

Professional schools lose grip on reality; A professor's praise for a teacher's misconduct highlights a gap between training and real jobs

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Sunday, November 4, 2007

Page: C2

Section: Comment

Source: Times Colonist

When a teacher at Langford's Millstream Elementary School refused to administer a reading test earlier this year, she was disciplined. Kathryn Sihota was told by the school board that her refusal to follow district policy was insubordinate. After she was warned that further misconduct could mean dismissal, Sihota elected to stay on and the matter seemed closed.

But now a professor at Simon Fraser University has weighed in. Paul Shaker told a graduating class of 300 education students last month that Sihota should serve as a role model for all teachers.

He commended Sihota for a courageous act of civil disobedience, and for standing up to "psychological and educational vandalism." Who is Paul Shaker? None other than the dean of education at SFU.

Later, when interviewed, Shaker backed off a bit. He had not, he said, intended to wade into a controversy. He was simply supporting a principled stand by a colleague.

Yet his remarks leave little doubt that, like many education professors around the country, he opposes standardized testing. Moreover, the advice he offered, while perhaps suited to his own workplace, is incompatible with the duties his students will bear. Civil disobedience, and disrespect for authority, are not the hallmarks of professionalism.

It's not our intent to pick on a few unwise remarks. There is a broader question here. While universities have an academic mission to pursue scholarship, in the professional colleges there are other duties as well. One is to prepare young teachers or nurses or lawyers for the workplace they will meet on graduation.

Since many will be employed in public institutions, like schools or hospitals, their duties will reflect the needs, and demands, of the community. Standardized tests are a good example.

They were introduced in B.C. because clear evidence existed that kids were graduating from high school with inadequate literacy skills. Children who could scarcely read and write were being passed along, from year to year, with "satisfactory" stamped on their transcripts. Grade inflation was common, with different schools and different teachers, applying their own scale of values.

More troubling, the kids hardest hit by lax or subjective standards were those most in need of help. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, the B.C. children's representative, made this point in a recent Vancouver Sun article.

She warned that aboriginal youngsters and children in care frequently slip through the cracks because learning deficiencies are not discovered in time. And she noted that standardized testing is the best way to identify kids who are in danger of dropping out.

Turpel-Lafond might just know what she's talking about. She grew up on a Cree reservation, graduated with a law degree from Harvard, and rose to be Saskatchewan's first native provincial court judge.

The question about what professional training owes to the community is not confined to education colleges. Two professors at the University of Ottawa's school of nursing recently published an astonishing article comparing science-based medicine to fascism.

They complained the health disciplines have been "colonized ... by an all-encompassing scientific research paradigm." And they railed against the requirement that "if health-care professionals perform an action, there should be evidence that the action will produce the desired outcomes."

Exactly what alternate view of medicine these professors are advocating, they don't say. But a more perfect example of ivory-tower silliness would be hard to find.

Yet this isn't a class on obscure political theories. Versions of this hostile attitude toward scientific principles are being taught in nursing colleges across Canada.

Perhaps that helps explain why so many young nurses, upon graduating, report dissatisfaction with the job. It's not at all what they have been led to expect by their teachers.

And maybe it also explains why hospitals report that nurses today are frequently not ready to practise after graduating. Long months of on-the-job preparation are needed to fill in the gaps left by inadequate professional training.

Likewise in law schools, the practical requirements of serving the public are virtually ignored in favour of more abstract notions. The result, as a blue ribbon panel of judges in B.C. recently observed, is a civil law system drowning in obfuscation and delay.

No doubt in all these cases, the question is one of balance. No one suggests that workplace realities should trump, far less extinguish, scholarly foundations. Yet there is a legitimate public interest in seeing that the needs of the community aren't left out either. We've invested hugely in universities, and granted them almost unlimited independence. With that independence certainly comes freedom to carry out pure research wherever it leads.

But the training of professional practitioners is a different matter. Nurses and teachers are not academics. They are responsible to a captive audience of patients and school children whose well-being depends on their skills.

And entrance into one of the professions, if not a licence to print money, is certainly remunerative. Universities benefit from that fact by charging enormous fees for this kind of training.

It seems fair to remind professors of education, or nursing, or law, that all of us are stakeholders in this debate. And that theory divorced from reality has no place in the classroom or hospital ward.

Idnumber: 200711040057

Edition: Final

Story Type: Editorial

Length: 856 words