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A Rebuttal — Review by Professor Ralph Miller of "My Encounters with Alternatives"

Professor Miller raises a number of issues with my report on the study of select alternative schools and ends by bringing the Canadian Education Association to task for producing "pamphlets which scratch the surface" only. Taking the second point first, I need only say that the value of any educational work can be judged on the basis of at least three conditions: (1) it advances — invents, extends and refines — theoretical constructs or models about the schooling process; (2) it enhances our empirical grasp of the determining conditions affecting practices in the school; (3) it alerts innovators among school practitioners to the problems, prospects and resolving possibilities inherent in any new development, in this case, alternative schools within public school settings. Ultimately, of course, the grounds for judging work are linked to the extent to which heightened effectiveness of schooling practices is reflected in the superior attainment of designated learning goals. This report was designed to serve the purposes of innovating practitioners and school systems where serious consideration is being given to the institution of alternative schools. Hence, it should more appropriately be assessed in terms of the third criterion base cited above. In any event, to suggest that the Canadian Education Association should "provide resources to enable something more . . .," is, necessarily, to enlist a wider range of political and economic considerations which would take the review beyond the realm of intellectual criticism.

The report was intended to serve as an ameliorating sensitizer to administrators and teachers who may well feel pressed to act prematurely as well as a source of advice and suggestion to those committed to the further exploration of alternative school designs. At this point in time, interest in the exploration of alternative schools is moving, albeit, at too rapid a pace. Hence, it was deemed to be a value to draw upon the experiences of professionals in various school systems who can provide insightful suggestions, anticipatory and speculative to be sure, but grounded, nevertheless, in actual experience "on the firing line."

At some point, the field response to any document or report is an indicator of usefulness of any educational product. And here, I can only say that I and the Canadian Education Association are encouraged by the interest expressed in the report by the fraternity of educational practitioners. Clearly, whatever judgment of value adheres will depend upon the valuational bias of the evaluator.

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Of greater concern, however, is the identification of issues by Professor Miller and the process by which he attempts to substantiate them. First, whether alternative schools, as presently existent, can continue to perform "valued functions" by the "average corps of non-volunteer teachers" is an empirical question, the answer to which would require eventually a more extensive and controlled study of practical strategies in local settings. As such, I view the question (and implicit scepticism) as an excessively harsh and premature test of the legitimacy of this innovative development. No one questions the need for assessing the feasibility of universal application as one measure of the promise of any innovation. But to insist on a definitive indication of such applicability at this point in time of alternative school designs is not warranted. Indeed, my report assumed that difficulties were being encountered and, as a consequence, one of its purposes was to identify problems of strategy and hopefully, some promising approaches or solutions.

This leads me to a related concern. Professor Miller makes much of the problem of "teacher burnout" and the apparent short-term career line of teacher participants. He argues that despite "selected volunteer teachers (who are reputed to be knowledgeable, resourceful, secure, tolerant of ambiguity and blessed with a sense of humour)," these teachers, he asserts, "cannot last more than a few years." It is simply not accurate to suggest that the teachers who had participated and were now engaged in alternative schools visited, actually possessed those characteristics cited by Professor Miller. The list of characteristics were summarized as *preferred* qualifications of a teacher candidate, such qualifications having emerged into view as a *result of* preceding experiences of coordinators and teachers with problems of staffing and managing alternative schools. We need to allow for the simple fact that misjudgements of the strength of teacher candidates combined with an inadequate experience base with such schools may well have led to the selection of some teacher applicants who failed to measure up to these requirements in local instructional settings.

To suggest that "it seems a little strange," to use Professor Miller's phrase, that burdensome pressures upon teachers somehow would prevail in "schools which are free of hassle from the students' point of view" is itself incomprehensible. What should make this an implausible (or, indeed, a plausible) relationship? A more careful reading of the report would have revealed the complex of specific factors contributing to the pressures on teachers (constraints of inadequate space, special equipment, curriculum resources and diagnostic and prescriptive procedures), (p. 17) as well as the inevitable pressures emanating from the need to adapt continually the form of teaching approaches and the nature of personal involvements. The latter, clearly, are expectations or commitments that are infrequently manifest among many teachers in regular schools which follow essentially a standardized, routinized and inflexible regimen of professional engagements. I would venture further that the human strains in alternative schools emanate more from the active and serious exploration of a new venture and, consequently, from the process of change itself rather than from what may eventually be identified as the intrinsic and unique demanding feature of alternative schools themselves.

Once more, a more careful reading of the pamphlet would have enabled Professor Miller to recognize that the statement he quoted from p. 17. "It looks like 2 or 3 years are all that anybody can take, then you need relief. . . .," is not that of the author, as any reader of the review might be reasonably inclined to presume but that of a coordinator of one of the alternatives schools who went on to describe, as others did, promising ways through which to attenuate and combat "teacher

burnout.”

In short, Professor Miller’s questions or issues appear more rhetorical than significantly substantive. He can indeed do better. Regrettably, in this review, he seemed content simply to scratch on the same spot.