

## *Book Review / Recension*

Heather Jane Robertson. (2007, Summer). *Great Expectations: Essays on Schools and Society*. Toronto: Our School/Our (Selves Special Issue).

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"[S]chools have been used increasingly to consolidate the advantages of those who need public education the least at the expense of those who need it the most" (p. iii). These schools fail to adequately meet the needs of children of "parents with the least amount of money and influence" because resources are spread "too thin" (pp. iii-iv). Robertson's primary pre-occupation in *Great Expectations* is with deepening inequalities in Canadian society reinforced through schooling. This collection offers timely responses in forty-three eminently readable articles, each previously published since 1999 in the Phi Delta Kappan magazine on emergent educational issues of the day in Canada's provinces. Robertson's conversational style and direct prose expose a range of problems affecting the quality of, access to, and resources for education in Canada. In each case, her portrayal lauds specific benefits or identifies threats to building and maintaining just education systems for Canadian students. Each dissection offers a critical exegesis with political currency that locates the interests of beneficiaries and of the deprived in a framework that advance our moral sensibilities.

Robertson offers her analyses in six sections with four to eleven articles in each section. *The Mirror of Society* section presents articles on how educational issues reflect larger societal issues and debates. In the article "The Devils in the Demographics," she focuses on the complexity of change where the political clout of baby boomers increased parental influence in schools, and how the "baby bust" generation "will cause barely a ripple in Canada's public priorities" (p. 253).

Further, she examines how bifurcation of the teaching profession into newcomers with their new generation of values and concerns, combined with the rapid retirement of baby boomer teachers and administrators, has potential to radically change teacher political culture. This convolution of Canada's falling birthrate and increased immigration has compounded the country's demographics, which demands that Canada's schools more substantively recognize diversity.

Another article in this section explicates the uncomfortable political tangle of the Canadian Teacher Federation's alignment with the federal government and "certain family value extremists" to retain section 43 of the Criminal Code that protects "using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child" (p. 260). Still another article reviews one of the Canadian Institute of Child Health's most comprehensive report *The Health of Canada's Children* that discusses children's "indifference to others" and increased "bullying behavior," parental concerns about behaviors, and how "loneliness continues to be a problem for many young people." Other articles in this section analyze the value and validity of Canada's ratification of the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child in light of how "current trends in education policy threaten substantive progress toward implementing the Convention"; examine the decline of reading; trash privatization of schooling and other public sectors responsibilities in "P3" public-private partnerships; and examines how curriculum content infrastructure required to support democracy has almost disappeared from Canadian schools.

Each section in the book has its own focus. *Stalked by the Market* section exposes corporate positioning as friends of nutrition and fitness, investigates conferences that recommend "dismantling the monopoly of public education so that market rules can be applied to the business of schooling," (p. 120) reviews battles to keep compulsory Youth News Network programming out of classrooms, identifies policies and laws that have fallen as a result of trade disputes associated with the Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA along with the potential threat they pose to public education, and recommends alternatives to learning about investing which could include learning about how "commercial banks, investment houses and brokerage firms stimulate financial crises in weak

economies, and then profit by lending money to the same people that they have ruined" (pp. 166-167).

The *Teaching in Interesting Times* section reviews how Ontario, for example, has been a hotbed of right wing efforts and experiments to control teachers rights, and assesses Premier Mike Harris' 1999 promise to evaluate teacher competence and the mandate given to the new Ontario College of Teachers to do so. It reports that none of Canada's self-regulating professions do such evaluations, how other professions regulate themselves, why provincial teacher unions do not initiate practice reviews, and how and why the premier of the time was unlikely not to relent on seeing that the testing will happen. In response to proposed 1999-2000 Conservative cuts to public spending in Nova Scotia that would have cut 10 per cent of Nova Scotia's teachers, Robertson documents how teachers, school boards, students, and parents rallied to force the Ham government to restore millions to the education budget. The other three sections in the book explore "Policy and Politics," "The Equity Agenda," and "The Digital School."

Self-conscious of her "speculative sociology," Robertson's work, engaging commentary, highlights the need for democratic institutions and processes that support visions of social justice. Although she acknowledges that "utopian expectations ... guarantee failure" (p. ii), Robertson nevertheless champions "Canadians' passionate faith in schools," (p. ii) and the public's persistence in seeking the improvement of this "organically conservative" institution which provides "relative isolation" from a "grasping and troubled world" (p. ii). This grounded survey of issues in Canadian education vividly details and ideologically criticizes "power dynamics playing out beneath the surface of the great and small decisions that shape our schools" (p. iii).