The OPERI screening of Beyond Measure
Ottawa, Ontario, January 28, 2016

Summary of Audience's Notes with some OPERI Comments

The following summary and comments are provided to help keep conversations going after screenings of *Beyond Measure*. The full list of unedited submissions make good reading and can be found on the OPERI website under the title [Audience Notes on Beyond Measure](#).

Assessment

- A common theme was that there is too much testing being done and it is having a detrimental effect on children.

> **Comment**: It has been said that the only valid form of evaluation is self-evaluation. Thinking of how we evaluate our own learning when learning something that is important to us helps to give meaning to the saying.

Canadian Society

- The role of public education in building the kind of society we need was a concern.

> **Comment**: Joel Westheimer's book *What Kind of Citizen?: Educating Our Children for the Common Good* brings attention to the somewhat ignored nation building role of public education. The following quote from the book gives an idea of its content.
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> > "If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy."
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> We are being faced with having to change how we live in order to preserve the planet and share its resources in ways that respect equality among people and promote peace. We need citizens who seek to enrich their lives with relationships and community involvement, which provide joy with a small carbon footprint. The following found on the *Schooling the World* website is worth repeating here.
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> > "If you wanted to change a culture in a single generation, how would you do it?
> > *You would change the way it educates its children.*"

- Canada strives to be a leader in human rights, but our schools were seen to violate the right to self-determination.

> **Comment**: Being equal with children is not well understood by adults. It gets confused with nurturing and keeping children safe, which drive adults to assume the role of boss. Dorothy Nolte's poem titled "*Children Learn What They Live*" is a reminder that we need to avoid raising children in boss-managed environments. They need to be treated as equals and have their right to self-determination respected.
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> The thought of this conjures up visions of unruly children making adults lives unbearable, but such visions arise from equality being misunderstood. Kids have no more right to lord it over adults than the other way around. If kids live in environments where adults are calmly assertive and politely require respect, they will grow up reflecting those behaviours.
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> Thomas Gordon's books and courses titled *Parent Effectiveness Training* and *Teacher Effectiveness Training* help to establish how to be equal with children. It's more time consuming than telling kids to do something, "because I said so", but expediency too often dominates. The extra time it takes to be equal is time well spent for what it teaches kids about good relationships and responsible citizenship. The following quote from *Parent Effectiveness Training* illuminates how to relate to children.
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>> "My experience with children of all ages is that they are usually quite willing to modify their behavior when it is clear to them that what they are doing does in fact interfere with someone else's meeting his needs. When parents limit their attempts to modify children's behavior to what tangibly and concretely affects them, they generally find children quite open to change, willing to respect the needs of their parents, and agreeable to "problem-solve."
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> A recent event emphasizes that a rethink of learning environments with children's rights in mind is needed. *The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal* has ruled that the federal government discriminates against First Nation children on reserves by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services that exist elsewhere. *Beyond Measure* points out that traditional schools fail to provide the same level of service for those who don't fit the mold as exists for those who do fit it. The number of Matt Whalans of the Monument Mountain Regional High School are of epidemic proportion. We need to stop treating them like second-class citizens, but we also have to stop producing what Daniel Greenberg of the *Sudbury Valley School* refers to as "recovering 'A' students". These are adults who appeared to thrive in school, but who were so busy pleasing their teachers that they are now poor at thinking for themselves and overly afraid of making mistakes.

Creativity

- Creativity was seen as being curtailed by schools. One person put it strongly saying, "Schools are designed specifically to destroy the natural creativity and curiosity of children." People who share this view may like John Gatto's YouTube video *The Purpose of Schooling*.
- Another person wrote, "How to encourage kids' creativity while getting them ready for some of the structure of real life after school."

> **Comment**: The *Sudbury Valley School* provides students with one of the most noncoercive learning environments in existence. A study asked its graduates how they adjusted to the structure of university after *Sudbury Valley*. One student said it was easy, that "they told you exactly what to do."
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> It was also found that high school students who participated in a self-directed program for a semester had no difficulty returning to a traditional program. School structure implies that decisions are being made for people. Lack of structure suggests that people need to make their own decisions, which requires them to develop the time management and priority setting skills, etc. they need to be successful. Students who have acquired these skills are more likely to do better in university than those who have not had as good an opportunity to develop them. Another student in the *Sudbury Valley* study commented that he felt disadvantaged by a substantive knowledge difference compared to his traditional school counterparts, but that an attitudinal difference allowed him to quickly close the gap.

Curriculum

- Comments about curriculum suggested that mandated curriculum was taken as a given by some people, but not by others.

> **Comment**: There are big questions about curriculum. One concerns "essential learning" and how will students acquire it if it is not mandated. There is also the one about "optimum learning times", particularly with respect to mastering language and musical instruments.
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> OPERI is not encouraging a potentially divisive debate on curriculum at this time. It wants to defer it until we have a clearer picture of where we need to go with it. To help develop this picture, OPERI recommends a shift of emphasis from course content to the skills required for effective lifelong, independent learning. By developing these skills with mandatory course content, students develop on both fronts. Maintaining the curriculum also provides "scaffolding" that helps to keep students from floundering as they adjust to having greater autonomy.

Engagement

- There are many comments that fall within this category. People want schools that are engaging for all students.

  > **Comment**: The *Principles of Learning* have been posted on the OPERI website. These principles form the basis of how to create engaging learning environments.

Film evaluation:

- American stories are nice – want to learn more about what is working internationally.

  > **Comment**: There is enough happening in Canada to make as compelling a film about educational innovation as Beyond Measure provides. In Ottawa alone, the quality of videos done on the COMPASS Self-Directed Learning Centre and other innovative programs match that of Beyond Measure. The OCDSB also has alternative programs running in five schools for pre high school students. Windsor House School in British Columbia and the Alpha I and Alpha II Schools in Toronto are working the boundaries of noncoercive learning under the jurisdiction of public school boards. The thought of producing a Canadian film to build on what Beyond Measure has given us is exciting and something OPERI would like to pursue with anyone who is interested.
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  > Internationally, the school that can be credited with starting the whole democratic school movement is Summerhill in England, and schools styled after Sudbury Valley outside Boston, Mass. are appearing in other countries. Wikipedia provides a list of international democratic schools. IDEC and AERO are two organizations promoting these views. The *Unschooling Canada Association* supports applying the practices of unschooling to public education, and there are people practicing unschooling throughout the world.

- Mainly focused on teen stuff. What about others???

  > **Comment**: The pilot programs proposed by OPERI are introduced at the high school level. The attention *Beyond Measure* brings to these schools will help OPERI to develop an awareness of the benefits the pilots offer. The pilots are open ended and easily expanded to include lower grades as people reestablish their concept of learners as the excited individuals with a lust for learning that we perceive them to be before they go to school. With the help of the pilot programs, people's imaginations will grow and they will find ways to incrementally extend greater control over learning to students of all ages.

Change takes time so parents of young children need to get involved now if they want their children to have a different kind of high school experience from what students are having today, but change does not have to start at the high school level. The OCDSB alternative schools are examples of how it is happening with younger students. By continuously pushing the boundaries, they can produce significant systemic change that benefits all students in their neighbourhood schools. OPERI would like to work in partnership with any group that focuses on creating immediate change in lower grades. Melding our efforts can accelerate the rate of change.

The big task of change at this time is to spark people's imaginations about what is possible. The following observation made by John Gatto is too accurate for the problem we face. The OPERI pilot programs promise to stimulate people's imagination.

> "It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things."

IPRC

- What is IPRC?

Comment: IPRC stands for Identification Placement Review Committee. It is a meeting of a committee to decide whether or not a child should be identified as having special needs or "exceptionalities" that fall under one of Ontario's Ministry of Education categories.

Despite the good intentions behind them, IPRCs are a blatant symptom of a system gone wrong. It puts blame on children who don't fit the mold, and it assigns them derogatory labels after their suffering can be ignored no longer. The damage done can last a lifetime.

The system we need is one that treats all children like members of a loving family. Parents know of children's special needs without labeling them as misfits and they provide the needed support in natural and caring ways that do not put spotlights on kids. With the integration of children who are today identified, others get to see how masterful adults provide effective support and bring out the best in all children. Trying to integrate "exceptional" children into the homogeneous classes of traditional schools doesn't work. We need to move to mixed-age and mixed-ability communities of learners where differences are seen as normal, diversity is celebrated, and bullying is not inadvertently cultivated.

Making change happen:

> **Comment**: OPERI's activities are guided by advice contained in a document titled *Organizing: People, Power, Change.* It is adapted from the work of Dr. Marshall Ganz of Harvard University and resources from the Leading Change Network and the New Organizing Institute. The following organizations collaborated in producing the adaptation: Dogwood Initiative, Leadnow, One Cowichan, the David Suzuki Foundation, and Stonehouse Institute.
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> *Organizing: People, Power, Change*
> **can be found on the OPERI website.**

- Why here?

> **Comment**: Richard Fransham is the primary force behind OPERI. He has taught in Ottawa for 30 years and gained experience working for the OCDSB, the OCSB and the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education. His wife had a long career as a primary grade teacher with the OCDSB, and their two children attended OCDSB schools. Ottawa is home, and therefore the place to try to make right, but OPERI is not focused on only Ottawa. It is urging school boards in other places to undertake pilot programs to show us what happens when students are liberated from the bells. Any school board can be the game changer. Ottawa may not provide that game changer, but OPERI's work here could help us to follow the lead of others sooner rather than later.
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> OPERI arises from the example set by Ecology Ottawa, an environmental group with the goal of making Ottawa the green capital of Canada. It builds environmental awareness and promotes healthy community action that supports city councilors who want to enact strong green policies. Similarly, OPERI is working to build awareness of great innovations and promising ideas in education, and to provide support for anyone in a position of authority who is inspired to eliminate the bells from public education and to pursue the kinds of learning environments that fully support all children.

Parents

- Audience notes mentioned parents as having an important role to play in the change process.

> **Comment**: Parents know their kids best and are the primary advocates for their children. Only the kids themselves should have greater influence over how they are treated. OPERI agrees with one person's comment that training needs to be provided for both parents and teachers.

PBL

- There was interest in PBL and how it might look in larger systems.

> **Comment**: "Problem-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered pedagogy in which students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem." (Definition from Wikipedia).
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> One person commented that there are numerous project based opportunities in Ottawa. Examples given are the cardboard boat competition, culinary competition @ Algonquin College, and Link crew events. Norman Johnson was also suggested as a place where project-based learning takes place.
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> - Link Crew is a structured year-long high school transition program that provides mentoring and character development. Visit http://www.boomerangproject.com/link/yearlong-program for more information.
> - Norman Johnson is an OCDSB alternate school for students at risk.

Resources

- A homeschooler drew attention to how traditional schools fail to take advantage of community resources. She said that as a homeschooler she gets to draw from parents who are biophysicists, architects, chiropractors, engineers, etc. Kids get to learn from people in the field.

> **Comment**: Teachers and community members at two OCDSB high schools are planning a human library event on March 23rd, 2016. Students attending will be able to pick the brains of a wide variety of people who have something to share. It is an example of how traditional schools can make use of community resources, but it also reveals that the current system makes it difficult to tap into those resources compared to the free flow that exists for homeschoolers.

Scaffolding

- The film and some comments point out that it is not only adults who have difficulty adjusting to change. Children also struggle if they are taken from controlled environments and placed in ones that require them to assume control.

> **Comment**: Daniel Pink's book *Drive* provides a thought provoking look at autonomy and how some people are cultivating it. An entertaining YouTube video, *The Backwards Brain Bicycle*, reinforces the view that kids too struggle with change, but that the plasticity of their brains allows them to adjust more quickly than adults.

Systemic change

- The need for systemic change was echoed by many of the people who viewed the film. The prospects were exciting to some, while others wondered how it could be accomplished.

> **Comment**: OPERI has a plan for how to create change. It is not interested in prescribing an alternative, but rather in establishing the conditions that invite people to find their own alternatives. The floodgates of opportunity for innovators do not open with fixed scheduling in place, so OPERI does prescribe the elimination of it.
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> Teaching style was raised as possibly being more of an issue than fixed scheduling. OPERI's view is that the constraints of bells dividing the school day into fixed chunks of time prevent teachers from exercising their teaching styles as much as they prevent students from exercising their learning styles. Illuminating the ills of fixed scheduling and the benefits to eliminating it is the primary focus of OPERI. The update of its website, which is due to be posted in the near future, will present the ills and benefits as seen by OPERI.

Teachers

- Teachers made most of the comments in this category. They see the need for change and indicated they want to be part of it. One said, "I want to be held accountable, but in a smart way." Another wondered how much of a priority systemic change was for teacher unions.

> **Comment**: It was encouraging to see so many teachers in attendance and the desire for change that they expressed. Change cannot happen without the involvement of teachers, which is what the question about the priorities of unions recognizes.
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> Teachers in the film showed elation from seeing their students become more engaged, and from the better relationships they had with students. It also showed them at times frustrated with students who were not seizing on the new opportunities, and exhausted from trying to make changes work. OPERI contends that the elation is there for the taking, and that the frustration and exhaustion can be eliminated with good change management. Teacher unions will embrace changes that benefit their members and so the question about union priorities is something that will be answered as more teachers assess the benefits proposed changes offer.