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ABSTRACT

A curriculum evaluation approach has been proposed that can enhance educators' understanding of how curriculum designed to effect social and vocational change in market economy cultures interacts with students, schools, and society. This method combines elements of a social evaluation approach fashioned by M.W. Apple and L.E. Beyer (1985) with a critical ethnography model developed by P.F. Carspecken (1995). It includes five levels or basic categories of inquiry. Stage 1 analyzes the social, historical, and ideological context into which the program is introduced and how that context is currently influencing school reform. It reveals the ideological connections between dominant social forces and school reform and identifies and critiques the various assumptions underpinning vocational and social preparedness programs. Stage 2 identifies informal components of employability skills curriculum to consider their potential impact on students and society. Stage 3 requires a conceptual analysis of the employability skills discourse contained in the formal curriculum of programs, such as the Career and Personal Planning curriculum. Stage 4 uses an ethnographic collection of data to acquire knowledge of the dynamic interaction between curricula and classroom culture. Stage 5 analyzes findings from the previous four stages through a critical conceptual framework founded on principles of social justice and equality. (Contains 23 references.) (YLB)

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Alternative Curriculum Evaluation:

A Critical Approach to Assess Social Engineering Programs

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August 23, 1999

Public schooling in virtually all industrialized countries faces growing pressure from the corporate sector to adopt occupationally relevant curriculum (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1997). On a provincial level, the Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) curriculum, introduced into B.C. secondary schools in 1995, reflects this current trend toward vocational education reform. The *career preparedness* component of CAPP allegedly strengthens labour market opportunities for B.C. secondary school students by equipping them with a set of generic employability skills. In spite of the present popularity of employability skills curricula, however, little formal research has been conducted to assess the moral appropriateness, social impact, or conceptual soundness of transforming Canadian schools in this fashion. This paper takes a preliminary step to correct this deficit by proposing a method to investigate the moral, social and educational consequences of curricula implemented for social and vocational purposes.

Curriculum evaluations of vocational education programs typically adopt a systems management approach that includes four basic stages of development: 1) selecting evaluation targets, i.e., determining what is to be measured and how; 2) planning the evaluation, i.e., determining data collection methods; 3) collecting and analyzing the data; and 4) preparing the evaluation report (Chandler et. al., 1997; Vannatta et. al., 1998). Systems management evaluations assume the effectiveness of a system, i.e., employability skills curricula, can be evaluated on the basis of how closely the system output matches system objectives (Apple, 1990). Although these evaluations promote the achievement of curriculum objectives by highlighting a program's instrumental inadequacies, their functionalist format severely restricts the scope of critical inquiry. Systems management evaluations determine whether curriculum objectives have been achieved by the program's recommended methods, for example, but do not assess whether those objectives, especially when placed within the larger social context, can be morally, conceptually, or educationally justified.

The inductive research methods employed in systems management evaluations produce

impressive statistical charts and data, but explain little, if anything, of the social structures from which that data emerges. The positivist tradition supporting this approach to curriculum evaluation requires education researchers to use methods and terminology developed by the natural sciences. Within inductive education research, for example, there is an overriding emphasis on the noble and impressive scientific research requirements of reliability, validity and generalizability. Since scientific discourse is generally afforded a higher epistemic status in education than the discussion of ethical or moral matters, system management evaluations are exceptionally popular, while foundational questions associated with curriculum reform, regardless of their tremendous moral importance, often remain ignored (Apple, 1990). By neglecting the social structures and ideological struggles that underpin curriculum development, then, these evaluations fail to investigate the impact of social engineering programs on students outside stated objectives.

In this paper, I conceptualize curriculum evaluation in a different fashion from how it is conceived within system management methodology. I hope to provide educators with an evaluation approach that can enhance our understanding of how curriculum designed to effect social and vocational change in market economy cultures more fully interacts with students, schools, and society. This proposed method combines elements of a social evaluation approach fashioned by Apple and Beyer (1985) with a critical ethnography model developed by Carspecken (1995), and includes five levels or basic categories of inquiry: 1) an analysis of the social, historical and ideological context into which the program is introduced, and how that context is currently influencing school reform; 2) exposing the informal curriculum accompanying the educational change, and reviewing its potential impact on students and society; 3) a conceptual analysis of the formal curriculum; 4) an ethnographic collection of data to acquire knowledge of the dynamic interaction between curricula and classroom culture; and 5) an analysis of the findings from the previous four stages through a critical conceptual framework founded on principles of social justice and equality. The five stages of analysis are not applied in rigid chronological fashion, however, but

rather in an overlapping, on-going and interconnected format.

The analysis of context in stage one is designed to reveal the ideological connections between dominant social forces, i.e., corporations, and school reform, and to identify and critique the various assumptions underpinning vocational and social preparedness programs. These ideological assumptions reflect moral, ontological and social viewpoints subject to evaluation through the critical lense provided in stage five. Evaluations limiting their inquiry to schools and programs, while ignoring social context, remain relatively unreflective about interests, values, and ideologies in curriculum:

> If our unit of analysis is only the school, the issues surrounding curriculum evaluation can stand alone and less of a serious challenge can be made against the process/product path it has taken. If, however, the school is interpreted as inextricably connected to powerful institutions and classes outside itself, then our unit of analysis must include these connections (Apple and Beyer, 1983, p.427).

Since schools are not immune to social pressures, disregarding social context and the connected ideological assumptions precipitating curriculum reform, means that evaluators accept the problems, values and objectives of education are those identified by dominant social interests. Further, the subsequent shift from the macro to the micro level of analysis should reveal how local education practice is influenced by global market forces, and how theory translates into classroom experience in social engineering programs (Taylor, 1998).

A brief analysis of the present social context, and its direct impact on CAPP, reveals the influence economic forces currently exact on public education policy by imposing market economy ideologies on schools. The Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) is the central lobbying force for domestic private sector business interests in public education policy development. The organization funds two education councils, the national council and the corporate council, both entirely dedicated to influencing Canadian public schooling. The corporate council is comprised of senior executives from CBOC member companies, including a disproportionate number of executives from large

technology related corporations (Taylor, 1998). The more powerful corporate council also developed the influential *Employability Skills Profile* (ESP), a list of generic skills employers supposedly require in students they hire (CBOC, 1997).

The CBOC's impact on Canadian public education policy has been both widespread and profound. The board reports, for example, that business-education partnerships are in "explosion mode" with twenty thousand now in place across the country (as cited in Robertson, 1998, p.279). In Alberta, numerous programs already have been undertaken based on CBOC initiatives (Taylor, 1998). In British Columbia, the CBOC plays an authoritative role in the career preparedness component of CAPP, as students are expected to master ESP skills before graduating from secondary school (CAPP, 1995).The CBOC's stated interest in education is to engage business and schools "in partnerships that foster learning excellence to ensure that Canada is successful and competitive in the global economy" (CBOC, 1997). From its business-driven perspective, the concept of "success" is inextricably connected to attaining the quantifiable rewards consistent with the consumerism of market economy cultures. A CBOC pamplet, *Matching Education to the Needs of Society* (1995), reflects the board's functionalist education agenda by asking, "Is the present [education] system capable of preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century and for a working life that is characterized by high technology and rapid change?" Kuehn (1997) has challenged the moral, ontological and educational assumptions entailed in corporate schooling objectives for regarding students as human capital, and marginalizing the social, cultural and ethical responsibilities of schools. Regardless of whether one agrees with Kuehn's analysis, highlighting the connections between dominant social interests and education exposes the market economy assumptions propelling current vocational education reform to critical review.

A common assumption on which employability skills programs are predicated is their hypothesized ability to improve labour market opportunities for students (CAPP, 1995; CBOC, 1997). To evaluate whether this claim is warranted once again requires more than a mere review of

student achievement scores or curriculum delivery protocols. Rather, in the case of CAPP and other similar programs, the contextual phase dictates an analysis of current labour market conditions to determine whether individual skill deficits are a major contributing cause to unacceptable unemployment levels. In fact, a preliminary investigation of labour market circumstances suggests that skill deficits have little to do with present unemployment levels. Livingston (1996) explains:

> Some empirical research indicates that an adequate Grade 8 education is all that is needed to perform the typical factory or office job in advanced industrial societies. Further studies reveal that since the early 1970s at least a third of the employed North American workforce have work-related skills they could use in their jobs but are not permitted to use (p.76-77).

From an ideological perspective, then, emphasizing educational shortcomings and individual skill deficits as the cause of unemployment problems successfully deflects attention away from their actual systemic origins.

Stage two of this evaluation method identifies the informal components of employability skills curriculum to consider their potential impact on students and society. Schools are generally structured to deliver specified pre-packaged knowledge to students, and thus exercise considerable epistemic authority over them. Coupled with the epistemic legitimacy afforded to schools as necessary socializing institutions, education provides the perfect means to impart dominant values and attitudes in future citizens (Althusser, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). Conveying ideologies through curriculum, however, need not reflect a large scale conspiracy on behalf of corporate elites, but only the informal, largely unspectacular, transmission of prevailing, often widely accepted, assumptions, beliefs and values to students (Portelli,1993). According to Habermas (as cited in Eagleton, 1991), for example, ideology typically takes the form of commonly accepted communication patterns systemically mitigated by social power relations. By transmitting and legitimating dominant attitudes and values to students, the employability skills discourse provides an excellent example of how schools convey ideology to students.

In the career preparedness section of CAPP, the informal curriculum transmits various norms and values not stated in the formal curriculum document. By presenting the concept of employability skills to students from a functionalist perspective, for example, CAPP legitimates the existing economic paradigm to students. CAPP's functionalist format encourages students to conform passively with market economy values and practices rather than actively assessing their general acceptability. Since their primary stated objective is enhancing student employment prospects, employability skills programs also contain the tacit premise that high levels of joblessness result from individual deficits rather than from structural inequalities of opportunity, an indispensable myth in promoting market economy culture. Once again, responsibility for unemployment is deflected away from its systemic origins, and the market economy practices inflicting widespread job loss are insulated from moral critique.

An analysis of the informal curriculum related to social engineering programs should also explore the particular forms of knowledge the formal curriculum validates. Apple and Beyer contend that ". . . prior to measuring whether or not students are `able' to learn or have learned a particular set of facts, skills, or dispositions, we should want to know whose knowledge it is, why it is organized and taught in this particular way, to this particular group" (p.431). A review of CAPP reveals a complete absence of labour movement history, or indeed any suggested discussion on the role and purpose of labour unions, while corporate attitudes, values and beliefs dominate the document. As part of the informal curriculum, then, – in this case what is left out of the formal curriculum – working class knowledge and experience are excluded, while corporate knowledge is legitimated and conveyed to students.

Stage three of this evaluation approach requires a conceptual analysis of the employability skills discourse contained in the formal curriculum of programs such as CAPP. The purpose of this evaluation phase is twofold: First, many of the so-called skills in the work experience component of CAPP are not skills at all, but are more appropriately categorized as attitudes, values and

dispositions. Under ESP's heading of personal management skills, for example, students are expected to demonstrate "a positive attitude toward change" (CBOC, 1997). Identifying such attitudes as skills confuses important conceptual distinctions between the two, and may preempt moral evaluation of the former's educational appropriateness. Similar to the underlying assumptions supporting employability skills programs, the values, attitudes and dispositions, once properly classified, are assessed through the critical framework identified in stage five. Secondly, even if the various assumptions supporting employability skills education are judged morally acceptable, serious questions remain regarding the pedagogical efficacy of these programs. A conceptual analysis pointing out fundamental category mistakes that impede student achievement of desired cognitive competencies may reveal that employability skills programs are not only morally suspect, but instrumentally flawed as well.

Analyzing context, identifying and critiquing messages conveyed to students by the informal curriculum, and conceptually analyzing the skills discourse in the formal curriculum are important steps in the assessment process, but an examination of the dynamic interplay between curriculum and classroom is also required. The first three stages provide insight into the potential interaction between students, schools and social structure, but structural analyses alone cannot reflect the complexity, uncertainty and impact of human agency on that interaction. Apple and Beyer explain: "No social institution, no set of ideological forms and practices, is ever totally monolithic. Students will not necessarily accept what the school teaches and we cannot take for granted that students or teachers are passive vessels who uncritically accept what curriculum documents entail" (p.432).

Ethnographic research conducted by Willis (1973), Wertsch (1998), and Lave and Wenger (1996) highlights the way in which human agency mediates between individual cognition, and the cultural, institutional and historical context of schools. Collectively, these findings seriously challenge exclusively structural critiques of education, and suggest the need for some form of ethnographic study to acknowledge the complex interchange between curriculum, student culture, and individual

cognition. From a reconstructionist perspective, structural critiques that fail to recognize human agency offer little hope of transforming the repressive and reproductive schooling practices they identify. Indeed, evaluations ascribing agency to corporations and economic systems rather than to teachers and students, and remaining aloofly detached from classroom settings, are themselves socially reproductive. No critical curriculum evaluation is complete, then, without investigating what is taught in the classroom, and considering student reaction to that instruction.

Employability skills programs provide ample opportunity for both teachers and students to apply the curriculum in various unexpected ways. Although critical thinking has been appropriated into the employability skills discourse (Lankshear, 1997), for example, no procedural parameters are typically established for its classroom application. Ethnographic research indicates that even when the supply of learning tools is regulated, their actual classroom application cannot be completely controlled (Werstch, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1996). Ironically, by adopting critical thinking as an objective, programs such as CAPP provide the necessary intellectual tool to challenge their own credibility as teachers and students could employ the concept to challenge the assumptions supporting employability skills instruction. The more salient point, however, is that only ethnographic research can identify and report curriculum consequences not knowable through structural analysis alone.

The ethnographic stage begins with compiling a primary record, or *thick description*, of classroom activities where virtually all speech acts, body movements and postures are recorded to represent as fully and accurately as possible the interaction between the curriculum and the classroom. Conceived by Eisner (1977), the concept of thick description emphasizes the importance of context in understanding student behaviour by "describing the meaning or significance of behaviour as it occurs in a cultural network saturated with meaning" (p.97). The second step of stage four requires speculating on the meanings of events and actions recorded during the compiling of the primary record, a process Carspecken (1996) refers to as "preliminary reconstructive analysis"

(p.93). During the reconstructive phase, because of its interpretive quality, a certain degree of subjective analysis occurs, but it attempts to identify behaviour patterns that offer insight into both classroom and student response to the program. Carspecken also advocates a stage of dialogical data generation, where students and teachers contribute directly to the data collected through various qualitative research techniques. Their participation is designed to check possible researcher bias, add to the interpretative data, and ensure that teachers and students are not objectified by the ethnographic evaluation process. In an assessment of CAPP, case studies, interviews or focus groups could be employed to gauge more fully teacher and student reaction to the program.

Social research suggests that society continues to remain firmly structured along race, class and gender lines (Ballantine, 1997), and the actual chasm between social classes has grown considerably over the last decade (Robertson, 1998). As a matter of moral coherence, social stratification, and any schooling practices operating to reproduce it, ought to be considered ethically inappropriate in a society embracing egalitarian principles. Indeed, the school is rightly conceived of in our society as an institution expected to advance the democratic concept of social justice (Apple, 1990). From a social justice perspective, then, the ultimate goal in any critical curriculum evaluation is determining the degree to which the program under review ameliorates or worsens social stratification and injustice.

In an attempt to address this question, stage five introduces concepts like social justice, class structure and gender equality to provide a moral conceptual framework to evaluate the data gathered during the other four stages. Following Apple and Beyer, and Carspecken, this stage of critical analysis contains the fundamental assumption that the principle role of education research is challenging all forms of social oppression reproduced through schooling practices. This final stage attempts to intermesh the results from the previous four stages into an existing macro critical theory of social explanation to evaluate the moral appropriateness of programs introduced for social and vocational reasons. Consistent with critical approaches, the level of inference in stage five increases

dramatically as the findings from the first four stages are explained with reference to a social system theory. As Carspecken suggests, "a critical researcher is able to suggest reasons for the experience and cultural forms reconstructed having to do with class, race, gender, and political structures of society" (p.43). Within a neo-Marxist critical framework, for example, the evaluation findings could be interpreted on the basis of whether they serve the needs of the social elite or actually improve social and vocational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Ballantine, 1997).

In this paper I have provided an alternative critical evaluation approach designed to highlight the individual and social consequences of education programs introduced to effect social and vocational change. I have argued that traditional systems management evaluations of such curricula are woefully inadequate because they ignore fundamental moral, social and ontological assumptions supporting such programs. In some instances these assumptions may reproduce forms of systemic injustice that are inconsistent with the general moral objectives of an egalitarian society. In response to this methodological shortcoming, I have proposed a five stage critical evaluation approach that examines social context, investigates informal curriculum content and consequences, and conceptually analyzes the employability skills discourse within the formal curriculum. Seeking to avoid an entirely structural critique of the connections between society, schools and students, stage four proposes an ethnographic study to reflect the dynamic interaction between the curriculum and the classroom. Finally, the data collected during the first four evaluation stages is situated within the context of a macro critical theory, and evaluated on its moral consistency with fundamental principles of social justice.

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