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The Seven Virtues of Queer-Friendly Schools

These programs, even in public schools, teach virtue in Catholicized terms that often keeps the realities of queer students, teachers and their families hidden and silent. At the same time, however, Canadian courts have increasingly recognized that all publicly funded schools are subject to scrutiny under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including scrutiny of the equality rights of young people in schools.

By reconciling the concepts of virtue and queer, I've identified seven guiding principles designed to reclaim the space of the "public" in public schools. The seven virtues of queer friendly schools include commitment, vigilance and shared responsibility, honesty and truth, passion and desire, critical and hopeful thinking, transformation of the self, and democratic classrooms and schools.

Queer friendly schools seek to create a public space that recognizes the need for deliberation and dialogue across differences as essential to creating an inclusive and participatory democracy in schools. Our goal as educators should be to develop critical literacies that enable students to negotiate and speak across multiple differences, rather than against them. And our commitment to building queer friendly schools should strive to move beyond the notion of tolerating or "putting up with" differences. This is a shallow form of democracy that is laden with notions of power and privilege, which allow us to accept someone, while refusing to interrogate our own attitudes and beliefs.

Building queer friendly schools calls for a more expansive notion of tolerance and dialogue - one that is premised in the need and desire for the other person. This, as Martin Luther King Jr. has suggested, is a disinterested form of love - a love that doesn't know the boundaries of race, gender, sexual orientation or other differences. This is a love for the other's sake.

In queer friendly schools all students can openly question understandings of sexuality, challenge gender roles and expectations and feel safe and valued for their differences. These schools don't force students or teachers to find their place in the mainstream. Instead, they create spaces that actively encourage students, teachers and same-gender parented families to ask critical questions in an effort to open up new possibilities for them (and others) to feel valued and accepted for who they are and not for what society tells them they should be.

What's in a Word?

In the new millennium, virtue has resurfaced with a certain cachet as the basis for a moral or upstanding education. Despite Canadian multiculturalism, contemporary discussions of virtue are steeped within Christian ethical perspectives premised in the desire to harmonize one's love of God in relationship to earthly men and women. However, the etymological origins of the word virtue reveal a host of differing perspectives, which open up a critical space to challenge understandings of what a truly virtuous education might entail.

Virtue comes from the Latin *virtus* meaning moral strength, valour, and excellence. In 1384, Middle English defined virtue as unusual ability, of inherent good quality, or being righteous and just. While for the Greeks, virtue was understood as habitual excellence, Aristotle noted that virtues can have several competing meanings and opposites (which would later be described as vices). For example, in Roman Catholicism, the Seven Virtues are justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude (known as the Four Western or Cardinal Virtues), faith, hope and charity (known as the Three Theological Virtues). In comparison, the Seven Deadly Vices (or Sins) are identified as pride, avarice (greed), lust, wrath, gluttony, envy and sloth. In contrast to these Western perspectives, Confucianism identifies perfect virtue as the global practice of gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness.

In comparison, queer derives from the Indo-European word *terwekw*, the German *quer* and the Latin *torquere*, which mean across, traverse and to twist. As noted queer theorist Judith Butler suggests, the word queer derives its force and understanding through its repeated invocation and the ways in which its usage has become linked to deviance, pathologization and insult. In the past two decades, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified persons have actively sought to reclaim the word queer as a source of pride and in protest of the ways in which society minoritizes and fixes a person's sexual orientation and gender identity as deviant or Other.

Queer persons do not ignore the painful history, discrimination and violence associated with the term. For example, the pink triangle, a prominent symbol in the queer community, was reclaimed from the Nazi Holocaust (much like the Star of David) and is now used as a symbol to fight back against discrimination and prejudice. The pink

triangle reminds queer people, in Kierkegaard's sense of the necessity of "remembering forward," to never forget the past for fear of it being repeated in the future. In this sense, queer is a political marker as much as it is claimed as a personal identity. Queer, in its more familiar popular cultural understanding, is also often understood as an umbrella category for the naming of a wide variety of sexual minority and non-conforming gender identities.

KRISTOPHER WELLS

Given the origins and history of the words virtue and queer, what then might the seven virtues of building queer friendly schools entail?

Commitment

Critical social transformation takes time and open dialogue. We will not overcome a history of discrimination and build queer friendly schools overnight. Societal and cultural change is built upon a foundation based in human rights and social responsibility. By helping to construct coalitions and support across multiple differences, we can open the dialogue towards full inclusion, meaningful access, and unrestricted accommodation.

Vigilance & Shared Responsibility

Challenging homophobia, heterosexism and sexism requires constant reflection and evaluation. How are the structures of oppression connected? For example, how is homophobia utilized as a weapon of sexism? Vigilance and shared responsibility are embedded in the belief that we need to look more critically at our schools and communities as we ask: Who is included and who is excluded? And why?

Honesty & Truth

We need to ask ourselves: What are the realities and resistances in engaging in this counternormative pedagogical work? By sharing our personal stories and collective history we invite an openness and vulnerability that encourages others to share their own experiences of difference. We all live storied lives. Stories are the way in which we relate and make sense of our shared experiences - our collective humanity. By sharing these lived experiences in an open and honest way we can begin to open the hearts and minds of others.

The virtues of honesty and truth are also embedded in the difficult work of challenging the status quo. This work can be understood as a part of learning in the struggle as we strive to dismantle the structures of oppression.

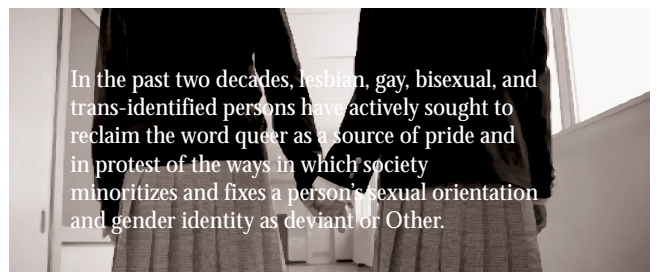
Passion & Desire

Ultimately we need to be able to internalize social justice and compassion in order to live them out in our everyday practice. The construction of knowledge is not separate from our lived experience. This desire for critical knowledge begins in a groundlessness that affirms destiny is not pre-given or pre-determined. Instead we need to envision and become the change that we seek in the world.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us that we can have two basic types of encounters with people: we may choose either humanizing or dehumanizing interactions. Which one will you choose? Will we continue to demonize the Other-that is, those who are different from us-or will we open our hearts and minds to accept, love and learn from them?

Critical & Hopeful Thinking

Critical and hopeful thinking not only involves asking "why" and "how," but



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Building queer friendly schools is not the sole responsibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified teachers and students. Everyone has a part to play in creating safe, inclusive and welcoming schools. In some cases heterosexual allies may be in the safer position to open dialogue and advocate for change.

also "why not," "what if," and "what about" questions. We need to believe that we can change the school system and society for the better. We can start to establish the foundation for this hope by creating the glimpses of the social transformation that we seek in our schools and communities. This begins by smugling in hope through the cracks

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in the walls of oppression. For example, this can occur by intervening in homophobic language and name-calling, through incorporating queer educational topics in the curriculum, and by establishing gay-straight student alliances and other safe spaces that seek to open up, rather than close down conversations.

Transformation of the Self

Noam Chomsky has passionately stated, "If we believe there is no hope, there will be no hope." Ultimately, we as individuals choose how we live and interact in the world. Before we ask others to change, we need to begin with ourselves and ask if our own values and beliefs are inclusive. This is about asking ourselves, "What makes us uncomfortable? Why?"

We must first start any process of transformation by learning to love and forgive ourselves. We need to overcome a legacy of external and internalized homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. We must also recognize that we will make mistakes in this journey. However, these practices of failure can become key sites of success if we interrogate and attempt to learn from them.

Democratic Classrooms & Schools

At the heart of any critical praxis is the understanding that classrooms are communities of learners. When one member feels excluded from this community, everyone loses access to that person's knowledge, insights and contributions. In this heartfelt community there is no learning for students, but only learning with students. In this way the teachers and the students both become the educators.

Democratic classrooms and schools ought to attempt to move away from a simple process of transmitting knowledge to a more complex understanding of transforming relationships to knowledge. In these schools, classrooms become sites for critical democracy where students and teachers learn to embrace, rather than fear diversity and its challenges.

Building queer friendly schools arguably revolves around a simple, yet profound statement expressed by Freire: "We need to create a world in which it will be easier to love."

Freire's words speak to a world in which human dignity is protected and respected, diversity and difference are embraced and everyone's individual destiny can be achieved. This world is our ethical obligation. This world is the project of hope, humanity and possibility that exists within our own hands if the seven virtues of queer friendly schools are to be realized.

The Seven Virtues of Queer Friendly Schools was part of a keynote address presented by Kristopher Wells to the Vancouver School Board's "Building Queer Friendly Schools as a Part of Social Responsibility Conference," held on October 22, 2004. ✪

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From the Tap to the Bottle and Back Again

Many of us have purchased a bottle of water thinking that we were paying for a pure product taken from an abundant source and packaged in a clean container. But Tony Clarke, director of the Polaris Institute (a Canadian institute designed to enable citizen movements to fight for democratic social change in an age of corporate driven globalization) and author of *Inside the Bottle: An Exposé of the Bottled Water Industry*, disagrees. Clarke believes that we may not only be supporting dubious social and environmental practices, but also contributing to the privatization of our public water systems.



LEAH ORR

The Birth of the Bottled Water Industry

According to the Canadian Food Bureau, consumption of bottled water in Canada currently outpaces that of coffee, tea, apple juice, and milk—but this wasn't always the case. As little as two decades ago, the industry was made up of a few local bottlers serving niche markets. Some estimate the bottled water industry's revenue growth at nearly 800 per cent in the past 20 years.

In the 1980s, European food giants Nestlé and Danone had expanded as far as they could in Europe and set their sights on North America. "So, they came in and bought up a whole series of the more productive and expanding bottled water operations," Clark says.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as bottled water sales skyrocketed and soft drinks were linked to health problems and obesity, Pepsi and Coca-Cola realized that there was a foreseeable end to the soft drink boom. They looked to juices and bottled water as the way of the future. Their entry into the bottled water market, however, was easier than that of their European counterparts.

"They didn't have to buy up bottled water companies. They already had their own bottling operations and their big bottling plants. It was a question of taking advantage of that infrastructure, moving on that and getting some kind of a toehold into the market," says Clarke.

That "toehold" was based on access to publicly built, maintained, and funded water systems, and the result is two of the best-selling brands of single-serve bottled water in North America: Aquafina and Dasani.

Public Water For Private Gain

In the cases of Aquafina and Dasani, bottled water is no more than tap water taken from municipal supplies that is reprocessed and marked up for resale. To get an idea of how much this water is marked up, compare 1.5 litres of New York City tap water (often flaunted as some of the cleanest water in North America) and the same quantity of Dasani. New York tap rings in at about 1/100th of a penny. A bottle of Dasani, however, costs around \$1.20. A 1999 Natural Resource Defence Council (NRDC) study titled "Bottled Water: Pure Drink or Pure Hype?" estimates that it costs "from 240 to over 10,000

times more per gallon to purchase bottled water than it does to purchase a gallon of average tap water."

Companies that use groundwater (or "spring water") have it a little harder than those who use municipal water, as they have to pay for drilling and infrastructure. However, they are not required to pay a fee or tax for extraction as they would for oil and gas.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one Ontario water activist notes, "They do pay for drilling and their own infrastructure, but notice that they are still accessing the water for free. A company takes a standard amount of one million litres per day. Each litre sells for \$1.25, so gross revenues are half a billion dollars per year."

"I don't think water should be priced," she continues. "Rather, private companies should pay hefty taxes for the privilege of temporary use, if they're to get it at all."

One of the reasons for a 2003 moratorium on new water permits in Ontario is that the province does not have a system to determine how much water is being extracted and whether permitted extractions are damaging the system.

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The situation in Alberta is similar, says Diana Gibson, Research Coordinator at the Parkland Institute. "Alberta does not have an accurate inventory of ground water aquifers, nor do we know the rate

at which those are being tapped or replaced." A current Natural Resources Canada initiative to map 20 per cent of key regional aquifers by 2006 indicates a shortage of information in all regions.

Would bottlers be concerned if they did have that information? The Ontario activist is doubtful. "Our experience locally is that [water bottlers] use up aquifers and move on to new ones when those have run dry."

But isn't it worth paying for a better product? Though the CBWA claims that "bottled water is held to stringent standards for quality, identity and labelling," Clarke and other water activists are quick to point to the NRDC report. This four-year study tested more than 1,000 bottles of 103 brands of bottled water and concluded that "about one-third of the waters tested contained levels of contamination—including synthetic organic chemicals, bacteria, and arsenic," and that bottled water "is not necessarily cleaner or safer than most tap water."

Add to this the environmental costs of manufacturing the components of plastic bottles, the bottles themselves, and what Clarke views as "the toxic chemicals and fossil fuel runoff of the biggest throwaway item there is," (plastic water bottles) and it seems water bottlers are getting away with more than price gouging.

All of this to transform water into... water.

The new consumer culture

The more we hear it, the more we come to believe that bottled water is a superior product. The more we accept that clean water is a luxury, rather than a right, the more we are willing to pay for it.

"By creating a consumer culture through bottled water, you set the stage for people to accept and promote the privatization of water services," says Clarke. "It helps to have those water privateers directly engaged in the bottled water portion of things to start to facilitate that kind of development."

What Clarke is referring to is the fact that some companies have their fingers in both pies, including one of the largest proponents of public-private partnerships in North America: Veolia (formerly Vivendi).

According to the Veolia Company Profile released in February 2005 by