Turning Eastside Kids Into Westside Kids: Employability Skills in the British Columbia Career and Personal Planning Curriculum

AMANDA BENJAMIN
University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines employability skills in the Career and Personal Planning Curriculum (CAPP) that existed in four Vancouver, British Columbia schools from 1995-2004. With corporate involvement in school curriculum on the rise through programs like the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile, it is increasingly important for educators to examine the larger role that employer based skills are playing in career education curricula. This paper examines how the corporatized CAPP curriculum influenced the ways in which teachers taught about work and employment skills in their career education classrooms and highlights an important tension whereby students were taught differently based on perceptions of social class. This study reveals that there was an important class distinction to how employability skills are presented to students.

RESUMÉ: Cet article analyse avec un oeil critique les compétences favorisant l'employabilité dans "Career and Personal Planning Curriculum" (CAPP) qui existait dans quatre écoles à Vancouver, en Colombie Britannique, de 1995 à 2004. Par le biais de programmes comme "Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile," l'entreprise s'implique de plus en plus dans le cursus scolaire et il devient donc de plus en plus important que les enseignants analysent à plus grande échelle le rôle que l'employeur a établi à partir de connaissances qui revêtent un caractère capital dans le parcours des programmes éducatifs. Ce papier examine la manière dont le cursus CAPP, avec la participation des entreprises, a influencé les méthodes d'enseignement des professeurs dans le domaine du travail et des compétences pour l'emploi pendant leurs cours sur l'avenir professionnel. Ce papier met aussi en lumière une tension importante à travers laquelle on a enseigné différemment aux étudiants et qui est basée sur les différences de classes sociales. Cette étude révèle qu'on enseignait aux étudiants la façon dont les compétences pouvaient être employées par rapport à une distinction sociale manifeste.

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What kinds of knowledge and skills should secondary schools provide students so they can enter and advance in the *new economy*? If this new economy is characterized by what Beck (2000) describes as change, insecurity, and unpredictability, then career education in schools becomes a complicated endeavour. In Canada, employer groups (e.g., Conference Board of Canada) and government agencies (e.g., Human Resources Development Canada) have argued that in the post-industrial labour market, a key component of workers' skills must include *generic* skills, referred to as "soft," "employability," and/or "life" skills (Conference Board of Canada, 1995, 2000). One example of this has been the inclusion of, and adherence to, employability skills as a significant part of the career education curricula in British Columbia, Canada. The move to employability marks a particular turn in policy and curricular discourse, because it signifies a shift away from vocationally specific training towards an emphasis on generic skills. The neo-liberal discourse of generic skills has been evident for the past decade in labour market policy and government funded training programs for adults; more recently, it has also made its way into secondary school curricula.

This article examines employability skills in the *Career and Personal Planning Curriculum* (CAPP) of British Columbia as it existed in four Vancouver secondary schools from 1995-2004. The role of schools in the transmission of these generic skills shapes the ways adolescents come to know and have expectations about the adult world. The location of the classroom (both ideologically and geographically) becomes essential when thinking about how students learn differently about careers (Edith, 2005). An examination of career education classrooms and curricula provides a vantage point to look at how adolescents learn to become workers and adults in our society. If career education is nothing more than social engineering (Hyslop-Margison, 2000a) in the way that it purposely instils these blanket skills, then a critical examination helps us to understand the ideological nature of career education and also serves to inform about perceptions of employment and employability. Understandings of adulthood, career, and employment intersect with the practice of teaching, the social location of schools, and the policies instituted by the school boards, to form an important and complicated relationship (Bortolussi, 2006).

The intention of this article is to bring a critical, discursive, and ideological lens to how employability manifested in four Vancouver schools. It examines how the corporatized CAPP curriculum influenced the ways teachers taught about work and employment skills in their

career education classrooms (Taylor, 1998; 2005). Furthermore, in the tradition of Taylor (1998), this paper highlights an important continuing tension whereby students were taught differently based on perceptions of social class, which along with other aspects of social location (gender, race, ability), became an increasingly important influence to the ways that teachers prepare students to be employed. An examination of these skills becomes vital because when looked at through a critical and discursive lens, employability skills are shown to be far less generic than they were previously envisioned.

Critical Understandings of Employability

Corporate involvement in school curriculum is on the rise. With the blurring of lines between private and public, it is increasingly important for educators to examine the larger role that employer-based skills are playing in career education curricula. Hyslop-Margison and Welsh (2003) site the the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as playing a central role in rationalizing career education on an international level. They highlight the OECD's position on the need to enhance the knowledge and skills of workers in order to resolve a range of social problems, which provides an example of a global shift towards generic skills development (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003).

This shift to a corporatized curriculum can be found across Canada, particularly in British Columbia and Alberta (Benjamin, 2009; Hyslop-Margison, 2000b; 2000c; Taylor, 1998). An important example of this is the "Employability Skills Profile" and "Employability Skills 2000+" put forward by the Conference Board of Canada (1995, 2000). The Conference Board of Canada acts as a lobbying group for many businesses in the private sector and is highly active in public education policy development as well as funding two education councils (one national and the other corporate) that influence Canadian public schooling (Hyslop-Margison, 2000b). Taylor (1998) argues that the Conference Board of Canada attempts to "draw educators into the hegemonic vision of corporate affiliates" (p. 148). This shift in education points to the need for a critical understanding of employability and a teasing out of the relationships between business interests in employability and schools. One of the important emerging critiques of this shift towards a market economy is that education has become the instrument by which the labour force is working to meet the needs of big business (Hyslop-Margison, 2000c; Taylor, 2002) with the result that in

this market economy, students are reduced to human capital. Human capital theory assumes that investments in education and training will result in improved earnings potential (Becker, 1993; Lakes, 2008). This neo-liberal view puts skills formation central to helping individuals perform better in the labour market (Lakes, 2008). The result, Lakes argues, is that public education is becoming increasingly vocationalized and school curriculum more and more prescriptive. Moreover, the individual is assumed to be responsible for charting their own course in a meritocratic system, placing failure in the labour market squarely on the individual's shoulder (Apple, 2001; Choi, 2005).

Taylor (1998) urges researchers to look at the ideological effects of employability skills and the implications for social relations in schools. She points out the importance of examining how students are positioned within these discourses (see also Hall, 1996). Discursive practices, which are the "rules by which discourses are formed, rules that govern what can be said and what remain unsaid, and who can speak with authority and who must listen" (McLaren, 1989, p. 188), can be a useful framework for looking at employability skills. Furthermore, Luke (1995) suggests that curriculum can be viewed as a text generated through these discursive practices, texts that are central to the operations and social/power relations of social institutions like schools, churches, and workplaces.

Also important is the issue of intertextuality – how all texts are part of other texts that create subject positions. "Texts enter into and order courses of action and relations among individuals. The texts themselves have a material presence and are produced in an economic and social process which is part of a political economy" (Smith, 1990, p. 162). McLaren (1989) and other curriculum scholars have called for researchers and practitioners to focus attention on the enabling and disabling elements of ideology: "educators forget at their peril ... that ideologies both constrain and enable the project of empowerment" (p. 179).

Critical discursive and ideologically-oriented studies of career education curriculum have challenged the taken-for-granted assumptions upholding the notion of generic skills, showing how the interests of capital are often dominant. Gaskell (1986) examined the shift away from vocationally specific skills training towards life skills in high school business education programs. "The complexity of the individual judgments ... are reduced here to a set of agreed upon procedures for acting, procedures which assume the employer's interest is the same as the students" (p. 435). Similarly, Griffith's (1988) study

of the Ontario Life Skills curriculum illustrated how students' lived experiences can enter into curricula, but are then judged in relation to capitalist modes of production. Like Gaskell, Griffith challenged the notion that life can be reduced to a series of skills (p. 205).

Hyslop-Margison and Welsh (2003) highlight some of the ideological implications for career education and they argue that here are two important factors, the first is that, "by ensuring that the goals of the market become the goals of education, students are indoctrinated into this world view" (p. 17) and secondly, career education continues to divert attention away from structural issues and other problems by implying that school and workers are responsible for these structural inequalities.

The integration of employability skills into the curriculum continues to be a relevant discussion; for example, Taylor's (1998) study of employability skills in the Alberta curriculum. This development, she argues, "represents an attempt to transfer the evaluation criteria of employers to schools [which] further legitimize the reproductive 'function' of schools" (pp. 160-161). Taylor further notes that how students take up employability skills is likely influenced by other factors such as their parents' positioning within the labour market. She also argues that the gendered reality of the labour market is obscured in employability skills, and suggests the need to explore how minority students are positioned in the discourse. I would further argue that social class continues to be obscured in this debate, thus becoming a focal point for examination of how employability skills "position different groups of students differently" (Taylor, 1998, p. 156). Hyslop-Margison and Welsh (2003) make similar observations in the United States and Australia. They point to California's *School-to-Career Plan* (California Department of Education, 2001) and Western Australia's *Work Studies* curriculum (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2001) as providing a similar impetus to CAPP as they attempt to rationalize the need for students to become productive "citizens and employees."

Much of this research leads to the important question of how societal expectations affect the development of career education curricula. More particularly, in what ways is the economic world reproduced in schools through programs that focus on helping students choose and attain careers? Reproduction theories have a long educational history, but the concept of reproduction can provide more than just an abstract theory (Bourdieu, 1977). Reproduction provides an important dynamic when juxtaposed with the movement towards employability skills in career

education curricula. Luke (1995) suggests that it is possible to document the large patterns of social reproduction and cultural representation that occur in the everyday classroom. Employability skills are just one example of the ways in which economic aspects of society emerge in the British Columbia school curriculum and classrooms.

Research Design and Methodology

This research was designed as a modified case study that integrated document analysis of relevant CAPP materials, along with ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing. The aim of the study was to provide a thick description of the BC Ministry of Education's CAPP curriculum in four Vancouver schools (Yin, 2004). The data was collected over four months and consisted of participant observation and in-depth one-on-one interviews with eight teachers and career guidance staff. The amount of time observing in each school depended on the CAPP strategy in place and over the four months time was spent in each of the CAPP classes or during any major career activity that was being offered in the school (i.e., Career Fairs). Teachers and guidance counselors were asked a variety of questions in the interview process including their perceptions of job, career, and what skills the teachers thought their students needed to enter the labour market. Additionally a document analysis of the CAPP curriculum and career education material available in schools was conducted including the CAPP Instructional Resource Package (IRP), career advice pamphlets and school career workbooks.

The four Vancouver secondary schools in this study were located in different catchment areas across the city.[1] The sites were selected so as to obtain as much diversity as possible in research data. While this study will not generalize about the use of employability skills across the city, in surveying the CAPP format in all Vancouver schools it was found that there were a variety of strategies to teach CAPP. The strategies ranged from formal on-timetable classes to career fairs, assemblies, and drop-in advising. While each school was able to choose, to some degree, their approach to teaching CAPP, it became clear that there was an important instructional divide in the schools' choices for how to enact the program. Two of the schools used career fairs and assemblies as their main CAPP activities (Elmwood and Cedar Valley), while the other two schools used longer on-timetable courses with which to fulfil their CAPP requirement (Oakhill and Pinetree).

Employability Skills and the CAPP Curriculum

The CAPP curriculum was introduced into British Columbia schools in September 1995 (BC Ministry of Education, 2003) and was based primarily on the *Learning for Living* curriculum (circa 1986), which was an extension of the Health/Guidance/Family Life Education curriculum. One of the most significant premises of CAPP is the assumption that if schools provide students with certain generic and specific skills, these students are more likely to find and retain careers and become more successful members of an adult community (Heinz, 2001; Shanahan, 2000). The introduction of CAPP reflects a view that a healthy society is something to be taught in schools and has thus become the implicit and explicit role of the school to inculcate certain societal values, putatively leading to a healthy society and successful adulthood. The CAPP curriculum was integrated into all grades from Kindergarten to Grade 12 with the intention of assisting students to become "well-rounded, balanced individuals" (BC Ministry of Education, 2005). The BC Ministry of Education believed that this curriculum would compliment other academic and vocationally oriented courses because of its focus on students' personal development and on how their schooling and extra-curricular activities relate to their future plans (BC Ministry of Education, 2003).

The CAPP curriculum has been notably based on the Conference Board of Canada's (1995) Employability Skills Profile (ESP). The BC Ministry of Education website (2005) described employability skills as "those skills which provide the basic foundation to get, keep, and progress in a job and to achieve the best results" (BC Ministry of Education, 2005). Employability skills are generally thought of as the combination of generic *soft* and *hard* skills or competencies that are needed by workers (Williams, 2005a). Soft skills refer to the behaviours and aptitudes such as teamwork that are believed to be needed for employment, whereas the hard skills are specific quantifiable skills like writing a résumé or cover letter. The argument of the ESP is that Canadian employers needed workers with specific skills in place (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003).

The skills defined in the ESP included communication, thinking, learning, positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility, adaptability, as well as working with others. These are the broad and generic categories under which there were many more skills defined. My examination of the CAPP Instructional Resource Package uncovered some of the ways in which employability skills were weaved throughout

many of the lesson plans. One example of the use of the ESP was found in the CAPP Grade 8-12 IRP. The outcomes for this lesson were: a) that all students review their transferable skills and relate them to occupational and lifestyle choices and b) apply research skills to identify the various types of work within career clusters. The suggested instructional strategies to meet these learning outcomes were to have a class brainstorm and list their transferable skills, and then compare them with the employability skills profiles (BC Ministry of Education, 2003). The lesson plan continues by highlighting the broad range of skills that students would need to learn:

> Effective communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, a positive attitude toward one's duties, work ethic traits (e.g., confidentiality, regular attendance, punctuality, honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility), respect for diversity and individual differences, ability to function as an effective team member, ability to meet performance standards of the workplace, and ability to perform work in a safe manner. (BC Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 68)

This lesson concretely showed how employability skills were expected to be used in the various CAPP programs and the promotion of the ESP skills as useful for students who must make their occupational choices. The lesson highlighted transferable skills, however it did not explain from where students were expected to transfer these skills. Students would be expected to internalize these and have a concrete understanding of employability skills, which could be a tension for those students who may not yet have decided their career paths. Moreover, these skills are represented as generic and available to all students. There was no unpacking of concepts like performance standards or working in a safe manner.

There are two important critiques of this use of employability. The first is that there is an assumption of transferability of skills. A clear challenge to the corporatization and universalization of a skills curriculum is that these skills may not be transferable from one work place to the next (Hyslop-Margison, 2000c). For example, the skills needed to be a builder and perform work in a safe manner would be very different than those needed to be a lawyer. Darrah (1994) urges us to consider that skills requirements become abstracted when not attached to a particular job because they are meant to fulfill the role of a particular occupational structure. This approach assumes that there is a generic set of skills required for all jobs and these generic skills are often a conflation of specific "hard" work skills and "softer" behavioural

aspects. Curtis and McKenzie (2001) note that those personal attributes or "soft skills" are often presented with no explicit reference to learnability, referring to how they are to be learned by workers. Hyslop-Margison (2000b) also critiques the notion of employability skills by arguing that it is a mistake to quantify the attitudes and behaviours of skills because they cannot be physically manifested or assessed.

The second critique is found in the blanket use of employability. As Griffith (1988) points out, there is an assumption that skills are everyday knowledge or common sense knowledge, a view that "obscure[s] the social organization of class relations and focuses on the individual mastery of skill" (p. 206). As an ESP-based curriculum, CAPP assumed that everyone needs the same things in order to succeed, ignoring the many systemic barriers faced by students in education and in the work force (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). Dwyer and Wyn remind us that aspects like gender and race continue to be powerful forces structuring the ways that young people form their identities. It stands to reason that intertextual layers further work to affect the ways in which youth enter and form understandings of the workforce. If career education is always devoid of any discussion of race, class, gender, ability, and other social distinctions, there will be no discussion of equity or access to post-secondary education (Coombs, 1994).

Hyslop-Margison (2000a) argues for the need to reveal the ideological connections between the dominant social forces of a curriculum like CAPP by reflecting on the ethical, ontological, and social viewpoints apparent in the text. For example, it is necessary to question the economic influence of such forces as the Conference Board of Canada and the ESP, and the ideological implications of having the interests of a business organization so firmly entrenched within the curriculum. Moreover, it is important to recognize how those forces might influence the ways teachers approach their work in teaching students about careers. Theorists like McLaren (1989) argue that it is impossible to look at students without understanding that their classroom performance is influenced by economic disadvantage, minority status, cultural frames of reference, gender, as well as every day social practices (Davies, 1989; Wyn & White, 1997). In this study, social class continues to be an important issue and had an important effect on the ways students were taught in the CAPP program (Anyon, 1980).

Teaching Employability Skills

In conjunction with the document analysis, detailed interviews with teachers and school counsellors were conducted. The first step in the interview process was to establish whether the IRPs played a factor in how the curriculum was formed. All of the teachers claimed to be following the CAPP curriculum in their individualized programs, however many admitted to not using the actual lesson plans. While a direct connection was difficult to make between the IRP and the programs at each school, employability skills were an important learning objective. An example of where this was apparent was the way in which the language of employability skills was part of the hidden curriculum of the teachers (McLaren, 1989). Employability skills thus took on different forms at the schools, due both to the difference in delivery of the program, and in the ways in which different teachers took up the notion of employability.

The differentiation in delivery also characterized an important divide; that of West and East, which is a historical social class division in Vancouver. Of the four secondary schools in this study, two schools were located on the Westside of Vancouver (Elmwood and Cedar Valley) and the other two were from the Eastside (Oak Hill and Pinetree). The schools on the Westside primarily used the career fair and assembly model of CAPP, while the Eastside schools had more structured on-timetable courses. While it is necessary to acknowledge that there are both perceived and real social class differences in Vancouver's east and west sides, there is a concern about essentializing these areas into poor versus rich. This analysis is based on Statistics Canada's definitions of low income which classifies neighbourhoods by family income. In Vancouver, 19% of the population was designated low income in 2001, with many of these families clustered in the Downtown Eastside (Statistics Canada, 2006).

This social class divide was further reinforced by several teachers in the study. An important way in which both Ms. Mason and Ms. Moore, from the Eastside school Oak Hill, viewed the school and their teaching of CAPP was through a division characterized by East and West. The East is historically considered to have students who are poor or lower income and working class versus the West in which it is assumed that students come from affluent families and are headed towards university. Both Ms. Mason and Ms. Moore made reference to this perceived divide, as they described their jobs as turning "Eastside kids into Westside kids." One of the ways they saw this happening was through increasing the number of students who were planning on attending a post-

secondary institution, and by helping students to achieve those opportunities.

The teaching strategies were indicative of the social class divide. Eastside schools were teaching more about employability (the skills needed to be employable) and less about employment (what jobs were available). Additionally the Eastside schools focussed on the aptitudes and behaviours associated with learning employability (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Williams, 2005b). The best example of how employability emerged in the Eastside pedagogy was found at Pinetree in Mr. Christie's classroom. He had a very clear idea about what it was that he wanted students to learn in his CAPP classroom. In these expectations, Mr. Christie described the attitude that he thought every good worker should learn.

> *I think it's important that they [students] know they can do it. It's important to know that the future is something that they've got control of and if they can just have the "I can" attitude, they can do just about anything. So I really do work on presentation and just their whole attitude to themselves and a career, their future wife, a job.*

What students should be learning, in this example, were the soft employability skills such as having the right attitude. This was similar to the BC Ministry of Education's interpretation of their employability skills profile as having the right attitude in terms of making the "appropriate decisions."

Mr. Christie asserted that students should learn to have control over their lives, in doing so he was associating particular learned skills with an increase in agency (Wyn & White, 2000). Students in this classroom were assumed to have less agency and options in relation to their more middle-class and affluent counterparts. The perception of the need for increased control over their lives represents one of the ways in which employability skills were differentiated for students based on social class expectations. It is also important to note that the right attitudes towards careers were reserved for the males in this classroom, who were expected not only to have the right career attitudes but the right attitudes towards their future wives (Connell, 1995).

In another instance, Mr. Christie talked again about proper attitude as a kind of skill that students needed to be learning. He said of his students, "*Well, I want them to have goals. I want them to be groomed properly, physically and attitudinally. They've got to have that 'can do' attitude. I keep saying that.*" Mr Christie, both in the interview and

classroom observations, continued to extol the virtues of learning proper adult-like skills in order to get a job. These skills, as Mr. Christie described them, were the same for all students, but particularly necessary for the male students in his classroom because he saw his role as providing students with life skills. Thus, employability skills were more than behavioural attitudes towards employment; they contained the social capital that students need to know in order to be successful workers in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The assumption built into the concept of employability skills, and as is demonstrated by the previous discussion of Mr. Christie's teaching methods, was the belief that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed at getting a job if they just learn the skills (like the ones outlined in the ESP). These skills are thought to be applicable to all students regardless of gender, race, social class, dis/ability, or sexuality. However, the critique that emerges of this meritocratic approach suggests that society does not function with everyone on a level playing field (Coombs, 1994). Thus, if curriculum is just a reproduction of what is already happening in society, students in CAPP are necessarily tracked and streamed into jobs through career education, the same way that they are tracked and streamed into ability levels at school. The result is that when employability skills take on a moralizing tone around becoming better workers by learning the right attitudes, it could lead to the class structure of society being reinforced in schools (McLaren, 1989). Moreover, the message that this sends to students is that failure to procure meaningful employment becomes a personal shortcoming, rather than a structural one.

At Oak Hill, a generalizing language was imbued in how employability skills were presented. For example, the kinds of skills that were described as important included personal planning skills, communication skills, teamwork, and cooperative skills. These skills were combined in the curriculum with specific "awarenesses" such as vocational possibilities. The CAPP curriculum described it as "the need for students to understand the personal relevance of their studies and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can help them make appropriate personal decisions and manage their lives more effectively" (CAPP Introduction, 1995). The result was that a skill was not just an aptitude or something at which you become good, rather a skill involved specific values about what constituted a good worker and the attitudes that all workers must have (Griffith, 1988). However, access to careers will not be the same for all students, and there was a very noticeable lack of discussion around who had access to particular kinds of work and

careers. In essence, careers were represented as available to everyone through the guise of employability skills (Wyn & White, 1997).

Ms. Moore at Oak Hill also spoke about the role of life skills as helping students to "manage their lives." She said,

> *What I would give to the students [is] life skills, options, lots of options. Because if you try this and it doesn't work, you can always try that. And success, you're going to have failures, but you're also going to have lots of success, set your goals. "Goal setting."*

Life skills in these examples reflect the softer skills of having the right attitudes.

The Westside teachers in this study also used the language of skills to describe what it was they thought they were teaching in CAPP. This language was intertwined with the economic language of employability skills. Hard skills often translated into lessons on interviewing, résumé writing, business card creation, and sometimes even how to bank or grocery shop. Soft skills were described as attributes such as cooperation and teamwork, which were common skills that were put forward as important for students. Students, in a few instances, were warned that if they could not work together they would have difficulty in the work force.

Teachers also expanded upon the employability skills rhetoric to include other soft skills and attitudes. In this case, "life skills" became another example of the kind of skills students needed in order to become employable. Ms. Jones at Cedar Valley felt that the one thing that students were lacking in school was life skills, which to her meant "*just knowing how to live, basically, and that includes going to a grocery store and shopping. As well as conflict resolution with people, as well as time management, like everything to have a successful life.*" Ms. Jones thought that CAPP was "*giving students some tools. I guess discovering who they are. Because they can't make those decisions, they have a lot coming at them.*" In several instances tools were being used interchangeably for the idea of skills.

While many of the teachers spoke about the need for students to have the right attitude, this language took on greater meaning when teachers had constructed their students as being at a deficit in the labour market, such as was found at Pinetree and Oak Hill. While the language of employability and life skills emerged at the Westside schools (Cedar Valley and Elmwood), they were often used in secondary ways

beneath the harder skills like the need to learn how to apply to university, or to write a résumé. This was evident in the career fairs which were used to introduce students to specific jobs, rather than to learn specific employability skills, whereas the on-timetable courses in the Eastside schools were very much about grooming particular attitudes. The assumption here is that Westside students already had the right attitudes because the majority of students were heading to university. For example, Ms. Black from Elmwood noted that students still had four more years to think about career and adulthood, which is the normal span a bachelor's degree takes to achieve. Here again perceptions of social class are important, as the students were viewed as driven by academics and towards university degrees.

The way employability was taught within BC's CAPP curriculum presents it as necessary for all students. With the tacit belief that all students need these skills, the actual approach to teaching did not take into account the social differences in the students themselves. The CAPP IRP however shows that students were often schooled differently based on presumptions about their social backgrounds. These differing approaches appear to be based on the perception that there are generic skills and attitudes that students must have to join the labour force that are different depending on the skills students bring with them to the classroom (Heinz, 2001).

Conclusion

In its use of employability skills, CAPP reflects a market economy and functional approach to what ought to be the role of schools (Wotherspoon, 2004); one that advocates that they should reproduce the economic structure of society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Placing employability skills in the neo-liberal context is important as it reflects the move towards skills and individualism as part of the marketization of the school curriculum. Reflecting neo-liberal policies, schools are becoming powered by forces such as the Conference Board of Canada which view schools and education as serving the needs of the market economy (Fenwick, 2004)

The language of employability skills suggests that these are the skills that students *must* have in order to get a job, without them they will not be employable. Consequently the adherence to employability skills teaches students that the learning of these skills is a societal expectation because they will eventually need these skills upon leaving school and entering the workplace. Even the title of the profile

"Employability Skills" suggests that students would be more likely to find employment if they had the skills that were presented in the curriculum. Thus for schools, it seemed to be a natural choice to teach to these particular skills and provide students with the kinds of abilities that would help them become members in good standing of an economic society.

Employability skills could be found throughout all four schools, and how they were presented differed depending on the teachers' perceptions of what was required of CAPP. The functional aspects of the ESP assume that the schools' values are in line with large employers, completely ignoring the contradictory aspects such as class conflict or the division of labour (Taylor, 1998). The use of employability skills marked an important class bias. This bias was evident most specifically for those students on the Eastside of Vancouver, for whom the teachers saw a more identified need to learn how to be employable. The Westside students, in contrast, were assumed to already have softer skills of right attitudes or behaviours and thus were directed towards harder skills such as learning to write a résumé. An important critique of this blanket use of employability skills included the ways in which they were presented in isolation for students. Skills were presented outside of a social context and without relationship to the labour market, nor with an understanding of the constant shifting nature of work. Noticeably absent from the curricula in the four schools was any discussion of the larger labour market, labour organization, or the history of work. The silences in the curriculum speak as loudly as the explicit focus on skills.

The use of employability skills in schools requires attention. Policy makers should consider the ways skills are represented with career education curricula. Are skills activities such as writing a résumé, or are skills about fostering the right attitude in students? How career education programs use skills requires greater attention. Additionally, skills should be discussed in context with the labour market, and jobs should be examined in relation to social realities. Discussions of the labour market need to be more central in career education classrooms so that students can have a better understanding of the reality of work in this society. With constant shifts and changes, career education programs need to be regularly revisited and updated in order to make sure they represent an accurate picture of the work, employment, and careers available to students.

NOTES

1. The pseudonyms for these schools are Elmwood, Cedar Valley, Pinetree, and Oakhill.

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Amanda Benjamin is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. She has published articles on career education in Canada and adolescents' perceptions of the job market. Her current research interests include how young people learn about adulthood, jobs, careers, and employability skills and how this learning is influenced by their local environment, including family, schools, neighbourhoods, and the wider labour market context.

Author's Address:
Faculty of Education
University of New Brunswick
P.O. Box 44
Fredericton, New Brunswick
CANADA E3B 5A3
EMAIL: ajb@unb.ca