



Doing our part to Support Public Education *Thoughts on Governance - by Angela Jurgensen*

Unfairness has always bothered me deeply. Throughout my life, I have taken the proactive, often unpopular position of pointing out where an injustice had been made, and have fought for causes I believed in with passion and conviction. When the dust settles, I am left drained and with a feeling that my voice has made little difference. In the courtyard, the older kids still kill the butterfly, so to speak.

When I finally decided to inform myself of the BCTF dispute with the government, I felt outraged by some of the facts; class size is not an issue for me, but class composition affected me directly during my last practicum, and I could not believe that what I lived through may become the norm in public schools. Even more, I felt dismayed by the number of teachers who preferred to not get involved. Before the strike started, Woodlands often had meetings with the teachers, but no one voiced any opinion, and all of them just wanted to go back to work. The only person who spoke was the union rep. I was there until the very last day – June 13th -- and while many of the teachers were against going on a full-on strike so early, they didn't voice their opinion, and so, lacking the voice of reason, the majority ended up voting for the strike.

Summer passed without a resolution; teachers were frozen out and ignored, and the government pretended that there was no strike. When it was clear that classes were not going to resume, I decided to gather some of the information I had learned and that mattered to me, and present it in a more human form to the public. My intention was to provide an alternative way to present the teacher's perspective, coming from someone who obviously has a bias, but does not turn off people from viewing the site. When classes started at VIU, I was able to clarify some of my views and started a website. I joined a few groups on Facebook and asked their opinion on what would be the best bits to divulge; publicly and privately, I was told that there was already a site dedicated to

the strike and that my site was not needed. Visiting the existing site, with its red giant letters all in caps, complete lack of information and simply yelling at visitors to join the fight, I could see a clear sample of the type of person who usually becomes an activist. Reading some of the comments on social media made me upset at those teachers and their inability to act professionally, to speak calmly and without personally attacking the opposition; and worse, because of the silent majority, those people were representing all teachers.

I completed my website, taking some suggestions along the way; during the next couple of weeks, the website gathered a modest 1500 hits, joining other more moderate voices -- essays and articles which usually came from the media. I continued to read and research the issues, speak with colleagues, teachers and the public, and have expanded upon my ideas quite a bit. What I have learned through this process was eye-opening. Reading the third chapter of *Worlds Apart* made me think how this situation, this lack of a moderate voice we currently experience, mirrors the conditions that gave rise to the BCTF's importance. The government stepped out of the limelight, and the Education Ministers themselves haven't been very proactive or innovative. When voting time comes, BC only gets a small percentage of voters, and from those, most abstain from selecting a school board trustee. Without a balanced voice for leadership, the BCTF was able to push forward several misconceptions and demands which are often seen as truth, besides taking actions which I consider very underhanded. They have fostered an "us against them" environment, done their part to escalate the conflict to where it is right now, and done little to enlighten the public.

One point I strongly disagreed with was the fact that resources in the classroom with quality of education. The idea suggested in 2009 by then-president of the BCTF, Irene Lanzinger, that the lack of resources somehow influences education, is simply not true – and makes it sound like teachers are currently unable to provide a good education for the children. The notion that a teacher's working conditions and a student's learning conditions are connected at the hip is also not true. I find both these concepts to diverge importance from what really matters, and in a way, I take it personally.

I remember being in school back in Brazil with fondness. A lot of learning happened in the classroom those days, despite the fact that some classes had 60 or more students. We were crammed in bare-walled rooms, chairs nailed to the floor, in neat rows, unable to move from class to class, and waited for the teacher to come to us instead. We did not decide our curriculum, as everyone went through the same classes, every year, and everyone was assumed to learn the same way. Our teachers did not receive benefits, and were notably one of the least paid professions in the country. And yet, we learned more every day than we could ever possibly expect. Our teachers were actors, game masters, they were clowns and jokers, they knew every one of us, and

cared for our future and what we would become. Teaching is much, much more than good conditions, fair wage, and resources. If teachers teach with heart, children will learn, no matter the conditions.

During my presentation, I wanted to bring some photos that would make this clear. There were so many to choose from; children learning in schools with no roof, teachers teaching in exchange for food, children writing on their laps because there was no table. So much to help us put things in perspective when embracing the teaching profession. I ended up bringing a photo of the Landfill Harmonic, which proves the main resource we can bring to our classroom is our heart and our imagination.

Without a more moderate representation, this conflict will continue, with cyclical face-offs that do little to find a common ground. Instead of avoiding involvement, or bashing our own profession, we should be taking charge of this situation and trying to improve things that really do matter. Instead of threatening parents with a bad future for their children if they remain in public school (which is what they are reading between the lines), teachers should be clarifying our side and asking for their support in giving a high quality education to the largest number of children.

I ended my presentation with a slide of a list of tips on how to get involved. The list is as follows:

- No Name-calling; Keep Kind And Cool
- Show Up For Meetings And Votes – when is the next AGM?
- Speak Up! In Meetings, Online, Everywhere
- Get Verifiable Facts Out There
- Focus On What Really Matters To Teachers (because everyone wants a pony)

When I concluded my presentation, I was pleased to hear the positive feedback from my colleagues, and to hear that they were now interested in becoming more involved. They unanimously agreed that the next five years will be crucial for us; that we must not sit back and wait until it is too late to make a difference. That these are the years that will matter, and getting involved now is the only way we can start changing the tides for the better. They said they wanted to give the moderates a voice, and that is all I could hope for in my presentation.

This question clearly means a lot to me. Looking for the answer has taken me down many views, articles and videos, and I have learned so much along the way, even though I have yet to reach my final destination. The main thing I have learned is that activism can be a beautiful thing when done right, and it doesn't need to leave you drained in the end.

There is always a new butterfly to defend, and always a new day to try and make things better.