

Interview of 28th February, 2014 with Professor Westheimer

**Question:**

*If student-centred learning is the logical outcome of a constructivist ideology at the ministry level, where in the school or school board structure, in your opinion, are the limitations to this pedagogy? Discrepancies? Obstacles?*

**Response:**

The question above was asked of Professor Joel Westheimer, who had the following insights to offer as regards the difficulties in working out an authentic student-centred pedagogy at the ground level.

First and foremost, what is an obvious hurdle is reflected in the vast, complex network of inter-departmental communications within such complex structures as school boards and the ministries to which they report.

Professor Westheimer points out, "School systems are a bundle of conflicting policies and goals. One of the issues is that there are no clear policies, or many different policies, in large structures or institutions.", and so it is to be expected that many reforms, at times, take a convoluted route before the average 20% of adherents begin to make their adaptations known and serve as role-models to colleagues in the field.

Within the student body of the Teacher Education Program at the University of Ottawa, it is this very phenomena that we are asked to think about at a deep level, through such seminars as Schooling and Society, offered by Professor Westheimer.

"The goal of the question, "What are schools for?", for example, is to address these conflicts.", he goes on to say. It is important that future teachers think about educational reforms, examine their source and applications, and understand their potential outcomes.

As regards student-centred teaching, the controversy is rather nebulous, especially since the sources of research cited by both sides of the issue seem clearly demarcated between those in favour of high achievement through standardized testing and those against this practice of assessment. There are concerns in other areas, as well, such as preparing students adequately for the work force.

"For example, EQAO testing, which answers to an idea of accountability, runs counter to constructivist, student-centred teaching and learning. At the moment, there is a movement towards "standardization" and this poses a problem to implementing

structures and pedagogy that embrace a student-centred learning and teaching practice.

The pressure to conform to this comes from the top, and the administrators must answer to it, and then so must the teachers. And so, these are some of the forces that work exactly counter to that ideology of student-centred learning."

Valuable studies on the subject are slowly emerging. They are informed by and organized around a body of intellectual work examining the nature and application of Educational philosophies, deconstructing along the way the many tenets that still uphold a traditional, and for all intents and purposes, bankrupt public school hierarchy. I am referring here to underfunding, sub-par academic achievement and unacceptable drop-out rates.

Recent research on student-centred pedagogy points to the generally positive effects on students' overall development of higher-order thinking skills that result from this methodology. It is, though, a politically and philosophically loaded gun, as some have indicated, in that it re-wires the very meaning of fostering an educated society.

Those who uphold the ideal of an educated society are often at odds with those who create the structures which students often struggle to adapt to, with inconsistent or less than desirable results. As mentioned, it is often a small percentage of those willing to follow the paradigm shift, or conceptual leap, that slowly set the groundwork for others. Change, especially effective change, is a slow, organic process.

As to possible ways of facilitating these changes, at the very least, in order to pursue unhindered with what seems to work for some in their own educational communities, Professor Westheimer suggests a usual, democratic principle of self-actualization, "There should be much more local control at the school site."