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A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES STRUGGLING WITH SHIFTS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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"Education systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the production of *social hierarchies*. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialed labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users" (Connell, 1993, p.27).

1.20 Introduction

This article argues that if students in disadvantaged schools and communities are going to receive a fair go then we must begin to interrupt existing conceptions of vocational education and training, in particular the ways in which they perpetuate established social hierarchies based on class, race and gender. Listening to the experiences of over 125 teachers, students and parents from four disadvantaged schools in the outer metropolitan suburbs of Perth, Western Australia (Smyth & Down, 2005) it soon becomes apparent that the new realities of the global economy fuelled by the increasingly successful educational policies and practices of the New Right are (re)shaping schools to better fit the narrow sectional interests of the economy. As politicians, business and corporate interests continue their sustained attacks on public schooling we are witnessing the emergence of what Apple (2001) describes as "conservative modernization" whereby educational commonsense is redefined around a set of neo-liberal and neo-conservative values:

… we are told to "free' our school by placing them into the competitive market, restore "our" traditional common culture and stress discipline and character, return God to our classrooms as a

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guide to all our conduct inside and outside the school, and tighten central control through more rigorous and tough-minded standards and tests. This is all supposed to be done at the same time. It is all supposed to guarantee an education that benefits everyone. Well, maybe not (p.5).

In this article I want to explore the implications of this conservative modernising agenda on schooling, especially in disadvantaged communities where schools are reinventing themselves around instrumental and utilitarian approaches to "career education", "school to work" and "getting a job". My argument is that these prominent slogans send powerful cultural messages to students, teachers and parents about what is deemed to be appropriate knowledge for students in disadvantaged schools. As Kumashiro (2004) argues "it's just commonsense that schools teach these things and students do those things, lest we be seen as abnormal, senseless, even counterproductive" (p.8). To this end, schools are placing greater emphasis on streaming students into vocationally orientated non-academic programs more suited to their abilities and interests. These programs typically focus on vocational education and training, enterprise education, structured workplace learning, school-based traineeships, and career development (Ryan, 2002).

For me, the questions worth asking include: Why is vocational education and training in schools so important at this time? Whose interests are served? What are the alternatives? Questions such as these involve "troubling knowledge" or making the familiar problematic. In the words of Kumashiro (2004) "it means to work paradoxically with knowledge, that is, to simultaneously use knowledge to see what different insights, identities, practices, and changes it makes possible while critically examining that knowledge (and how it came to be known) to see what insights and the like it closes off" (pp.8-9). In a similar vein, Ball (2006) urges us to "de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience" (p.62). In pursuing this line of inquiry, I have structured the article around the following sections: first, the impact of the global economy and New Right educational policies and practices on the lives and prospects of disadvantaged youth; second, a critique of the ways in which schools are talking about and doing vocational education and training; and third, how a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training might contribute to an alternative vision and practice.

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1.21 The impact of the global economy

There is no doubt we are currently living in a social, political and economic climate dominated by corporate and neo-conservative efforts to shape politics, work, culture and education to serve the interests of capitalism (Saul, 2004; Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2000, 2002). My purpose in this section is to explain how the "globalisation of capital" (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p.39) and the neoliberal education policies that flow from it are seriously impacting on the life trajectories of young people. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) get to the heart of the matter:

> Neoliberalism ('capitalism with the gloves off' or 'socialism for the rich") refers to a corporate domination of society that supports state enforcement of the unregulated market, engages in the oppression of nonmarket forces and antimarket policies, guts free public services, eliminates social subsidies, offers limitless concessions to transnational corporations, enthrones a neomercantilist public policy agenda, establishes the market as the patron of educational reform, and permits private interest to control most of social life in the pursuit of profit for the few (that is, through lowering taxes on the wealthy, scrapping environmental regulations, and dismantling public education and social welfare programs). It is undeniably one of the most dangerous politics that we face today (pp.15-16).

Neoliberalism is wedded to the idea that the market should be the organising principle for all political, social and economic decisions. This involves trade and financial liberalisation, deregulation, the selling off of state corporations, competition, heavy tax cuts, and a shifting of the tax burden from the top to bottom. As Giroux (2004) argues, "under neoliberalism everything is for sale or is plundered for profit" (p.1). Saul (2004) describes it as "crucifixion economics" because of it's failure on a number of fronts including: a growing environmental crisis; job insecurity; unemployment; child labour; death from wars; epidemics; malnutrition; violence; and inequality of wealth (p.150). As well, there are a host of other consequences identified by an emergent critique of neoliberalism such as: "endless consumerism" (Harvey, 2003, p.65);

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"accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2003, p.20); "hyperrationalization" (Kincheloe, 2001, p.44); "unpredictability", "irreversibility", "disorderliness" and "complexity" (Urry, 2003, p.138); "the politics of fear" (Hinkson, 2006, p.25); "social disintegration" and "fragmentation" (Kincheloe, 1995, pp.9-10); "personal helplessness", "ineffectuality" and "vulnerability" (Bauman, 2002, p.18); and "risk" (Beck, 1992).

Clearly, these broader sets of forces have particular consequences for the futures of increasing numbers of disenfranchised young people. Best and Keller (2003) elaborate:

> For youth today, change is the name of the game and they are forced to adapt to a rapidly mutating and crisis-ridden world characterized by novel information, computer, and generic technologies; a complex and fragile global economy; and a frightening era of war and terrorism. According to dominant discourses in the media, politics, and academic research, the everyday life of growing segments of youth is increasingly unstable, violent and dangerous. … These alarming assaults on youth are combined with massive federal cutbacks of programs that might give youth a chance to succeed in an increasingly difficult world (p.75).

As well, young people are struggling against an increasingly hostile and volatile labour market (Eckersley, 1998). According to Hinkson (2006) "the techno-scientific revolution" of modern day capitalism is unleashing such profound changes to the economy that the 80/20 society – where 80 per cent of the population will achieve the freedom, whether voluntary or not, of not having to work. He explains that the transformation of the mode of production allows for a radical expansion of the capacity of the economy to produce commodities and to do so with an ever-reducing labour force (p.26). In short, changes in global capital have resulted in a labour market reliant on ever decreasing numbers of 'core' (knowledge) workers and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector of the economy. Apple (1998) makes the point that this emerging reality is quite different from "the overly romantic picture painted by the neoliberals who urge us to trust the market and to more closely connect schools to the "world of work"" (p.345). Even more disturbing, according to Hinkson (2006), is the

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emergence of the 'Walmart factor' whereby large transnational companies shop around for the cheapest global wage rates, thus further deindustrialising national economies in the search for profits. Compounding these trends in Australia is the recent introduction of WorkChoices industrial relations legislation which "de-institutionalises" work conditions and puts Australia in competition with rivals such as India and China (p.26) - the so-called "race to the bottom". In this scenario, according to McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005), "the global economy is increasingly relying on low-wage, part-time jobs comprised of an army of "contingent", "disposable", "temporary", and "footloose" laborers" (p.44).

As a consequence, young people are facing lower labour force participation rates, are less likely to be engaged in full-time work, are likely to be exploited in casual part-time jobs and more likely to experience high rates of unemployment (The Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2004). Giroux (2000) explains that as the "the state is hollowed out …. children have fewer opportunities to protect themselves from an adult world that offers them dwindling resources, dead-end jobs, and diminished hopes for the future" (p.44). Worse is the manner in which these structural changes are having significant differential effects based on ones class, gender, race and geographical location (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, pp.70-74; Kenway, Kelly & Willis, 2001). Nationally, evidence consistently shows that different classes of children have different experiences of schooling and as a consequence life chances: only 59.2% of boys from unskilled or working class families complete Year 12, compared with 88.6% from professional backgrounds (Ainley, 1998, p.55); for girls the figures are 69% and 95% respectively (p.55); the proportion of young people from rural areas who complete Year 12 is 51% (p.56); and 60.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders leave school before the age of 16 and fail to complete a secondary education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000) (Smyth & Down, 2004, p.57).

The Rockingham/Kwinana region of Western Australia where the research for this article was conducted is a low to medium socio-economic area, historically heavy industrial, with a relatively high degree of social dislocation, and unemployment of around 12%, making it among the highest areas of unemployment in Western Australia. Statistics in the Rockingham/Kwinana region of Western Australia illustrate the uneven impact of the global economy on disadvantaged schools and communities. In terms of youth unemployment

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the figures indicate: a high unemployment rate of 12%; a disproportionately high number of unemployed young people; nearly three quarters of the population have not achieved any meaningful post-school qualification; those unemployed predominately work in non-professional occupations with a relatively low income; nearly 38.1% of the population is under 24 years of age; the indigenous population has grown considerably over the past decade, and of the 18% of students who obtained employment only half of them gained full-time employment (South Metropolitan Youth Link, 2003, p. 47).

A critical pedagogy of vocational education and training is interested in making connections between these broader patterns of social inequality, schooling, and global capitalism. In the words of McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) "Capitalist schooling participates in the production, distribution, and circulation of knowledge and social skills necessary for reproducing the social division of labor and hence capitalist relations of exploitation" (p.50). To this end, education is designed to impart particular kinds of knowledge, skills and social capital to particular classes of students (Apple, 1990, 1996). As Wexler (1992) explains, schools are places actively producing the "identity, selfhood, the 'somebody' which students work to attain through their interactions in school" (p.8). From the perspective of global capital, education is valuable to the extent to which it increases the efficiency and the productivity of future workers and citizens and their willingness to adapt to whatever pathway flexible labour markets follow (Beckman & Cooper, 2004, p.2).

1.22 Vocationalisation and differentiation

One of the most worrying aspects of the rise of neoliberalism is the way in which schools are portrayed as being responsible for Australia's lack of international competitiveness. The logic is that if schools can only play their part in the process of economic restructuring then everything will be okay. As Smyth (2001) explains:

> The role and function of education is undergoing dramatic change in response to these economic imperatives. The notion of a broad liberal education is struggling for its survival in a context of instrumentalism and technocratic rationality where the catchwords are "vocationalism," "skills

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formation," "privatization," "commodification," and "managerialism." In circumstances like these, education 'comes under the gun' because it is simultaneously blamed for the economic crisis, while it is being held out as the means to economic salvation – if only a narrow, mechanistic view of education is embraced (p.37).

Viewed in this way, the task of schools is to ensure that students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills for jobs, no matter what kind, and positive attitudes to the world of work. In short, students should leave school job ready, and fit for purpose (Down, 1994). As Butler (1999) argues "colonized education is being utilized to naturalise, 'manage', and serve economic globalism, as well as to produce 'enterprising' students who, as future citizens, comprise a self-disciplining, flexible and mobile reserve of human capital" (p.22). Historically, such arguments are not new (Bessant, 1989-90; Kliebard, 1997; Grubb & Lazerson, 1975). The instrumentalist logic of human capital theory has driven the expansion of state secondary schooling in Australia since the end of the second world war (Down, 2000). However, as the economic crisis of the 1970s deepened and youth unemployment increased, so did the right wing attacks on education. In response to employer concerns the *Williams Report* (1979) prepared the groundwork for a greater emphasis in schools on: vocational education; careers guidance; work experience programs; links with Technical and Further Education (TAFE); school and industry partnerships; and curriculum differentiation. Since the publication of the *Williams Report* in 1979 the business mantra has been persistent and noisy. During the 1980s and 1990s a plethora of reports such as *Schooling for 15 and 16 Year-Olds* (1980), *In the National Interest: Secondary Education and Youth Policy in Australia* (1987), *Skills for Australia* (1987) *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (1988), *Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training* (The Finn Review) (1991), *The Australian Vocational Certificate and Training System* (The Carmichael Report) (1992), and *Putting General Education To Work* (The Mayer Report) (1992) called for a tighter correspondence between schooling and the needs of the global economy. For instance, *In the National Interest* (1987) identified three principal ways in which this might happen: first, through the knowledge, skills and attitudes which education develops and industry utilizes; second, through the qualifications or credentials that education gives students and which employers use as the basis for selection; and finally, through the labour market itself (pp.4-5).

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This ideological groundwork has been rammed home during the past 10 years of John Howard's conservative coalition government where the key themes have been: the development of work skills; the role of ability, hard work and interest in determining how far one rises (liberal meritocracy); the importance of 'good citizenship' and a sound work ethic; the limitations of bureaucratic structures and rigid work practices; the benefits of school choice and diversity of school types; and increased surveillance and accountability (Reid, 1999, pp.4-5).

Ball (2006) cites from Carter and O'Neill (1995) five main elements of 'the new orthodoxy' around current educational reform:

- Improving national economics by tightening a connection between schooling, employment, productivity and trade;
- Enhancing students outcomes in employment related skills and competencies;
- Attaining more direct control over curriculum content and assessment;
- Reducing the costs to government of education; and
- Increasing community input to education by more direct involvement in school decision-making and pressure of market choice (p.70).

Apple (1998) argues that the pressure to vocationalise "could not have grown as rapidly if it was only an imposition on schools by economically powerful forces" (p.349). In his view, the push to vocationalise is also the result of "more broad based worries and demands from local working class communities, … who have historically been mistrustful of an education that seems consistently to privilege those with economic and cultural capital at the expense of working-class children and children of color" (p.349). Apple believes the demands for vocationalisation from working-class parents is connected to economic fears and anxieties. For them, education is an insurance policy to "guarantee that their children will see economic benefits from their education" (p.349). He goes on to argue that while this seems like a reasonable and understandable position, it "puts these same communities at risk of being more easily convinced by and incorporated

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within a conservative discourse in which a school-economy connection *is* made, but only on terms acceptable to capital" (p.349).

In response to these policy shifts many schools have embraced vocational education and training as a panacea to problems of student disengagement and enforced retention and participation advocated by the former Western Australian Minister of Education and Training and current Premier Alan Carpenter (2004). Some extraordinary work by many dedicated teachers, often in circumstances of diminishing resources, has produced a proliferation of innovative programs to engage students and prepare them for the world of work. These programs typically have a number of features including: a niche profile, for example, horticulture, sport, maritime studies, engineering, hospitality and tourism, community services and business studies; compliance with Australian Quality Framework (AQF) competency based requirements and certification; and school based apprenticeship schemes, involving a mix of school attendance, waged employment, and training with Registered Training Organizations (RTO's) such as TAFE. Students are also involved in a host of work related programs and activities including structured work place learning, career development and counseling, enterprise teams, and work based subjects.

How these policies and practices get translated into organisational patterns, routines and habits at the school level raises a number of important questions: How do schools talk about vocational and training? How do they justify streaming practices? What are the assumptions about students, schools and work? What are the effects? Whose interests are served? Who benefits and who loses? In searching for answers three interrelated commonsense logics are apparent in the way students are spoken about, labeled and streamed in schools. These logics emerge from some early analysis and theorising of interview data collected from teachers, students and parents in four disadvantaged public secondary schools in Western Australia (Smyth & Down, 2005). First, is the logic that most students are not "academic" or "bright" as evidenced by teacher comments such as: "we don't have a lot of academic kids"; "we take all the kids that everyone else doesn't want"; "we used to be an academic school ten years ago"; and "TEE [academic] courses are fast disappearing in the wake of VET programs." Typically, teachers explained this lack of success in terms of the material and cultural background of the students' family lives, for example: "the

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school has a ghetto mentality, rigour is low, and students don't see a future"; "as a general rule 10% are bums and 30% are lazy"; "parents have negative experiences of schooling"; and "many parents do not value education". Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) explain the consequences of this pervasive type of deficit thinking:

> In schools, pathologizing the lived experiences of students becomes a process of treating differences (achievement levels, abilities, ethnic origins and knowledge perspectives) as deficits that locate responsibility in the lived experiences of the children (home life, home culture, socioeconomic status) rather than locating responsibility within classroom interactions and relationships or indeed the education system itself (p.xx).

Second, is the logic that schools should develop a practical and job orientated curriculum for "non-academic" students as evidenced in teacher comments such as: "kids excel at working with their hands"; "kids want a job and parents look to school to prepare them for work"; and "employers value particular kinds of knowledge and skills which drives the curriculum". Kincheloe (1995) argues that this artificial division of knowledge leads to two worlds in schools - academic knowledge that prepares students for university and a decreasing number of highly paid core jobs; and an "anti-matter world" that values knowledge of work and prepares students for jobs at the bottom end of the labour market (p.32). In this way, schools function to allocate different forms of school knowledge (high status versus low status) to different classes of students. Teese (2000) explains:

> School subjects are codified, authoritative systems of cognitive and cultural demands. The nature of these demands weighs more or less heavily or lightly on different families, depending on their historical experience of academic schooling and the extent to which formal education infuses their life-styles and values. It depends on their economic strength and capacity to act collectively. … It is through the curriculum that the financial and cultural reserves of educated families are converted into scholastic power – the ability to differentiate one group of children from others on a socially legitimate and authoritative scale of general worth (p.3).

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Furlong and Cartmel (2001) argue that as individuals are made more accountable for their "labour market fates" (p.28) young people from advantaged backgrounds have been "relatively successful in protecting privileged access to the most desirable routes" (p.34). This means that "middle-class children ... are increasingly placed in schools with a 'name', while working-class children are left in schools with inferior resources which rapidly become ghettoized" (p.19). Devine (2004) draws similar conclusions based on extensive interviews with families in Britain and America. She too found that middle-class parents have greater capacity to mobilise their economic, cultural and social resources to ensure their children attain middle-class positions although it is not as easy or straightforward as it once was. In the words of Connell (1993):

> The steering of young people towards different educational and economic fates has to be located within the social processes that create unequal 'fates' to be steered into. There is, we might say, a second poverty of cycle: the production, shaping, legitimation and reproduction of structures of inequality (p.27).

Third, is the logic of preparing a skilled workforce for the needs of a modernising economy as evidenced in teacher comments such as: "schools need to adjust their programs to the demands of industry"; "the emphasis needs to be on workplace competencies"; "and "schools and industry need to work together to ensure that students leave school with skills which enhance their employment opportunities". According to Stuart (2005) schools are being urged to produce workers who are adaptable, have flexible skills, are life long learners, and who possess the skills to work autonomously and in small teams. He goes on to say that this "reforming enterprise culture" has three key roles: equipping students with appropriate skills and knowledge for the post-fordist workplace; developing structural self-transformation so students become more efficient, entrepreneurial and responsive; and developing entrepreneurial values and a pro-business disposition (p.221).

If, however, as Welch (1996) argues structural unemployment or joblessness is the real problem then changing the curriculum to promote students' work skills, preparedness and attitudes to work may simply raise expectations and/or credentials, especially for the 15-20% who are the most disadvantaged (p.63). In the case of Britain, Furlong and Cartmel (2001) believe that the government's heavy reliance on the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and skill training programmes simply serves "to perpetuate a false assumption about a one-to-one relationship between being qualified and being employed" (p.69). Furthermore, they argue that the largest numerical growth of jobs has been in the service sector which normally requires short-term on-the-job training (p.17). In short, the obsession with narrow vocationalism and training serves to mask the fact that the process of restructuring and de-skilling of the labour force has resulted in more not less unskilled, repetitive, boring and poorly paid jobs (Aronowitz, 1977; Grubb & Lazerson, 1975). In this context, Noble (1997) argues that the corporate focus on "human capital, training, and skills is largely a ruse, a device to win over labor through a false promise of worker empowerment" (p.207). In his view, this situation will continue "so long as a visible few reap the rewards of the new celebration [of skills] and the rest strive to be among them" (p.207).

For Blackmore (1992) the debate on the vocational function of schooling and how it should respond to the skill demands of the workplace is really about who is taught what curriculum, how and by whom. As she explains, "vocational education is seen to be the lesser alternative to the hegemonic academic curriculum, an alternative which targets 'disadvantaged' or 'at risk' groups" (p.353). In the meantime, the private school system continues its uninterrupted monopoly of the liberal-academic curriculum (p.371). Bessant (1989) observes that historically, the vocationally orientated curriculum has been used to restrict the numbers climbing the educational ladder, on the grounds that "the masses would 'lower standards', threaten 'excellence' and impede the progress of the academic elite" (p.70). As one teacher commented, "many smart kids now go to private schools."

My argument is that we need to pause and critically reflect on the broader social democratic functions of education so that it does not become totally subservient to the sectional interests of employers and a narrowly conceived job-skill training curriculum (Kenway, Kelly & Willis, 2001, p.120). Dewey (1916)

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grappled with this distinction between education and training at the end of the last century and offered some timely advice:

> But an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. This ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are intrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends (pp.318-319).

1.23   Towards a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training

So far I have argued that neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies have effectively harnessed schooling to the world of work and the rhetoric of developing a globally competitive labour force. As a consequence, vocational education and training programs are conceived around value-adding to students and supplying the labour market with a ready made stream of workers who have prerequisite job skills and positive attitudes to work required by employers. Furthermore, such programs serve to legitimate existing power relations, social practices and privileged forms of school knowledge that reproduce inequalities (who gets what, when and how) based on class, race and gender. As Giroux and Simon (1988) argue pedagogy is a practice which "specifies a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment" (p.12). That is, schooling "always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life" (McLaren, 1989, p.160). The question becomes, then, whether we want to inculcate students into the dominant ways of looking at

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the world or whether we want to develop truly democratic spaces within schools and the larger social order? In the remainder of this section, I want to pursue the latter option by briefly alluding to some general theoretical and practical orientations from critical pedagogy and to identify some worthwhile questions that might assist teachers in the task of reconceptualising vocational education and training in more socially just and pedagogically sound ways:

Asking worthwhile questions

Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the moral question of "why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them" (Simon 1988, p.2). It involves a critique of existing practices for the purpose of taking action to improve student learning for the benefit of all students, not only the privileged few. Critical pedagogy takes seriously the question of "social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p.47). As McLaren (1997) explains the purpose of a critical pedagogy "is to provide students with "counter-discourses" or "resistant subject positions" - in short, with a new language of analysis - through which they can assume a critical distance from their familiar subject positions in order to engage in a cultural praxis better designed to further the project of social transformation" (p.37). Under this mandate, there are significant questions worth investigating in regard to vocational education and training in schools like: What are the underlying assumptions about students, schooling and work? Where do these views come from? Whose views are they? What kind of knowledge is legitimated? What are the implications for different classes of students, families and communities? Who benefits and who loses?

Teachers as cultural workers

In the tradition of "teachers-as-intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1986) Giroux (2002) argues the importance of "redefining teachers as cultural workers" who are capable of "reclaiming, without romanticizing, popular culture as a complex terrain of pedagogical struggle" (p.78). For him (1996),

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"Pedagogy represents a form of cultural production implicated in and critically attentive to how power and meaning are employed in the construction and organization of knowledge, desires, values and identities" (p.52). Giroux's approach brings together the "intersection of pedagogy, cultural studies and a project for political change" (p.52). This kind of approach would see teachers questioning commonsense understandings and interrogating dominant media and consumer representations of youth, work and social life (Weiner, 2003).

For example, Smyth, Shacklock and Hattam (1999) develop an "Australian critical cultural studies" approach to teaching which invites "a critical exposure and interpretation of relationships people form with everyday cultural effects like work, sport, music, school, printed text, television, cinema, art, theatre, consumer goods, advertising, and fashion" (p.74). Pedagogically, students and teachers co-author the school curriculum around "generative" themes from everyday life, "topical" themes that have local, national or international significance or "academic" themes that lie in traditional disciplines (Shor, 1992). In pursuing this task, the following kinds of questions emerge: Who creates images of youth? What kinds of attitudes, behaviours and identities are denigrated? Which ones are celebrated? What are the effects? What economic, social and political conditions shape these representations? How do I question these circumstances? How do I show respect for students' lives and experience? What power relations are embedded in my practices? How might I think and act differently?

Integration/interdisciplinary

Kincheloe (1995), perhaps one of the most persuasive writers on vocational education, calls for the integration of academic and vocational education as an important first step (p.284; see also Lawton, 1997; Apple, 1998, p.357). For him, the current divide between academic and non-academic students serves no useful purpose other than perpetuating social divisions based on class, race and gender. Furthermore, he argues that it damages the majority of students who no longer look to the school or work as venues in which the creative spirit can be developed (p.124). In tackling these kinds of complex problems, Kincheloe argues that integration can create situations where students can learn to use material and conceptual tools in

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authentic activities. In this way, students and teachers come to "appreciate the use of academic skill in real life context; at the same time, they understand the vocational activity at a level that activates their creativity" (p.254).

Kincheloe (1995) believes that vocational education approached in this manner is not only more respectful of the intellectual and creative potential of all learners but recognizes that crafts and trades involve higher orders of intellect. Importantly, he states that such an approach refuses "to validate the common assumption within the culture of formal education that the theoretical ways of knowing of the academic disciplines are innately superior to the practical ways of knowing of the vocations" (p.270). Thinking about the integration of vocational education and training and academic learning poses a number of questions for teachers: What knowledge is of most worth? How is it organised and for what reason? How did it get this way? What are the obstacles/barriers to integration? How might integration look in my school? What kind of conditions need to be created? How can I use community as curricula? How do I incorporate workplace experience and expertise? How might I get started?

Critical citizenship

A critical pedagogy of vocational education and training would also seek to combine the role of schools in "developing forms of critical citizenship, while at the same time, helping students gain the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the social relations of the economy" (Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991, p.6). Currently, little space is allowed for questioning workplace issues such as personal experiences of work, the changing nature of work, structural unemployment, trade unions, power relations, health and safety, child labour, industrial legislation, and wages and conditions (Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991). To engage with these broader substantive economic, social and political issues would put at risk the goodwill of many school-industry partnerships. Under a sustained period of neo-conservatism there has been a "manufacture of consent" (Chomsky, 1999, p.10) leading to a depoliticised citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism or what Macedo (1995) describes as "literacy for stupidification" (p.81).

To address this problem, Simon, Dippo and Schenke (1991) develop a critical pedagogy of work education "to encourage students to: question taken-for-granted assumptions about work; comprehend workplaces as sites where identities are produced; see this production as a struggle over competing claims to truth and to correctness; and envisage ways in which the quality of their working lives can be improved" (p.15). For Shor (1992), this means inviting students "to make their education, to examine critically their experience and social conditions, and to consider acting in society from the knowledge they gain" (p.188). Teachers committed to this more activist view of citizenship can draw on a range of useful resources such as: "students as researchers" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998); "communities as curricula" (Theobold & Curtiss, 2000; Sleeter, 2005); "teaching for social justice" (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998); "problem-posing, situated and participatory learning" (Shor, 1992); "local literacies" (Street, 1994; Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001); "teaching for resistance" (Howard, Woodbury & Moore, 1998); and "place-based education" (Gruenewald, 2003). Some possible questions to consider include: How do I utilise community assets and resources in my teaching? How do I pursue socially engaged strategies and with whom? What kinds of community partnerships and networks are desirable? How do I negotiate curriculum with students? What resources do I require? How do students demonstrate their learning?

Ultimately, the purpose of a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training is to enable students and teachers to not only better understand the world of work but to actively participate in creating alternative conceptions of their future. It means restoring "schools as democratic public spheres" (Giroux 1997, .p.218) based on the values of "social cohesion, empathy, caring, respect, reciprocity, and trust" (Beckman & Cooper, 2004, p.11).

1.24 Conclusions

Today, young people face a world vastly different from the experience of their parents and teachers. With the demise of the social democratic settlement in the 1970s and the dominance of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda schools are being refashioned around the imperatives of global capitalism. The official rhetoric focuses on producing students with the knowledge and skills (competencies) relevant to the

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workplace, curriculum differentiation, specialisation, standardisation, high stakes paper and pencil testing, school choice, league tables, and accountability. This article argues that the renewed emphasis on vocational education and training in schools cannot be divorced from the wider shifts in the global economy and the changing nature of the youth labour market, in particular the escalation of part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector of the economy. In response, neo-liberal and neo-conservative public policy makers have attempted to blame individual students, schools and communities for this state of affairs while rendering their own ideologies invisible. For increasing numbers of young people in public schools the practice of streaming into vocational education and training programs based on deficit logics serves to perpetuate their relative disadvantage compared to their middle class counterparts. In addressing these problems, a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training begins the task of interrupting existing instrumental approaches and creating an alternative vision and practice founded on the values of economic and political democracy, critical inquiry, civic engagement and "educated hope" (Giroux, 2001, p.125). It is a process where teachers and students work collaboratively to "gain new ways of knowing and producing knowledge that challenge the commonsense views of sociopolitical reality with which most individuals have grown so comfortable" (Kincheloe, 2001, p.372). In short, a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training would have broad social meaning, take students experiences seriously, help them to give meaning to their lives, and enable them to envisage alternative conceptions of their future.

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