In Retrospect

Research proposal for study of the factors
influencing academic performance in the
New Brunswick education system.

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Thesis:

The poor academic performance of some students in the New Brunswick education system can be reduced, in part, to curriculum and policy planning based on an incomplete structural-functionalist analysis and its resulting theoretical framework, further compounded by the research and findings grounded therein. I propose a revision of the existing structural framework that has heretofore informed both educational research and policy planning, that considers developments diachronically (versus synchronically), and incorporates previously marginalized idioms of educational discourse into its narrative construction. In more concrete terms, I posit an interpretive paradigm that a) considers the historical development of educational policy, curriculum standards, etc. as narratives in order to better forecast directions of future growth and their capacity to create or resolve tensions, and b) highlights a variety of social relationships whose agency has been ignored by the existing structural model.

Theory and Scholarship:

Large-scale public education as an institution has only existed in Canada for four decades (Osborne: 1999: 4). It emerged largely from government-related pressures, specifically to enforce the routine needed for high industrialization, educate voters to ensure a legitimate democracy and promote nationalism through civics. This narrow agenda informed the first curricula, and so it is not surprising that early curriculum theorists adopted a structural-functionalist conceptualization of the school system as one organ with a particular function (defined by others) that, together, constitute society; it helped that this paradigm was in vogue during the 1960s. Educational discourse-practice has since been couched in structural terms, and has placed curriculum (theory) at the centre of its inquiry – at the expense of policy (practice). The important characteristic of this early period is that it promoted a single, unified ideal, albeit one reflected from government policy.

I suggest that, with the advent of more recent paradigms in Western thought (post-structuralism/modernism, Marxism, feminism, etc.) and the resulting critique of the social sciences, curriculum planning has been fragmented and subordinated to a multiplicity of external interest groups: employers demanding more skills education to decrease training expenses, linguistic groups clamouring for immersion programmes, medical and social workers encouraging health education, etc. This influx of new variables has been problematic for curriculum theorists mainly because they attempted to incorporate them into a structural framework that could not contain them; the 'lexicon' of the discourse was too limited in its consideration of social relationships relevant to education. To cite two examples, the potential of the family unit has largely been ignored vis-à-vis curriculum, and the high abstraction characteristic of the structuralist model has effectively isolated students by grade and age, even though the relations between students in different grades are both immediate and tangible; a quick survey of the schoolyard at recess will attest to this.

In framing the problem as I have above, the notions of knowledge commodification, performativity and system efficiency suggested by Jean François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition,* and Cleo Cherryholmes' incisive criticism of structuralist discourse-practices (*Power and Criticism*), have been of critical importance; both underscore the transfer of power, restructuring of institutions and the transformation of knowledge that are hallmarks of 'developed societies'. Ken Osborne's text, *A Guide to the Canadian Schooling Debate,* has greatly helped me contextualize the problem locally.

On curriculum theory, three giants of the field are worth considering: Ralph Tyler, Joseph Schwab and Jerome Bruner. Though there are numerous theorists, I identify three distinct schools of thought that most can be collapsed under, originating with each respectively: Tyler's rationale for curriculum improvement, Schwab's practical considerations and (admittedly self-evident) classifications of student, teacher,

content and context that together create the socio-educational milieu, and Bruner's psychological perspective and innovation, popularly manifested in the widely successful 'spiral curriculum'. Though these theorists provide adequate coverage of their field, it is important to consider once more that the field is limited to curriculum alone. Very little work has been done in developing a theory of policy; arguably Schwab's synthesis of the Practical curriculum may have swung in this direction, but few have ever pursued this vein. Furthermore, a consideration of the gamut of social relationships the student manages and the nuanced communities (s)he lives in has been ignored by all three. This is no fault of the theorists: if these considerations are incorporated into a *curriculum*, the results are potentially disastrous. Consider a hypothetical example for each case: if planners seek to use, say, the parent-student relationship to prompt learning in a different sphere, this comes with the presupposition that all parents have the wherewithal to follow through; thus the students from busy or otherwise neglectful families fall short of a standard. This is unfair. As for considering local factors such as concentrations of certain socio-economic classes in different regions of a district: is it sensible to craft a curriculum that teaches blue-collar students blue-collar skills, or only provides fine arts classes for wealthy neighbourhoods? The ethical dilemmas of multiple curricula are immediately present.

It seems, then, that a uniform, universal curriculum is the only way to avoid such difficulties. Though the question of what this curriculum must contain has little direct bearing on my proposed research, it adds a dimension to the theoretical backdrop that will doubtless inform my decisions when conducting the projects described below. I maintain – backed by the authority of Schwab, Tyler, Bloom and Bruner, among others – that a 'liberal education' must be the content of this universal curriculum. It is evident from the discussion above that the power to influence the school system has been transferred from the government and the school to the

society at large in recent decades. This means that the existing 'structure' of the broader society-culture is defining the role of education, and is thus able to *perpetuate its structure* through the school system. Old values and power hierarchies are reinforced in the classroom, rather than deconstructed and reconstituted. A liberal education introduces students to learning for its own sake, and gives them a chance to make choices that determine their future, rather than being 'softly terrorized' into giving up their agency. A liberal curriculum places the education system on par with other institutions as an acculturating agent. Previously, this may have been an impossibility due to the vested interests of the government in raising a certain kind of child, but since the 1970s many forces have eroded the old notion of the school system as an instrument geared toward economic or national efficiency; the Canadian government's Innovation Strategy (http://innovation.gc.ca), launched in 2002, can be seen as the capstone of this process and the step needed to promote an atmosphere conducive to the ideals discussed above.

It would serve well to briefly define a 'liberal education': key features of such an approach are the synthesis, rather than abstraction and opposition of subjects taught, and a uniform emphasis on each subject. As Bruner suggests, it encourages students to learn together, promoting a many-to-many relationship that balances out the student-teacher binary (Bruner: 1996, in Palmer: 2001, 94). The common element here is the deconstruction of certain rigid syntaxes, and the high abstraction (largely in the form of curriculum) that makes them possible.

It has been established that a liberal education is needed in schools, and that curriculum alone, qua idiom in current discourse-practice, is inadequate for this purpose. I propose that one part of the structuralist framework's revision must promote policy as a theory itself, rather than simply the practice-end of curriculum theory. *How* a school goes about achieving its ends can be – and in most case, is – dependent on local factors and a wide array of interpersonal relationships. It is this

revision that I argue can be accomplished through my proposed research design, which I now address below.

Research Design:

As it stands, the theory discussed above is merely conjecture; it is a hypothesis that has been neither proved nor disproved. The first step that must be taken is to determine whether there is enough corroborating evidence for the claims made above to merit any large scale action. I have therefore chosen to divide my research into two phases: verifying my hypothesis in the first, and acting on its principles in the second. This also increases the feasibility of the project by lessening the liability of sponsors: it divides the amount of capital invested into first a small, and then larger amount. If the project is abandoned mid-way, only a part of the investment is lost.

In this section I will briefly describe the theoretic nature / character of my proposed design, and then outline the methodology for each phase respectively. I am grounding my work primarily in a critical research paradigm, as I hope to expose the underlying and hidden power relationships that marginalize certain groups in a socio-cultural milieu (LeCompte: 1999: 45-6). I will be dealing with a structural framework, which lends itself most suitably to positivist research methods: it is important to believe oneself capable of making empirical judgements about knowable phenomena, particularly when trying to verify a hypothesis. The second part of my investigation will require the action research approach, as I will need to obtain and secure the co-operation of officials in the system to achieve results; as will become evident, it would be impossible to manage the research task alone.

In the first phase of research, I will use mostly survey methods to try and construct 'little narratives' centred around particular schools in a district. I will attempt to create ethnographic profiles of both successful and poor students by considering factors like family structure, number of siblings, parents' income, extra-

curricular activities and hobbies, grades, etc. Each criterion sought will be empirically recordable to facilitate information gathering. Separate sets of profiles must be made for each school in a region, as different configurations of relationships among the variables can yield a profile of a successful student in one setting that may resemble a poor student's elsewhere.

As a general formula, I predict a greater incidence of successful students in settings where social roles and structures are more fluid, rather than rigidly defined. An ideal example of a success criterion would be the smaller school, where limited student resources mean a wider cross-section of the population shares in extra-curricular activities; thus there is frequent contact among students of different ages in different settings. I suggest this is so because students come to view the education process as something continuous through constant contact with students further ahead or behind them; recall that this was a feature of the liberal ideal. Based on the principles I've outlined above, I would expect that there would be a higher ratio of successful students in wealthier neighbourhoods, as a greater income may indicate more leisure time that the parents can devote to their child's studies; the converse would be true of poorer communities. Smaller schools would suggest better performance, larger schools a greater incidence of learning problems stemming from a general sense of alienation, in turn bound up with the abstraction and rigid structure needed to manage such a large population and so many resources. A quick survey of the environment immediately surrounding a school, then, may itself forecast the type of student profile that would function best in it.

The best approach to collecting the necessary information in the first phase is passively, as there is no need for any direct involvement in school affairs. However, if I find enough evidence to support my hypothesis, the second part of the project cannot be conducted in the same manner. If there is, in fact, reason to believe that performance can be improved by deconstructing social relationships and

administrative structures, doing so requires an active, reciprocal commitment. This presupposes a few conditions: firstly, as nearly the entire study will be done through participant observation, I must be in the right position, i.e. a teacher, before any projects can be undertaken. Secondly, I need the support and co-operation of an entire district office, as well as a number of officials working in particular schools.

The aim is to implement programs that cater specifically to the needs of each school as appraised in the first phase of research, monitor their effectiveness and track students' progress. Their common character will be the promotion of the liberal educational ideal, but depending on local factors the effort will take different forms. For example, it may be more appropriate to establish a peer mentoring program in a larger school, where alienation is more common, than in a smaller and less formal institution. Conversely, it would make more sense to encourage parents to take an active role in school affairs in a smaller setting – though an army of parents can accomplish many things, rarely can they be co-ordinated for any role beyond audience in larger schools. There are dozens of possibilities to explore: if the region is very active, perhaps start with an intramural sport program, with the older students coaching or guiding the younger; if the school is reputed for fine arts (in a well-to-do neighbourhood?), encourage three or four grades to work together on a production. Elder students will be compelled by new responsibilities, younger will think differently about the conventional teacher-student binary.

I hope to have shown the potential a theory of policy has to round out the existing analytical framework used in educational discourse-practice. The curriculum has been developed conscientiously for over four decades, and needs merely a few tweaks to meet the liberal ideal as defined above. However, old structural principles still govern the *way* the curriculum is taught, thereby obscuring the liberal thrust. It is indeed likely that a great deal of students' learning problems stem from this

confusion, and I sincerely hope that the program I have outlined above works to resolve these difficulties.

Significance of Study:

I have mentioned above that much scholarship has been devoted to curriculum theory, to the point where the subject has been exhausted. What I am proposing is an interpretive paradigm that extends beyond the limits of curriculum, or rather, incorporates curriculum into a wider structural framework. I hope that this collapses the theory-practice opposition that has traditionally characterized educational discourse.

In 1996, David Hargreaves presented an alarmingly convincing critique of educational research (Hargreaves: 1996, in Hammersley: 2002: 9). His main arguments were that educational research has failed to create a cumulative body of knowledge, and that researchers' findings are generally of little use to teachers. This proposal offers a response to Hargreaves' criticisms. Research grounded in the principles outlined above, geared toward enhancing policy and not curriculum, can indeed both provide cumulative knowledge and help teachers immensely. A fellow researcher working in a different province can, for example, draw on findings of a study done elsewhere in Canada, but nonetheless in a culturally similar setting. Teachers who lack the resources to research their own community can defer the task to dedicated researchers, and model their approaches to suit the student profile constructed by them.

The Canadian public school experience is by no means unique, and follows in the tradition of most developed nations of colonial Europe. Public schooling always arose out of government interests, curriculum was invariably developed with a structural bent, and increasingly, interest groups demanded their say. The regularity of this pattern implies that a structural revision need not confine itself to New Brunswick, or even Canada. As all societies develop, they must invariably look back.

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