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# OUR SCHOOLS

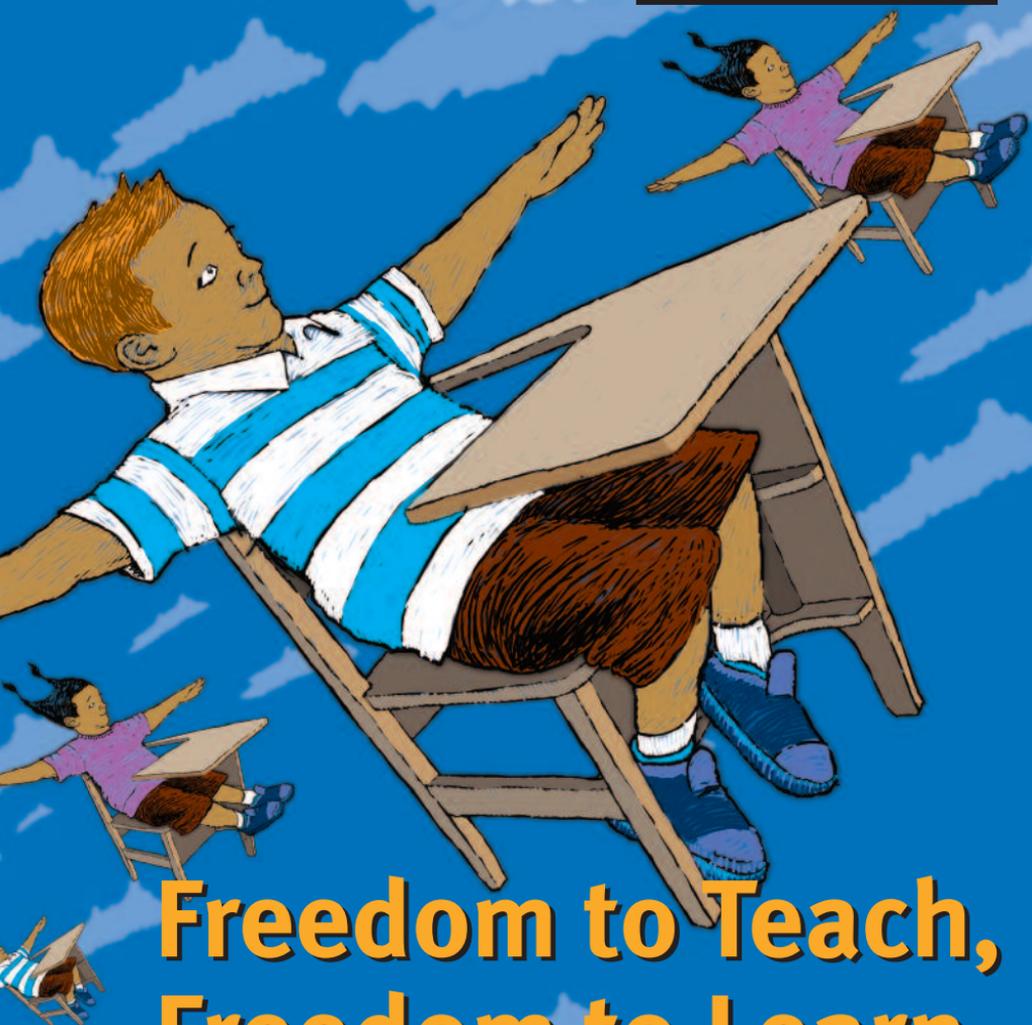
The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

Building inclusive  
classrooms, communities

Financial literacy  
education — the solution  
to credit crises?

The corporate presence in  
Japanese classrooms



## Freedom to Teach, Freedom to Learn

Professional judgment, authentic  
learning and creative classrooms

Van Fraen



**NICK FORTE**

## **The Student's Freedom to Learn Requires the Educator's Freedom to Teach**

I always believed — and still do believe — that education is about learning to think critically, asking questions and using one's imagination: creating a classroom atmosphere where thinking, questioning and imagining is encouraged because this is what permits students the freedom to truly learn. But for students to learn, teachers need the freedom to teach. And increasingly, freedom to teach is in short supply.

Over my 20-plus years of classroom teaching, I have become convinced that the debates about education are now, more than ever, populated by an excess of experts whose purported expertise is inversely proportionate to the amount of time they have spent inside a classroom. Those of us who have taught in classroom for many years have seen scores of bandwagons come and go — but the vast majority of the time we have not seen these initiatives produce the panacea of results they had professed to obtain. Short-term ideas — often politically-driven, inconsistent and incoherent rather than providing concrete information, realistic ideas or authentic suggestions — are intruding and micromanaging my classroom practice. As a result, I usually find that, more and more, my freedom to use professional judgment and, therefore, my autonomy as an educator has been and is being curtailed.

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An experienced classroom teacher knows when quality learning is taking place — and has no problem being responsible for ensuring that students are learning, provided that this assessment is determined by theory, research and practice. Making a judgment cannot be reduced to adding up different marks or simply compiling data on tracking sheets. When a teacher

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assesses performance it means observing students in many situations, both inside and outside the classroom. The teacher sees not only the work produced in a field of study by the students, but also witnesses the way students critically think, the style of ques-

tions asked, the willingness to take risks and whether or not they use their good sense. Professional judgment serves the teacher in planning for evaluation, choosing evaluation methods, and making real decisions about student learning, based on relevant, valid and sufficient information compiled over days, weeks and months. And after years of teaching, I believe I have an understanding of student educational needs and have developed suitable strategies to observe and determine whether or not learning has taken place.

For quality student learning to occur, teachers need to be able to exercise professional judgment and autonomy. But as a classroom teacher I am always amazed at the interference exercised by those who are not in a classroom, do not know the context of the classroom and never have to implement the initiatives they advocate, over my professional judgment. What I sense is a push to automate and speed up the learning experience — which in turn cheapens and truncates the students' ability to engage in worthwhile learning. I have seen a myriad of initiatives introduced, all of them justified as a “new way” of learning. And at this stage of my career, when I see initiatives that are introduced as new and I recognize them as the ones that were introduced as “new” at the beginning of my career, I can truly state that I have been around for a long time.

In practical terms, what this has meant for me is that my freedom to teach is restricted, my students' freedom to learn is restricted and, in the end, I am left to face and eliminate the obstacles and undesirable consequences that result from these initiatives (initiatives that might be theoretically sound but do not necessarily result in better learning for the student). Often, even before implementing many of these "new (or not so new) ways of learning", my professional judgment has already told me that these pseudo-plans will not work, (or in previous incarnations have not worked), and will not permit the students to truly learn. I can reach this conclusion by drawing on my many years of experience as a classroom teacher, my education, my research and my qualifications. Nevertheless, against my better professional judgment, I am often required to push on with these flawed initiatives.

It seems that every professional development day brings forth a guest speaker who is an expert in the field of classroom management, assessment, or evaluation. They have never personally implemented their initiatives in a classroom; however, we as classroom teachers are expected to put into practice a new classroom management style, a new assessment strategy, or a new reporting spreadsheet. And in my experience these initiatives hardly ever bring forth the desired or intended results.

Let me offer some examples. My non-instructional time is the time I need to carry out a number of my responsibilities and professional duties, in order to be professionally accountable to my students and their parents. But because non-instructional time is seen as "non-teaching" time, it is increasingly taken up by extra tasks that school boards now require of teachers, and we have less time to spend focusing on the needs of our students both inside and outside the classroom. When my time is restricted, my students' learning time will be restricted and the necessary communication required with parents will be restricted.

Another, perhaps less obvious, example: fundraising is something that is increasingly seen as part of the duties of a school community — for teachers, parents and students. In many cases it's become an additional responsibility. People for Education's "Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools 2009" states that, collectively, publicly-funded elementary and secondary school councils in the province raise nearly \$600 million dollars in

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funds for various reasons (buying library books, computers, and even upgrades to the school building or grounds), to augment school budgets. The building is in need of repair and we burden

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our children and their families with the responsibility and obligation to raise money to repair it. Having students and teachers use more and more of their teaching and learning time to solicit money to repair buildings and purchase books to achieve

curriculum expectations does not make sense. Something is appallingly wrong with this image.

Over the years, I have seen incremental increases in curricular requirements, which means that elementary and secondary students must meet hundreds of expectations — and more is added to that list each year. Further to curricular expectations, educators must include daily physical activity programs, healthy food choices programs, anti-bullying programs, home and school safety programs, breakfast programs, and new literacy and numeracy projects. Much of this is nothing new, of course, only repackaged policies dressed up in the latest jargon. After all, didn't teachers always teach students how to read and count?

### **What does the research tell us?**

But what constitutes excellent teaching? At the Institute of Education, University of London Professor Mary James Associate Director and Chairperson in Education, for the Department of Learning, Curriculum & Communication, conducted a massive 10-year long teaching and learning research programme to help determine just that. Her research states that teachers prefer practical guidance, based on thorough research rather than on opinion. She stresses that more emphasis must be put on teacher autonomy so teachers can innovate and adapt to students' needs — resulting in more genuine learning being achieved by students. Professor Patricia Broadfoot, vice-chancellor of the University of Gloucestershire, concurs when she persuasively argues that the evidence from international studies shows that

“the highest quality teaching and learning comes when we have the greatest autonomy for the teacher and the learner”.

Furthermore, Professor Debra Myhill, Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at Exeter University, states that a crucial ingredient in excellent teaching is the teacher’s ability to reflect on his or her own performance and then to adapt if necessary. Teachers need to embrace a dose of healthy skepticism and not passively comply in implementing projects of the day. Rather they should adapt those projects to ensure legitimate and authentic student learning.

We don’t need to only look at European research for thoughtful commentary and analysis of the teaching profession: the 2006 report, “Loss of Learning Education Versus Evaluation” by the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association recommends that teachers be given the autonomy to use their professional judgment. Kenneth Leithwood is of the same mind as he writes in the 2005 *Orbit* magazine article, “Transformational Leadership for Challenging Schools,” that teachers should be buffered from excessive and distracting demands on their attention.

And in “The Long and Short of Educational Change,” Andy Hargreaves examines research over the past 30 years in Canada and the United States and finds that although politicians and administrators are eager to celebrate the snapshot successes of pilot projects, new technologies or innovative schools, historical evidence shows that the celebration is mostly premature. The quality of teaching is not improved by increasing the paperwork, reinventing report cards, forcing high stakes testing and making teachers take ownership over things they do not want, need or should have. Quality teaching is improved by decreasing unnecessary and excessive external demands. Hargreaves points to Finland as one of the highest performing nations economically and educationally. Here the government relies on the trusted, highly qualified teachers, who exercise their acute sense of professional and social responsibility in their teaching. This is achieved not by endless initiatives, targeted interventions or constant crunching of numbers, but by quiet, “professional cooperation”.

In the March 2007 *Professionally Speaking* magazine, Hargreaves further states that Ontario teachers are motivated and highly qualified. He believes that releasing the energy of

these teachers will, in turn, release the energy of the students so they will learn.

### **Curtailing professionalism and learning**

Teachers have an ethical responsibility to use their professional judgment and autonomy to better ensure that the students are given the educational freedom to learn. But unfortunately educators are often mandated to implement initiatives that they know from their classroom experience and professional training will impede the students' freedom to learn.

I'll describe a series of related examples: first, Ontario's current initiative to let students hand in assignments beyond the due date with no penalty, at the whim of the student. Now, how does this enhance learning? Ministry initiatives such as this more often hinder rather than help real learning and impede the students' ability to learn what is authentic and worthwhile. In this case, "learning" goes beyond the content of the paper (which may or not have been submitted on time, or at all) — the learning experience includes time management, thoughtful negotiation of facts and content, fulfilling classroom responsibility and commitment. Aside from the skills required to research and complete an assignment, when due dates do not have to be observed, often all of what the student needed to learn is not learned and the educative potential of this experience has been jeopardized.

Secondly, if after an entire year of school the student is still unsuccessful in obtaining a credit, he or she can apply for a number of initiatives: summer school, save-a-credit, credit recovery and student success assistance. These initiatives are part of a plan to allow a student multiple pathways to success. As a teacher I have diligently and honestly carried out my professional responsibilities and duties for an entire school year. I am now faced with the reality that in spite of not completing what is required, a student can still obtain a credit, at the last minute, by filling out the appropriate paperwork. Was my time and work with students for the past year worth anything?

Thirdly, the pressure to have students pass is putting increasing ethical pressure on teachers. According to Regulation 298 Section 20 (a) of the *Education Act*, teachers "are responsible for effective instruction, training, and evaluation of the progress of pupils ... and to report to the principal on the progress of

pupils...". In some cases, principals are pressured to overrule a teacher's year's worth of service and find ways in which students can be successful prior to the end of the course. It's all very logical, within this paradigm: when marks are seen as too low, parental complaints are forthcoming. With the barrage of school ranking initiatives and the focus on test scores and graduation rates as "proof" of a successful school, the optics of too many students doing poorly or failing don't look good and there's a built-in incentive for marks to be "corrected" to alter the perception.

Fourthly, schools are awash in standardized student testing, which is not a learning initiative; rather, it is an evaluation method

(and a questionable one at that). It takes a lot more skill to help students think for themselves than passing on information in preparation for a standardized test. But a standardized test cannot truly capture or indicate what a student has learned. Standardized tests take away valuable student learning time, de-emphasize thinking and application of knowledge, and overemphasize memorization. Test preparation and administration take up enormous amounts of valuable classroom learning time that could be used for students to authentically learn and teachers to genuinely teach. As teachers are increasingly (sometimes subtly, other times not so subtly) forced to teach to the test rather than to what would facilitate and enhance students' learning, the focus on standardized tests is unduly narrowing the teaching and learning process. Teachers are led to distrust their own professional judgment, formed and reformed through months of close observation and interaction, and students are led to distrust what they have learned throughout the year as part of the classroom experience for a one-shot, high pressure, mass-scored exam.

As a classroom teacher, I believe that my professional judgment and autonomy and that of my colleagues, based on daily classroom assessments and contact with students and parents, forms the basis of an important relationship that allows our students to truly and genuinely learn. This is supported by state-

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ments made in 1995 by Lorna Earl, Professor of Theory and Policy Studies in Education at OISE/UT: “classroom teachers and their daily classroom assessments may form the basis for the most important accountability relationships.” Because of their regular contact and close relationship with students, teachers are in the best position to conduct ongoing, contextualized and authentic assessments of students, provide regular feedback on their performance to parents and to the students themselves, and recommend ways in which students can learn more effectively. In sum, there is little evidence to support standardized testing from a learning standpoint. Standardized testing has been shown to have a negative impact on learning, and is particularly harmful to at-risk students because it perpetuates and worsens educational inequities.

### **A student’s freedom to learn requires the teacher’s freedom to teach**

When as a teacher I am not allowed to use my professional judgment and freely exercise my professional autonomy, I am limited to the extent that I cannot wholly touch the hearts and minds of our children. And in turn, students are cheated from having a rich and varied school experience that reveals to them places, events and experiences they have never seen before. Giving teachers autonomy and allowing them to use their professional judgment will help create a learning environment that arouses and sustains the students’ curiosity, encouraging them to think critically, ask questions and use their imagination. This is fundamental to the development of citizens who are capable of fully participating in and contributing to their families, communities and the greater good as imaginative, empathetic and responsible individuals. This will not only bring personal fulfillment to our young learners, but it will create citizens within our communities that have inquiring minds, creative problem solving skills and civic responsibilities.

When we as teachers are given the capacity and freedom to teach, only then can students achieve the freedom to truly learn.

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## ENDNOTES

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# media

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November 2-6, 2009

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Together we can help ensure our children and youth develop the critical thinking skills necessary to understand and actively engage with media.

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Canadian Teachers' Federation  
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants



[www.medialiteracyweek.ca](http://www.medialiteracyweek.ca)



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