

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
7TH COUNCIL, 53RD SESSION**

TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 15-53

TABLED ON JUNE 19, 1974

EDUCATION

Tabled June 19, 1974.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE IS NEITHER EASY NOR OBVIOUS

COPY

Although "Education Week" in the schools of the N.W.T. was observed in March, it appeared at times that most of the newspapers (present company excepted) and the radio station of the Territories, were featuring "anti-education months" during April and May.

A number of items in the news and editorial columns of the media suggested that pupils of the schools in the N.W.T. were engaged in play rather than work; that "standards" of education were not being maintained; that there was no discipline in the schools and that the educational system of the N.W.T. was in some way inferior to that of Southern Canada. Interestingly enough, the alleged lack of discipline and so-called "permissiveness" in the school system, was in no way linked in these stories to the fact that these same features characterize the home, the community and society generally. There is no doubt that the school is in many ways a mirror of the society in which it exists, and yet we expect much more of our children and our schools than we are willing to demand of ourselves.

We, in the Education Department, are extremely pleased that parents are interested and are prepared to comment on what is happening to their children in school. We are heartened that the community is concerned with the educational system. We admit moreover, that we have failed in many instances to keep parents informed and involved. We do believe, however, that

the greatest educative influences in most children's lives are - in order of importance - the home, the community, the school and the church.

We welcome constructive criticism that will improve the educational process in the N.W.T., but we suggest that such criticism be informed and that it be fair in presenting both sides of the story.

We firmly believe that every parent has the right - and the duty - either personally or through his elected representatives - to have a voice in his child's education. Every parent, indeed every resident, in the Northwest Territories, is welcome to visit any school or classroom at any time and see for himself what is taking place. Unfortunately, this invitation is all too seldom accepted, and I have the uneasy feeling that much of the recent criticism levelled at our schools by the press, has not been as the result of observation or investigation, but is based on somewhat vague hearsay.

Let me suggest a few of the philosophical and pedagogical principles upon which the educational system of the N.W.T. is based. These principles are backed by educational research, and have been drawn from the experience of educators in many parts of Canada and the world; for education, particularly today, is an international experience.

Education must be relevant to the environment, and must attempt to meet the needs of all the people it is designed to serve. For this reason, we believe it is futile to trans-

plant to the N.W.T. a system of education designed for southern Canadian children whose value system and life style is vastly different to that of children living in Fort Franklin or Clyde River. At the same time we recognize differences in the educational experiences that should be provided for a youngster living in Pine Point, and one whose home is in Baker Lake.

In the latter case we believe, that if it is the wish of the parents, the Baker Lake Inuit child has the right to be taught in his own language in his early years at school and that his teacher should be Inuit like himself. (We believe too, of course, that an Indian or English speaking child has these same rights.) We further believe that the tradition, history, life-style and culture of the Inuit and Indian parents have a place in the school curriculum, so that the things of worth and value in the home and community are so recognized in the school. Not only does this process help to create a positive self-image, but it builds on the strength - not the weakness - that a child brings to school with him. And what greater strength does a five-year old child possess than the very complex process of having mastered a language!

Because English is the language of commerce and industry in the N.W.T., and because most parents wish it to be taught, our schools teach English as a second language in the early years, and there is overwhelming linguistic evidence to suggest that a child who is taught initially in his mother tongue is far better able to master the target language eventually.

We have not, as yet, developed in our Northern schools a bilingual, bicultural system of education, but we feel that in many settlements in the North it is a worthy goal for which to strive.

Our Curriculum Guides - Elementary Education in the N.W.T. and Learning in the Middle Years have been produced in the North by Northern people for Northern schools, and they have won high acclaim from many leading educators in Canada and other parts of the world. They are, however, what they purport to be - guides to the development of curriculum and learning experiences that are flexible enough to be adapted to serve the needs of our diversified school population.

It will be of comfort to those who deplore the lack of "standards" in Northern education to learn that our Department of Education is a member of the Western Canada Curriculum Directors' Association, and that all the basic concepts in language arts, mathematics and science which are considered essential in Grades K - 9 in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C. are presented in the N.W.T. curriculum guides. The fact that our programs in Art, Music, Technical subjects, Social Studies and Physical Education are designed with a Northern bias seems to me to be a plus-factor.

There is a strange contradiction in the fact that a great number of people who rail against southern political control of the N.W.T., at the same time deplore a Northern education system. Is education in the N.W.T. under attack because of the colonial attitude which suggests that anything Northern must be

second-rate? I certainly hope that such is not the case.

Our philosophy of education maintains that the individual child is the vital concern of the educational process, and that the system should be designed to fit the child, and not vice versa. The recognition of individual differences among children; the provision of activity-centred learning, so that a child may learn by doing, not listening; the development of a warm personal relationship between teacher and child; less insistence on absolute silence and lack of movement within a classroom; the individualization of instruction, so that each child may progress in his learning activities at his own rate and in his own style; the use of concrete materials in learning; - all these are methods through which joy and excitement may be brought to the learning process, and through which schools become less like factory-assembly lines, and more like "good places for kids".

It may be our common puritanical background that suggests to most of us that work must be distasteful and that play must be a complete waste of time. Is it not possible that many valuable learnings - social, intellectual, physical and even spiritual - can be gained through the medium of play? Perhaps, in the perfect school and the perfect society, the two terms will become indistinguishable.

We believe that communication in its broadest sense is the tie that binds the school curriculum, and indeed the whole educative process. Certainly, learning to read and to write is important, but is not the be-all and the end-all of education.

Art, Music, Science, Physical Education, films, records, television and many other in-school and out-of-school activities are equally legitimate and important means of communication, which must be utilized in the development of school programs. In a world where we and our children are increasingly bombarded by the output from the press, radio, T.V., movies, computers and satellites, the school cannot remain an academic island where "readin', ritin' and rithmetic" are the only considerations.

The pupils in our schools of today realize that the world is a global village. The mass media brings them news of a desperate concern for the environment and the quality of life, the plight of the consumer, racial tensions at home and abroad, the need for human understanding. Surely school programs cannot ignore these concerns and offer instead a classical education that prepares a person to live, not in the present or the future, but in the past. I cannot accept the premise that because the educational system of my day was good enough for me it is good enough for my children. The world has changed, the rate of change is accelerating, and it is the responsibility of the school to adjust to these changes.

In light of the "knowledge explosion", the elusive and shifting values of present-day society, and the communication barrage, facts are no longer sufficient. Pupils in a changing society must learn to learn, to evaluate, to discuss, to discover for themselves, to experiment, to weigh the evidence and to make judgements. Devising a curriculum which will help pupils to acquire these "survival skills" is no small task.

There will always be tension between two groups of educational objectives - those concerned with individual growth and fulfillment, and those concerned with the transmission of specific skills, intellectual disciplines and bodies of knowledge. Finding the right balance is neither easy nor obvious.

I would not suggest that we in the N.W.T. have found the answer. I do suggest that we are working toward it. We ask for the help and support of the parents and the community in enabling the school to assist each individual to develop to the maximum, his aptitudes, skills and competencies, so that he can live a satisfying personal life, while discharging his duties as a participating member of a complex society.

Yellowknife, N.W.T.
10 May, 1974.

N. J. Macpherson,
Director of Education.