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Manufacturing Workers: How Adult Literacy and Welfare-to-Work Programs Construct the World of Work

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Abstract: This paper examines the complex ways educational programs for welfare recipients construct "success," especially in terms of the workplace. Teachers, students, and curricula in the programs represented success as largely an outcome of individual agency, while also recognizing but minimizing the importance of structural factors.

Background to this Research

With the passage of the Workforce Investment Act in 1998 and the newly formed alliance between literacy education and welfare reform, adult literacy education and job training are increasingly being viewed as essential to moving people from welfare to work (Dirkx, 1999). Many educational programs serving welfare recipients support individualistic thinking and deficit views of participants and generally fail to examine economic, social, or structural reasons that create unemployment. Both the Workforce Investment Act and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (commonly referred to as the "Welfare Reform Act") help maintain the "new literacy myth"-which emphasizes the idea that people are unemployed primarily because they lack basic education and work ethics.

As a critical educator I am interested in how curricular ideology is transmitted and contested through educational practices, and in this study I was particularly concerned with how assumptions about work and education undergirding welfare policy initiatives are played out in the classroom. This study is based in the critical sociology of education, especially the literature that examines the tension between the roles educational programs play in the reproduction of inequality and the potential of education to help engender social change. This body of theory has shown us how education is always a political enterprise, and reveals that classrooms are sites of ideological struggle, with classroom practices embodying unequal power relationships (Gore, 1993). Surprisingly little research has been conducted on the ideological impact of curriculum in programs that serve unemployed adults, however. Griffin (1991) states that critical curriculum scholars have "had little impact upon the tradition of philosophical analysis or upon the psychologists who have influenced adult education theory and practice" (p. 264). In this project I sought to understand the ideological messages about the world of work enacted in educational programs for unemployed women, and in this paper I specifically examine how teachers, learners, and curricula in these programs construct notions of success in the workforce.

Because I am interested in understanding ideas about work from multiple perspectives, I employed an ethnographic case study design. I spent four months in a literacy classroom that served unemployed women on welfare, and two months in a short-term employment preparation

program designed to increase the job skills and the job-finding skills of women on welfare. At these programs I conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, conducted classroom observations, and gathered curriculum materials. I analyzed data using qualitative content analysis, searching for themes in the data that addressed ideological assumptions about employment. Questions guiding data collection and analysis included: How do programs depict the world of work? How do they position learners as workers? How do they explain success or failure within the job market? What ideologies about work and workers do they emphasize?

Findings

My analysis of the programs revealed ideological components of a larger worldview concerning success in the workforce. I found that while curriculum materials focused almost exclusively on individual explanations of success, students and teachers held complex and seemingly contradictory views on how to achieve success at finding and keeping a good job. Explanations of success fell into two major categories: individualistic/agentive and structural. While almost everyone interviewed mentioned *both* sets of factors, individualistic explanations were discussed much more frequently than structural ones in everyday practice.

Individualistic Explanations of Success

Students, teachers, and curriculum materials quite frequently expressed that success came about as a result of individual agency. That is, whether one obtains a job or succeeds at the job is largely a matter of individual effort, action, or behavior. Seccombe (1999) states that the individual perspective "focuses on the achievement of the person, arguing that we are ultimately responsible for our own economic positions" (p. 40). It is not surprising that such individualistic explanations were so prevalent in these programs—they are part of a popular wisdom in the United States that emphasizes equal opportunity and economic mobility.

Effort and hard work. One theme that emerged more often than any other was that hard work and effort were key to success in finding and keeping a job. Hard work was also seen as the key to success in the classroom. Teachers, students, and curriculum materials all stressed the connection between hard work and success. Barbara, an adult literacy teacher, when asked why she thought her 'good students' would succeed, stated, "I think they're more determined. And they're...they don't mind hard work. They seem like very hard workers at anything they would do. Uh, they really, really, seem to want a better life. And they want to learn." Barbara also highlighted the fact that success is largely a result of how much effort an individual puts forth:

But it's up to you, I mean, if you want to accomplish something and meet your goals, you got to stay with it, you've got to come. The older students, the few that I've had, are more mature on the whole. They know that to reach their goals they're going to have to really work at it themselves and really put a lot of effort into it themselves.

She further stated that if she could get one thing across to her students, it would be the idea that "to reach their goals they're going to have to really work at it themselves and really put a lot of effort into it themselves." Julia, a job training teacher, also highlighted this idea. She stated, "We

have been raised to work, and we know that if we get anything, we have to work for it. Whereas THEY, on the other hand, haven't had to work for anything."

Students, too, emphasized hard work as a factor in whether or not they would succeed at getting their GED, and also whether they would ultimately succeed in the job market. Pamela, a GED student, stated, "I'm here for one thing, and that's to get my GED. It's gonna take time. I'm just gonna REALLY buckle down REAL hard so I can get up on out of here." Zoe, another GED student, also stated, "All you've got to do is help yourself. I know what I want. But if it's gonna be that way, I know that it's only gonna be that way if I make it that way."

Many students were quick to point out that many people they know who are on welfare are not working because they have not tried hard enough to look for a job. They saw themselves as working hard to get off the system, expressed dismay that other people are 'using the system,' and agreed that those who are lazy should have their welfare cut off. For instance, Talisa, a GED student said,

I'm not gonna say that nobody can't get a job, cause they can if they want to. It's just that some people just want to be lazy, and depend on the state to take care of them all their life...There's jobs out there. It's many jobs, I see everyday, saying hiring, hiring, hiring, hiring. But hey, they sitting at home doing nothing. They don't want to work. They just want to get drunk or loaded or something.

The right attitude. A second, complimentary component of a larger ideology about workplace success was the idea that having the right attitude will carry you far-in many cases farther than having the right skills. This message was stressed by teachers, students, and curricula. One book used in the job training program stated, "You may not enjoy everything about your work, but it's important to keep a good attitude. The happier you are, the happier you'll make your supervisors and coworkers, and you will be more likely to keep your job." Students in both programs also stressed the importance of having the right attitude. To them, this meant having a positive outlook, regardless of what else was happening. Talisa, for instance, stated,

To succeed, you have to be willing. That's what I think. As long as I keep that positive thought in my head, can't nobody stop me or pull me back, unless something drastically happens which is gonna, you know make me fail. And so other than that, I'm gonna do it! I'm GONNA do it! I'm doing it! And that's the positive attitude I have toward it, I'm gonna do this! Nobody's not gonna stop me!

Penny, a job training student, said that one of the strongest messages she learned in class was: "Don't say never, don't say what you can't do. Until you try. They just teach you to be positive. I know they taught me to be positive because I didn't know how to do any of that stuff before I got up in here. But I see I can, so I'll never say never again." Lavette, another job training student, stated that attitude definitely affects one's ability to succeed. She said, "You know, sometimes you can look at a person and tell, if you be around them for a while, and you can almost read them. So you can almost know if they're willing to change or do better."

Julia discussed in one of her lessons that it was important to have a positive attitude when going on a job interview. She said, "You should always act interested in an interview even if it's a dog job and you don't want no job dog. That dog job that you don't want may open the door to more success." A student agreed: "Yeah, you might get a better job once you get your foot in the door," to which Julia replied, "Let's face it, we all have to crawl before we walk," while several students nodded in agreement and repeated the statement.

Following rules. In the classrooms, having the right attitude also included being obedient and following rules. For instance, when discussing how to behave on the job, Julia stated, "There's a time and place for everything." Almost every teacher expressed concern that students were not following rules, and emphasized that teaching students how to behave correctly would be important to their future job success. Barbara, for instance, stated, "They are getting used to a schedule which they may not be used to getting up every morning and getting dressed and going somewhere and being there on time. And obeying rules. Those kind of things, I would think in general would help, cause those are the same kind of things you have to do when you get a job."

This workplace ideal was also enacted in day-to-day classroom life. In both programs, participants were given lists of rules that they must follow in order to stay in the program. In the job training program, for instance, students were given personnel guidelines at the beginning of the class, and were told exactly how they would be evaluated throughout the course of the program. Students were reprimanded if they slept, used profane language, were disrespectful, were violent, if they ate or drank during sessions, if they did not participate in activities, if they did not come to class on time, if they did not call the supervisor within 30 minutes of the start of class, and if they did not "dress appropriately" - which meant presenting a "neat, clean appearance including practicing personal hygiene."

Students were well aware of the rules governing the classroom, and referred to them often. While many students questioned the rules they had to abide by, and found ways to resist them, many at the same time saw the necessity of the rules and stated that they figured "the teachers are just doing their job." Some students saw a direct correlation between following rules in the classroom and their future job success. Pamela, a GED student, stated,

It's all gonna be the same when you get to work. You're gonna follow those rules. You're not gonna just want to go there and not follow rules and then quit your job and then wonder why, what happened, why you quit or how you got fired. You have to follow rules and directions at work, and orders that they give you.

Structural Explanations of Success

While curriculum materials focused almost solely on individualistic explanations of success, students and teachers also referred to structural explanations. Explanations that focus on structure "stress that the inequality found in social institutions such as the labor market, families, and government affect our economic positions" (Seccombe, 1999, p. 40). These structural explanations were not mentioned nearly as often as individualistic explanations, however, although almost every student and teacher did mention something structural at least once during interviews or class discussions. Structural explanations of success fell into three categories: the

availability of jobs in a particular region, students' lack of access to educational capital, and students' lack of access to economic capital.

Availability of jobs. Teachers and students both discussed how availability of jobs in a particular area would affect students' abilities to obtain employment. The teachers and students in the job training program, which was located in a rural county with an unemployment rate for African American women of 13.2% (compared to a statewide rate of 7.9%), discussed the lack of local jobs as a real hindrance to employment. Teachers complained that there just "aren't enough jobs" while students' classroom conversations often focused on the latest plant closings and lay-offs. Given this situation, much emphasis was placed on entrepreneurship. Sandra, a job training teacher, stated, "In many places there aren't enough jobs so the only way to make people self-sufficient is to teach them to go into business for themselves." Even given this realistic view of job availability, however, students remained hopeful that they would find a job if they just looked hard enough. And teachers in the job training program who complained about there not being enough jobs also stated that there were job opportunities in the area, and remained hopeful that students would be gain employment in the future.

The literacy program was located in a more urban county whose unemployment rate for African American women was 4.8%. This economic situation shaped the kinds of ambitions that students held. Whereas in the rural county many students believed they would work at chicken plants or manufacturing plants, many students in the literacy program spoke of entering the local technical school and obtaining jobs as medical technicians, hairdressers, and secretaries. Teachers in this program were very optimistic that students would be able to find decent employment, especially once they earned their GEDs. Students were more ambivalent about the availability of jobs, and many students held contradictory views on the issue-some said in one breath that they thought there were abundant jobs for everyone who wanted them, and then in the next breath argued that there really were not very many good jobs in town.

Access to educational capital. Most teachers and students agreed that without a high school diploma or GED, or post-secondary education, the employment that students were likely to get would be pretty undesirable. The teachers in the literacy program were concerned that students would be unhappy with menial jobs and stated that they were pushing education as a means to better employment. In the job training program, teachers seemed more conflicted about the situation. On one hand they stated that women should get more education in order to get better jobs, but in the next breath stated that the women really need to be working, and implied that any job is better than no job.

Students, too, repeatedly stated that they wanted to increase their education in order to get better jobs. The students in the literacy program consistently had higher hopes for their job futures, and most talked about getting their GEDs and entering further training at the local technical school. The women in the job training program were less optimistic, and while they stated that they wanted more education, seemed more resigned to working in chicken plants or sewing factories. This might have been due to the fact that there was no technical school nearby, because most students were so far away from completing their GEDs, and because their caseworkers were pushing them to get jobs rather than obtain further training or education.

Access to economic capital. Another major structural barrier to the women in the job training program was their lack of access to the economic capital necessary to obtain fulfilling employment. A significant example was that students could not afford cars despite telling me how much easier their lives would be if they had personal transportation. Only one student had a car, and public transportation was unreliable because of the rural nature of the county. Halfway through the program local funds that had been providing free transportation to students who had been placed in jobs were slashed, and the women using this transportation suddenly found themselves without it. Students were very discouraged by this situation and all stated that lack of transportation was a huge barrier to them finding employment. Teachers were conflicted about this issue. On the one hand they were sympathetic and realized what a big barrier lack of transportation was for their students. On the other hand they stated that they believed many of the women would use their new-found lack of transportation as a "cop-out." Julia, discussing a woman who had left the program to work at a nearby chicken plant, stated, "She's not even trying! Not even trying! If that were me, I'd be scrambling to get transportation. I wouldn't just give up like that." When I stated that I'm sure many of the women would try hard to arrange other transportation, Julia said, "Well, no, ours aren't gonna." And Sandra said, "Well some of them will, but a lot of them won't. They'll just use that as an excuse not to go to work."

Discussion and Significance

Teachers and students in the programs held contradictory beliefs about how to explain success in the workforce. Though keenly aware of structural factors that shape economic opportunities, in the end they tended to retreat to individualistic explanations of success. Working hard, having the right attitude, and following rules were stressed as being components for success both in finding a job and in keeping it. In addition, individual factors were referred to when teachers judged participants in the classroom as students and when students were taught how to behave in the classroom. I believe the teachers in these programs are operating out of good will and genuinely wish to help students, but in the final analysis, despite some attempt at raising structural issues, both teachers and students are upholding a not-very-satisfying American myth of success that stresses individual accomplishment and a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality. They see limitations in their environment yet keep the faith that they will be able to make it if they try hard enough. I believe that students and teachers cling to agentic explanations because to do otherwise would be fatalistic, depressing, and overwhelming.

This tension was constantly negotiated by teachers and students, and played itself out quite tellingly in the classroom, revealing the programs' ultimate stances on the issue. The topics discussed in class focused on individual issues, not structural ones. For example, the day we learned about the transportation crisis in the job training class the topic was how to dress for an interview. The teacher would not engage with the issue of transportation when the students were desperate to talk about it, except to say that she had no control over it. In steering the lesson back to how to dress, I believe she was trying to deal with something she felt she DID have control over-how people present themselves is something individuals can address. Structural issues can feel too overwhelming, or out of the realm of education. But if they are not addressed, then the structures of unemployment are obscured. Programs place a few people successfully into work, leaving everyone else behind and the larger system unquestioned. This raises the question, "Can education provide a solution to structural problems such as unemployment?" Programs aiming to

teach students how to negotiate the world of work fail to recognize that students already have much of this knowledge. Programs assume lack of individual knowledge prevents people from getting jobs, but structural factors such as lack of economic capital are much more significant.

This study demonstrates the need for a more critical vision of adult literacy education and employment preparation programs. The programs in this study are setting up false expectations for students and ignoring harsh social and economic contexts that surround welfare and unemployment. If students fail to get jobs, the discourse in these classrooms promotes the idea that this is mainly their fault, and places little responsibility on the way our economic system is structured. The programs are also responsible for producing certain "types" of workers suited for or prepared for certain types of jobs. I question whether this is offering students a "second chance," and believe instead that this is meeting society's needs for a reserve army of labor at the expense of a truly democratic and just society. Critical research is always tied to "an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 140). With this research I hope to begin a conversation on how literacy and employment education help maintain an economically unjust society by promoting ideas that ultimately blame the people least powerful to alter both discursive and material realities.

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