Critical Work Education and Social Exclusion:
Unemployed Youths at the Margins in the New Economy

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The European Union has funded dramaturgical projects that utilize role-playing activities designed to enable unemployed youths to better confront life-course decision-making and develop constructive living strategies, such as building positive interactions with supervisors and bosses (Miller, 1986). These projects used simulated theatrical exercises to teach communication skills for team-building and leadership development. The emphasis upon improvisation, with sketchy stage directions but no written script, encouraged spontaneity of expression as well as exploration of unfamiliar emotions. Moreover, by performing the exercises in a safe, unthreatening place, the young people gained confidence in peer listening and speaking (Monks, Barker & Mhanacháin, 2001). Educators in the United States have utilized the theatre arts in career development, as well, to help young people find meaning in their educational and employment futures (Lakes, 1996). Critical education projects such as these may assist at-risk young people in clarifying uncertainties in life and in repelling cultural marginality (Miles, Pohl, Stauber, Walther, Manuel, Bahna & Gomes, 2002).

A number of policymakers in career and technical education (CTE) have highlighted pedagogical approaches that nurture small communities of students who work with compassionate adults. Imel (2000) noted that contextualized teaching and learning already was a "hallmark of excellent CTE programs" (p.2) and recommended it be continued, specifically when working with urban young people. Brand (2000), former Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education, claimed that CTE should embrace "small, individualized, and caring learning communities" (p. 1) so that youth could manage the life

course, negotiate adolescence, and prepare for school-to-work transitions. She enjoined CTE to align itself more closely with the values of youth development in "the vision of a new learning experience for teens" (p. 1) in the next millennium, and touted high school reforms in which youths are "surrounded by caring and competent adults" (p. 1) as they are prepared for a range of activities such as lifelong learning, civic involvement, leadership, and careers. By highlighting family, neighborhood, peers, and community institutions in youths' lives, vocational policymakers now are touting the values of merging youth development into urban schools (Steinberg, Almeida & Allen, 2003). Curnan & Hughes (2002) enhanced this philosophy when they stated that youth development "holds an appreciative, holistic, ecological, relational world-view, grounded in equality and justice, compassion, and sustainability" (p. 3).

Social Exclusion and Risk

The concept of social exclusion was originally developed in French policy circles in 1974 to characterize individuals and groups of people without social insurance. Faced with declining revenues, France was unable to reach these individuals through universal welfare benefits, thus rupturing the social contract between the citizen and the state that was once a major feature of Western European life (Gore, 1995). Over time, the meaning of the term has changed to encompass a much broader condition in the United Kingdom and continental Europe (and all of the advanced industrialized countries of the West in general) in which the unemployed fall through the cracks of the social safety net. Impacted by globalization and technology, a decline in labor-intensive manufacturing, and a rise in neo-liberal economic reforms, the socially excluded could be described as "a reserve army of labour, continually changing places with those in low-status employment" (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002, p. 2). This situation is especially difficult for young adults who, when denied access to the labor market often for the first time, have little reserve income to pay for health care and housing. If, in addition, the young person is a recent immigrant, he or she may also face a language barrier that segregates him or her in a neighborhood where there is little opportunity for further

education or job retraining. In the U.S. we sometimes use the term "ghettoization," "marginalization," and "the underclass" to denote the condition of those individuals similarly living in poverty (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002, p. 2).

Theorists of social exclusion and risk recognize that young people without steady jobs face future threats that include long-term unemployment, family disintegration, homelessness, and other obstacles, as well as an inability to make the transition from full-time schooling into the full-time, paid workplace (Byrne, 1999; Hills, Le Grand & Pachaud, 2002; MacDonald, 1997; Pierson, 2002). An increasing portion of this marginalized group enter contingent labor which offers part-time hours and few if any benefits. Because the idea of career is built upon risk—or as Beck (1992) noted, the individual's "susceptibility to crises" (p. 133)—young people's options are governed by conditions of uncertainty and instability. These individuals are directed into formal schooling, where they must learn the hidden curriculum of success, as a way to gain a livelihood and to repel cultural marginality. A young person "denied access to either [a job or an education]," Beck (1992) stated, "faces social and material oblivion….Those rejected by the vocational training system fall into the social abyss" (p. 133).

Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (1996) underscored the impact of globalization upon shrinking labor markets and noted changes in the way young males viewed occupational futures and social roles as breadwinners. These two British scholars indicated that "high rates of unemployment, the de-regulation of youth labour markets and punitive legislative changes that have led to the withdrawal of financial state support for young people" (p. 23) have intensified the growing alienation of working-class males. In particular, they referred to the abolition of wage protection for young people under age 21, the removal of restrictions on adolescent working hours and conditions, and the withdrawal of social security benefits for teens. By the mid-1990s post-recession declines in national job training programs accompanied the rise of post-compulsory schooling in institutions where the working classes prolong education to avoid unemployment and where young people "learn not to labour" (p. 24).

Some young people on the margins of the new economy are aware of the challenges they face in terms of social mobility and educational and economic advancement. For example, in a study of survival narratives among mostly homeless and unemployed London youth ages 17 to 25, Blackman (1997) found that opportunities for economic improvement brought on fear and anxiety. For these young men, getting a steady job raised the fear that momentary success merely prolonged the inevitable fall deeper into sub-standard existence. One twenty-year-old named Dave said

> If I could leave the world of the homeless, I'd do it today. Say if I leave, what happens if I don't make it again? I will end up having to move on. But if I stay homeless I have my friends, contacts, people I know. This is my world why should I throw it away (p. 116)?

Individuals preferred to stand still, Blackman (1997) wrote, because the "massive realignment of attitude and emotional resources" (p. 116) required in order to make the transition from homelessness to security was too taxing. But these individuals are not without social networks which operate among excluded youth and provide them a strong source of support for hard times (Heikkinen, 2000). In another example of group support, females using websites and zines have encouraged their peers to take the opportunity of unemployment to pursue creative endeavors and self-interests "on their own terms"—a disruptive notion that "shift[s] the image of young women without work as losers… [and] questions the meaning of work and programs to get youth into work" (Harris, 2004, p. 169). Again, the prospect of steady work creates tension in the lives of those hoping for an opportunity to succeed.

The idea that one can achieve anything if he or she is resolute is problematic to young people faced with the realities of low-skilled employment where there are too many qualified applicants for too few jobs (McDonald, 1999). Serge and Rob, unemployed lads from the poor west side of Melbourne, Australia, declared

> SERGE: You've gotta know someone to get a job these days.

> ROB: I went for a job yesterday. There were about 200 people lined up. It was at a biscuit company in Abbotsford. There were six jobs. I'd lost concentration by the time I got there…. I got interviewed but they reckon they'll call me [generally understood to mean that you haven't got the job] (McDonald, 1999, p. 41).

Rob was aware that as an outsider he was expected to act in his own self-interest and appropriate a personality that fit into the entrepreneurial demands of a post-industrial setting.

Other young men faced with marginalization manifest belligerent and destructive, thrill-seeking behaviors. After talking with unemployed young men in Australia who were high school dropouts and all on the dole, Connell (1995) noted their biographical histories displayed

> Bullying and outrageous caning at school, assaulting a teacher, fights with siblings and parents, brawls in playgrounds and at parties, being arrested, assaults in reform school and goal, bashing of women and gay men, individual fist fights and pulling a knife. Speeding in cars or trucks or on bikes is another form of intimidation, with at least one police chase and roadblock and one serious crash as results (pp. 98-99).

Collectively the young men clashed with school authorities, which in most cases led to their being expelled or their simply leaving school. Drug dealings were pathways for several of the males and many faced prison terms as well. None of the interviewees had any use for the state as a way of advancing themselves through further schooling. Connell (1995) was left with an impression that the loss of financial power and the history of childhood poverty and abuse among unemployed Australian working-class males led to exaggerated displays of masculinity which included acts of toughness, confrontation, sexual harassment and homophobic violence.

Beck (1992) suggested that the life course for young people was no longer carefully scripted from birth or socially prescribed by class or family. Due to societal changes under globalization, clearly defined age-linked transitions from school to work have eroded. The cultural context for planning one's biographical path requires new improvisational strategies for

avoiding risk. "The individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage," Beck observed, "to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships, and so on" (p. 135). Young people nowadays seek ways to negotiate risks at the individual level. The differentiation of skill requirements in the new economy has led to varying educational plans for work. School-to-work transitions have been prolonged or elongated for adolescents who desire training and job preparation. "Subjectively young people are forced to reflexively negotiate a complex set of routes into the labour market," Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argued, "and in doing so, develop a sense that they alone are responsible for their labour market outcomes" (p. 39).

Du Bois-Reymond (1998) agreed with Beck that the life course for young people has changed under late modernism. No longer are youths simply adopting a cadenced adolescent-to-adult pattern of training and career preparation, but are making career decisions based upon uncertainty and risk management. This means that while some adhere to normative life-course development, characterized by sequential movements through age-identified passages, still others may choose unemployment without a sense of negativity and anguish (Furlong & Cartmel, 2003), rationalizing that a temporary condition of joblessness is simply a feature of an unpredictable future. In a nine-year longitudinal study of Dutch youth, Du Bois-Reymond (1998) asked a number of questions to students and parents to elicit their perceptions of uncertainties and their plans for educational and occupational futures in the risk society. With the most recent round of qualitative interviews, the researcher (Du Bois-Reymond 1998, pp. 69-76) found five major core concepts or themes that indicated the variety of pathways available to young adults:

- Gaining time—variety of options. This concept allows individuals to forestall finalizing plans by entering training programs without a clear picture of the job market.
- Choosing a profession that develops one's own personality. This pathway permits individuals to value and prioritize social contacts and

communication, or "having fun," over wages and financial gain.

- Choosing a professional future. This concept enables young people to keep their options open and recognizes that at times they will drift in and out of the labor market. It encourages individuals to develop a fallback plan in case things do not work out as once anticipated.
- Delaying adult responsibilities, such as partnership, family and job. Individuals who follow this pathway choose to avoid or delay marriage and childbirth and even an active sexual life.
- Growing up later or never. In this concept individuals reject aspects of maturity out of hand as too confining and rigid. Adulthood, in their view, signifies a routine work life, a monotonous schedule, and a host of other responsibilities and is indefinitely postponed.

Critical Work Education

Critical work education projects are based upon what Pierson (2002) termed a "social action framework" aimed at reversing exclusion. They give voice to the participants "exploring what common experiences they share and what stories they have to tell….The social action approach bears strong resemblance to the process of neighborhood capacity building." Pierson continued, "The objective is for young people to acquire the confidence, standing and recognition to achieve a variety of ends that are transferable across time" (pp. 107-108).

The real challenge for CTE is to assist young people in developing optimism in the face of entrenched hopelessness. Traditional training schemes and further education are unable to provide effective psychic motivation or emotional self-confidence and do not make use of the rich context of personal experiences in shaping pedagogical activities. Rather than viewing alienated youth as dysfunctional and deficient and attempting to transform the marginalized into disciplined, docile conformists, some service providers and community agencies are using novel approaches for

school-to-work transitions that recognize the new realities of employability. Colley (2003) summarized the three-pronged thrust of program initiatives along these lines: (1) accept the fact that youth-at-risk will be working on the periphery of the new economy, (2) help young people reinvent their own identities so that they can overturn negative outlooks and viewpoints, and (3) facilitate their pathways into employability through guidance, career education, and mentoring.

Skills formation in the new economy now stresses building competencies in the personal realm of self-improvement and impression management (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003). Scholars have described post-industrial workplaces where employees are trained for customer service interactions and front-end public relations (Wirth, 1992). In these jobs, in addition to explicit knowledge of production methods, technical vocabulary, and trade-specific terminology, employees require competence in personal factors such as effective communication skills and the ability to work collaboratively in teams. In some quarters, employment readiness, particularly for the socially excluded or unemployed, emphasizes training in aesthetics and personal affect, and encourages individuals to make themselves over, physically and emotionally, in a way geared to impress potential employers. "Clearly, employers do want social skills, such as communication and team working," Nickerson et al (2003) clarified, but "they also rely upon the physical appearance, or the modulated voice and understated accent or more specifically, the embodied capacities and attributes of those to be employed" (p. 190). Employers in retail are looking for abilities more aligned with the notion of style, befitting jobs where looking good and sounding right take precedence over thinking skills.

Along these lines, unemployed young people living in Lisbon, Portugal; Liverpool, England; and Mannheim, Germany were provided an opportunity to explore through the theatre arts what Alheit (1995) termed "biographicity" and defined as the reflexive process that offers the means and builds the self-confidence to redesign one's life course (cited in Miles et al., 2002, p. 24). Improvisational theatre for biographical analysis was implemented in these projects, specifically among Turkish and Italian migrant youth in Mannheim, as a way to motivate these

young people. The evaluation team of EU researchers who studied the three youth development projects recognized that education and training programs must allow "young people to make sense of their youth biographies" (Miles et al. 2002, p. 3). Job-related skills acquired in traditional training and employment programs offered false promises of prospects in the labor market. The alternative training, they argued, shifts the curriculum away from teacher-centeredness toward critical work education in which young people garner an investment and a say in learning about their own life course. Presentational theatre simulated everyday realities and assisted the young people in uncovering and assessing their own strengths and weaknesses. The EU researchers (Miles et al, 2002) explained the process at length:

> Individual perceptions and interpretations have to be expressed in the public sphere, either in the context of a group or in front of an audience. This exchange between the internal "self" and external feedback potentially leads to the very core of biographicity: it provides a context in which individual life histories can be legitimized. In this setting and in this social network young people are able to relate individual experiences and orientations to the local opportunity structure as regards, education, training and employment. In short young people can play out their own biographies in a creative context in which those biographies are accepted and nourished (pp 24-25).

The technique used in the drama workshops was created as the forum theatre by Augusto Boal (Boal, 1979) in the 1970s, coterminous with the pedagogical work of Paulo Freire (1995). Both Boal and Freire were radical educators devoted to critical inquiry and social action among the rural poor in Brazil. The Boal technique was favored because it offered participants an opportunity to name their oppressions (Boal, 1979). In the workshops, the theatre actors, along with the audience members, who were facilitated by an intermediary, identified a protagonist and an antagonist. Together they engaged in problem-posing activities and collective storytelling, thus creating a laboratory for heightened self-expression and group consciousness-raising. Contemporary workshops fashioned along the lines of Boal have

been put into a wide variety of practices: in social work and therapeutic settings among marginalized populations, within schools tackling the theme of bullying, at universities for leadership development classes, and among political activists in general (Houston, Magill, McCollum & Spratt, 2001; Monks, Barker & Mhanacháin, 2001).

In the Mannheim project, the theatre group met twice weekly for three hours per session and culminated in workshop simulations that incorporated a number of themes generated from among the peers' dialogues concerning their daily lives. During the first four weeks, the young people were initiated into drama via an initial "animation" phase which taught basic breathing exercises, relaxation, and movement techniques. This was followed by an "improvisation" phase of six to eight weeks that entailed voice and mime exercises. The project concluded with the "production" phase in which a collage of scenes were prepared and acted out for public screening (Miles et al., 2002). The theatrical vignettes were developed from street-life realities that had been personally experienced by these non-native-born youth who were faced with few prospects for full-time employment in Germany. One such scene involved a role-play between a young man and a local employment officer at the *Berufsberatung* (vocational guidance and career counseling center.) The officer, described as "a moody bureaucrat who only cares about how to keep his office furniture clean and safe from the young people who enter to seek advice," attempts to counsel an angry, disgruntled young man who becomes more discouraged over time at the power imbalances and verbal battles he encounters there (Miles et al. 2002, p. 52). Other scenarios included themes such as the actors' conflicts with parental expectations and their "relationship with their friends, jobs, girlfriends, drugs, and attitudes toward violence" (Miles et al., 2002, p. 49).

The participants in the Boal method did not learn performance techniques as an occupational goal in order to pursue an acting career in itself. After all, these students were resistant to formal learning—a feature of their biographical histories that was never denied or silenced. Instead, the projects affirmed informal learning processes and cultural expressions among at-risk youths, and "provided a forum in which young

people were given a relaxed atmosphere in which they could discuss the pros and cons of their particular training "biographies" (Miles et al., 2002, p. 127). Additionally, the youths were not schooled in self-reflection skills and therapeutic approaches, yet the theatre group facilitated self-examination without dictating normative, moral behaviors from the adult youth-workers such as the drama coach.

These biographical projects exposed unemployed youth to methods for understanding transitional passages in their life course. This type of critical work education offered marginalized groups ways to self-reflect and helped them develop methods for appropriate alternative-career planning. In the new economy, young people's transitions are no longer traditionally scripted and are more often constructed as do-it-yourself projects with fragmented training, periodic employment, and episodes of unemployment (Stephen & Squires, 2003). The popular perception of under- and unemployed youths as a group filled with apprehension and fear and heightened social exclusion fuels talk of regulation and control over this rising public menace. Too often the popular press and television media portray young adults in anti-social roles as criminals, thugs, and delinquents. Kelly (1999, 2001) illuminated that Australian youth training policy was conceptualized as a containment process for the inhabitants of so-called wild zones. He suggested that contemporary populations of youths labeled as at-risk were increasingly viewed as ungovernable by neo-liberal governments. These youths, it was feared, may jeopardize the future polity because, undermined by negligent parenting, they rejected the "good life" and constructed pathological biographies outside of those traditionally considered responsible or accountable.

Although dramaturgical instruction for the unemployed has been used with varying levels of success, the practice has been criticized as reinforcing a psychology of inferiority by blaming the victim for their own lack of cultural capital (Miller, 1986). This result certainly is not within the spirit of critical work education as presented in this article. Biographical projects ultimately affirmed an individual's self-worth simply because the projects told stories that resulted in "identifying 'epiphanies' which represent interactional moments and experiences that

leave marks on people's lives by altering their fundamental meaning structure" (Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis, & Sharpe, 2002, p. 337). The underlying purpose of narrative inquiry, then, is not to colonize our subjects but to provide what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have termed "wakefulness," that is, ongoing reflection and development within "sustained response communities, communities that help us question our living and telling of stories in the field" (p. 184).

Conclusion

The visual and performing arts gave at-risk young people opportunities to explore their biographical histories and personal experiences. Teens and young adults were provided spaces to express their world in ways that showcased peer productions. The arts provided democratizing influences and allowed the participants to reach outward to new communities of individuals and to new venues for these forms of cultural work. Young people reacted positively when their works were legitimized in community projects. Furthermore, the arts offered anti-elitist messages as seen from the perspective of young people on the margins of society. Their creative displays of ancestral origins, identity politics, and subcultural alliances highlighted both literal and figurative meanings of street life. In addition, the arts provided a variety of complex psychosocial meanings depicting the anomie and despair in the city and allowed life histories to be confirmed and legitimized as well as to be planned and reformed (Mattingly, 2001; Taylor, 2000). Within these youth development projects, critical work educators offered students control, ownership, and freedom of expression, particularly in relation to career orientations and job readiness.

For the past decade, CTE leaders have advocated a shift in the field, from the deficit model of viewing youth as dysfunctional and in need of fixing to a more humanizing and integrated approach of building learning networks within schools and communities. With the passage of the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act in 1994, youth development principles mentioned in the act linked employer partnerships and community resources to CTE student achievement and well-being. The career academies movement flourished and drew

closer parallels to youth development approaches as well. So-called communities of support enhanced vocational learning in these small-scale or school-within-a-school programs. In these academies the total environment included not just a package of technical training but real engagement among teachers, peers, parents, and employers in relationships devoted to motivating students (Kemple, 1997). Grubb (1995) advocated CTE reforms that reversed skills and drills instruction toward a "meaning-making" (p. 256) occupational curriculum for urban students. Predmore (2004) noted that students in inner-city career academies took "an active role in their own education" (p. 23), exhibited by high rates of attendance, lower dropout rates, and pride in their programs. CTE programs equipped students with skills to design neighborhood renewal projects and create enterprises in the city (Lakes, 1996).

Certainly CTE teachers may serve as critical work educators in aiding and assisting school-aged children and young adults through projects that help reshape their connections to self and society. "Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students," wrote Hooks (1994). "Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process." (p. 21). Youths want to experience community building with teachers as caring and supportive mentors. By enlisting teams, partnerships, and coalitions into the calculus of community, people of all ages participate effectively in benevolent and humane social organizations devoted to empowering education and revitalizing hopes for the next generation.

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