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Corporate Downloads: Attitudinal Grooming in Ontario's Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

For twenty years, public institutions in Ontario have been dominated by socioeconomic interests that insist on a 'lean state' and corporate-friendly economy; the health of the marketplace is positioned as the key to a healthy and content citizenry. Secondary school reforms at the close of the province's last structural recession mirrored and extended Ontario's capitalist restructuring by encouraging the linking of student identities to the marketplace. The belief that individual achievement in the economy as a worker is dependent upon society's ability to integrate skills and competencies training into schooling prevails: post-secondary success professionally and as consumers, the message goes, will, otherwise, elude graduates. An analysis of the policy and curriculum documents that guided the re-culturing of Ontario's secondary schools reveals the government's efforts to conscript youth into this agenda, grooming this attitudinally as 'useful' workers in the global economy. Thus schools-responding to both the needs of capital and the goals of capital-have become a territory where students are offered few political alternatives.

Keywords: curriculum; neoliberalism; corporate culture; critical pedagogy; school-to-work policy.

Introduction

At the close of the twentieth century public institutions in Canada were, decidedly, under siege by neoliberal economic and political interests. This trend, in turn, generated a belief that individual achievement in the economy as a worker, and material acquisitions as a consumer, render successes outside of these realms irrelevant. For students and educators learning and teaching in Canada's public schools the transition was particularly biting: a pervasive sentiment that Canada's schools weren't 'working' was growing among the status quo, fuelled by negative messages from business, media outlets and, in some instances, politicians. These messages became beliefs as voters across the country surrendered to the new neoliberal command. In Ontario change came swiftly following the election of the Progressive Conservative party under the lead of Mike Harris and his Common Sense Revolution platform. In September of that year the new Minister of Education, John Snobelen, said publicly that 'If we really want to fundamentally change the issue in training and...education we'll have to first make sure we've communicated brilliantly the breakdown in the process we currently experience... We need to invent a crisis (Sears 2003: 4).' According to Sears (2003: 11), the 'revolution in common sense [was geared to] extend and deepen the current process of capitalist restructuring'; in education specifically, the 'neo-liberal agenda... seeks to reorient schooling so that the individual develops a self in relation to the market rather than the state.' To this end all curricula from grades K – 12 were reformed. However it is in secondary school – the years where a student approaches entry into the workplace – that these ends are most overt under the Ontario Secondary School Reforms implemented in September 1999.

An analysis of the policy documents that accompanied these changes, and the curriculum documents governing the compulsory course Careers, reveals that government's efforts to conscript youth into the neoliberal economic agenda as both subjects and consumers, allowing distinctions between politics and the economy, public and private, to become obscure and, ultimately, merge in a school-based 'culture of achievement'. While teaching in Ontario under these reforms, I completed an MA at a Canadian university in Educational Studies and Global Change; in my studies and in this analysis I relied heavily on critical pedagogy to interrogate

contemporary efforts by politicians in Canada and elsewhere to graft a business ethos onto curricula and the life of schools via direct partnerships with corporations. At work inside or outside of schools, critical pedagogy delineates ‘schools and other educational spheres’ as more than ‘instructional sites...places where culture, power, and knowledge come together to produce particular identities, narratives, and social practices (Giroux 2006: 4).’ Thus, schooling, in Giroux’s ethos, is about more than acquisition of skills and the banking of knowledge; instead schools turn on the ‘construction of knowledge and identities that always presuppose a vision of the future’. And so critical pedagogists seek to ask: ‘Whose future, story, and interests does the school represent (Giroux 2006: 4)?’

The Spectre of Incompetence

Writing about the marked absence of democracy in contemporary North American life, Cornel West (2004: 177) offers that young people ‘see clearly the hypocrisies’ and mendacities of our society’; with time they ‘also begin to see that their education has been distorted and sugar coated and has sidestepped so many uncomfortable truths.’ The workplace and economic ‘truths’ of globalised free trade and corporate restructuring carry alternate realities for workers, present and future. The flip side of the ‘flexibility’ assertion is the death knell for secure employment: such changes have affected workers of all stripes ‘from office temps to high-tech independent contractors to restaurant and retail clerks...in every industry temporary contracts are replacing full, secure employment (Klein 2000: 232).’ The goal of the corporate-generated ‘job flight’ message—little more than a threat aimed at reducing workers’ collective rights—was revealed in ‘a study commissioned by the NAFTA labor committee...in the United States between 1993 and 1995 [when it was learned that] ‘employers threatened to close the plant in 50 percent of all union certification elections...specific, unambiguous threats ranged from attaching shipping labels to equipment throughout the plant with a Mexican address, to posting maps of North America with an arrow pointing from the current plant site to Mexico’ (Klein 2000: 223-224).’

In the arena of knowledge and skills acquisition, this workplace trend is equated in the prevailing, corporate-spun narratives with economic competitiveness and even survival. Edwards and Usher note the use of semantics in pushing this message:

Behind competence stalks the spectre of incompetence; the view is that it is people being unable to do the jobs asked of them to a satisfactory standard, if at all, which leads to uncompetitiveness in the economy as a whole. ‘Competence’ offers a ‘warm’ and ‘obvious’ common sense solution to the problem as constructed. To favour incompetence is surely irrational? (1994 cited in Alexander et al 1994: 83)

The skills and competencies movement has focused specifically on new technologies in response to the prevalence and pervasiveness of technology in the workplace. However, according to one observer, ‘our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system.’ Unfortunately these conditions have led to our submersion ‘in a new ‘culture of silence’ (Schauhl 2003: 33).’

A ‘culture of silence’ doesn’t necessarily spell blind compliance: subliminal coercion works to achieve the same result. Accordingly, to further the Darwinian ethos of global capitalism through education means that ‘survival of the fittest is the message, but for public consumption, right-wing education reform must be couched in the language of excellence and achievement (Barlow et al 1994: 121).’ In Ontario, the corporate-fuelled agenda that precipitated the changes to public education in 1999 had become a pervasive public narrative earlier in the decade. In the Canadian federal election of 1993, numerous candidates, including then Prime Minister Kim Campbell, ‘were heard quoting a disturbing statistic: Canada faces a skilled labour force shortage of 300,000! Our schools and training programs must start producing the high-skilled workers to fill this hole in our nation’s economic infrastructure.

Otherwise, Canada will not be able to become globally competitive (Barlow et al 2004: 45).’ This narrative and its simple agenda have resonated globally: according to Sharon Stephens (1995: 20), ‘The implications of...changes [in global capitalism] for children are legion. As the Third World ‘comes home’ to industrial nations, widespread economic uncertainty, unemployment, and decreased public services... drastically affect the lives of children.’ Further, she offers, ‘the materially privileged are affected too, as the conditions for economic well-being appear ever more tenuous’.

The Creep of the Private into the Public

Neoliberalism ‘is premised on [the] steadfast belief that political and social problems should be solved primarily through market-based mechanisms as opposed to state intervention (Soederberg 2005: 329).’ While this may not be the explicit stated aim of the secondary school reforms formulated and implemented in 1999, the spectre of neoliberalism is never far away. In the Introduction to the policy document authored by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to set out the Ontario Secondary School Diploma requirements, Ontario Secondary Schools Grades 9 to 12: Program and Diploma Requirements, the reader is told that ‘The Ontario secondary school program is designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills they will need to lead satisfying and productive lives... The program will prepare students for further education and work, and will help them to become independent, productive, and responsible members of society.’ This is to be accomplished through a standardized curriculum ‘that provides all students with the learning opportunities and support they need, and that is relevant to society’s needs and expectations (1999: 6).’ The provision for a compulsory ‘Guidance and Career Education Program’ is set out in this document. The purpose is as follows:

...[S]tudents will acquire the knowledge and skills that they need in order to learn effectively, to live and to work cooperatively and productively with a wide range of people, to set and pursue education and career goals, and to carry out their social responsibilities. (1999: 45)

The goals include:

- [understanding] the concepts related to lifelong learning; interpersonal relationships...and career planning;
- [developing] learning skills, social skills, a sense of social responsibility, and the ability to formulate and pursue educational and career goals;
- [applying] this learning in their daily lives both at school and in the community. (1999: 45)

Among the ‘key features of the province’s policy in...guidance and career education’ is the ‘completion of the compulsory half-credit Career Studies course as a secondary school graduation requirement (1999: 45).’ According to the course overview, Grade

10 Career Studies ‘teaches students how to develop and achieve personal goals in education and work and contribute to their communities’; beyond reviewing their personal skills and interests ‘Student learning will include...investigating economic trends, workplace organization, work opportunities, and ways to search for work.’ Students will also ‘build the capabilities needed for managing work and life transitions (MOE 2006- 13).’ Among the specific expectations of the course, students are to ‘identify and describe an occupational classification system (e.g., National Occupational Classification) and identify occupational groups in this system that are of interest to them (MOE 2006: 16).’

According to the Explanatory Notes provided after the course’s curriculum expectations, the ‘National Occupational Classification [is a] Canadian occupational classification system that codes and categorizes over 25 000 occupational titles according to two basic criteria, skill types and skill levels (MOE 2006: 27).’ Two basic criteria, then, define an occupation: what a person does and how well he or she does it.

According to Barlow et al (1994: 125) ‘Curriculum directly validates particular points of view...about privilege and power through the topics it evades as well as those it addresses.’ Nowhere in the curriculum for Grade 10 Career Studies is there language related to organized labour or collective bargaining for workers; an exploration of ‘safety in the workplace’ balances employees’ rights and responsibilities with those of employers’ (MOE 2006: 16). Although the word ‘career’ is defined sweepingly as the ‘sum of one’s experiences in a variety of roles throughout life...which includes all of the individual’s work, learning, community, and family roles’ (MOE 2006: 26), there is no discussion of a social safety net or social justice issues in those life experiences. Integrated throughout the course, however, are ‘Employability Skills’ or ‘core competencies required in all work settings.’ Those designated for use are those established by The Conference Board of Canada (2006: 26).

The Conference Board of Canada is ‘a not-for-profit Canadian organization that takes a business-like approach to its operations.’ While the organisation asserts that it is ‘objective and non-partisan’ it is ‘funded exclusively through the fees [charged] for services to the private and public sectors’; these services include ‘running

conferences...conducting, publishing and disseminating research, helping people network, developing individual leadership skills and building organizational capacity.’ The Conference Board of Canada bills itself as offering ‘Specialists in economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues’; the Conference Board of Canada is ‘Independent from, but affiliated with, the Conference Board, Inc. of New York which serves some 2,000 companies in 60 nations’ (2011). The Employability Skills referred to in the curriculum document are made available for classroom use by The Conference Board of Canada in a brochure and poster called Employability Skills 2000+. Not only was the Conference Board of Canada consulted in preparing the curriculum, these supporting materials for use in classrooms and guidance offices were prepared and distributed by this body. Thus, both curriculum and classroom, formerly public domains, have been made increasingly private in spite of the public funds that allow both to operate.

The introduction to Employability Skills 2000+ lists ‘the skills YOU need to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work—whether you work on your own or as part of a team...the employability skills, attitudes and behaviours that you need to participate and progress in today’s dynamic world of work (1).’ Three skills continuums are provided. The first, ‘Fundamental Skills’ are skills that insure ‘You will be better prepared to progress in the world of work when you can...’; these skills and behaviours are grouped under communication, managing information, using numbers, and thinking and problem solving. The second, ‘Personal Management Skills’, are skills that insure ‘You will be able to offer yourself greater possibilities for achievement when you can...’; these skills and behaviours are grouped under the subheadings demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviours, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously, and work safely. Finally ‘Teamwork Skills’ are skills that insure ‘You will be better prepared to add value to the outcomes of a task, project or learn when you can...’; these skills and behaviours are listed under the subheadings working with others and participating in projects and tasks (2).

The emphasis and repetition of the word ‘you’ in the foregoing passes a direct message on to students about the fate that awaits them in the marketplace as workers: your ability to find a job, to find the job you want, your prospects of advancing in and keeping a job rests solely with your efforts-as if governments and the markets have no

responsibility in employment issues beyond responding to the whims of global capital.

Further, education serves little purpose beyond economic success. Thus, skills and competencies training for the workplace, and preparation to take one's place in the market does not end with the Careers course or courses specific to a vocation: it evolved to infect much of classroom discourse in Ontario following the reforms of The Common Sense Revolution. The shift to education for employment solely for economic growth via increased production and consumption has brought the goals of the workplace to those of classrooms, curriculum, and pedagogy.

In the Introduction to the policy document that governs 'all disciplines in the Ontario curriculum', the MOE (2000a: 3) stipulates that: The curriculum has been designed with the goal of ensuring that graduates from Ontario secondary schools are well prepared to lead satisfying and productive lives as both citizens and individuals, and to compete successfully in a global economy and a rapidly changing world. The greater part of the Ministry document, 'Considerations for Program Planning', lays out 'considerations for program planning that must be taken into account by teachers in all disciplines (MOE 2000a: 4). This drift into all areas of schooling creates an educational institution geared primarily to employability by privileging the skills required for success in the workplace. This policy document is divided into eight sections; alongside 'Education for Exceptional Students', 'Types of Secondary School Courses', and 'English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development', areas such 'The Role of Technology in the Curriculum', 'Career Education', and 'Cooperative Education and Other Workplace Experiences'. Here the literacy and language skills that allow citizens to participate in a democracy, and the rights to access an education by the disabled-enshrined rights, democratic rights in Ontario—are given equal time with school-to-work transitions and technological training.

'The Role of Technology' does highlight the how technology can augment the learning experiences of students and the potential of the Internet for research purposes (MOE 2000a: 10). However, the section is framed with this opening statement: Increasing reliance on computers, telecommunication networks, and information

technologies in society and the workplace makes it essential for students to become computer literate and to develop ‘information literacy’ skills. (MOE 2000a: 9) Students, the document stipulates, ‘should become familiar with a range of available software programs (MOE 2000a: 9).’ Teachers, the document stipulates, ‘should work collaboratively within and across disciplines to effectively plan for the integration of computers and information technologies into the teaching/learning process (MOE 2000a: 10).’ The section entitled ‘Career Education’ indicates that ‘The skills and competencies that students acquire through the guidance and career education program...will not only help them succeed in school, but will also contribute to their success in the workplace.’ Further, across their four years in secondary school, ‘students will learn about the educational and career opportunities that are available to them; explore and evaluate a variety of those opportunities; relate what they learn in their courses to potential careers in a variety of fields; and learn to make appropriate educational and career choices (MOE 2000a:10).’ ‘Cooperative Education and Other Workplace Experiences’ provides one such venue for students to become educated about a career path. Academic credits towards the Ontario Secondary School Diploma may be acquired via an internship in a given workplace if the placement is part of a Cooperative Education placement sanctioned by the school (MOE 2000a: 11).

Beyond what is taught in the classroom about employability, business interests are furthered in schools through business partnerships that encourage pleasure-seeking consumerism through advertising, and give businesses a greater voice in the operations of the school. This is the continuum of the neo-liberal agenda: a public education system, in order to be effective, must be run like a business. Thus, ‘Eliminating ‘waste’ and increasing public sector productivity is the watchword of the lean state’ (Sears 2003: 15); accordingly schools everywhere are increasingly open ‘to corporate sponsorships and to direct forms of brand promotion’ in an era of tight funding (Klein 2000: 89). Alan Sears (2003) offers that the reforms in Ontario marked an overt shift towards partnerships with business through policy. This commercial thrust ‘provides direct marketing opportunities to corporations and changes the character of educational spaces.’ Thus, ‘Children are being drawn deeper at ever younger ages into the realm of commercialized culture (Sears 2003: 225).’ This ‘market consumption’, he offers further, is a ‘new (and highly contradictory) [form]

of inclusion in capitalist society that [has], to some extent, superseded social citizenship' (Sears 2003: 17).

The Mind Factory

While documenting the spread and role of the neoliberal agenda in Japan's public schools, Norma Field (1995: 54-55) observes that: 'The ideology of choice, nestled at the heart of liberalism, necessarily plays a complicated role in most societies ...[stunting] social imagination by short-circuiting the impulse to question the proffered terms of choice.' While the corporate narrative proffers the competition-equals-choice-equals-democracy mantra for students, they are simultaneously reduced to common denominators as workers and consumers within a market-driven system of schooling. What are the implications of a free-market educational climate for students as citizens? After studying school reforms in the United Kingdom, Mary John (1995: 116) asked, 'What role is now being created in the social world for children...what roles are children being prepared for in adult life?' The author posits that 'we are preparing children to compete, to look after their own interests, to attach differential values to other children in terms of their abilities/disabilities.' Courses such as Grade 10 Careers and the policy documents that establish the sweep of career and skills and competencies training across the curriculum are geared to preparing students to respond to changes in their lives, their workplaces, and the economy; forced upon them by the marketplace, these are changes over which, seemingly, they will have no control. Within the context of Ontario's schools productivity, implicit in policy and practice, trumps human needs through the limits on the choices students have for self-determination within the expectations.

As has been noted, teachers are mandated by the policy and curriculum documents to 'work collaboratively within and across disciplines to effectively plan for the integration of computers and information technologies into the teaching/learning process'; and, students are mandated to 'become familiar with a range of available software programs' (MOE 2000a: 9-10). The initial curriculum document governing English in Grades 11 and 12 prepared by the MOE, reveal the government's efforts to further shape youth as 'useful' workers in the global economy within their studies of language, literature, and media. The skills and competencies movement in education that has focused specifically on new technologies in response to the prevalence and

pervasiveness of technology in the workplace represents a very obvious intersection between state values and market values. The rush to put computers in schools and classrooms has been fuelled by what R. D. White (1987: 103) describes as a conditioning ‘by a combination of factors linked to both private and public sector responses to economic crisis.’ For those who own or control the means of production, ‘the concern is primarily centred on measures to bolster profit margins.’ In the case of legislators and lawmakers the concern, he offers, does not deviate significantly from that of capital: ‘in addition to a concern with matching education with labour market requirements...a major impetus behind computer purchases is the need to reduce financial costs in education.’

In the Introduction to *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12 English* (2000), the ‘Place of English in the Curriculum’ is said to allow students to ‘participate fully in the society and the workplace of the twenty-first century’. ‘Literacy skills,’ the authors assert, ‘are important for higher education and for eventual entry into the workplace’ and ‘Students who are preparing for careers in business and industry also need these skills in order to adapt to a workplace that is constantly changing (MOE 2000b: 2).’ While proficiency in ‘language helps students to learn in all subject areas’ the authors remind readers that students ‘must also learn to use many technical terms and types of specialized language (MOE 2000b: 3).’ The core English courses in the University Preparation, College Preparation, and Workplace Preparation streams are all organised under four strands: Literature Studies, Language, Writing, and Media Studies. Each strand under each course has a series of stated Specific Expectations. While the language of the expectations does not specifically state the connection between subject mastery and preparation for the marketplace, the tasks offered by the authors as suggestions for teaching these stands do, in places, point to this goal.

In the Grade 11 University Preparation course this ethos is found primarily in the Media Studies strand; here the language used to describe suggested assignments points to production and sales. While ‘Analysing Media and Media Works’ students may ‘explain the use of media to launch a new product line’; while ‘Creating Media Works’ students may ‘write dialogue for a commercial to promote sales of a novel [and/or] create a promotional campaign to sell the same idea or service to two or more

different audiences’ (MOE 2000b: 21). In the Grade 11 College Preparation course the Overall Expectations in the Language strand stipulate that ‘By the end of this course, students will...use listening techniques and oral communication skills to participate in classroom discussion and more formal activities, with a focus on using business and technical language appropriately in oral reports and other presentations (MOE 2000b: 28).’ Much of the Grade 11 Workplace Preparation course is vocational in nature, and for these students the workplace is their sole destination after graduation.

The language of the curriculum document – like that used by the Conference Board of Canada – points to the need for workers to identify their shortcomings and to work to standards that are set for them. For example, under the Writing strand students must ‘compare their current writing skills those required in a variety of workplace situations and occupations and identify goals for improvement’ (MOE 2000b: 36). Under the Language strand students must ‘compare their current oral communication knowledge and skills with those required in a variety of workplace settings and create a plan to address identified needs (MOE 2000b: 38).’

As was mentioned in the review of the policy documents, there is a proviso that teachers must integrate skills in the areas of technology, career education, and workplace experiences into all subject areas. In subject English areas for integration are addressed in the curriculum document under the section ‘Some Considerations for Program Planning in English’. Under the heading ‘The Role of Technology in the Curriculum’ the following caveat follows that heading: ‘Using information technology will assist students in the achievement of many of the expectations in the English curriculum.’ To this end:

Information technology helps students in their written work and in the analysis of literary works and informational materials. Students should use word processing to draft, organize, revise, edit, and format written work. In their research, students should use multimedia resources to find, process, and reorganize information and ideas. Presentation software and audio-visual technologies will enhance the effectiveness of oral and visual presentations (MOE 2000b: 111).

Many of these benefits, along with those that encourage students to move beyond pen and paper assessments to foster creativity through performance-based assessments, cannot be denied. Further, the necessity of these technological skills in most contemporary workplaces is well established. However the goals of corporate Canada are stated more explicitly under the heading Career Education:

Expectations in the English program include many opportunities for students to apply their language skills to work-related situations, to explore educational and career options, and to become self-directed learners...Regardless of their post secondary destination, all students need to realize that literacy skills are employment skills. Powerful, literacy skills will equip students to manage information technologies, communicate effectively and correctly in a variety of situations, and perform a variety of tasks (MOE 2000b: 111).

The benefits of performance-based assessment and creative, student-led extensions of coursework aside, the question begs: is it the role of publicly funded schools to provide this training? Or, is it the role of private corporations, businesses, and public employers?

Offering to foster workplace survival skills in students so that they will thrive in the free-market economy honours task mastery rather than subject mastery; ultimately, this action represents a downloading of technology skills and management attitudes onto the public education system in all subject areas.

Conclusion

So it is that contemporary schooling in Ontario is supposed to represent a system geared, ultimately, to helping individuals realize their potential as individuals it is, instead, both in policy and practice, geared to individuals realizing their potential as players in the marketplace and serving the needs of production.

Soederberg (2005: 325) offers that ‘global economic governance is said to be about ‘steering or control mechanisms’ initiated at multiple spaces of political organization’. Clearly classrooms and schools in Ontario became one of those multiple spaces as students were offered few political alternatives in the stated purposes of the role of school in their lives. The only political alternative, it appears, is that which they create

themselves: resistance that compromises their futures in a culture and a global economy where success in school is valued, privileged, viewed and portrayed as the rational route to realizing one's economic dreams via stable employment and conspicuous consumption. Within three years of these reforms, mainstream media outlets in Canada were noting a marked increase in the numbers of early school leavers. As Alison Taylor (2005: 322) described it in her study of school-to-work policy in Ontario, there were obvious 'tensions between the rhetoric of enhancing opportunities for all students and the reality of lower graduation rates' associated with the new curriculum. The curriculum and its delivery pose a territory where students are offered few political alternatives in the stated purposes of the role of school in both their lives and the marketplace: corporate culture and technological skills are delivered by neoliberal drills at the expense of self-determination, a collective voice, and the rigours of true academic achievement.

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