

Sewing and the Sustainable Society

By Mary Leah DeZwart
SD# 24, Kamloops

What is the place of clothing and textiles classes in British Columbia schools? If you had asked me this question a few years ago, I would have had no answer. Now, however, I have experienced a wildly enthusiastic class of grade eight clothing and textile students at Barriere Secondary. This age group overwhelms me with their interest in their devotion to sewing. At the first bell, they tear in, whip out the machines and for the most part, spend 60 minutes cheerfully ripping and stitching. The downside is that the class involves only twenty hours with nothing offered beyond grade eight "Life Skills". While I ponder attracting more students to the course, I also think about the case for the practical subject in the modern school system. This question is not new. Over ninety years ago, Mary Urie Watson, an early pioneer in home economics declared the educational value of sewing to be its honest and direct relationship of cause to effect:

[P]roperly taught, sewing engenders a habit of observation, a knowledge of the difference between accuracy and vagueness, which wrought into the mind remain there as a lifelong possession. It confers precision, because, if you are doing a thing, you must do it definitely right or definitely wrong. It gives honesty, for when you express yourself by making things, and not by using words, it becomes impossible to dissimulate your vagueness or ignorance by ambiguity. (Watson, 1901, p. 63).

Those who are presently involved in teaching sewing would be hard-pressed to disagree. A well-turned seam separates the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, the valued practical from the pseudo-craft or semi-academic. Where does this leave sewing in the school? We have been plagued by the underlying wish to use sewing as a means of teaching department morals and cleanliness. The reporter in Elizabeth Berry's 1912 Vancouver classroom captured all of these concerns in her observations of a grade four class sewing a doll's undergarments:

[A]ll (garments) had been white to start with but some had fallen so far behind..as to be described only as grimy ... The Supervisor (said) one must keep harping on this subject of neatness...-some children are so untidy and unclean that it is an unpleasant duty to have to bend over them, and one wonders what sort of homes and mothers they must have. Others are a delight to look at and to instruct. ('Casual Comment', 1912, p. 9).

The particular moral values in the foregoing statement have evolved into sewing as means to keep the world going around. In her book *Home Economics and Feminism* Patricia Thompson remarked upon; the counter-entropic value of sewing up a ripped pair of jeans: "*It is not a trivial task..It is a means to conserve resources in which families have invested time and energy*" (Thompson, 1944, p. 27).

If you follow my thinking, the "honesty" of sewing clearly contributes to the sustainable society advocated by the mission statement of the *Year 2000* report. We don't need less sewing in schools; we need more, directed to boys and girls before and after the grade eight level. If we could maintain the enthusiasm of students when they first learn how to control a machine and express themselves by practical means, we would have a class that rivals Nintendo in popularity, with considerably more redeeming value.

References

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