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Review Essay

A Synthesis of Critical Perspectives in the School-to-Work Issue

Gaskell, J. (1992). *Gender matters from school to work*. Toronto: O.I.S.E. Press, 168 pp., \$24.50 (softcover).

Muller, J. (Ed.). (1990). *Education for work, Education as work: Canada's changing community colleges*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 225 pp., \$19.95 (softcover).

Weis, L. (1990). *Working class without work: High school students in a de-industrializing economy*. New York: Routledge, 240 pp., \$13.95 U.S./\$16.95Can (softcover).

The publication of three books on the topic of relationships between school and work provides an opportunity for readers to develop new insights into the transition process, a passage all students make, and to refine conceptual frameworks that assist in developing a more sophisticated understanding of this complex social issue.

Although students individually make decisions about when to leave educational systems and enter the workforce, their collective behavior symbolizes one way in which a society renews itself: These young people carry with them the conceptual tools for maintaining the culture. Our youth are our legacy and to them we bequeath the promise of a future that is better than the present.

Nonetheless, the transition from school to work is increasingly difficult for many young people as social change exacerbates mismatches between individual intentions, educational credentials, employment opportunities, and a fluctuating marketplace. Unlike the recession of the 1980s, during the

depressing economic cycle of the 1990s educators have not been made scapegoats. Nevertheless, educators are not immune to the current trends of downsizing, accountability, inflation, and increased competitiveness affecting both public and private sector employees. Therefore, insights into the school-to-work issue offered in the three publications discussed in this review should be of interest to many educators, regardless of whether they are instructing in the secondary system, in the college environment, or at a university level. Readers would do well to reflect about how the school-to-work issue affects their professional milieu as well as that of youth employment. In addition to the content focus, all three publications demonstrate how theoretical analyses, framed by a critical perspective, may offer dynamic interpretations of the social environment that are less deterministic than holistic. Academics wishing to revitalize the intellectual paradigms from which they work will be interested in the conceptualizations, regardless of their own research interests.

In Gaskell's discussion (1992) the transition from school to work is analyzed from the perspective of gender differences which may reside within the perspective of the researcher as well as that of the student. The essays in the book edited by Muller contribute to a greater understanding of the role community colleges play in preparing students for the workplace; some of the challenges echo throughout the secondary and university systems. Urbanized "rustbelt" (p.3) America may be an employment wasteland for some high school students as Weis (1990) notes; it is disturbing to speculate how closely the situation might be paralleled in Canada.

Jane Gaskell focusses upon gender differences in schooling, the transition, and employment, using the voices of business education students to further an understanding of how young men and women "get very different kinds of preparation for work" (p. 29). Reviewing her intellectual "agenda" during the past 10 years, Gaskell presents her values to the reader: "Research should be an attempt to find answers we don't already know to situations we care about My political commitment is towards providing young women with more control of their lives" (p. 30-33). She summarizes research studies conducted since 1977 in schools situated in two working-class neighborhoods. Data were analyzed from two series of recorded interviews with 35 male and 47 female students in transition from school. Later, an analysis of the organization of clerical training was undertaken to further an understanding of why young women continue to buy in "to low-paying, low status jobs" that perpetuate gender inequality (p. 34). Gaskell concludes that clerical skills have been devalued because they have been "women's skills" and "argues that education for the hand and for practice must be reintegrated with education for the mind and for theory" (p. 35). Her style subtly highlights the issues she addresses and key sentences provide an elegant repast for educators who are intellectual gourmards, not afraid of challenges. For example she analyzes curriculum content: "What was useful in

preparing middle-class men for work became the accepted academic curriculum" (p. 144); "The distinction between women's knowledge and men's knowledge has been just as deeply ingrained in the curriculum as the distinction between vocational and liberal knowledge" (p. 144); "The teachers I interviewed would define the ideal of sexual equality in the school as gender blindness" (p. 146); "Gender blindness means silence on gender issues" (p. 146); "The vision of school and work proposed here would open the school to a broader set of curriculum issues and to a more critical discussion of them" (p. 151); "Schooling would develop its links with all spheres of life, and teachers would strive to provide a sense of possibility for all students" (p. 151).

Gaskell defines power as residing in "interactions between groups, not in a person or a group of people" (p. 23). However, she clearly expects educators to be catalysts of social change. As Sandra Acker states in the introduction, the transition from school to work is a microcosm of the relationship of education to the economy. The journeys of such sociologists as Gaskell and Acker provide clear indicators that Canadian secondary schools are not as accessible or equitable as the pupils, the professionals, and the public would like to believe.

Gender differences contribute to diversified career paths, some of which include community college programs. This educational mandate is quite different from that of either high school or university. The community college system is the most rapidly growing sector of education; however, literature about any aspect of the teaching environment is scarce. Muller presents a perspective often absent from considerations of education in Canada. Alarmed by "managerial re-direction" (p. 13), Muller perceived his task as a "need to develop an understanding and criticism of the social and historical context of changing managerial practices for the practical purpose of resisting them" (p. 13). The book comprises nine essays organized into three themes: management and resistance in reorganization, management and resistance in curriculum and teaching, and the shifting terrain of college education and skills training. Included in part one is an essay by Carl Witchel whose voice of experience as a union executive in Québec during the 1980s contains echoes and shadows that touch all who teach in the public sector, wherever they may be located in Canada. He describes how large teacher organizations may become agents of social control, not "motor(s) for social change" (p. 52). According to Witchel, the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s became the Quiet Surrender of the 1980s. The party elected to represent working professionals (the Parti Québécois, a party sustained and supported by many college instructors) passed legislation that "cut salaries by 20% but also unilaterally cut the government's contribution to public sector pension plans," having "increased the workload by about 19%, closed access to tenure and undermined the job security of many who had already obtained it" (p. 60). The "Common Front" between various public sector unions fragmented and there is now no "collective tool which reflects our values as educators" (p. 65).

Lest readers suspect that this is an issue isolated by language and by Québec ideology, Nancy Jackson, from McGill University, identified "growing anxiety over the relation between education and work" (p. 113) when analyzing policy documents in a Department of Business Administration at a British Columbia college. Driven by reduced budgets to justify existent programs, administrators are using competency-based criteria to argue relevance; such criteria are developed in workshops with local employers, led by outside consultants. Instructors are excluded from the dialogue, but are expected to implement competency-based curricula. Not surprisingly, the argument is for one of "collective resistance" (p. 124).

In the final section of the book, Dorothy and George Smith of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education move from a study of college curriculum documents (e.g., the Designing a Curriculum package-DACUM) to a discussion of the changing social relations between education and labor markets, wherein students are viewed less as human capital and more as human resources, thus becoming a "stock of trained workers" (p. 193). The shift is from college-controlled curriculum with which students are prepared for occupations to a government-industry collaboration of skills development and training in which students and instructors are resources to be managed in an effort to improve the effectiveness of the Canadian state in a competitive international marketplace (p. 186). These authors do not view theory and ideology as interchangeable. Theory is "situated in the social relations of a scientific discourse" and subject to logic, debate, and criticism, while ideology has a "practical cogency" connected to "formulating and generating solutions to problems confronting rulers" (p. 195).

Of all educational systems in Canada, colleges have the most explicit mandate to mediate between the education of students and the workplace. As both secondary schools and universities develop linkage programs with employers, many of the problems addressed by the essayists in Muller's book of readings about educator concerns in the college system will have relevance elsewhere. In a world that is shifting from industry-driven economies to a technological base, realignments between educators and employers are both desirable and inevitable. However, the problems that emerge will not be easily resolved. When in doubt Canadians often turn to the American model — thus the relevance of a discussion about American high school students and their possible futures.

Lois Weis examines the "identity-formation process among white working-class youth in the context of the deindustrialization of the American economy" (p. 3). Using data from an ethnographic study conducted in a school situated in "Freeway" — a city located in the northeastern 'rustbelt' of the United States — she explores how students and teachers "come to see themselves in relation to others in particular ways" (p. 3). Because "we are moving into a post-industrial area, one that is, by necessity, characterized by struggle over the symbolic realm of information and the production of a culture more generally"

(p. 9), she is concerned about whether the identities being forged by the interactions between teachers and students and their immediate locale, a town in which the steel plant has closed, will result in a New Right backlash or a demand for radical change. (After 1983 layoffs, "all that remains of close to 20,000 workers are 370 bar mill workers" (p. 14).) Her on-site participant observations took place during the 1985-1986 school year; the students she observed will now be in their mid-to-late twenties. At a time when America has unprecedented global power but many internal frictions, how these young people vote affects other countries almost as much as it affects their fellow citizens.

Weis, a Sociology of Education professor and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Educational Studies at the State University of New York (Buffalo), suggests that the jobs available to Freeway youth "are likely to be those that offer low pay with little security and virtually no benefits" (p. 199). Under these stresses, underemployed males are more likely to "attach themselves to the New Right" (p. 212) while women are likely to be caught in the classic double-bind, envisioning themselves as primarily connected to home and family but in fact working full time outside the home at relatively low-paying jobs (p. 203). Given the alignment of traditional values with the New Right agenda for family wages, these women are probably living in environments that produce both overt and covert violence, and the probability of divorce is high. "What will happen as working-class women attempt to live out their lives is not yet clear" (p. 213). Weis is skeptical about the possibilities of working-class men "reconsider(ing) their own gender identity. . . . The question for me is how this (male dominance) plays out on an individual personal and collective-movement level and which way working class females will go" (p. 213). She notes: "There are competing movements in the United States and they do, in fact, have opposing agendas" (p. 214).

The school serves to support most aspects of the New Right, not so much as a "suppressive apparatus" but "to encourage one movement as opposed to another" (p. 213). In the "programmed" society that Weis thinks is emerging, women will be forging identities without much support from the educational system and males will be dependent upon a "family wage" which does not support the concept of self-identity that was encouraged in the classroom. Although students recognize that they must obtain an education, "they adhere to the form of education rather than its substance. . . . 'Sitting' one's way through high school, the community college, or even a comprehensive four-year college will not, in all likelihood, lead to high-level employment, or even stable employment with relatively high pay and benefits" (pp. 210-211).

Perhaps many Canadians, subsequent to the 1990s depression, will identify with the youth profile and with aging industries that restrict local employment possibilities, but how many Canadian educators would recognize themselves as

"Freeway teachers"? Noting that nearly 50% of the teachers had attended and graduated from the high school in which they are teaching, Weis states that their social class background is "not so terribly unlike that of the students (p. 118). . . . It is no accident that such a high proportion of teachers are from Freeway" (p. 122). "Inbreeding" and patronage play an important role in the hiring process ("I had to pay them [school board members] twelve hundred dollars — one-third of my salary," one teacher is quoted as confessing (p. 122)). However, many Canadian educators will identify with the many Freeway teachers who said, "I like working with kids" (p. 140).

Working with kids is what educators do best and the authors whose work is reviewed here reflect their love of teaching by presenting sophisticated analyses of the changing relations between school and work, emphasizing the difficulties for students who must go through the transition during a period of accelerated societal change. Although the passage from education to employment is individualistic, recognizable patterns of behavior and the social profiles of this cohort emerge. Some have been identified (Crysdale & MacKay, 1993; 1985; Donaldson, 1990, 1992; King, 1988). Canadian academics can no longer avoid a dialogue about student destinations, implied values in curriculum content, and relations between education and employment. Their own professionalism is at stake. Not everyone affected by the social pressures is a student; educators, regardless of their status, are also participants in these changes.

The contribution that these individual authors collectively make is their understanding of the transition process as an interactive social movement in which conflicting agendas influence policy formulation and people's development. By focusing upon women, upon curriculum content, and upon policy documents, these writers have contributed to an understanding of both the roles schools and education have in student transitions from school and the roles that linkage programs have in this process. By accepting the complexity of the situation and abandoning the determinist stance so characteristic of critical theorists, their contributions to knowledge should be extended to a broader audience, one which needs to receive the message and accept its relevance.

However, I continue to wish that the penetrating skills of critical theorists and researchers would be applied to construct a vision of the future and to identify the success stories of the present. Missing from these publications, as with most contemporary critiques, is the vision of spirit that illuminated Hegel and a recognition of how personal decisions empower and how this empowerment has economic consequences, as Marx noted. Among those struggling to cope with the difficult challenges suggested by the findings reported by these authors must be many heroes. Readers could benefit from learning about individual stories of successful resolutions to the problems faced and, if not resolved, reduced. From these young people our leaders will emerge. Their stories are missing from the pages of these three books. As educators, we bear considerable responsibility to

nurture their talents, to support them during the passage from school to work, and to acknowledge their achievements. Our future rests in their hands and minds.

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