

# BLURRED VISION

RETHINKING THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM



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## INTRODUCTION

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**T**he purpose of a curriculum is to outline specific knowledge, skills and values that students are expected to acquire in the course of their formal education. However, a curriculum is more than a course of study. Depending on the priorities of the day, the “tone” or emphasis of the curriculum will vary, as particular areas of study are deemed more or less worthy of attention. The curriculum determines what educators will or will not teach, and is a useful indicator of prevailing values and concerns in a given historical period.

In an effort to distance itself from its predecessors, the current government has gone to considerable lengths to redefine public education in this province. The new curriculum reveals much about the social climate of Ontario under the government of Mike Harris. The curriculum from grades 1 to 8 emphasizes skills involving rote memory, the acquisition of facts, data and specialized technical terminology. In many respects, the choice of subject matter and the emphasis on memorization hearken back to a pre-1960’s system of education. At the same time, the curriculum advocates the use of advanced technology. In fact, computers and the Internet are viewed as essential learning tools in both classroom and home.

On the surface, the Ontario curriculum seems to embrace two opposing directions. On the one hand, the current methodology and recommended materials recall the “little red school house”. On the other hand, the Ministry is clearly committed to ensuring that children are conversant with the latest technological innovations. What then, are we to make of this unlikely blend of traditionalism and modernity?

In general terms, the curriculum may be understood as a direct response to a pervasive unease with rapid changes in society in recent years. Since the 1960’s, liberalized immigration policies have given rise to a society that is increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic. This development has been accompanied by ongoing efforts by various groups to win a wide range of specific rights. For many, these changes have signaled a welcome move toward greater freedom and self-realization. As historian Michael Ignatieff observes:

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*Women seeking sexual and economic equality, aboriginal peoples seeking recognition of their title to land, ethnic minorities seeking protection of their culture, and same sex couples seeking rights equivalent to those afforded heterosexuals. [From the perspective of these group] ... the history of the past forty years is a story of freedom painfully fought for and far from achieved.<sup>1</sup>*

For others, however, change has engendered fears that the fabric of Canadian society is quickly unraveling:

*Minorities have won recognition, and now it is the turn of the majority to look around and ask, in astonishment, whether it recognizes itself. Where is the majority any more? Once we thought we knew: white, heterosexual, family-oriented, native-born people who were Canadians first and anything else second. Now the population is cross-cut with identities – sexual, racial, religious, and ethnic – making it difficult to speak of a Canadian majority at all.<sup>2</sup>*

Add to this an economic climate where insecurity is now the norm, and it is not surprising that some people yearn for a time when life seemed simpler and more predictable. In these circumstances, fears are easily aroused and exploited for political gain. When Ontarians are told repeatedly that education in the province has plummeted below international standards, we are understandably concerned. We are told this is a crisis. We are offered a solution: a curriculum that promises a “return to basics” and a simultaneous rise in standards.

However, “turning back the clock”, while offering some comfort, cannot dispel concerns of “falling behind” in a rapidly changing, highly competitive world. Accordingly, an unconditional faith in technology becomes the curriculum’s antidote to societal fears of “failing to keep up.”

This is not to suggest that the current curriculum is without merit. Indeed, teachers appreciate the manner in which it clearly outlines the expectations regarding what is to be taught at each level. Nor do teachers take exception to the memorization of facts and technical terminology; these methods are recognized aspects of formal education. However, the tendency to emphasize this form of learning above all others does pose problems. For one thing, the intense pressure on teachers to ensure that students absorb extensive lists of information within a limited time-span creates the risk that subject matter will be dealt with superficially and at too fast a pace for many students.

It may also mean that subjects of crucial importance to society are not covered at all. For example, according to recent surveys, 75 per cent of Ontario residents believe the Province should do more to protect the environment<sup>3</sup>. Yet the Ontario Curriculum offers little direction on the teaching of environmental issues. In this respect, the priorities of the Ministry seem to differ from the priorities of the public.

Other issues are neglected as well. Canada is now recognized as the most socially diverse country in the world<sup>4</sup>. We are a nation of multiple identities. Whether this reality is seen as one of our greatest strengths or a factor leading to our collective downfall, the curriculum ought to prepare students to meet the challenges of contemporary society.

Public education in democracies should furnish students with the conceptual tools to act as informed participants in the larger society. With this objective in mind, we surveyed the Ministry expectations for the Primary, Junior and Intermediate divisions in Language, Mathematics, Social Studies, History, Geography, The Arts, Health, and Physical Education, looking for ways in which the curriculum can be modified and enhanced to increase students’ understanding of complex issues.

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We are not suggesting that teachers simply add to or modify the existing curriculum; the curriculum itself needs to be reviewed and revised as part of an ongoing project of reassessing educational priorities. Currently, the emphasis on learning massive amounts of often fragmented information places excessive demands on teachers and students. Educators don't have the time or resources to add to the already overwhelming number of expectations. ETFO has called on the Ministry to identify the curriculum's core expectations and themes for integration across subjects and grades.

In our review of the curriculum, we explored four themes highlighting specific areas requiring elaboration in the curriculum. These themes are summarized below:



## CRITICAL THINKING

Comparison, assessment and evaluation are all components of the advanced level of thought known as Critical Thinking. The ability to think critically plays a fundamental role in the processing of information. The curriculum does list Critical Thinking as an expectation in the various areas of study. However, aside from its abstract application in Mathematics and a cursory reference in the Reading program, there is little guidance to teachers on developing this essential skill. We looked at how Critical Thinking can be implemented in a range of subject areas.



## ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Environmental Awareness involves recognizing the interdependency of living things. In the contemporary context, it also means understanding the range of factors threatening the existence of many species. After Walkerton, it is painfully apparent that the degradation of the environment seriously endangers us all. The very survival of our species may ultimately depend on our ability to understand and address this issue. However, the environment receives only superficial attention in a few select areas of the Curriculum, and the general language of the Curriculum tends to reinforce the very attitudes that have led to our current dilemma. We explore opportunities for infusing Environmental Awareness throughout the curriculum.



## MEDIA LITERACY

Today almost all information is conveyed through some form of mass media. The enormous influence of the media is apparent when we consider the effect advertising has on our desires and behaviour. Moreover, our perceptions of one another and the world at large are generally informed by what we see or hear in the media. Children need to learn how to evaluate the range of information to which they are continually exposed, so that they will be equipped to make responsible decisions. We focussed on the opportunities for linking media awareness to many areas of the curriculum.



## DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

Canada is one of the most socially diverse nations in history. The Ontario curriculum makes some attempt to acknowledge this diversity; however, in general, the expectations fail to reflect the contributions many groups have made to Canadian society. As a result, many students may feel excluded from the curriculum; for some, this renders the curriculum profoundly irrelevant. This situation presents inherent risks: for one thing, alienation reduces the likelihood that students will do well at school. Underachievement, in turn, can further reduce students' opportunities for positive participation in the larger society. We explored the elements of an inclusive curriculum, aimed at increasing the chances of academic success for all students.

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1. Ignatieff, Michael, *The Rights Revolution*, Toronto: Anansi Press Ltd., 2000 p. 113.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
  3. *The Toronto Star*, Friday, January 5, 2001.
  4. Dyer, Gwynne, "Visible Majorities", *Canadian Geographic*, Jan./Feb. 2001.
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## CRITICAL THINKING

**L**earning occurs on many levels. It begins with our earliest sensory explorations. It continues over time as through experience we accumulate, store or discard information. A great deal of learning occurs without our conscious awareness; on the other hand, much knowledge is the result of our conscious efforts to acquire and organize data and ideas. The latter form of learning is the kind that we generally associate with formal education.

One method by which people consciously gather information is rote learning. The ability to memorize terminology and “facts” is an important facet of our education system. Learning by rote involves a secondary skill: the capacity to exercise judgement. For example, when a child answers a question requiring rote memory, she must recall relevant data and then decide whether her notion is correct.

Although rote learning by itself involves fairly basic processes, it can lay the foundation for more complex thought. For instance, upon answering a question, the child may be further asked to explain and defend her idea. The judgement used and the depth of evaluation demonstrated form the basis for the higher order of thought referred to as critical thinking.

During the past decade educators in Ontario have attempted to teach and evaluate critical thinking skills. For instance, the present provincial tests for mathematics require children to provide a specific numerical answer, and then to explain the process by which they arrived at that answer and their reasons for believing that process to be correct.

Critical thinking is developed and evaluated in other subject areas as well. For example, there are specific “Reasoning and Critical Thinking” expectations in Reading at all grade levels. Critical thinking in Reading is defined as “... examining opinions, questioning ideas, interpreting information, identifying values and issues, detecting bias, [and] detecting implied as well as explicit meaning”<sup>1</sup>. Critical thinking is an expectation in the Arts Curriculum, though the term is undefined. The “habits of mind” that students are expected to develop in Science and Technology, Social Studies, History and Geography involve critical thinking skills.

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However, it remains the individual teacher's responsibility to find a way to teach critical thinking, and here the curriculum provides little help.

We have said that critical thinking involves three skills: comparing, assessing and evaluating a number of different ideas. To draw comparisons, a person must be exposed to a variety of diverse ideas. To evaluate, one must be able to consider ambiguities, such as the possibility that an answer fits in one context but not in another or that a particular combination of elements may exist in a certain time and place, but not necessarily in others. To assess, someone must be able to draw connections that are not always obvious between various elements.

The exercise of critical thinking doesn't involve resorting to pre-established answers. Pike and Selby call this "perspective consciousness":

*[It] requires the student to take an imaginative leap outside of her own cultural framework, to assume, in her mind, a 'fly on the wall' position... But established worldviews are profoundly constructed and persistent in their influence: imagination and creativity are needed if they [conventional assumptions] are to be consistently challenged and adapted.<sup>2</sup>*

Here's an example of how critical thinking may apply to a problem in Mathematics. Students are given a grid with a starting point at one square and a destination point at another, and asked to find the shortest route from the start to the destination traveling along the vertical and horizontal lines of the grid. To complete the task, a student must first be aware that there are a variety of alternate routes; this is necessary in order to compare them. Secondly, he or she must evaluate the situation and realize that a diagonal line, or a route that mimics it, may not fit in the present context. Thirdly, in order to assess a given choice, the student must connect different kinds of concepts, in this case measurement and geometry, in order to explain a rule of travel.

In other areas of the curriculum, critical thinking is less clearly apparent as an expectation.

The evaluation of knowledge and skills outlined for Social Studies from grades 1 to 8 includes four categories:

- a) Understanding concepts
- b) Inquiry/research skills and map and globe skills
- c) Communication of required knowledge
- d) Application of concepts and skills

All but one of these categories require evidence of rote learning with no progression towards critical judgment. For example, "Communication of required knowledge" calls for the "consistent ... use of appropriate terminology, vocabulary and symbols". The curriculum appears to favour the memorization of specific words over the elaboration of concepts. In contrast, critical thinking would emphasize drawing connections over the utilization of isolated terms. By limiting its expectations to the application of rote learning, the curriculum misses opportunities to make conceptual linkages and promote critical thinking.

The evaluation of knowledge and skills outlined for Language from grades 1 to 8 includes four categories:

- a) Reasoning,
- b) Communication,

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c) Organization of Ideas,

d) Application of Language Conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style).

The development of critical thinking ought to provide direction for students to use language in order to create, connect and analyze complex ideas. Here again, the primary emphasis of the curriculum is on learning terminology. For example, under the category Reasoning, it states that the use of complex ideas is to be demonstrated through the use of specialized technical vocabulary. Under Communication, the employment of complex forms is to be shown through students' use of charts in their writing. Under Organization of Ideas, children are to demonstrate complex logic by writing a formal letter.

As Pike and Selby say,

*The process of learning at school is [for the student] essentially rational, logical and sequential. What she should learn is decided for her and neatly parceled in student-sized chunks. How to learn, too, is a preordained pathway, consisting of recording and organizing information into categories and compartments so that it can be reproduced at will, in as near-perfect a form as possible, whenever required for the purpose of 'assessment'.<sup>3</sup>*

The Ontario Curriculum's allusions to complex language should call on children to challenge concepts and to create arguments. Although the curriculum uses critical thinking as a category of expectation in Reading and states that detecting bias is an essential component of critical thinking, it provides no references for developing this skill in its expectations. If the criteria of critical thinking are to be achieved, language must be used to analyze and deconstruct concepts.

Paulo Freire criticizes the traditional approach to education by pointing out how it ignores students' creativity and thereby negates their humanity.

*This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits. They [the students] do, it is true, have an opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men [sic] themselves who are filed away. In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of the oppressed, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>*

Freire concludes that this form of education serves those who do not want the world to be transformed, nor even to have the world, with its problems of inequity and environmental damage, be revealed. For this reason "the banking approach will never propose to students that they critically consider reality."<sup>5</sup>

Critical thinking involves challenging the status quo, including ideas or actual issues within the real world. Earlier it was noted that the Mathematics curriculum contained the basic structure of critical thinking. However, the application of this structure can and should be given greater depth by using Mathematics not only in reference to the real world, such as by counting jelly beans, but by challenging that world. For example, statistics can be used to show the inequities within society, from the disproportionate distribution of wealth to the disproportionate representation of various groups in positions of power. Most importantly, critical thinkers must have access to alternative ideas, such as "systemic discrimination", aesthetics, good citizenship and environmental awareness in order make comparisons with popular prejudices and media-controlled ideas.

Critical thinking should, as the curriculum suggests, lead to the asking of questions, but these questions should not be easy ones with ready-made answers. Instead, questions should lead to discussions and discussions to the formation of a diversity of answers.

The following are some examples of how critical thinking can be taught in various areas of the curriculum.

## EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM

### SOCIAL STUDIES

#### Heritage and Citizenship

Grade 4, page 21

- identify some of the significant events which occurred during medieval times (e.g., the Crusades, adoption of the Magna Carta)

#### History

Grade 8, page 49

- demonstrate an understanding of the diverse groups and individuals who contributed to the formation and growth of Canada

### LANGUAGE

#### Reading

Grade 5, page 34

- begin to identify a writer's or character's point of view
- use research skills (e.g. formulate questions, locate information, compare information from various sources)

### HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

#### Healthy Living

Grade 5, page 16

- explain how people's actions (e.g., bullying, excluding others) can affect the feelings of others

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1. Ministry of Education and Training, *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 Language*, Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997, p. 49.
2. Pike, G. and Selby, D., *Global Teacher, Global Learner*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, p. 54.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
4. Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1971, p. 58.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p>The curriculum should expose students to more than they will get from popular media about the glory of medieval times.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the influence of Africans and Jews on medieval Europe.</li> <li>• Identify anti-Semitism as a major feature of medieval times, e.g., pogroms.</li> </ul>
<p>Expectations point primarily to the contributions of European groups. The possibility of focusing on non-Europeans is reduced by the amount of time teachers are obligated, through the specific expectations, to dwell on White history.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expose the partnership of Métis and First Nations in Confederation.</li> <li>• Illustrate Manitoba as an Aboriginal political entity, which was created and given recognition as an equal franchise and province within Confederation.</li> <li>• Illustrate the positive political force of Natives during the Western treaty process, which led to the formation of the Western provinces.</li> </ul>
<p>Students are directed to retrieve information without specifically being required to critique information. Students are not given tools, such as anti-racist concepts, to form comparisons. Hence comparisons may be as shallow as “this book has more writing than that book”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to deconstruct ideas by suggesting why some writers or sources of information may be biased.</li> <li>• Have students examine writing which shows bias towards race and gender.</li> <li>• Investigate picture books to determine the bias in the presentation of family members. Ask questions such as “Why are homosexual parents or parents with disabilities rarely (if ever) depicted?”</li> </ul>
<p>The curriculum needs to acknowledge that certain groups are singled out for more abuse than others. It should help students to reach beyond their own reference groups in order to understand the greater context of their lives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore homophobia in the student population. Have students heard the terms “fag” or “dyke” used at school/in the media/at home? What do the words mean? How are they being used? How do they make children feel?</li> <li>• Name-calling is not acceptable.</li> <li>• Approximately one person in ten is gay or lesbian.</li> </ul>





## ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

*The changes in human attitudes that we call for depend on a vast campaign of education, debate and public participation. This campaign must start now if sustainable human progress is to be achieved... Many present efforts to guard and maintain human progress, to meet human needs, and to realize human ambitions are simply unsustainable – in both the rich and poor nations. They draw too heavily, too quickly, on already overdrawn environmental resource accounts to be affordable far into the future without bankrupting accounts. They may show profits of the balance sheets of our generation, but our children will inherit the losses. We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying...” (United Nations Commission on the Environment and Development)<sup>1</sup>*

**E**nvironmental awareness is more than just being cognizant of one’s surroundings. It involves learning about the needs and the interdependence of living things and recognizing threats to their health. Furthermore, environmental awareness must include a discussion of the impending dangers faced by the entire Earth. Such a discourse must involve the deconstruction of the present situation, including discussing the causes of environmental threats and the possibility of reducing or eliminating these causes. Environmental awareness is in fact based on the capacity to think critically.

The expectation of environmental awareness has been curtailed in the current Ontario curriculum, compared with former Ministry guidelines in which environmental awareness was an ongoing theme infused throughout all subject areas and all grade levels. The new curriculum limits these issues almost exclusively to Science. Moreover, habitat studies are restricted to grades four and seven exclusively and a critical approach to the subject is suggested only in the latter grade. Environmental awareness involving critical thinking no longer appears as a unified theme, but as a series of sporadic expectations.

The emphasis of the Science program is on learning to observe through preconceived concepts: the successful student “uses appropriate vocabulary, including correct terminology...”. Superficially, the

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curriculum does appear to build towards critical thinking by making it an expectation in grade 7, when ecosystems are studied. It may be argued that the basic ideas introduced in the primary and junior years lead to the exercise of critical judgment later on.

However, an examination of the central ideas in the guidelines suggests the opposite may occur. In the curriculum for primary and junior years there is a tendency to regard the environment and the creatures that inhabit it as economic and utilitarian resources rather than as entities of worth in their own right. For example, in grade two, students are advised that the environment is significant primarily because animals require it; that is, it provides essentials such as food, materials for construction, camouflage, etc.

This perspective suggests that life can be defined as a process by which species take what they need. The problem with such an approach is that it reduces complex interrelationships to images of consumption. This in turn suggests that life is enhanced by increasing one's ability to consume. A recent CBC parody of contemporary politicians' stance towards the environment rings all too true: "Ask not what you can do for the environment, but what the environment can do for you."

For educators, suggestions of this nature ought to raise serious concerns: given the finite nature of the planet's resources, is this a message we wish to convey to our children? Following are some examples of changes to the curriculum for Life Systems that would promote greater environmental awareness.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Life Systems</b> Grade 2, page 18</p> <p>– describe ways in which humans can help or harm other living things (e.g., protecting endangered species)</p>	<p>Children should understand that single species cannot be protected in isolation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop webs to understand that anything that happens to one element of the web will affect the others.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Life Systems</b> Grade 4, page 22</p> <p>– describe ways in which humans can affect the natural world (e.g., urban development forces some species to go elsewhere and enables other species to multiply too rapidly; conservation areas can be established to protect specific habitats.)</p> <p>– show the effects on plants and animals of the loss of their habitat (e.g., nesting sites of ducks may be destroyed when a dam is built)</p>	<p>Students need to learn that isolated ark-like pockets are often insufficient for protecting species. Many species migrate in and out of various places that are not protected.</p> <p>This is the only expectation out of the entire primary and junior Science curriculum, which deals specifically with the negative effect of human activity on habitats. There are about 125 expectations and 200 examples of study for each grade. There should be deeper probing of traditional practices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the book <i>Wolf Island</i> to describe how normal ecological niches are populated to capacity and how new migrants may unbalance the equilibrium or be shut out.</li> <li>• Explore the consequence of isolated habitats, such as that of the grizzly bear, with respect to restricted ranges.</li> <li>• Understand that traditionally loss of habitat has not been an issue unless it affects commercially viable species, such as ducks and fish.</li> <li>• Ask questions such as why are governments less concerned about non-commercial species?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Life Systems</b> Grade 5, page 24</p> <p>– explain how the health of human beings is affected by environmental factors (e.g., smoking, smog, and pollen affect the respiratory system)</p>	<p>The curriculum reverts to its previous perspective of avoiding controversial issues. Environmental concerns are observed as only factors of health. There is no expectation to challenge the forces that endanger the Earth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand that it is not just individuals or even species that are endangered by pollution, but that the Earth itself is threatened.</li> </ul>

The grade seven Science unit on Life Systems is appropriately devoted to employing critical thinking regarding issues of environmental awareness. However, this complex subject cannot be effectively dealt with in an isolated unit. Each one of the grade seven expectations could begin sooner and should not be reserved for such a late stage in children's education.

Moreover, Life Systems is only one of the five topics that can be taught during the year. Since the curriculum lists up to 200 examples that may potentially fulfill the science expectations for each grade, there is a possibility that expectations dealing specifically with environmental awareness will receive only superficial attention as teachers struggle to meet the 125 specific expectations in Science.

Environmental awareness can also be taught in areas other than Life Systems. In fact, within other strands of the Science curriculum there appear to be allusions to environmental awareness. The problem is that most of these references are too disjointed to be meaningful.

The following are examples of how expectations in other areas of Science could be further developed to meet the requirements of genuine environmental awareness.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Earth and Space Systems</b> Grade 1, page 89</p> <p>– identify the sun as a source of heat and light</p>	<p>The curriculum discusses ways in which we can be protected from the wind and weather, but the most relevant danger, ultra violet radiation, is omitted.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach the importance of using sunscreen.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Structures and Mechanisms</b> Grade 7, page 85</p> <p>– tell them a story of a product used every day, identifying the need it meets and describing its production, use, and eventual disposal</p>	<p>Clear directions should be given to make students accountable for learning about important environmental issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at the product and identify its byproducts; its packaging; what can be reused, recycled, etc; its useful life span; what happens to it after it goes to the dump.</li> </ul>

It is important that environmental awareness, like other principles of education, be taught systematically. Given the volume of the curriculum, it is incumbent upon the Ministry to provide guidance and direction. Key concepts should be taught early in order to allow students time to think about what they learn and not just memorize vocabulary in preparation for a test.

Our children learn in the context of a culture in which the media influence our thinking and behavior. Within this context, students must be given opportunities and time to question ideas so that biases are not absorbed uncritically. They must be encouraged to ask questions such as:

- Do we need a form of economic wellbeing that is sustained by environmental sacrifices?

- 
- Do forestry companies demonstrate good citizenship when they propagate tree plantations in areas they have previously clear-cut?
  - Does the resulting monoculture constitute a legitimate forest, given the diversity of habitats missing?
  - Are humans inherently different from other animals?
  - Do ideas that draw an essential difference between humans and the rest of the animal world lead us to acts of cruelty?

Concentrating these questions within one unit of study and at the very tail end of a child's learning experience raises the risk of not asking them at all.

There is a pressing need for human beings to deepen their appreciation of nature and to internalize key concepts such as biodiversity. Scientists affirm that without a massive shift in our thinking and our behaviour, all life on this planet faces grave perils. The education system needs to promote environmental awareness in an ongoing, systematic fashion to prepare our children to deal with the serious challenges ahead.

However, the curriculum focuses only periodically on issues crucial to our survival as a species. It immerses our children in economic and utilitarian terms, conceptualizing everything in the natural world as a potential commodity. This is not conducive to the development of environmental awareness. It is the language of technology and domination. The lesson it teaches is simply to see how the natural world may be useful.

*We have seen the bison, the trumpeter swan, and the bighorn sheep fall before the gunners; we have seen the prairie dog, the black-footed ferret and the whooping crane give way before the sod-busters; we have seen the giant baleen whales reduced to the vanishing point by international commercial greed. Most significant of all, perhaps, has been the unchanging traditional assumption that although the loss of these animals may well have been regrettable, it was inevitable and unavoidable in the context of the advancement of human progress..."<sup>2</sup>*

The problem with training children to become utilitarian technocrats is that they lose their sense of the earth and its inhabitants as organic beings with a right to exist on their own. Students should be encouraged not only to consider how much profit can come from the land, but also how to draw subsistence while maintaining respect for other creatures. They should also be exposed to forms of production that meld into nature aesthetically, such as the terraced agriculture of Southeast Asia. In this respect, the validity of other cultural ideas and practices must be introduced. For example, many non-European cultures view Earth as a living entity. This is not unlike the pre-Socratic Asiatic Greeks' idea of Gaia.

*Many cultures have myths in which the planet we inhabit is perceived as alive—as a creative force, a nurturing goddess or a collection of powerful spirits. And modern science may be providing corroborating evidence for such a view of life on Earth.<sup>3</sup>*

By applying critical thinking and considering the validity of alternative ideas, students may evaluate prevailing Eurocentric theories within a broader spectrum of cultural ideas. The context of technology and utilitarianism should not be the fundamental arena of learning.

Children cannot be good learners unless they learn to question. Learning basic concepts has no validi-

ty unless those concepts can be both applied and tested. Children need to be encouraged to probe; they must be exposed to alternative concepts and thus given an opportunity to debate ideas. Environmental awareness is not simply a teaching option; it is an essential element of good education, which will prepare students to face and deal with the future. It should be taught across the curriculum.

The following are examples of how expectations and skills specific to Social Studies can be achieved with this kind of Environmental Awareness in mind. The strands and expectations in Mathematics, Language and the Arts are less specific and differentiated in each of the grade levels than in Science and Social Studies. Therefore, the examples for these subjects will be more brief and general.

## EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM

### SOCIAL STUDIES

#### Canada and World Connections

##### Grade 1, page 28

- identify ways in which people travel around the community (e.g., bus, car, bicycle)

#### History

##### Grade 7, page 45

- demonstrate an understanding of life in English Canada (e.g., early pioneer experiences, family life, economic and social life, growth and development of early institutions, transportation, and emergence of towns)

#### Geography

##### Grade 8, page 64

- demonstrate an awareness of the fundamental elements of an economic system: what goods are produced; how they are produced; for whom they are produced; and how they are distributed

#### Heritage and Citizenship

##### Grade 1, page 15

- demonstrate an understanding of the need for rules and responsibilities (e.g., need for protection, for respect)

##### Grade 2, page 17

- identify the significant features of various family cultures (e.g., food, dress, celebrations)

##### Grade 4, page 21

- identify the reasons for the Crusades and describe their impact on medieval society

LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p>Clear directions are needed to include environmental issues as part of this study.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In basic terms, evaluate the environmental impacts of the different modes of transportation.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding of the prejudices against nature held by the new settlers who viewed the “wilderness” as dark, foreboding, and something to be conquered. Understand the impact of European settlement on the land.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding that economic detriments accompany goods. The total costs of these factors traditionally are not included in economics, e.g., the cost of health care associated with industrial pollution, transportation, tobacco use, etc.</li> </ul>
<p>Find links to environmental awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss rules that may help to protect the environment: the three Rs, reduce, reuse, recycle.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the centrality of a tree at Christmas, the moon during the Chinese harvest season, and the river during the Indian Maha Kumbh Mela festival.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify the environmental factors, including overcrowding, famine, epidemic diseases, which influenced people to forsake their homelands and to occupy the land of others.</li> </ul>

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS
<b>MATHEMATICS</b>	
<b>Number Sense and Numeration</b> Grade 4, page 19 – pose problems involving whole numbers and solve them using the appropriate calculation method: pencil and paper, or calculator or computer (e.g., what 2 items whose total cost is less than \$20 can I buy from this catalogue?)	
<b>Algebra</b> Grade 6, page 58 – pose and solve problems by recognizing a pattern (e.g., comparing the perimeters of rectangles with equal area)	
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	
<b>Reading</b> Grade 6, page 35 – make judgements and draw conclusions about ideas in written materials on the basis of evidence	This expectation should include examples about environmental issues. A variety of written materials should be made available to familiarize students with varied points of view.
<b>THE ARTS</b>	
<b>Visual Arts</b> Grade 7, page 42 – produce two- and three- dimensional works of arts (i.e., works involving media and techniques used in drawing, painting, sculpting, printmaking) that communicate a range of thoughts, feelings, and experiences for specific purposes and to specific audiences (e.g., create a mask from “found” materials to celebrate the coming of spring)	The basic form of this expectation is found in every grade from one to eight.
<b>Music</b> Grade 8, page 26 – create and perform a short musical that consists of contrasting songs, dialogue, and drama	Although the arts have always been a way for people to portray political messages, students are not introduced to this concept in Visual Arts or in Music.

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## SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Pose problems related to the environment, e.g., if one acre of rain forest is destroyed every minute how many acres will be destroyed in one day?

- Pose and solve problems based on calculating ecological disasters. For example, deer can give birth to one fawn each year after they have reached maturity at three years old. How long will it take for deer to over-populate a conservation area that can only support 100 deer? How long will it take to overpopulate an area that can support 200 deer?

- Compare points of view in newspapers, Greenpeace publications, *Green Teacher Magazine*, etc.

- Have students create works that communicate environmental issues.

- This expectation could be an excellent opportunity for integrating the theme of Environmental Awareness across the curriculum. Students could experience how performances can be used to effect change.

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1. Nickerson, Mike, *Planning for Seven Generations, Guideposts for a Sustainable Future*, Hull, Quebec: Voyageur Publishing, 1993, p. 81.
2. Livingston, John, *One Cosmic Instant*, Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1973.
3. Suzuki, David, *The Sacred Balance, Rediscovering our Place in Nature*, Toronto: Greystone Books, 1997, p. 139.





## MEDIA LITERACY

**A**nother essential component of critical thinking is the ability to analyze and evaluate the media. By media, we mean print material (including books, magazines, newspapers, and billboards) as well as technological media such as television, radio, computers, videos, and films. Artwork and music are also included. Because almost all information is conveyed through some form of media, we need to ensure that children acquire the conceptual tools to deconstruct what they see and hear. The curriculum can play an important role assisting students to develop their analytical skills.

The importance of media awareness for students is apparent when we consider the extent to which the media penetrate our lives. In an era of unprecedented communications, children need to be able to evaluate critically the range of information to which they are exposed. Otherwise, they will be unprepared to make the kind of informed choices required in our increasingly complex society. In modern democracies media literacy is a crucial element of responsible citizenship and has an obvious place in public education.

*Education is the only institution designated and funded as the agent of the larger society in protecting the core value of its citizenry: democracy. The essential value of the public school in a democracy, from the beginning, was to ensure an educated citizenry capable of participating in discussions, debates, and decisions to further the wellness of the larger community.<sup>1</sup>*

One of the most pervasive forms of media facing children today is advertising. Few of us are immune to the powerful, lifelong influence of the advertising industry. From the earliest years, the commercial world is a constant companion to young children as they engage in almost every activity. Whether they are watching television, listening to the radio, participating in sports, browsing on the Internet, leafing through a magazine, or simply walking down the street or travelling on the highway, the invitation to purchase and consume is an ever-present fact of daily life.

Even the classroom, traditionally a sanctuary from commercial interests, has come under pressure to

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accept “limited” advertising in exchange for specific “gifts”. In an era when schools often find themselves struggling to raise funds, a marriage between education and commerce may prove irresistible. For example, in a highly publicized contract between the Youth News Network and a high school in Peel region, the school received extensive media equipment, including computers. In return, the Network secured the rights to show twelve minutes of news and advertising in every classroom every day.

Advertisers spend enormous sums to vie for our children’s attention because encouraging youthful consumerism is highly profitable. However, for educators and parents this poses serious questions: In a culture of unabashed consumerism, how can we prepare children to become informed, discriminating consumers?

Another problem parents and educators must address concerns bias in the media. Awareness of this issue involves understanding how the ownership and control of information affects society as a whole.

*The media in the past few years have become increasingly conglomerated and globalized ... Unlike earlier periods when each city had several newspapers owned by local families, news is now packaged by a few monopolies. These monopolies have become conglomerates with major holdings not only in newspapers but also in film, television, cable, music, and book and magazine publishing.<sup>2</sup>*

The concentration of control over the dissemination of information has consequences for the ways in which we view one another. Because so much of the print and electronic media are managed by white, middle-class American males, this group to a great extent defines “the norm”. As a result, white, American middle-class male values are frequently promoted as the standard for all.

The premise of a largely homogeneous population is false and largely American in origin. Nevertheless, this vision has considerable influence in Canada, even while it conflicts with our reality. The discord between an idealized uniformity and our true diversity is readily apparent when we consider the variations in class, culture, ethnicity, ability and sexual identity that comprise Canadian society. However, predominant media images in print and visual material continue to feature people in gender specific roles who have white skin, are heterosexual and appear to be middle-class with no visible disability.

In recent years, there has been some progress with respect to bringing imagery that is more diverse to various media. This is particularly true of gender and race illustrations in school textbooks, picture books and certain advertising. However, much of what we see and hear around us continues to reflect prevailing stereotypes regarding who “ordinary Canadians” are. For example, although visible minorities make up a very large percent of the population in many urban areas, there are no current Canadian prime time shows featuring racial minority characters in leading or primary roles.

What are the consequences when the mainstream media and social reality are continually at odds? Interestingly, the implications are not lost on children. Very early in life, young children recognize that power and privilege are connected to issues of class, colour, language, gender and physical ability.

When the media do feature people outside the dominant group, there is a tendency to cast them in peripheral or unrealistic roles. For example, Native Canadians seeking a resolution to historic claims may be ignored by the media or depicted in a controversial light. On the other hand, Indians assisting white people in search of “traditional” wisdom and self-knowledge may be regarded as desirable and fashionable adjuncts to the dominant culture.

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Likewise, people with disabilities advocating increased services and accessibility may have difficulty commanding the attention of the mainstream media. Most often, to become worthy of notice at all, individuals must rise above physical limitations to perform superhuman feats. While no one would deny that Terry Fox or Rick Hansen deserves our respect, we must ask ourselves: What message do we convey to children about a particular group when we dismiss all but its most outstanding (white, male) members?

Of even greater concern are negative stereotypes promoted through sensational news coverage. A preponderance of “bad news” in print and broadcasting often confirms our most deeply rooted biases. This can have a profound impact on the way we perceive one another.

Many communities, finding themselves the focus of unfavourable attention, argue that the crime and violence featured regularly in the news has little to do with the everyday existence of most of their members. Nevertheless, they feel implicated by an ongoing emphasis on crime, wars, famine and natural disasters. This form of reporting coupled with familiar Hollywood icons of (predominantly) Black, Latin and Islamic villains, leads to some of our most persistent and harmful stereotypes.

With respect to children and education, the far-reaching consequences of negative stereotyping are widely acknowledged. We know that children who are systematically denied opportunities to see themselves and their communities depicted in a positive light are at risk of developing a wide range of problems related to self-image. These difficulties in turn can affect academic performance. Accordingly, the ability to recognize and evaluate bias in all forms of media from textbooks to the Internet should be regarded as a fundamental cornerstone of public education.

How can the curriculum foster media awareness? As a beginning point, it should encourage students to consider the following questions:

- What overt message does this material convey?
- Is there a hidden message?
- Who does this message represent?
- How does this message make you feel? Why?
- In what context are people seen?
- In what context are people not seen?
- What stereotypes does this material promote?
- Does anyone benefit from this message? If so, who?
- Where did this idea originate?

Turning to the specifics of the Ontario Curriculum, in day-to-day classroom activities there are many opportunities to link the influence of the media to courses of study. Unfortunately, the Curriculum itself provides little direction as to how this might be accomplished. Following are suggestions for linking various subject areas to media awareness.

## HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The media emphasis on fitness and wellness coupled with the reports on eating disorders, drug abuse (including steroid use), cosmetic surgery and rising incidence of diseases related to lifestyles provide a perfect backdrop for drawing a connection between popular images and Health and Physical Education.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Healthy Living</b> Grade 1, page 12</p> <p>– identify the food groups and give examples of food in each group</p>	<p>At an early age, students should begin to look at how they are influenced by the media in choosing foods to eat.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch children’s programs on TV. What foods are advertised? How nutritious are these foods? Is junk food a food group?</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 4, page 15</p> <p>– identify the major harmful substances found in tobacco and explain the term addiction</p>	<p>Students need to use analytical skills to make connections to the impact of media on fostering or hindering tobacco addiction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use media sources to track how the media both encourage and discourage tobacco use.</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 6, page 17</p> <p>– describe and respond appropriately to potentially violent situations relevant to themselves (e.g., threats, harassment, violence in the media)</p>	<p>Students need opportunities to analyze the causes of violent situations and discuss the influence of the media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students list titles of popular films and/or discuss lyrics of popular songs: How many suggest violence? Does violence in media encourage violence in life? How does violence relate to power imbalances between groups?</li> </ul>

## LANGUAGE

The role of various media is included in the Language Curriculum under Oral and Visual Communication. Although there is some mention of the pervasive influence of high technology media in our lives and society, the majority of the expectations deal with learning to use specific equipment. The following examples illustrate how these expectations might be further enriched.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Oral and Visual Communication</b> Grade 4, page 43</p> <p>– identify camera angles and distance from the subject in photographs and describe their effects on the viewer’s perceptions</p>	<p>This expectation is limited to the technical use of cameras. Students need to look at the power of the still visual image and critically examine subjects of past and current media photos for stereotyping.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss: Whom do we not see in your magazine of choice? (e.g., the poor, the elderly, Aboriginal people) Who is over-represented?</li> </ul> <p>Analyze how males and females are photographed and give opinions regarding why.</p> <p>Explain how presentation of a subject has an important effect on viewer perceptions.</p>
<p>Grade 6, page 45</p> <p>– analyze and assess a media work and express a considered viewpoint about it (e.g., write a movie review)</p>	<p>There is no direction on what to analyze and assess in the media work. Until grade 6, students’ analysis has been strictly technical (identify elements, use basic terminology, and create works). Students need the tools to assess beyond the technical to have any possibility of countering the often-singular message of media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review concepts of bias, stereotypes, prejudice, etc.</li> </ul> <p>Discuss under what conditions media works are fair or unfair. Then listen to a radio call-in show using an anti-bias analysis and assessment grid created by the class.</p>

## MATHEMATICS

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<b>Number Sense and Numeration</b> Grade 4, page 18  – identify and appreciate the use of numbers in the media	Appreciate is a vague term. Does it mean recognize the importance of the use of numbers in the media, particularly in advertising? Does it mean use numbers to analyze media bias? These concepts need to be clarified and extended to numbers of who and what.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine a variety of magazines to identify the number of Aboriginal peoples in illustrations.</li> </ul>

## SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The following example shows how media awareness can further illuminate concepts in science.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<b>Energy and Control</b> Grade 4, page 6  – identify various uses of sounds encountered daily (e.g., warning sounds such as security alarms, fire sirens, smoke detector alarms)	Students need opportunities to recognize how sound is used to heighten the sense of reality in some media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using personal observation and Media Watch, research how sound is used to get our attention as consumers. For example, note the way sound is raised during television commercials.</li> </ul>

## SOCIAL STUDIES, grades 1 to 6 and HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY, grades 7 & 8

The nature of inquiry in this area of study is such that students will have a great deal of opportunity to work with a variety of media. We would augment the curriculum in the following ways.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Canada and World Connections</b> Grade 4, page 39</p> <p>– demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics of the provinces</p>	<p>This expectation needs to be extended to the territories. The only references to territories are in labeling them on a map and looking at fishing and hunting communities in the Hudson Bay lowlands. Students need to consider bias in omissions since the majority population of the territories is Aboriginal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding of the territories by conducting media searches about the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.</li> <li>• Prepare reports on the characteristics of the people, social issues, environmental issues and governments.</li> </ul>
<p><b>History</b> Grade 8, page 51</p> <p>– describe the role played by the North West Mounted Police in the opening of the West (e.g., stop-page of illegal whiskey trade) and identify some of the significant personalities associated with this role (e.g., Sam Steele)</p>	<p>Students need to learn what the term “opening of the West” meant to Aboriginal people and discuss the bias in this expectation, including the heroic media image of the Mounted Police. Students need to understand that in reality, the Mounted Police were not created in order to champion Native rights; on the contrary, they were sent West to enforce a new order that rapidly led to Native disenfranchisement and the loss of traditional lands.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research how western Aboriginal communities “policed” their own peoples compared to white society:</li> <li>• Deconstruct the popular media image of the Mounties bringing law and order to the West.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Geography</b> Grade 8, page 62</p> <p>– demonstrate an understanding of the factors affecting population distribution (e.g., history, natural environment, technological development)</p>	<p>An anti-bias curriculum would include the human factors like access, war and discrimination that affect distribution and are readily apparent in media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use media sources to compile images of factors affecting population distribution.</li> <li>• Study the connections between World Trade and the displacement of peasants in the Third World. Examine race and culture as factors affecting population distribution in an Ontario city.</li> </ul>

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## THE ARTS

We recognize that Music, Visual Arts and Drama and Dance are forms of media themselves, intended to convey meaning, evoke emotional response, express particular viewpoints, and act as agents of change. The following suggestions focus on how the media shape our thinking about the arts.

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### REFERENCES

1. Allan, Jo Beth, *Class Action: A Community of Critique, Hope and Action*, Teachers College Press, New York, 1999, pp. 8-9
2. *Ibid.*, p. viii

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Visual Arts</b> Grade 2, page 23</p> <p>– recognize and name the secondary colours of pigment (purple, orange, green)</p>	<p>Students can focus on how the media use colour to attract their attention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine magazines that show children and bright colours. Pay attention to the use of colour in advertising.</li> </ul> <p>How do these colours make students feel? Why?</p>
<p><b>Drama and Dance</b> Grade 3, page 51</p> <p>– write and perform chants</p>	<p>Extend this to their understanding of chants as communicated in the media (e.g., at sports events, demonstrations).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss why people use chants in demonstrations, and discuss why chants are effective.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Drama and Dance</b> Grade 6, page 57</p> <p>– identify the significance of symbols in dramatic explorations, and use various props appropriately</p>	<p>This expectation needs to be extended to recognize that the majority of students’ first or primary exposure to drama is via movies, videos or television. Cost limits many students’ access to theatrical productions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure where possible a visit to a professional theatrical production from a minority culture.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Music</b> Grade 7, page 25</p> <p>– describe their response to a musical performance in their community</p>	<p>Anti-bias curriculum exposes students to performances of diverse communities. Many can be seen via media.</p> <p>This expectation should also provide students with opportunities to analyze contemporary pop music.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch a multicultural channel or CD Rom musical performance from various cultures. Analyze in terms of similarities and differences.</li> <li>• Have students list popular musical performers. Discuss examples. What messages do lyrics convey? What impact, (i.e., the promotion of tolerance or hate) might such ideas have on groups in society?</li> </ul>





## DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

**W**e expect our schools to provide children with a setting conducive to achievement as they mature into responsible citizens. Clearly, for many children, the education system does offer a positive learning environment.

However, for many children who do not conform to the mainstream image, i.e., those who are not middle-class and male, white, able-bodied or heterosexual, school may be a profoundly alienating experience.

As educators, we must ask ourselves, how do we bring marginalized children into the curriculum so that they may become fully integrated participants in the school system?

At a very young age, children learn that class, colour, language, gender, and physical ability are connected with power and privilege<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, to be effective, a curriculum must be inclusive; that is, it must offer children of all backgrounds the opportunity to see themselves and others in a positive manner. As such, it must address the following basic principles:

- It will contribute to children's self-worth regardless of culture, faith, gender, sexual orientation, ability, race, and socio-economic backgrounds by allowing them to learn about themselves and to be recognized, respected, and valued.
- It will promote the idea that while we are different, we are also the same.
- It will illuminate the systemic barriers faced by specific groups and the ideas that target and victimize these groups.

In other words, the curriculum should reflect our Canadian diversity. It should seek to develop pride in the child's own identity coupled with respect for others. Children require a strong sense of their own identity in order to withstand various forms of prejudice. At the same time, the development of a positive self-identity must be devoid of ethnocentrism and superiority so that respect and acceptance of differences can be nurtured.

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These principles must be fundamental if children are ultimately to assume the role of responsible citizens.

*It is difficult for students to develop positive attitudes towards other groups and a strong identification with the nation-state unless they have a clarified identification with their first cultures. Understanding and relating positively to self is a requisite to understanding and relating positively to other groups and people.<sup>2</sup>*

Diversity in the curriculum must give children the opportunity to understand the historical and contemporary discrimination facing certain groups in Canada.

In the Ontario Curriculum, there is an implied acceptance of diversity among students. The curriculum appears to recognize that students are different and come from a variety of backgrounds. However, it offers little direction as to how teachers might implement a program that reflects and values the contributions of all people in the community.

A program that is not fully inclusive is detrimental to all students. When certain segments of the population are regularly denied the opportunity to see themselves and the positive contributions they have made to society, they may inherit feelings of inferiority. Others, seeing only themselves reflected in the curriculum may acquire delusions of superiority and dominance over those who are different from them.

The Ontario Curriculum seems to be addressing diversity, but the references tend to be vague, making it difficult to engage in meaningful discussions about systemic discrimination. The examples below typify the problems that persist throughout the curriculum:

- In grade two, students study Traditions and Celebrations. The celebrations are mainly European in origin. These guideposts impose unnecessary limits, particularly in our multi-ethnic society.
- In grade three, students study Pioneers. The title alone gives European pioneers centre stage, leaving entire nations of Aboriginal peoples on the sidelines with the role of furthering the main mission of the Pioneers. As well, the document neglects to mention the significant numbers of non-white pioneers in early Canada. The curriculum's neglect coupled with museums' depiction of exclusively white pioneers inevitably sends the message that there once was a time when Canada was totally white.
- In grade five, students study Early Civilizations of the world. All continents are mentioned, but specific illustrations mainly allude to European examples. In order to ensure a program that goes beyond the archetypes already popular in children's literature, we need to develop curricula that explore a more diverse understanding of the world's civilizations. Moreover, the focus of these materials should include not only the wealthy upper classes, but also the lives of "ordinary people".

Regarding the issue of civilization, we need to examine precisely what we mean by this word. It must be recognized that there are prevailing prejudices about who is "civilized". Generally, the label is attached to societies that have been able to seize wealth, build monuments, and deplete the environment. This measure of civilization has prompted us to believe that peoples such as hunter-gatherers, whose cultures may be rich, but whose way of life involves a less ostentatious display of material wealth, are less developed and therefore in need of civilizing.

Alternative ideas of civilization need to be encouraged in order to deconstruct prejudicial and dangerous uses of the term. The domination of Canada’s indigenous peoples is a case in point.

*... for the brief periods of “settlement,” we tillers of the soil did what the children of Cain have done all over the world: we spurned the existing, proven life ways of the land. These Indians are the lost tribes, we said, “purely nomadic,” mere wanderers who must be shown the proper way to live – in settlements, with ploughs and farms, churches and schools<sup>3</sup>*

The Ontario Curriculum makes no mention of Canadian pre-European civilizations in its unit on ancient civilizations.

There are very few references to women relative to men throughout the various subject areas of the curriculum. Our diversity in terms of class, ability, and sexual identity needs to be represented on an ongoing basis. Our culture has been enriched by the contributions of all groups. When we fail to illuminate this fact, we convey the unspoken message to children that some people, regardless of achievement, are of marginal importance.

Let us now examine some specific opportunities for implementing diversity in the classroom. We will begin with the section on Language, as few areas offer greater opportunities when it comes to thinking critically about issues related to social justice. If “writers are the modern day seers”, the inclusion of literature from diverse authors allows children to view and thus appreciate our Canadian mosaic and the world at large.

## LANGUAGE

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Writing</b> Grade 1, page 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– communicate ideas (thoughts, feelings, experiences) for specific purposes (e.g., write a letter to a friend describing a new pet)</li> </ul>	<p>These expectations provide excellent opportunities to reflect the various experiences of children. Examples should include diverse character types such as single-parent families, same sex parents, working class families, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read picture books about various character types in order to explore and express emotions.</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 2, page 13</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– identify nouns as words that name people, places and things</li> </ul>	<p>Be sure to include examples specific to students’ diverse experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brainstorm nouns for family members, places of worship, home countries, toys, etc.</li> </ul>

## MATHEMATICS

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Geometry and Spatial Sense</b> Grade 3, page 45</p> <p>– investigate the similarities and differences among a variety of prisms using concrete materials and drawings</p>	<p>The principles of mathematics have been used by many ancient cultures to build large and stable structures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• compare the different types of pyramids built around the world, including Central America, North Africa, Asia, etc., to the structure of prisms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Number Sense and Numeration</b> Grade 4, page 18</p> <p>– represent and explain number concepts and procedures</p>	<p>This is an opportunity to demonstrate that many of our basic concepts have origins outside of Europe.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand that our number system has been largely developed by people of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.</li> <li>• Introduce the abacus.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Data Management and Probability</b> Grade 6, page 67</p> <p>– make inferences and convincing arguments based on the analysis of tables, charts, and graphs</p>	<p>Statistics can be an illuminating instrument to expose students to issues of equity in the real world.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand that inequities in the representation of certain groups in specific professions, such as women in politics and the disabled in teaching, are often shown in graphs.</li> <li>• Also statistics about the over-representation of groups in negative situations, such as prison populations, can reflect class and racial bias in our legal system.</li> </ul>

## SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The goals of Science and Technology in the Ontario Curriculum are “to ensure that all students acquire a basic scientific literacy and technological capability before entering secondary school.” (p. 4) We believe that the curriculum should also further students’ awareness of the astounding range of ideas in today’s world of scientific and technological thought. The following examples illustrate some of the areas to consider.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Life Systems</b> Grade 1, page 16</p> <p>– describe a balanced diet using the four basic groups outlined in Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating and demonstrate awareness of the natural sources of items in the food groups, (e.g. bread is made from plant products, meat and milk come from animals)</p>	<p>In a multi-cultural society diverse eating habits should be recognized. It cannot be assumed that everyone understands “breakfast” as cereal, eggs, and toast.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include foods from a variety of cultures to show variety within the food group. Bread is an excellent example.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Matter and Material</b> Grade 1, page 33</p> <p>– identify each of the senses and demonstrate understanding of how they help us recognize and use a variety of materials (e.g., our sense of sight enables us to determine whether a banana is ripe, our sense of hearing tells us whether the washing machine is working properly)</p>	<p>Our senses do convey specific information. However, people also live full and useful lives even after one or more senses are impaired. Discussion should include some of the ways people deal with these challenges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss how a blind person tells whether a banana is ripe or a hearing impaired person knows whether the washing machine is working. Contact associations for people with disabilities such as the C.N.I.B. for information or guest speakers. Guide dogs are available for awareness programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Earth and Space Systems</b> Grade 6, page 99</p> <p>– recognize major constellations visible at night and describe the origins of their names (e.g., Orion, Leo)</p>	<p>The constellations have been a subject of fascination to people throughout the world. This expectation appears to be limited to European perspectives. Other cultural perspectives should be included as well.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research Native Canadian names and stories regarding the major constellations. Look to other continents as well for this purpose. Compare similarities and differences. Read <i>The Orphan Boy</i>.</li> </ul>

## HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The goal of the Health and Physical Education Curriculum is to promote “healthy active living [,]... a combination of physical activity and appropriate lifestyle choices.” (p. 2) These aims are also compatible with the goal of promoting respect and acceptance of differences among students.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Fundamental Movement and Skills</b> Grade 2, page 23</p> <p>– travel in a variety of ways, changing path-ways and direction (e.g., in creative dance and dances from other countries)</p>	<p>There are many cultural dances that can be mentioned here.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add examples such as the Limbo from Caribbean countries and Samba from Brazil. Show students different ways they can be successful by not expecting a finished product that is named “X” dance (e.g., move high, low, sideways – putting a series of moves together). Many students will have their own dances to share.</li> </ul>

## THE ARTS – MUSIC/VISUAL ARTS/DRAMA

The arts offer unequalled opportunities for students to develop creativity and express their emotions. In recognition of this, an expectation of the Ontario Curriculum is to cultivate an appreciation of the arts in students. It is widely understood that artistic appreciation is best developed by exposure to a wide range of artistic genres. In this respect, the curriculum does, at times, acknowledge select contributions from various parts of the world; however, the primary focus of the guidelines is European artists.

We do not question that Europe is a rich and varied source of artistic expression but, within the broad spectrum of artistic creation, Europe is only a part of a larger picture. In a world of cultural exchange, European art owes much to the influence of Africa, Asia, and other continents. Accordingly, if students are to gain a genuine appreciation of art in its many styles, they must have more opportunities to sample the artistic wealth stemming from all parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, and the Americas. As well as reflecting our ethno-cultural diversity, the curriculum must also acknowledge the contributions of all groups in society, including people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, working class, etc.

It should be noted that art, particularly in its more esoteric forms, is not always readily accessible or understandable to everyone. Because of the enormous range of expression, we cannot expect classroom teachers to become instant experts in all areas. This is another area where further curricula need to be developed. The following selections illustrate some of the possibilities.

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Music</b> Grade 2, page 15</p> <p>– express their response to music from a variety of cultures and historical periods (e.g., “Largo al factotum della citta” from The Barber of Seville by Rossini; “Lunatic Menu” by Ippu Do)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include experiences with music that include African-American spirituals, calypso, native chanting, folk music from various cultures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Visual Arts</b> Grade 1, page 31</p> <p>– describe the subject matter in both their own and other’s art work (e.g., La Orana Maria by Paul Gauguin and Kettle of Soap by Joseph-Charles Franchere, which depict people engaged in everyday activities)</p>	<p>There are many examples from around the world of art that could be added to this list.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use some of the many prints from Japan to show people engaged in everyday activities. Include art from other cultures, including native art.</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 3, page 35</p> <p>– explain how the artist has used the elements of design to communicate feelings and convey ideas (e.g. show that the artist has placed certain objects in the foreground of a picture to convey the idea that they are important)</p>	<p>This expectation should include the works of women artists who traditionally have not received the recognition accorded male artists.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study the works of female artists like Georgia Okeefe, Mary Cassatt, Emily Carr, and explain how they used design to communicate feeling and convey ideas.</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 8, page 44</p> <p>– describe, in their plan for a work of art, the main idea they wish to communicate and the artistic discussions they have made to support the message</p>	<p>Examples should include social issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggest works of art that focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gay rights issues</li> <li>poverty</li> <li>hunger</li> <li>exclusion</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Drama and Dance</b> Grade 6, page 57</p> <p>- create, rehearse, and present drama and dance works to communicate the meaning of poems, stories, painting, myths and other source materials drawn from a wide range of cultures</p>	<p>There should be more direction given to instruct students to explore controversial stories and accounts in history.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a drama or dance that examines the reactions of Native peoples to European exploits on their land.</li> </ul>

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## SOCIAL STUDIES

The Social Studies Curriculum is divided into two sections. From grades one to six, children study Heritage and Citizenship and Canada and World Connections. In grade 7 and 8, the curriculum is divided into History and Geography. This program was created to “develop an understanding of connections between the past and present, of interactions between various cultural groups in Canada, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.” (p. 14)

Under ideal circumstances, Social Studies offer an opportunity for students to begin to think critically and to deconstruct stereotypical viewpoints. However, without adequate direction from the Ministry, the curriculum has the potential to reinforce some of our most harmful stereotypes.

For example, the grade 8 Geography expectations require children to “compare the characteristics of developed and developing countries.” (p. 19) The recommended textbook compares the life of a child from an upper middle-class, professional background in Germany, with the life of a child from a rural family of seasonal labourers in India. In the book, we see the blonde, well-dressed, German child who tells of the parties and movies she attends with friends, and her ambitions to graduate and find a lucrative job. In contrast to this, we are shown the brown-skinned, unkempt Indian child whose life revolves around collecting animal dung, and not being able to attend school or see a doctor for his malaria.<sup>4</sup>

In another chapter, the same textbook dismisses the better part of an entire continent, claiming that, “It is hard to be optimistic about the future of Sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>5</sup> Among a litany of problems cited, the text states that Africa is “desperately” in need of capital, but the “richer countries around the world have to cut back on their foreign assistance programs” and “Africa is seen as a bad risk.”<sup>6</sup>

These are the kind of images that seriously undermine public education. The above examples may seem extreme, but they illustrate what children are currently learning in Ontario classrooms.

By drawing the experiences of diverse students into the curriculum, the inclusive program becomes a keystone of academic achievement. Moreover, by furthering the rights of all groups, it plays a crucial role in the development of responsible citizens. This is because the values of acceptance and respect that it engenders are essentially Canadian in character. As historian Michael Ignatieff has observed:

*We have reason to be hopeful, and not just because places like Canada are rich and have capacities to conciliate conflict ... Today, in our multi-ethnic, multicultural cities, we are trying to vindicate a new experiment in ... peace, and we have learned that the preconditions of order are simple: equal protection under the law, coupled with the capacity for different peoples to behave towards each other not as members of tribes or clans, but as citizens... It all depends whether our differences can shelter under the protecting arch of a legitimate legal order.*

*So the unity and coherence of a liberal society are not threatened because we come from a thousand different traditions, worship different gods, eat different foods, live in different sections of town, and speak different languages. What is required of us is recognition, empathy, and if possible, reconciliation. To use ... the words [of Chief Justice Antonio Lamer] when he delivered a judgment that brought long-delayed justice to fellow citizens of aboriginal origin, “Let’s face it, we’re all here to stay.”<sup>7</sup>*

EXPECTATIONS IN THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM	LIMITATIONS/PROBLEMS WITH THOSE EXPECTATIONS	SUGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
<p><b>Heritage and Citizenship</b> Grade 2, page 17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identify the significant features of various family cultures (e.g., food, dress, celebrations)</li> </ul> <p>page 18</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identify community celebrations that reflect their own heritage and Canadian identity (e.g., Carnival de Québec, Calgary Stampede)</li> </ul>	<p>These expectations should include more examples of cultural celebrations in Canada.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify ways in which Heritage and Traditions are passed on e.g., respect for Elders and their knowledge re: Native Spirituality, Caribana, Chinese Celebrations, Hindu celebration of Divali (Festival of Lights), Muslim celebration of Ramadan and Id-ul-Fitr, Pride Week celebrations, Passover, Sukkoth.</li> </ul>
<p>Grade 5, page 37</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identify the significance of early Canadian Members of Parliament (e.g., John A. Mac Donald, Agnes McPhail)</li> </ul>	<p>The curriculum omits reference to the influence of Aboriginal leaders on our system of government in Canada.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include Aboriginal leaders such as Joseph Brant, Tecumseh, Molly Brant and Big Bear, Poundmaker, etc.</li> </ul>

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## CONCLUSION – RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

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*We believe that ... schools should help prepare students to become responsible citizens, to move from adolescence to adulthood, and from schooling to employment... Every school must promote the development of basic moral values, such as a sense of caring and compassion, respect for the human person and anti-racism, a commitment to peace and non-violence, honesty and justice. We don't dispute that it is the home that is most often the primary determinant of values. Finally, however, ... it is the mutually reinforcing efforts of home and school that we promote as the way for optimal development both in the academic area and in the realm of values.<sup>1</sup>*

Since the publication of this report in 1994, education in Ontario has experienced tremendous upheavals. Everyone is familiar with the aura of uncertainty that has accompanied massive changes to the school system in recent years. Yet despite these developments, one thing has not changed: today, as in the past, there remains a widespread desire for schools to promote in students a sense of respect, justice and commitment to community. It does not matter that these ideals themselves may be subject to diverse or even conflicting interpretations; in the public mind there is general agreement that schools, along with families, ought to impart values understood to be consistent with good citizenship. However, there are divergent views regarding the question of how this goal can be best achieved.

In recent months, the media have highlighted numerous incidents involving violence and bullying in schools. If educators have a mandate to promote civic responsibility, there is a growing perception that this message has bypassed a number of students. In response to these concerns, the provincial government has announced its intention to adopt a tough “law and order” approach toward deviant behavior. Consequently, the campaign for responsible citizenship now has at its disposal an arsenal of Safe Schools Policies, Zero Tolerance Policies and increased powers of expulsion for schools and teachers.

This situation highlights the controversy regarding how good citizenship should be fostered. On the one hand, the position of the provincial government appears to suggest the solution resides in tougher standards of behavior. According to this viewpoint, strict codes of conduct need to be implemented

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and enforced in order to create a more orderly student body. Once this has been achieved, greater responsibility among students will follow.

On the other hand, there are those who question whether regulating behavior is an effective way of imparting values. Few would dispute that rules play a role in curtailing undesirable activities. However, the primary function of rules is to reinforce public standards, not to create them. Therefore, regulations, in themselves, cannot be expected to engender values of civic responsibility where such notions have not already begun to take root.

In fact, commitment to one's community most often begins with feelings of belonging. That is, children who feel valued by their community and who have access to the benefits it has to offer will generally be receptive to values that strengthen civil society. To use the contemporary jargon, students who view themselves as "stake holders" in society will tend to give it their support. Where this perception is absent, the reverse may be true. Consequently, a curriculum that is inclusive and thereby cultivates in all students a sense of belonging both in school and in the larger community lays the groundwork for the development of social values.

As we have attempted to show throughout this document, genuine responsible citizenship involves more than an affinity for the larger society. In democratic societies the very concept of responsible citizenship, to be meaningful at all, also presumes an ability to exercise informed judgment. This ability combines an appreciation of the complex phenomena affecting our world with the capacity to assess critically and act upon this information.

From an educational standpoint, this means a curriculum that exposes children from an early age to the broadest possible range of ideas and information. In a nation of diverse identities, it means instilling in children a deep awareness of the contributions all groups bring to our uniquely Canadian tapestry. In a world of increasing "globalization", it requires examination of the social and ecological consequences of international trade. In a planet sustaining unprecedented environmental destruction, it entails challenging youthful minds to seek viable alternatives to our traditional "nature is for conquering" ethos. In an era when almost all information is disseminated by some form of media, it involves exploration of the ways in which our perceptions are formed.

Throughout students' formal education, they must have ongoing opportunities to draw comparisons, ask questions and to engage in discussion and debate. These are the intellectual preconditions for the development of a knowledgeable, genuinely responsible citizenry.

The school is an ideal forum for advancing responsible citizenship because of its extended involvement in children's lives. However, we are speaking of a long-term enterprise entailing diverse resources and sustained commitment, not the kind of authoritarian, "quick fix" solutions recently announced in Ontario.

The problem is that if children have not developed the emotional and intellectual capacity for social responsibility, any civility created by rules will be superficial, at best. We have witnessed the semblance of public order constructed by authoritarian regimes the world over. Yet, as global events frequently demonstrate, order born of coercion is exceedingly fragile. The moment external controls are eased, the facade of cohesion dissolves into chaos. Surely, the implications here apply to educators as well as governments.

At the outset of this document, we noted that much in the curriculum is worthy of praise. The Ministry of Education deserves credit for offering teachers and students clear direction regarding what is to be taught at each grade level. In so doing, it makes an attempt to introduce a formidable array of factual

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information and technical skills. The emphasis on the use of current technology reflects legitimate concerns with preparing children for a rapidly changing, highly technological world.

For these efforts to be of future practical use, the Ministry must demonstrate a similar commitment to developing students' critical faculties. As we noted in the introduction, this should involve a reappraisal of current educational priorities. For example, fact-finding and memorization do have a role to play in the acquisition of knowledge; however, these activities must be balanced with opportunities for students to reflect upon and assess what they have learned. Otherwise, there is the danger that children's educational experience will be reduced to an elaborate form of Trivial Pursuit.

Likewise, an emphasis on high technology has some immediate value in that it increases the range of tools available to children in school. Some studies suggest that a familiarity with the digital world may promote the development of specific conceptual skills, such as the ability to solve puzzles.<sup>2</sup> However, notwithstanding these advantages, the question arises: What are the long-term benefits of such training?

To all appearances, they are somewhat limited. Knowledge of advanced technology is not reputed to enhance students' abilities with respect to language, mathematics, or practical problem solving.<sup>3</sup> Nor, given the rapid pace of change in this area, should we deceive ourselves into believing that a familiarity with contemporary technology will prepare children for the innovations of tomorrow. Technological training, by its very nature, quickly becomes obsolete.

There is, however, an unlimited "shelf life" to an education that enables students to understand and respond to the myriad challenges of an ever-changing world. Ultimately, the single most important legacy public education can hope to offer children is the ability to think critically.

To this end, the Ministry of Education must ensure that students are equipped to assume their role as informed, responsible citizens. In this document, we have shown how a very few expectations from the various subject areas might be modified and improved. However, the possibilities are unlimited. Therefore, in the spirit of constructive criticism, it is our hope that these examples will provide the stimulus for discussion and revision of the curriculum.

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## RESOURCES

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### **For more curriculum and teaching resources for anti-bias education, see**

- *We're Erasing Prejudice for Good*, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. A literature based comprehensive anti-bias curriculum document with integrated lessons from Kindergarten to grade 8 consistent with Ontario's curriculum. Resource guide. Available in whole or for each grade.
- *The School That Equity Built*, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Backgrounder on equity and a 55 page integrated unit Discoveries (Grade 1-4). Creates a climate of learning for all students in the classroom. Annotated resource lists for students and teachers.
- *Community Role Models. Resource Inventory*. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Ontario students are fortunate to live in a province rich in strong aboriginal and racial minority community role models. The document provides annotated biographies, lesson plans, and community contacts (Toronto).
- *Take A Closer Look: A Media Literacy Resource for Intermediate Grades*. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Linked to the Ontario Curriculum, this practical guide provide lessons and student activity sheets to explore issues of media violence through thematic units such as Television, Advertising and the Internet.

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## BLURRED VISION

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