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The Market Economy Discourse on Education: Interpretation, Impact, and Resistance

This article suggests that the most serious threat posed to contemporary education is the deleterious impact that market economy policies have on current curriculum theory and development. It explores the market economy discourse on education that emerges internationally from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and domestically from private institutions such as the Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) and public ministries such as Industry Canada. These various organizations promote the market economy discourse on education by framing discussions on curriculum policy between government and business interests. By referring to the primary sources of the market economy discourse on education, then, this article draws attention to the global economic vision currently shaping Canadian schools and explores its impact on domestic education policy. Further, it proposes a means whereby those teachers holding a less intractable perspective on education might resist the current market economy siege on schools. Ironically, this approach involves using the critical tools appropriated by the market economy discourse on education in a manner entirely unintended and unforeseen by its supporters.

Cet article propose que la menace la plus imposante qui plane sur le système éducatif contemporain consiste en l'impact néfaste des politiques d'économie de marché sur la théorie et le développement des programmes scolaires. On y étudie le discours de l'économie de marché sur l'éducation tel qu'il ressort au niveau international de l'Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques (OCDE), au niveau national d'institutions privées comme le Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) et des ministères publics comme Industrie Canada. Ces diverses organisations promeuvent l'application des politiques d'économie de marché sur l'éducation en abordant les discussions sur la politique curriculaire du point de vue des intérêts du gouvernement et des entreprises. En s'appuyant sur les sources primaires du discours d'économie de marché sur l'éducation, cet article fait ressortir la vision économique globale qui dicte actuellement l'orientation des écoles au Canada et étudie l'impact de celle-ci sur les politiques canadiennes sur l'éducation. De plus, l'article propose une façon pour les enseignants dont les perspectives sur l'éducation sont moins arrêtées de résister au siège actuel des écoles par l'économie de marché. Ironiquement, cette technique implique l'utilisation des outils critiques dont s'est approprié le discours d'économie de marché et ce, d'une manière tout à fait inattendue et imprévue par ses adeptes.

Introduction

Foucault (1988) suggests that human thought largely derives from the social structures, institutions, and behaviors naturalized through prevailing discursive practices. Indeed, individuals are steeped in language. As they learn to speak and understand a language, they are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the cultural artifacts it carries. People learn to name the world with descriptive signs, symbols, frames of reference, and entire discourses that they themselves did not create. As they learn and employ a preexisting discourse, the accompanying values, ideas, and assumptions it embodies are also acquired. Discourse, then, is the process by which biological life becomes

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sociocultural life. It influences thoughts, constructs identities, binds and divides communities of action, and shapes world views.

In this article I contend that the most serious threat to contemporary education is the deleterious impact that market economy discourse currently has on curriculum theory and development. Internationally, the market economy discourse on education emerges primarily from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This institution, a successor to the United States-led Marshall Plan, is publicly funded by the world's 29 leading industrialized countries. On a domestic level, private institutions such as the Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) and public ministries such as Industry Canada promote the market economy discourse by attempting to frame discussions on education between government and business interests. In British Columbia, this same prevailing discourse on education is reflected at the secondary school level in the Career and Personal Planning 8 to 12 curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1995).

By referring to the primary sources of the market economy discourse on education, I draw attention to the global economic vision currently shaping Canadian schools and briefly explore its impact on domestic education policy. Further, I propose a means whereby those teachers holding a less intractable perspective on education might resist the current market economy siege on schools. Ironically, this approach involves employing the critical tools appropriated by the market economy discourse on education in a manner entirely unintended and presumably unforeseen by its supporters.

The Context of the Market Economy Discourse on Education

Since the early 19th century, public education has assumed a prominent role in promoting capitalist ideology. Ryder (1995) points out, for example, that the New York school system of the 1820s encouraged working-class children to accept their inferior social status, if not happily, at least submissively. But the current market economy discourse on education is a relatively recent phenomenon directly traceable to the global market changes that have occurred during the past three decades. State autonomy has been significantly reduced in the context of economic globalization as government's primary responsibility has been increasingly limited to creating ideal conditions for maximizing material gain in the new hypercompetitive milieu. As Mittelman (1996) explains, "Faced with the power of globalized production and international finance, including debt structures, leaders are constrained to concentrate on enhancing national conditions for competing forms of capitalism" (p. 7). The mitigation of state control over traditionally public administration realms has directly affected education.

Young (1990), citing views advanced by Habermas, argues that contemporary involvement of private-sector interests in education is the inevitable consequence of a market economy's perpetual boom-and-bust cycles. Under conditions of extensive government control over management of the economy, economic downturn results in a confidence crisis as society appeals to governments and economic experts for explanations and solutions, only to realize that both are virtually helpless to ameliorate the situation. When the general populace recognizes that government is unable to reverse economic decline by political intervention, its very legitimacy is threatened. Public and private calls

for governments to retreat from active interference in people's lives, and in the economy, soon follow.

As a result of growing demands that governments avoid involvement in traditional areas of state responsibility, market economy principles increasingly dictate policy within these realms. Echoing this perspective, Crouch, Finegold, and Sako (1999) suggest that "a perceived declining effectiveness of governments with the less predictable cycles of global and post-Keynesian economy make people less likely to see governments 'doing something for us' in terms of positive policy development" (p. 5). This phenomenon is reflected domestically in the government sale of crown corporations, dismantling of social programs, and an increased focus in public education on being sensitive to the needs of private industry in order to create winning conditions in the new global economy.

Consistent with the neo-liberal perspective emerging from this trend, then, education is considered an instrumental means to address labor force requirements in the burgeoning global marketplace. Unfortunately, this perspective threatens traditional public education, and society, in a variety of ways. One obvious criticism of this approach is that it creates a rather disturbing image of students being objectified as human capital and prepared for the inevitable impact of economic globalization. Related to this concern is the potential social damage the view exacts by undermining the traditional educational ideals required for maintenance of a democratic state. Young (1990) argues, for example, that when education becomes entirely instrumental, without any expression of individual interest or autonomy, it loses its capacity for rationality, as rational social participation rests on communicative autonomy, not on narrowly prescribed knowledge or skills. Communicative autonomy requires that individuals be able to critique and reject existing historical conditions rather than merely acquiesce in prevailing social or economic demands. Barlow and Robertson (1994) observe that the notion that schools should entertain a range of social perspectives and possibilities has already been abandoned, and teachers are now expected to prepare students "to cope with a future of known, frightening characteristics" (p. 122). Indeed, without communicative autonomy, and providing students a reasonable opportunity to make informed choices on the future direction of society, both education and democracy are seriously threatened.

The Power of Discursive Persuasion

Canadian educators should be generally familiar with the market economy discourse. Indeed, this familiarity constitutes the most serious hurdle to overcome when attempting to marshal resistance against market economy control over schools. Given its prominence in the prevailing discourse, for example, many individuals consider the law of supply and demand akin to the law of gravity. Through prevailing discursive practices, people are deceived into believing that a socially constructed economic system, a cultural artifact, operates like an inexorable natural force. The discourse is pervasive. First, there is the bottom line. Humans are objectified, commonly referred to as resource or capital to mask the widespread psychological and economic suffering that follows corporate retooling, restructuring, and downsizing. In the market economy discourse, there are acceptable levels of poverty and unemployment.

How many individuals can resist the attraction of a balanced budget, even when balancing that budget has been done at the expense of the most vulnerable members of society? Successful people in market economies are depicted as intelligent and hard-working, whereas unsuccessful people are often deemed stupid, lazy, inferior, and dishonest. Enormous banking profits in the face of widespread human suffering are the sign of a healthy economy. The discourse is well known—all too well known.

The market economy discourse and the powerful ideological messages it conveys legitimize the current siege on schools by judging the effectiveness of public education based on market economy principles. This discourse is reflected, for example, in comments offered by Anita Ross, VP Personnel, IBM Canada Ltd., during a speech at a CBOC gathering:

> Companies like IBM view education as crucial and see an urgent need to create a science culture that attracts more students to technical disciplines because skilled graduates are vital to staying competitive in the global economy. Business can contribute by raising the visibility of the link [between education and the economy], helping to form national educational goals, and building partnerships with education. (Taylor, 1997)

The messages contained in the market economy discourse on education are powerful tools of social persuasion. They shape conceptions of reality by framing discussions of ideas, values, and actions associated with education within arbitrarily established boundaries of acceptability. Of course, the circumscription of thought and action does not mirror reality in any absolute sense, but only reflects linguistically established limits on "appropriate" individual and community action. When individuals live inside the linguistic confines of one discourse, that is, the market economy version, they are defined and limited by the particular world view it promotes. All discourses circumscribe alternative social visions by ignoring or denigrating other perspectives (Lankshear, 1997).

By effectively circumscribing discussions of society in market economy values, the prevailing discourse attempts to convince individuals that certain social injustices such as child poverty, unemployment, worker exploitation, and homelessness are either inevitable, or they are not really injustices at all. It achieves this objective either by falsifying social reality, suppressing and excluding negative features of it, or by suggesting that these features are either unavoidable or the fault of those victimized. The market economy discourse is ideological, then, because it precludes systemic critique and reform by restricting the conceptual frame of reference. It may be true, for example, that in a market economy framework there will always be unemployment, child poverty, worker exploitation, and homelessness. But just because a degree of unemployment or worker exploitation is inevitable, perhaps even desirable, in a global economic context, the same cannot be said regarding alternative social visions. Other social visions that embrace social justice and equity rather than competition and consumption as their foundational principles may create a culture where social and economic disparity receive primary administrative attention.

Education in the Global Economy

The signing of international trade agreements such as NAFTA and the establishment of trade cartels such as the World Trade Organization, the European Economic Community, and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation have created an increasingly borderless world. Individual nation states facing the haunting specter of economic exclusion have effectively granted transnational corporations the unfettered opportunity to move their capital freely between nations. Basking in the delights of this new unrestricted mobility, corporations can successfully pit nation states against one another as the latter compete for the economic benefits of corporate presence. Typically, countries with the worst environmental standards, highest unemployment, lowest wages, and an absence of labor regulations provide the ideal milieu for corporations seeking to maximize profits (Robertson, 1998). However, transnational corporations also require a skilled, as opposed to educated, labor force. An education that fosters social critique, for example, may generate subsequent social unrest, whereas a more passive model of education focused on meeting instrumental objectives will be more likely to generate social compliance.

As the international voice for market economy interests, the OECD, through the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, extends the market economy paradigm into the realm of public education:

> If economies require increasing numbers of highly skilled workers to expand, then growth will be affected by existing practices of employers, individuals and governments. The reserve employment pool ... is low skilled ... improving educational opportunities in that pool must be a necessary part of any industrial growth strategy. (OECD, 1995, p. 6)

The OECD's primary interest in education, then, is one part of an expanded industrial growth strategy to increase the skills of the "reserve employment pool," or the vulnerable and underemployed labor force, available in the global market. The concept of skill is broadly applied in the market economy discourse on education to categorize a disparate range of qualities, abilities, and dispositions that include perceptual, social, critical, and interpersonal characteristics. This same human capital discourse is reflected in the OECD's (1991) policy on higher education when it suggests that universities require major restructuring to meet global market labor force requirements. Indeed, the OECD (1990) supports the move away from traditional liberal education objectives:

> There has been a shift in emphasis away from a general liberal education towards the acquisition of the many specific skills required in a technologically advanced society. The acquisition of knowledge has become the acquisition of human capital; and the benefits of this capital are appropriated ... in the form of higher output. (p. 12)

In administrative terms, meeting human capital demands typically involves transforming or eliminating traditional academic programs and replacing them with those that supply the technical skills required by corporations. Ontario premier Mike Harris has already directed universities in that province to eliminate programs that lack occupational relevance (Lewington, 1997). Of course, eliminating or reducing the academic programs that encourage social

critique also provides an ideological advantage to the market economy discourse by silencing potential opposition.

The OECD, then, is primarily responsible for spreading the market economy discourse on education to industrialized countries. From its perspective, education is deemed an economic investment that prepares students as human resource to contribute to global economic growth (Spring, 1997). In 1997 the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation introduced international testing for cross-curricular competences, or generic skills that supposedly transfer between different learning contexts. These include participating in the corporate life of an organization and the ability to cope with change. Not surprisingly, a similar set of skills comprises the focus of domestic employability skills programs such as BC's Career and Personal Planning 8 to 12 (CAPP, Ministry of Education, 1995) where students are also expected to adopt an acquiescent attitude toward change. Throughout CAPP students are expected to "demonstrate an understanding of transferable employability skills" (p. 143).

Globalization and Domestic Education

The market economy discourse on global education advanced by the OECD corresponds with that supported domestically by Industry Canada (1998). The federal ministry's general mandate is "making Canada more competitive by fostering the growth of Canadian business, by promoting a fair and efficient marketplace for business and consumers." Reflecting the diffusion of traditional public responsibility into the private sector, the ministry contends that government alone cannot "fully prepare Canadians to realize the breadth of opportunities in a global, knowledge-based economy ... the role of the private sector is crucial." As the government ministry responsible for advancing the market economy discourse on education, Industry Canada ensures that the competitive global market is kept at the forefront of discussion in Canadian schools. One example of its impact on public education is the SchoolNet program, of which the objective is to provide "Canadian students and teachers with exciting electronic services that would stimulate and develop the skills needed in the knowledge society" (Robertson, 1998, p. 167). The accompanying software package includes a *Global Vision's Global Classroom* section dedicated to "giving tomorrow's business leaders a solid understanding of the marketplace" (p. 172).

The CBOC is the central lobbying voice for private business in Canadian public education. Taylor (1998) points out that the market economy discourse on education advanced by the CBOC closely resembles that found among other OECD countries. The CBOC has established two privately funded councils, the National Council and the Corporate Council, both dedicated to influencing Canadian public education policy. The National Council consists primarily of CEO-level corporate leaders, but includes senior officials from education, government, labor, and community organizations. The Corporate Council, having dispensed with any illusion of alternate sector consultation, comprises exclusively senior executives from CBOC member companies, including a disproportionate number of large, private sector, technology-related employers (Taylor, 1998). The Corporate Council drafted the influential *Employability*

Skills Profile, a document outlining the set of generic skills that employers supposedly require in the students they hire (CBOC, 1998).

The impact of the CBOC's Employability Skills Profile (ESP) on public education has been widespread and profound. The partnerships between education and business, in which the CBOC plays a central role, are reportedly "in explosion mode" with 20,000 currently in place across the country (Robertson, 1998). According to the CBOC's own records, 7,000,000 copies of ESP were distributed throughout Canadian schools and businesses following its initial publication in 1992 (Bloom, 1994). In Alberta, a number of major initiatives have been launched based on CBOC recommendations (Taylor, 1998). In BC secondary school students are expected to master the generic skills identified in ESP as part of CAPP. The successful completion of a CAPP module, including a 30-hour practical work experience component, is now a required element for graduation from BC secondary schools. Further, the provincial Ministry of Education, Skills and Training will now consider new college-level programs only if they include ESP (Falk, 1999).

The work performed by the OECD, Industry Canada, and the CBOC reveals the intense ideological impact the market economy discourse has had on public education policy. The final section of this article describes some specifics of the market economy discourse on education as contained in the CBOC's Employability Skills Profile (ESP), and the Province of BC's Career and Personal Planning Curriculum (CAPP). These documents provide clear examples of how this discourse has appropriated the tools of critical pedagogy to assuage the concerns of educators who are uncomfortable with the monolithic vision of education it embodies (Lankshear, 1997). By appropriating the concept of critical thinking into its discourse on education, however, the market economy perspective has also unintentionally provided an effective tool of resistance to teachers who hold alternative educational philosophies and world views. Indeed, during the adoption of this language of critical pedagogy the Trojan horse may well have slipped through the market economy discourse gate.

ESP and CAPP: The Problem and the Solution

The ESP is a concise, one-page document that identifies the skills, qualities, attitudes, and competences that employers seek in the new recruits they hire. These skills are divided into three major categories: academic, personal management, and teamwork; with academic skills further subdivided into communication, thinking, and learning skills. Marked by a series of discursive ploys to inculcate students with market economy principles, practices, and values, the ideological intent of ESP is clear. Under communication, for example, students are expected to "understand and speak the languages in which business is conducted" as well as "write effectively in the languages in which business is conducted." Students are also required to "listen to understand and learn," as opposed to listen and evaluate, the practices and values embodied in the market economy discourse. Indeed, throughout the academic communication skills section of the ESP, the emphasis is on students mastering and employing the cultural tools of the market economic discourse in an entirely uncritical fashion.

Fortunately for those teachers and students not convinced of the merits of applying global market economic principles to education, the picture may not

be quite so bleak as it initially appears. Among the various skills included under the academic section of ESP is an ill-defined construct of critical thinking. Indeed, immediately following the so-called skill of learning to write and speak in the language of the market economy discourse, students are asked to "think critically and act logically to evaluate situations, solve problems and make decisions" (CBOC, 1998). Typical of the verbal inflation endemic in education, critical thinking is common jargon in most public school curricula, but there is little agreement or clear understanding of what the practice actually entails. Given the functionalist objectives of the ESP framework, one assumes, of course, that thinking critically and acting logically are intended to be sharply circumscribed by the parameters of market economy discourse. But critical thinking constructs run the gamut from understanding the rudiments of formal and informal logic to questioning fundamental assumptions regarding virtually all epistemic claims. The potential scope and depth of critical thinking is an important point to remember, a point that authors of ESP may have fortuitously overlooked.

As part of the trend toward employability skills programs, the BC Ministry of Education, Skills and Training introduced the CAPP curriculum. The ministry's rationale for developing the program is the perceived need for schools to contribute to the development of well-rounded, balanced individuals. CAPP courses in grades 11 and 12 are mandatory for graduation because, the ministry contends, "students [should] understand the relevance of their studies and acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that can help them make appropriate personal decisions and manage their lives more effectively" (p. 1). Not surprisingly, many of the skills, attitudes, and themes promoted in CAPP are drawn directly from those identified by the CBOC, and the accompanying discourse, consistent with current global education practice, sounds the familiar alarm of answering the global economic challenge confronting students:

> The curriculum for CAPP 8 to 12 has been designed to help students prepare to deal with a world of complex, on-going technological change, continuous challenge, expanding opportunities, and intricate social evolution. Learning opportunities that are relevant and experiential help students make informed choices, and take responsibility for their personal and career development. (p. 4)

To complete the work experience component of CAPP, students are required to spend 30 hours as an unpaid employee at an agreed work site to "develop and practice the critical skills required by the Canadian and international workforce, as identified by organizations such as the Conference Board of Canada and the Business Council of British Columbia" (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 7).

Under the section entitled *Work Experience (Employability Skills)*, and again indicative of the CBOC's (1998) influence on Canadian public education, teachers are expected to "have students develop and practise the critical skills, attributes and attitudes ... identified by the Conference Board of Canada" (p. 114). Thus, calling on the expertise of the CBOC, the Provincial Ministry of Education expects students to think critically about their opportunities, decisions, and circumstances.

Both ESP and CAPP present critical thinking in a context that seemingly depicts the so-called skill as a mystical cure-all for effective problem-solving in

the new global economy. This depiction supports Lankshear's (1997) view that critical thinking in the market economy discourse on education represents a "silver bullet" to enhance student success in the competitive global market (p. 41). Developing a critical approach to learning, then, currently assumes the same rhetorical value as concepts such as citizenship education, democracy, and natural learning. From a critical pedagogical perspective, however, a critical discourse has been introduced to lie beside the market economy version, and the two discourses potentially make for uneasy bedfellows.

Illuminating truly critical approaches to knowledge and learning requires exploring the entire sociohistorical context in which education occurs. One need only recall Freire's (1970) famous dictum that students must learn to read the word and the world. As Klafki (1995) explains, critical thinking in and about education should cast a wide net:

> critical is best understood in the sense of social criticism, which implies constant reflection on relations between school and instruction on one hand (their goals, contents, forms of organization and methods), and social conditions and processes on the other. (p. 14)

Problem-solving in critical thinking, then, ought to examine the entire sociohistorical context of the subject at hand rather than trying to solve problems within a limited range of possibilities circumscribed by market economy principles and values. These latter, functionalist approaches to education domesticate students by encouraging passive obedience to externally dictated instructions and information. Klafki's (1995) approach, on the other hand, is designed to foster critical engagement of the world students encounter by making them active subjects in, rather than objects of, the educational process. Again, when one considers the objectives of the market economy discourse on education, this is clearly not the construct of critical thinking students are expected to master as an employability skill. In the final analysis, however, there is nothing to prevent teachers from employing Freire's or Klafki's more radical critical pedagogies in their classroom discussion of employability skills education and global economic practices.

Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) provide a useful example of how an actual lesson criticizing the global economic paradigm might proceed. The lesson, entitled The Pervasiveness of the Global Market, is designed to challenge the market economy practices presently exacerbating global economic disparity by ignoring the human rights of workers in developing countries. The lesson begins with students being asked simple questions such as where their shirts or shoes are made, who made them, and why they were made there. Asking why clothing is manufactured in underdeveloped countries is intended to initiate investigation into current transnational corporate practices. Students are exposed to the human costs associated with global market economy practices and judge the morality of those practices accordingly. In a related lesson, students might be asked to determine the impact that agreements such as NAFTA have on the international garment industry, its workers, and the environment. They could also propose ways that conditions for garment workers at home and abroad might be improved to more human levels and submit these suggestions to appropriate government and corporate authorities. This form of direct polit-

ical action following a critique of global market practices engages students in praxis and demonstrates that enhanced social understanding increases political activism and power.

Wertsch (1998) found that even in situations where discursive terms, practices, and expected outcomes are rigidly prescribed in curricula, their classroom application and eventual learning outcomes are generally unpredictable: "cultural tools may help set the scene within which human action will occur ... but even the most complete account of these cultural tools and the forces of production that give rise to them cannot specify how they will be used" (p. 166). His findings challenge structuralist critiques of education by supporting the view that human agency mediates between mental functioning and the cultural, institutional, historical, and discursive context of education: "much depends on the properties of the agent and the immediate context of the learning situation" (p. 183). During similar investigations, Lave and Wenger (1998) also found that learning outcomes are noticeably mitigated by human agency and that in any learning situation there is a constant interchange of teachers and students being defined by, and actively defining, the conditions and subject matter they encounter.

The findings of Wertsch (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1998), then, suggest that even in controlled learning circumstances where learning tools are tightly regulated, the actual application of these tools is virtually impossible to control. Considering the nebulous, confused construct of critical thinking included in ESP and CAPP, the opportunity for unintended application appears exponentially increased. Ironically, by appropriating critical thinking into its education programs, the market economy discourse provides the required pedagogical tools to challenge and transform its own questionable assumptions and practices.

Conclusion

In this article I examine the impact of the market economy discourse on education by tracing its sources from the macro to the micro level. The policies emerging from the OECD, Industry Canada, the CBOC, and domestic curriculum documents such as CAPP reveal increasing pressure on curriculum developers to construct public education based on market economy principles and values. Following the findings of Wertsch (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1998), I argue that human agency plays a fundamental role in determining classroom outcomes, and the market economy discourse on education accordingly confronts a range of potential challenges and modifications. Indeed, the nonpellucid nature of the critical thinking construct included in ESP and CAPP provides ample opportunity for critical pedagogues to challenge the assumptions, practices, and values edified by the market economy discourse and to ensure that schools continue to embrace the communicative autonomy required to protect our democratic way of life.

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