005, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, where “ The event will also discuss the role of the World Bank, IFC, and other development partners in fostering a public-private partnership in education and the theoretical arguments behind mobilizing the private sector.” (<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/conferences/MPSPE.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Barber was keynote speaker at a Calgary Teacher’s Convention, I listened to him and was impressed. I bought his book and found it an informative and important read even if somewhat limited on the topic of education.

<sup>4</sup> These two articles, “Gang World” by Andrew V. Papachristos and Ana Arana “How the Street Gangs Took Central America” are real eye-openers to global effects of local solutions to problems. This is not dissimilar to moving recalcitrant children to a different school, solves your immediate problem as long as s/he does not come back after school looking for someone and exports the student and the behaviors to someone else’s school.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/Databanks/Dossiers/rcanada.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/shared/readmore.asp?sNav=pb&id=575> A fascinating read and

really shows you something about interpretation - they all need time in a real classroom.