

# A Well-kept Secret

By **Mary Curran**, Principal, St. Mary Catholic Secondary School, Durham CDSB

Like a well-kept secret, the professional learning of teachers lies largely unseen beneath the gaze of those whose theories map the right ways to change education. I have found that a good theory can provide a practical map when placed beside our hard-earned experience gleaned from work, meetings and readings. But, we who spend our professional lives in the daily company of youngsters know in our hearts that organic change moves slowly, like a snail carrying her home on her shoulders, over paths with sharp turns and the occasional dead-end.

I have heard it said of teachers that we do not read much, but that belies the flow of articles and books that make their way from colleagues' desks to mine. Since these shared readings cover the spectrum of strict law and order solutions to radical critiques of educational theories, I must pry my mind open often. Learning, irrespective of our age and situation, is ultimately a social act of hospitality when we make room for others' interests, experiences and ideas. Real learning draws us into relationship and community as much as it propels us towards self-direction and personal autonomy.

Last week I saw a practical application of that particular paradox when I fell into conversation with a colleague at school and mentioned my plan to place values posters and small prayer centres in each classroom and bald-walled portable. There are problems with such legislated change, he told me, then mentioned the Bibles gathering dust on shelves around the school. Afterwards, as I drove home I remembered a lovely line about human freedom from a book I once read. I have forgotten the name of the writer, but not the words on the page about the power of God. God operates through social-political institutions and the individual expression of human freedom, gentle words and a reminder that a hasty act on behalf of others may usurp their ideas and knowledge and lead us into angry cul-de-sacs where we can neither hear nor see each other.



Sometimes in meetings about professional matters, I am surprised by anger; my own or others. Liberman and Miller are partially right when they say that the constant focus on student learning leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and under-appreciated, but there is more to my frustration than professional pique at being over-looked. I prefer Beverly W. Harrison's wider perspective that anger is a demand that our presence be recognized and valued: that we be seen and heard, irrespective of our age or situation.

Not long ago I attended a book club composed of teachers, friends and former colleagues. Our relationships date back almost a quarter of a century. When we meet the book selected presents an opportunity to talk about our lives in school. There is much laughter and just occasionally a sense of frustration about our work. Last time we discussed the chosen book, Ellison's *The Invisible Man* and then moved on to school-talk. There was casual conversation about the changes over time in our professional lives, mention of computers and technology until someone mentioned the visibility of youngsters with disabilities in our classrooms. In a heartbeat, I recalled from the past young ones I once taught who had suffered the "savage inequalities" that Jonathan Kozol describes, and I felt an old, familiar sadness. That is the "power of the powerless," Christopher de Vinck mentions in his book about his brother Oliver; power to evoke a deep response in us to love and care for them, or to reject them in our anxiety and render them invisible.

Each one of us, irrespective of our age or situation, wants others to make room for our lives and our experience. For that reason, good theories about education are like good neighbours, they are generous in outlook but circumscribed by humility.

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