

Being in the Know: Cultural Reproduction & Standardized Knowledge in an Alternative School Setting

by
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Introduction

Uncritical views of schooling assume that education is the unproblematic process of offering all students equal access to success. In this view, reasons for student failure are attributed to the individual. A student's lack of effort or ability, for instance, is a common explanation for student failure in a purportedly fair meritocratic system. The presumption of equal access/equal potential in education mirrors capitalist economies—in which all are assumed capable of amassing wealth—and turns the same blind eye to class, race, and other barriers to success.

In contrast to this view, the analysis that follows utilizes the conceptual tools of cultural capital and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Carrington & Luke, 1997) to shed light on how failure is created by schools as part of a larger process of reproducing inequalities among social classes and cultural groups. Bourdieu's ideas about schooling allow us to understand student success/failure by considering the class- and culture-based assumptions that infuse school curricula and the practices that surround it. That is, schools embody the ideas, dispositions, and values of the dominant group(s) that tend to favor those students who possess dominant forms of cultural capital.

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Applying this social reproductive perspective to my own teaching context in Québec—an officially unilingual French province—I examine the role of official curriculum content and its final exam requirements in reinforcing the dominant cultural heritage and in the process selecting against many of the marginalized students I have taught. I offer an appreciation and understanding of the hidden dynamics that produce the otherwise obvious effects of schooling on the reproduction of the social order.

In the course of teaching (2003-2008) in a small alternative school (Alternative High¹) that caters to students considered “at-risk²” of failure by the school board, my students and I struggled to cope with a History curriculum that was highly problematic in terms of its content, and infamous among students as the course that would prevent them from obtaining a high school diploma. I draw connections between the micro-specificity of this History curriculum (content and final exam) in an alternative high school context to larger meso- and macro-economic and cultural dynamics of reproducing dominant Eurocentric and meritocratic narratives as well as social and economic injustices intergenerationally. The Eurocentric nature of the official curriculum on the one hand, and the practical barriers to students placed at-risk successfully passing the exam and attaining a high school diploma on the other are implicated in the inequitable distribution of educational and ultimately economic and social opportunities of students failed by the school system.

I share this analysis as a teacher who has struggled (and often failed) to live out my own critical pedagogy and to add my voice to those of other teachers and students who sense that there is a deep and troubling pedagogical and societal crisis playing out in our schools (Kincheloe, 2008). Since the discussion that follows is generally informed by my own teaching experiences at Alternative High in Québec, some context may be in order.

Alternative High is a publicly-funded alternative school that emerged within one of the urban English school boards within the province of Québec. It caters to grades 10 and 11, is considered a “special-needs” school by the school board, has a student-teacher ratio of 15 to 1, and accepts students who are deemed “at-risk” of failure and who choose to continue their schooling in an alternative setting. The majority of students at Alternative High are identified by the board as having a learning or behavior challenge and are linguistic and cultural minorities in the Québec context. The school has fewer than 100 students, limited human resource support and approximately one-half of the students (2007, 2008) live in areas representing the lowest 30% of average household income for the city (Comité de gestion de la taxe scolaire, 2009).

1. This is a pseudonym for the school.
2. A problematic yet common term adopted by the Ministère de l'Éducation in Québec to refer to students at risk of failure; a category that often refers to students with “learning disabilities or behavioural challenges” (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1999, p. 25)

I have organized this article into three distinct sections: Section I analyzes the Ministry's curriculum content of the History 414 course; Section II discusses the nature and impact of the Ministry's final exam on students in the alternative school context; and Section III outlines the implications of these analyses in light of the most recent curriculum reforms now taking shape in Québec high schools.

Curriculum Content as Dominant Cultural Knowledge: Exclusion, Selectivity, Eurocentrism, & Scientism

The *Québec and Canadian History* program (History 414) emerged in the context of US and Canadian educational reforms of the 1980s and 90s, motivated by behavioral objectives and standardization. The course was taught at the grade 10 level in Québec from 1983-2008 before being replaced during the 2008-2009 academic year by a new *History and Citizenship* program as part of the most recent curriculum reform process (Québec Education Program – QEP) in Québec. As we settle into a new curriculum reality, I reflect back on the defunct and discredited, if not failed, curriculum of yesteryear. A critical analysis of the previous curriculum reveals problematic Eurocentric narratives and positivist approaches to knowledge as well as requirements that work to exclude those students already marginalized within the school system. This retrospective analysis intends to assist in future curriculum analysis and development, and to contribute to ongoing debates regarding the role of our schools in reproducing social and economic disparities.

Who (dis)appears in a curriculum and what counts as knowledge, has implications for which students “connect” or identify with that curriculum and their desires or abilities to meet required standardized criteria for demonstrating understanding. The now-dated History 414 curriculum (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983) served as one step in a complicated process whereby particular cultural forms and capital were recognized and reproduced through the schooling experience. While many critiques could be made, this analysis focuses on two problematic aspects of the official curriculum: 1) its selective and Eurocentric learning objectives; and 2) its positivistic epistemology and ideologically conservative approach to constructing knowledge. This focus is intended to provide *illustrative*, not comprehensive, critiques that clarify particular and problematic dimensions of North American curricula and their reproduction of dominant cultural forms. I use this analysis to help inform later discussion of the new Québec reforms (QEP) currently taking hold at the high school level.

Curriculum Content: Eurocentrism and the invisibility of Indigenous Struggles

As part of the project of Western modernity, the History 414 curriculum embodied a conventional Eurocentric perspective. It sought “to identify the foundations of modern reality in the collective experience and enables him (*sic*) to see a logical

connection between the past and present” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 16). The “pupil” is constructed within “a collective experience” that can best be understood within the purview of modern reality as articulated through the curriculum: a rational/logical construction that renders invisible the power struggles and domination that make up the histories on this continent. Indigenous peoples of this continent who have suffered cultural genocides since the arrival of White settlers might challenge the notion that they have been fairly integrated as part of a presumably harmonious, “collective experience.”

The Eurocentrism of this “modern reality” all but erases the rich history of Indigenous peoples within the borders of present-day Québec and Canada. This is evident in the division of the course into three distinct historical periods: “French Régime,” “British Rule,” and “Contemporary Period;” thus, the history of this region is implicitly framed as beginning with the arrival of Europeans. Largely absent from each period are the dimensions or details of the near disappearance of the more than 50 distinct Indigenous language groups living within present day borders of Canada. Indigenous peoples enter the curriculum almost exclusively in terms of the social organization of two Indigenous groups (“Iroquois and Algonquin tribes”) who were present in this territory at the time of European arrival. The two groups, although presented as homogeneous, in fact comprise diverse groups of linguistically related Indigenous Peoples. For instance, the “Iroquois” is confusing and perhaps inaccurate since the Iroquoian linguistic group is made of several different Indigenous groups which include the groups belonging to the Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and later the Tuscarora), as well as other groups (Huron, Neutrals, Eire). This may be an example of the lack of historical rigor that the curriculum displays in regard to Indigenous peoples.

As can be seen from Figure 1 (below) this Eurocentric orientation is reflected, conceptually and symbolically, in the hierarchal “organization of content charts” found within the curriculum document (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 21). In this case, an understanding of the “social and cultural organization of the Iroquois and Algonquin Tribes” is framed as a “Condition which Affected French Exploration in America” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 26). Thus, French exploration takes the foreground, while the “social and cultural organization of the Iroquois and Algonquin Tribes” takes the background. In this framing, the study of Indigenous Peoples is important only insofar as it aids our understanding of “European exploration.” Put another way, White, male, European agents were the primary subjects and actors while Indigenous Peoples remain generally defined, static, passive, and secondary. This Eurocentrism, as just one dimension of the History 414 course, exemplifies how official curricula validate particular actors and stories, and in this manner contribute to the reproduction of dominant and oppressive narratives.

Concurrently, the Eurocentrism of the curriculum tends to omit the role of power and conflict in shaping historical events and narratives. When interactions

between Indigenous Peoples and White European settlers are addressed, they are framed as an understanding of “mutual influences” - as though European colonization had an innocuous and mutually beneficial/challenging impact on each of these two groups. Obviously, it is misleading to subsume the exchange of snowshoes, squash and corn along with Europeans’ contagious diseases, or the genocide of the Beothuk people under the category of “mutual influences.” This sanitized discourse from the standpoints of Europeans leaves unexamined and unrecognized, the process and outcomes of colonization from other—for instance Indigenous and postcolonial—perspectives.

Unit 1.1

- Terminal Objective** **1.1 To describe the conditions which affected French exploration in America.**
- Intermediate Objectives:**
- 1.1.1 To explain French exploration in America in terms of European expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries.
 - 1.1.2 To describe the geographical features which influenced the first settlements in the St. Lawrence Valley and the Great Lakes region.
 - 1.1.3 To distinguish between the social and cultural organization of the Iroquois and that of the Algonquin tribes.

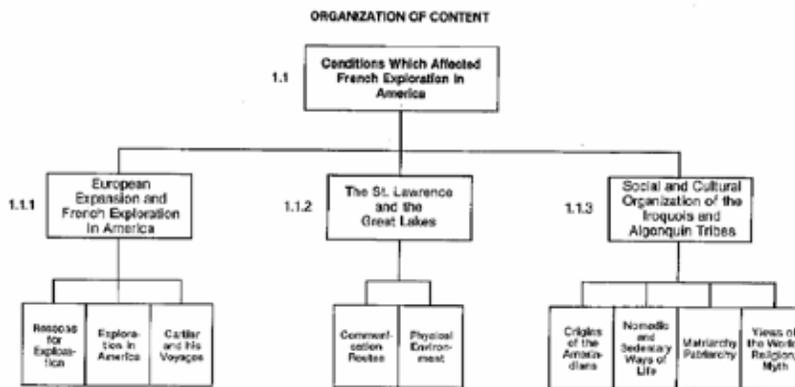


Figure 1: Curriculum Content Chart (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 26).

This discussion is not meant to imply a simplistic conception of knowledge transmission whereby curriculum documents dictate directly the learning process of, or language used by, students (or teachers) in an uncomplicated top-down manner. However, the language and content of the course comprises part of a larger discursive context that shapes an understanding and experience of the cultural forms that are legitimated and reproduced. The “truth” which emerges in this context is “produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). This curriculum is understood as but one, albeit significant, form of constraint which in this case, creates an

understanding and legitimization of hegemonic Eurocentric historical narratives. The effects of the curriculum document include the shaping of the classroom pedagogy as well as the final exam. The provincial History 414 final exam reflects course content and is—almost without exception—absent of more recent or contemporary references to Indigenous Peoples, their cultures, challenges, and histories. Although the “contemporary” period (1867-present) forms almost half of the material covered in the course, Indigenous peoples are much more likely to be represented and essentialized by images of “timeless” Amerindians in a “wigwam” than to see an image or aspect of Indigenous Peoples’ lives from a particular community, time and place.

While the curriculum purportedly sets out to “select certain meaningful themes which relate to pupils’ questions” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 16), it is clear that the selection of course objectives and themes may not reflect the questions or interests of certain (racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual, abled etc.) groups. The History 414 curriculum reflects particular aspects of dominant cultural knowledge; in this case, the superiority and benevolence of European powers and a general failure to address power relationships between geographic/cultural groups. Students of particular standpoint positions, or in Bourdieu’s framework, with dominant forms of cultural capital (e.g., familiarity with dominant-Eurocentric-cultural narratives and values) will more readily relate to the curriculum and “understand” it in its own terms. Thus, the curriculum’s Eurocentric, colonial *selection*, devoid of an analysis of power and domination, may speak more directly to those who identify with the standpoint of (white male) European colonizers and/or those who remain unaware of power differentials and their effects.

The above discussion serves as an illustrative example of cultural bias, or erasure, within a curriculum in the North American context. This example demonstrates how curricula can serve in the cultural reproduction of particular—in this example colonial/Eurocentric—hierarchies through the hegemonic narratives that emerge, as well as the (dis)engagement which can result for particular students. Concurrently, failing to explore power and the economy of oppression in its rendering of history, official curricula can work to subdue emancipatory or counter-hegemonic student responses. In these ways, problematic curricula shape how schools “create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (Apple, 1990, p. 3).

The dominant approaches to understanding history, and their implications for particular students and the consecration of a dominant “cultural heritage,” cannot be separated from the epistemological stance of the Ministry’s curriculum. This stance privileges the assumptions and commitments of modern scientific claims about neutrality and truth. It is these epistemological concerns, which are embedded in issues of cultural reproduction, to which I now turn.

Curriculum Content and Epistemology: Scientism, Claims of Truth, and Dominant ways of knowing

In addition to its Eurocentric bias, the History 414 curriculum privileges an epistemic position that valorizes dominant scientific discourse. The course was based on a “guiding principle” (among others) to “develop the pupil’s ability to interpret historical events objectively” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 16). Indeed, it is asserted that the “discipline of history provides answers to man’s [*sic*] questions” as the “historical approach should...help develop objectivity” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 15). The scientific necessity of “objectivity” is often associated with claims of being above ideological or political influence, or in a word: neutral, as though historical interpretations could be made in an objective and neutral political vacuum that renders the curriculum “correct” (and beyond dispute). As Freire pointed out, neutrality is a convenient alternative to saying that one is siding with the dominant or the oppressor (Horton & Freire, 1980, p. 104).

While there is value in working towards a “reading of the world,” which attempts to transcend one’s own particular perspectives and experiences, or those of one’s own cultural group(s), couching the curriculum’s truth claims within an “objective” or scientific position can discourage or foreclose alternative interpretations or counter-truths. The “rationale” of the History 414 course asserts that the course “enables the pupil to understand the progress of the society in which he [*sic*] lives and thereby to discover its nature” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1983, p. 15). This rationale reflects a positivist ontological position that presumes a singular objective reality (“nature of society”) and a positivist epistemological position that the nature of reality can be (unproblematically) revealed or discovered. This discovery of the nature of society apparently results from an understanding of the “progress of the society” as opposed, perhaps, to its regression, conflicts, or crises.

These ontological and epistemological positions working within a modern narrative of progressivism also construct particular interpretations, explanations and meanings of historical events. Essentially, a “conservative perspective on the usefulness of conflict” is conveyed as capital “T” “Truth/s” are presented in the absence of an analysis of power as historical knowledge is not examined “as a personal construction of human beings” (Apple, 2004, p. 82). This approach to history is evident not only in the stated goals regarding “objectivity” (1983, p. 15) but in the nature of the Organization of Content charts referred to earlier (1983, p. 26-64, see Figure 1). The charts practically and symbolically lend themselves to the presentation of history as a series of discrete “facts.” These facts are presented within a singular version of history, rather than among multiple and competing versions which take place in the context of power and/or relationships of domination.

In the absence of reflecting on the process of knowledge production itself or questioning the knowledge presented in the curriculum document “as a given,” students (and teachers) are exposed to a “local” (Harding, 1998; Seidman, 1994)

ethnocentric curriculum couched in a modernist Cartesian version of history/the world (Kincheloe, 2001). As teachers attempt to teach/transmit the official curriculum, they run the risk of students learning to equate the memorization of (politically, ethically, socially sanitized or racist) discrete facts with developing an understanding of history or historical thinking. The Eurocentric perspective previously discussed, presented as it is within a positivist epistemological purview, is an illustrative example of the “localness” and problematic nature of a North American curriculum situated in Québec.

The curriculum’s understanding of history as science, with its concomitant claims of knowledge and truth, allow those students of particular *habitus*, who conform to (or embody) this hegemonic conception of (or disposition toward) history and knowledge, to experience success. Conversely, those students whose “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) are not reflected in the curriculum or who possess non-dominant forms of embodied cultural capital (Carrington & Luke, 1997) are unlikely to easily master the culturally inscribed “local” (yet hegemonic) content of and approaches to knowledge. In light of these dynamics, and compounded by their previous experiences of failure, I observed that many of my students did not expend great effort in the memorization of the reductive curriculum. Some would remark that they saw “no point” to the history and in some cases would opt to fail with minimal effort rather than investing in a game they felt likely to lose. These types of student response cannot be separated from the dynamics of reproducing social positions (Willis, 1977).

The History 414 course, in terms of epistemological orientation and content, is part of a wider system of discourse through which power “circulates” and which serves to subdue and objectify individuals in our society (Foucault, 1995). Significantly, the specific nature of the assessment regime - the final exam - forms part of the “techniques” and practices, which serve the same disciplinary ends. All students at Alternative High were required to write an exam that ignores their diverse abilities (Gabel, 2002) and embodies specific forms of literacy and thinking which serve to oppress students who arrive at the examination moment without the necessary volume and structure of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99). In light of the content-based concerns regarding this curriculum, I now focus on the final exam and its effects to further illustrate how the History 414 course reproduced hegemonic knowledge constructions and practices which, in turn, are implicated in *producing* the failure our alternative school was meant to combat.

Part II: The Imperatives of Provincial Curriculum: A Look at Assessment

The epistemological stance and cultural and ideological overtones of the History 414 course take on new meanings when the nature and impact of the standardized ministry exam are considered. As a high stakes (worth 50% of grade) final exam

for a course prerequisite to graduate, students' failure to understand, or demonstrate understanding of, the examination questions prevented them from attaining their diploma (or institutional capital (Carrington & Luke, 1997)) and the privileges (credentials, status, employability) it may afford³.

High stakes final exams have the power to direct the energies of both students and teachers toward the attainment of government-set standards and specific (dominant) cultural practices. This power has its own instrumentalist effects on classroom practice as it shapes how students and teachers perceive the purpose of school. This form of high-stakes assessment also presumes that all students possess particular literacies and dispositions, which are not held by many and which are needed to demonstrate curricular knowledge on the exam. It is to these effects of the Ministry's means of evaluation to which I now turn.

The Exam: Enforcing Dominant Cultural Knowledge

Critical teachers tend to be aware of the paradox that even as schools work to reproduce structural inequalities, they also remain among the few institutions that can produce opportunities to contest them (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). A complex challenge of working with students of diverse abilities and cultures is the existing chasm between student-centered teaching and curriculum- or exam-centered teaching. If teachers take seriously the impact of status attainment (or institutional capital) *vis à vis* a high school diploma, the corollary of helping students overcome the immediate barriers to attaining that status (passing of Ministry Final Exam)—even if it means “teaching to the test”—is not far behind. This situation, and its contradictions, is not an easy one for teachers to navigate. From my own experience, and those of many of my colleagues who have taught the History 414 course, “preparation of students” for the final exam is a powerful imperative shaping the types of educational experiences that history teachers attempt (or do not attempt) to create in classrooms.

The “content heaviness” of curriculum often obliges teachers to depend upon particular instructional methods in order to “cover” required content within a given time period. In an attempt to cope with the sheer quantity of information that students in Québec were required to memorize for the History 414 course, much of my own classroom time was dedicated to note-taking, memorization, repetition, and/or teacher-led lectures. As Noddings (2003) describes in the US context, “specifying the entire curriculum as objectives before teachers and students begin to interact forecloses the freedom of students to participate in the construction of their own learning objectives” (Noddings, 2003, p. 77). Thus, in contrast to Dewey's (1966) student-centered pedagogy, students (and teachers)

3. Although diplomas will confer differentiated benefits to graduates depending upon their gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, etc. (Fine, 1996), the general empirical relationship between educational attainment or credentials with socioeconomic attainment is well supported by research (Bills, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2004).

spend countless hours familiarizing themselves with the predefined and culturally specific language and codes of the curriculum and Ministry exam. The imperatives of the final exam thus shape classroom practices which facilitate a process whereby (official) knowledge is more likely to be “passed down” from teacher to student, as opposed to being co-created, questioned, or consciously constructed together.

The priorities of classroom instruction which result from the imperatives of the curriculum/exam prevail at the expense of other priorities that could otherwise lead to more serious questioning of why success and failure are produced within our school system in the first place. Indeed, with the spectre of exam failure looming, and the concerns about exam preparation, teachers may be less likely to dedicate class time to exploring the uneven distribution of privileged knowledge or cultural capital among people—not to mention a similarly asymmetrical distribution of economic capital within the larger society.

The primacy of the curricular imperatives manifest not only in the assessment tools employed by teachers throughout the academic year (i.e., mirroring the upcoming final exam), but in the priorities and focus of students as they become aware (to varying degrees) of the consequences for their passing or failure of the course. Unfortunately, these pressures intensify when compounded by the “learning challenges” (*vis à vis* the curriculum) of some students. These challenges are evident as students must retain abstract information, retrieve it upon demand, and be capable of attending and behaving in the manners that such learning demands.

There are many life circumstances or challenges which students at Alternative High face that complicate what are often idealized middle-class notions of “the pupil” which too often inform curriculum expectations. Many Alternative High students struggle to control their own anger and grapple with serious drug addiction or abusive relationships, and they often require intensive tutoring and practice to successfully commit three key dates and the events associated with them in order. One might wonder if all students need be expected to dedicate many hours of their schooling career to learning the (de-contextualized) details (dates, purpose, aspects) of, for example, the various constitutions of “British Rule” in British North America and how to demonstrate that knowledge in the Ministry exam format. The need for control in the classroom becomes paramount for teachers at the juncture where students with diverse learning needs and behavioral challenges engage in traditional banking education (Freire, 1970). Control is required to create classrooms where students with various behavioral, emotional, and/or learning challenges will be disposed to learning (and/or not interfering with other students’ learning) a curriculum that is not suited or designed to meet their pedagogical needs.

Even the seemingly benevolent and creative techniques employed by well-meaning teachers to relate student interests to an aspect of the history curriculum

may be understood as the effect of disciplinary acts of power⁴ on teachers and students as they are implicated in a process of control that attempts to “pass on” or teach/learn politically and epistemologically problematic curriculum. How can we, as teachers, avoid creating learning situations which reproduce the explicit and implicit assumptions of dominant culture, as we attempt to prepare students for the final exam? Is engagement with youth culture enough for teachers to “easily cover the content requirements of the curriculum” in a critical manner (Carr, 2008, p. 91) irrespective of curriculum requirements, cultural milieu, or the diverse abilities (Gabel, 2002) of our students? In this context, teachers must trouble curricular assumptions relating to the nature of knowledge (as objective, privileged, and de-contextualized information), the purposes of education, and the value or relevance of students’ lived experiences in the schooling process. Caught at the nexus where curriculum, dominant culture, young people and broader class and cultural dynamics interact, teachers are constantly faced with the sometimes contradictory tensions of helping students graduate on the one hand, and reproducing dominant knowledge and epistemic positions on the other.

As Foucault (1980) reminds us: “[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (p. 52). The effects are both the learning of explicit curriculum, and the “hidden” curriculum of implicit power relationships, uses of the body, attention, and continual subjection to evaluation (of students - by teacher and Ministry – and of teachers, through, for example, the publication of standardized-exam-results- based school rankings (for example, in the Québec context see Boyer & Laberge, 2008).

Curriculum, Assessment and the Creation of Failure

The History 414 curriculum and final exam produces a type of failure for some students as it fosters instrumental attitudes toward education and is implicated in broader school structures which (re)produce inequalities. In my own classroom, not only had many of the students failed the History 414 course at their previous school, many remained in the class for the sole purpose of passing the course in order to attain their high school diploma. This is such an obvious observation for teachers teaching the course within “special needs” schools that it hardly need be mentioned, but for the fact that it speaks to the overwhelmingly instrumentalist approaches to school that many marginalized students (and their teachers) often experience. Students are not there to quench their thirst for learning but out of (often resentment-eliciting) necessity: as a means of fulfilling requirements to obtain a high school diploma or to please a parent or guardian. This instrumentalism is also reflected in the school culture of many alternative schools where the sense of “community” within the school is predicated, in part, on the shared “struggle”

4. “...modern Western techniques used to train an individual; examples include examination and surveillance” (Jardine, 2005, p. 10).

of teachers and students to have students *pass* their courses, indeed this is the *raison d'être* many alternative school programs.

Indeed, the alternative schools tend to attract students with resistant dispositions to being taught or succeeding within a mainstream classroom setting. With the aid of a standardized curriculum (e.g. the History 414 course), these schools *produce* various types of success and failure, as the great majority of our students do not go on to higher education (or high-status institutional capital attainment), and more often will enter trades, work for family members, remain or become involved in criminal activities, or work at various low-wage jobs. Thus, on a meso-level, and taken as one part of the education system as a whole, the composition of students within Alternative High, in terms of their cultural capital and *habitus*, reflects a larger process of social reproduction of economic and social opportunities.

There is also a cruel aspect to the examination moment which arrives every June. At Alternative High we have observed a variety of student responses to the grade 10 final exam. These include (but are not limited to) anxiety attacks, extreme apathy, a compulsion to avoid or disrupt the examination process, and extreme agitation. Perhaps most alarming are the compliant bodies with relatively expressionless countenances which many of our most disadvantaged students bring to the examination moment. As they attempt to meet the requirements of an exam that they are unlikely to pass, their stoic manner belies the hopelessness of the moment. Passing the exam (having mastered enough of the content and codes of, and practices surrounding, the exam) opens the door to high-school graduation, while failing may close it. In both cases, the power of the exam—its epistemological and disciplining nature—produces its effects.

Equipped with the power to enforce a high-stakes standardized test for the course, we can see how the government and its “educational institutions are centrally implicated in the processes whereby official knowledge is distinguished from and given privileged status over other forms of knowledge” (Wotherspoon, 1998, p. 92). The official knowledge consists of explicated curricular objectives on the one hand, while on the other hand, there are the required cultural skills and knowledges students need in order to successfully cope with the standardized government assessment. Some of these knowledges/skills include a facility with spoken and written standard English, delayed gratification, and the ability to sit and concentrate on reading and comprehension tasks for extended periods of time, to name a few. Bourdieu argues that it is the *habitus* of the student which forms (or not) those dispositions, and supports the behaviors and aptitudes, which would put them in good stead for experiencing success within specific school contexts. It is this latter point to which we now turn our attention.

The Role of Schools in the Creation of Failure

“Evaluation, to be valid and fair, must take into account the characteristics of the pupils, of the discipline, and of the educational context” (Gouvernement du

Québec, 1983, p. 67). This commendable Ministry intention seems absurd when reflecting upon my students' attempts to pass the History 414 course. Reasons for student failure included (but were not limited to) being absent on exam day, not understanding the exam questions, not being able to demonstrate knowledge on the exam, and/or not being able to learn the curriculum content in the first place.

For those students who struggled to connect the "correct" facts in the "correct" order, enormous effort was directed toward memorization of dates, people, and events that have little or no connection to the students' understanding of their lives or cultural contexts. For those who *did* have a good understanding of the content and its chronology (as defined by the Ministry curriculum), many were unable to demonstrate what they knew in the manner demanded by the exam's format. Similar to Bourdieu's observations in the French (European) context, the pedagogy and assessment tools employed by the Québec government emphasize "the spoken as well as written word, the traditional preference in...schools for the eloquent lecture helps secure the privileges of those rich in [dominant] cultural capital" (Swartz 1997, p. 200).

This emphasis is evident in the reliance of the "chalk and talk" type teaching methods teachers employed to "get through," or "pass on" the dense facts and events that make up the History 414 curriculum. Emphasis on the written word is also evident in the types of literacy required of students in order for them to demonstrate their understanding of course content; by reading, comprehending, and responding in writing on their standardized final exam. Typical exam booklets require approximately 30-40 pages of reading (including images) and include approximately 20 multiple choice questions, nine short answer questions, and, in recent years, one essay question. The problematic nature of the "written word" (Swartz, 1997) that is privileged through the Ministry exam, becomes apparent in my classroom where students read government exam questions and are unable to understand what is expressed or asked due to the type of language (ethnocentric, or otherwise) used in those texts. The different vocabularies and manners of speaking that students bring to the exam moment aid or hinder their understanding, depending on their class and cultural positions in relation to those embodied by the exam (Delpit, 1988). I add my voice to those teachers who consider the provincial final exam questions to be unfair in their formulation and "tricky" to some students (Branswell, 2008). It is often those students of particular *habitus* and whose parent(s)/guardian(s) are not of the "educated class" who are more likely to be "tricked" by the various codes and formats evident within the exam (e.g. Appendix question 24).

The final exam questions demonstrate how students with a vocabulary set more indicative of the "educated class," and/or familiarity with certain cultural references (e.g. those of dominant Québec Christian culture such as "parish," or "clergy") might better decipher the meanings that the Ministry expects students to understand in order to "correctly" respond to the question. Some might view this

culturally inscribed language as an example of the type of presumed universality of cultural references that Wotherspoon describes:

Test items like many classroom activities, often rely on knowledge or experiences that may seem to the teacher or tester to be universal but that in fact reflect a particular orientation to reality not shared by all groups. (1998, p. 95)

Such a presumed universality goes beyond specific cultural references such as those having to do with religion or ethnic diversity (see Appendix question #10). They also include the tacit cultural skills, attitudes, and practices associated with being able to complete the final exam; for example: 1) an ability to sit for a substantial period of time (approximately two and a half hours) in order to read and respond to the final exam questions (arguably, students with various emotional or neurological conditions/circumstances are unable to meet this requirement), and 2) a student's likelihood of showing up to a final exam on a specific day (due to a fight, court date, sleeping difficulties, substance abuse, etc.). Compared with many mainstream schools, students leaving the examination early or not showing up the day of the exam are relatively common occurrences at Alternative High. .

Since being absent on exam day could have serious consequences for students' final average, it is worth noting possible reasons why students would miss the exam. During one particularly tragic two-week period, students were late or absent from school for the following reasons: friend died (run over by car), friend committed suicide, (single) mother had bi-polar episode and needed to be hospitalized, student was "jumped" at the metro station (had the black eye to prove it), student suffered an anxiety attack, had to work for boss on short notice, was too "high" that morning to attend, slept in, did not sleep the night before, was sick (without documentation), had to attend court, arrived late from home with no reason given, etc. These examples may be viewed as reflective of the exigencies of students' lived experiences and their classes and cultural locations. These dynamics and realities which shape students' lives are rarely accounted for in the design and implementation of curriculum, evaluation or school programs.

In those cases where documentation was required in order to avoid being penalized for missing the exam, many students of a non-dominant *habitus* lacked the necessary dispositions or cultural capital to ensure that appropriate documentation was obtained and handed in to the correct administrative body within a required time period. Thus, a genuinely ill student on exam day might be unlikely to get the necessary documentation to exempt them from the final exam. Perhaps less obvious are the repercussions for those students who are unable to concentrate on exam day as a result of any number of their life circumstances at that time. For many "at-risk" students (those students with a *habitus* that has not positioned them to experience success within the regular (dominant) school system), having to attend a final exam worth 50% of their final grade, on a particular day and at a particular time, and whose failure can preclude them from attaining

their high school diploma, does not appear to be a valid or fair measure of student knowledge. Thus, the evaluation mechanism of the Ministry is invalid for many of the students who attend Alternative High and other students whose *habitus* is informed by similarly difficult life events or circumstances.

More generally, the student's facility with standard language forms, conceptual abstraction, linear thought, and familiarity with the types of questions (multiple choice, fill in the blank, short essay) that are found on the final exam are also skills and knowledges that the Ministry (ostensibly) assumes students bring with them to the assessment moment. The idea that exposure, practice, and priority would be given to these culturally inscribed skills by various cultural and economic classes in our society to the same degree outside of school is the basic falsehood upon which much of our functionalist, meritocratic school system rests (Delpit, 1988). This presumption helps, perhaps, to create the kinds of failure that lead to the "necessity" of alternative schools to begin with. Without questioning and challenging how our school system assumes an equal distribution of dominant forms of cultural capital, our schools - alternative or otherwise - become problematic and contradictory at best, and at worst locations where the disparities between different societal groups are reproduced and (re)enforced from generation to generation. Thus, certain types of cultural capital (students) are selected, or privileged (i.e. through the nature of curriculum content and assessment) that *creates* failure within our school systems, and similarly, translates into the asymmetrical distribution of credentials/status, achievements and ultimately economic class.

Part III: Looking Ahead and Looking Behind: The QEP

The most recent Québec reforms (the Québec Education Program or QEP) currently being implemented in Québec high schools, represent, in some respects, a very significant philosophical and pedagogical departure from the older curriculum discussed in this article. While an in-depth analysis of the latest curriculum lies beyond the scope of this article, I mention a few aspects of the new program. Whereas the previous curriculum tended to favour a banking model (Freire, 1970) of education, the QEP explicitly calls for a student-centered pedagogy that fosters empowerment. It states:

A pedagogy based on the transmission of knowledge is not the best way to foster the empowerment of students, and even less an empowerment that takes into account their individual differences. (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 9)

Indeed, the QEP reframes the meaning of "success" as it attempts to account for student differences, without presuming that all students arrive in the classroom with the same capacities and backgrounds. Other significant elements of the QEP reform include:

- the construction of teachers as professionals with valuable expertise;
- the construction of students as the "main agent of their education";

- a shift from learning objectives to competencies, which are defined as “the capacity to act effectively by drawing on a variety of resources”;
- a concern with student empowerment which incorporates choice making, reflection and action.
- targets “cross-curricular learning that transcends the boundaries of subject-specific learning” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, pp. v-9)

Unlike the more traditional positivist scientism of the former curriculum, there is an emphasis on meaning-making and social-construction. For example, in the QEP “territory is defined as a social space that human beings occupy, modify, give meaning to and organize in a specific way” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007, p. 4). There also appears to be a greater recognition of and engagement with the diversity of people who make up contemporary Québec society. Additionally, concepts of power are addressed within the History and Citizenship curriculum in the form of “official power” and “countervailing power” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007, p. 28). Perhaps most relevant to this discussion is the shift in evaluation: “Evaluation is not an end in itself. Students do not learn in order to be evaluated, but they are evaluated in order to help them learn better” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 10).

While the implementation of the reform has been controversial and is viewed by some as a source of problems for teachers (e.g. Advisory Board on English Education, 2006), this brief and incomplete description of several of the reform’s aspects indicates a potentially critical pedagogical turn in Québec curriculum development. I would like to suggest, however, that our experiences with the previous curriculum should caution us against overly optimistic initial responses to the new curriculum. In terms of content, a cursory look at the QEP reveals that Indigenous peoples are addressed in a more sophisticated and comprehensive manner as “Relations with Native peoples” are incorporated into most of the subject-specific competencies of the course. However, this framing maintains White European settlers as the central subjects in the historical narratives that emerge, and thus leaves intact aspects of the hegemonic story lines of the previous curriculum. As well, the recent final exam (June 2009) representations of Indigenous peoples are as before, “timeless” images of people next to a wigwam, or distance views of a village with longhouses (Ministère de l’Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2009, p. 11). The one image which clearly portrays Indigenous peoples from a specific time and place is an image of many Indigenous people with a handful of French Europeans present. In the center of the image is Jacques Cartier, and the title of the image is “Jacques Cartier at Hochelaga” (Ministère de l’Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2009, p. 9). Once again, Indigenous people recede to the background and become important insofar as they aid an understanding of the central actors: Europeans.

Fundamentally, the QEP appears to contain a central tension, if not contradiction. The main orientation of the curriculum reform targets “one central objective:

success for all, with no lowering of requirements” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 4). The problem lies in what the “requirements” end up being, and how and by whom “success” ends up being defined in practice. Will the “requirements” be measured through high-stakes standardized exams? Will those exams become worth a large percentage of students’ final grades? Will competencies in the end consist of “acting effectively” but only insofar as such action may be measured through culturally dominant writing and reading comprehension in all subjects? As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, the evaluation element of the high school level curriculum will significantly impact the nature of the teaching and learning taking place in the classrooms, as well as the “success” that students experience (or not).

For all the differences, there are also salient similarities between both the old and the new curriculum programs as far as the History course is concerned. While the History program has been expanded to encompass a two year period, in grades 9 and 10, the case remains that there is a large amount of content to be covered in each of those years with the passing of the course remaining a requirement for high school graduation. Another salient similarity is an accompanying standardized exam to be given to students at the end of the course. The “new” final exam, initiated for the first time this June of 2009, was considered “provisional” and was worth 30% of students’ grade as opposed to the previous course’s 50%. At this point in time, it is unclear whether or not the weighting or structure of the exam will change. The good intentions behind making the evaluation a means of learning were evident in the additional small font words that explain the specific criteria for receiving marks on a question and also explicating the specific intellectual operation being evaluated (e.g., “Places facts in chronological order”). While I am no longer teaching at Alternative High, I did help with the exam invigilation (2009).. For many students with reading difficulties, this significant amount of additional small text on the page was disorienting and certainly, the new exams bring new codes for students and teachers to decipher and attempt to overcome. The overall form of the examination event was not very different this year from the previous five that I have experienced here in Québec. The student anxiety and absenteeism, as well as the frustration of many students unable to comprehend what was being asked of them indicated that little has changed, at least on the surface, in terms of the examination moment at Alternative High.

Indeed, the exam itself was surprisingly similar to those of the previous and highly problematic curriculum. As one Social Studies Consultant of a local school board wrote in response to the “new curriculum” exams: “Evaluation drives instruction. The present evaluation effectively forces teachers to concentrate on prescribed content at the detriment of competency development” (Social Studies Consultant, 2009). The consultant went on to state,

[T]he inclusion of the old program content and the focus on knowledge in the exam means this course is the same old history....It does very little to foster

the development of historical thinking, rather it reinforces the status quo....[U]nderlying the program are the positivistic notions of truth and progress...[T]here are two conflicting views of the program. One, initially developed by the curriculum team, and the other, developed by the evaluation team. (Social Studies Consultant, 2009)

This very brief discussion serves as a very tentative and incomplete sketch of some of the concerns and questions in response to a History curriculum/evaluation development and implementation process ongoing in Québec. Further and more systematic research into both the content as well as the school practices which comprise curriculum are called for. In the face of standardized curriculum and assessment within our schools being implicated in an unjust reproduction of societal inequalities on the one hand, and miserable experiences at school for students (and some teachers) on the other hand, we would do well to consider the experiences of those most marginalized by these practices as the focus for our research⁵. As Kincheloe (2003) asserts: “The words of students are the ore of teacher research” (p. 45). And as Sandra Harding (1998) points out, by including those standpoints on the margins, we can better understand the ways dominant knowledge and epistemologies are both local and inscribed with power.

Starting thought from the lives of those people upon whose exploitation the legitimacy of the dominant system depends can bring into focus questions and issues that were not visible, “important,” or legitimate within the dominant institutions, their conceptual frameworks, cultures, and practices. (Harding, 1998, p. 17)

By attending to the multiplicity of experiences within our schools from various analytical perspectives, we are in a better position to create complex, and more comprehensive understandings of power, knowledge, and experience as they play out in, and through, our schools. In the process, we might better negotiate more just and enjoyable educational experiences for all of our students.

The potential for the new History course and associated evaluation regime to reinforce or transcend the previous, outdated and discredited curricular practices of yesteryear remains to be seen. While the recent QEP documents have afforded educators in Québec new discursive terrain upon which to justify and explore issues of social justice and pedagogy and to support progressive teaching practices, there remain significant challenges to facilitating “success for all” students. This is especially true in the context of an educational system that operates within a competitive model whose purpose historically has been ideologically and culturally assimilationist, and which creates understandings and definitions of success and failure which work to benefit some groups and not others. It remains unclear how these new curriculum reforms will shape the nature of dynamics of cultural reproduction discussed in this article.

5. Including those students who dropout of school altogether.

REFLECTIONS

If we aim for an equitable and inclusive justice in our schools, we must dedicate more rigorous discussion to the connections between the micro-contexts of our classes and larger meso- and macro-trends which raise concerns regarding the efficacy and purposes of our educational system and the practices and ideologies which comprise it. I have sought in this article to explore several serious concerns relating to how our schools fail those students most in need of success, and the roles that curriculum content, standardized exams, and wider dominant discourses have in consecrating dominant “cultural heritage” while selecting against particular students and reproducing social and economic disparities in the process. I hope that by fostering discussion about the roles of educators, their curriculum, and schools in the complex dynamics of inter-generational reproduction of social and cultural inequalities, we will be in a position to better understand the challenges we and our students face as well as recognize opportunities to disrupt these processes and thereby help to transform our education (and economic) system.

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Question #10 (Multiple Choice) – June 2008 Final Exam

(Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 12 of Question Booklet)

10. Between 1867 and 1896, Québec experienced major economic and social change.

Which document below describes an action taken by the Catholic Church in this period?

A) [The clergy] sought to establish unions . . . in which the presence of a priest would ensure respect for the social doctrine of the Church. . . . Catholic unions in the province of Québec joined together to form the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada [Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour] . . .

Marcel Roy and Dominic Roy, *Je me souviens: Années du Québec et du Canada (Saint-Laurent: ERPI, 1995)*, p. 363. [Translator]

B) To the clergy . . . the only way to solve the problem of emigration was by colonizing new regions. . . . The government's policy on colonization had the support of the clergy, who wanted to maintain a generally rural and traditional society in Québec. Along these lines, it created colonization societies and established new parishes.

Claude Bouchard and Robert Lagasse, *Nouvelle-France, Canada, Québec (Montreal: Beauchesne, 1991)*, p. 213. [Translator]

C) The Church retained considerable power, but the social and economic situation had changed. . . . Québec became predominantly urban. . . . The values of city people were changing. . . . It was harder for a parish priest to provide guidance for all his parishioners than it was in the country.

Louise Charpentier et al., *Nouvelle histoire du Québec et du Canada (Montréal: CEC, 1985)*, p. 318. [Translator]

D) The Church had a particularly important role in [calming] popular unrest. In the countryside, parish priests received clear instructions from the bishops to support established British authority and the divine right of the monarchy.

John A. Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Québec (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003)*, p. 155.

Question # 24 (Short Answer Section) – June 2008 Final Exam

(Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 26 of Question Booklet)

24. In the second half of the 19th century, the beginning of industrialization in Québec gave rise to economic and social changes.

In your Answer Booklet, place the number of each document in the appropriate space in the diagram.

Document 1

As it modernized, agriculture freed up workers, who became available for industrial jobs in the cities.

Louise Charpentier et al., *Nouvelle Histoire du Québec et du Canada* (Montreal: CEC, 1985), p. 254. [Translator]

Document 2

Urban population of Québec				
Years	Montréal	Québec	Sherbrooke	Hull
1851	57 715	42 052	2 998	—
1861	90 323	59 990	—	—
1871	107 225	59 699	4 432	3 800
1881	140 747	62 446	7 227	6 890
1891	216 650	63 090	10 097	11 264
1901	277 730	68 840	11 765	13 993
1911	470 480	78 710	16 405	18 222
1921	618 506	95 193	23 515	24 117
1931	818 577	130 594	28 933	29 433

Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, data taken from Jean-François Cardin et al., *Le Québec: héritages et projets* (Laval: ÉRIU, 1994), p. 204 and 220.

Document 3

In a union, workers [could] agree to refuse to work for wages that were too low . . . They could put pressure on employers by going on strike.

Jean-Pierre Charland, *À l'aube du XX^e siècle: Histoire du Québec et du Canada* (Montreal: Lides, 1997), p. 304. [Translator]

Document 4

Agricultural regions near cities began to specialize to meet the needs of a rapidly growing urban population.

Marcel Roy and Dominic Roy, *Jr me souviens: Histoire du Québec et du Canada* (Saint-Laurent: ÉRFI, 1996), p. 325. [Translator]

Document 5

The workers' pay was only supposed to pay for their food and shelter. The hours could be as long as [the employer] wanted; the only limit being that the worker should be physically capable of coming to work the next day.

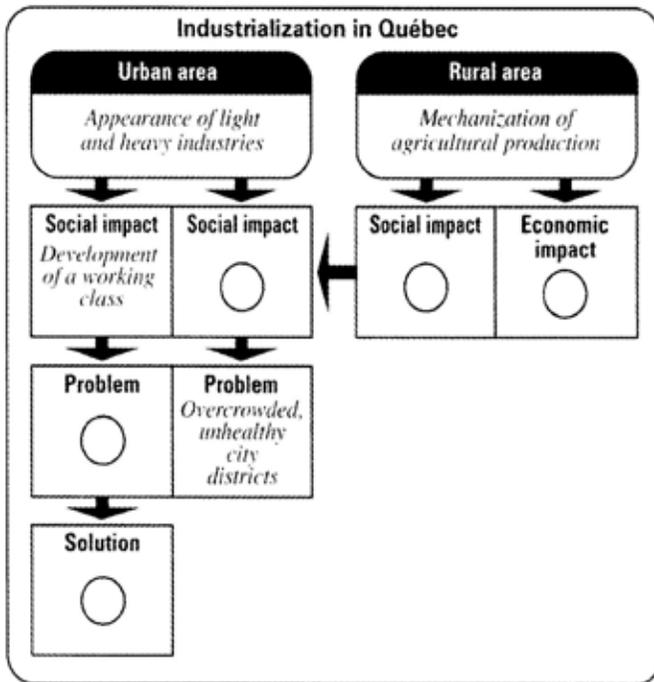
Jean-Pierre Charland, *À l'aube du XX^e siècle: Histoire du Québec et du Canada* (Montreal: Lides, 1997), p. 302-303. [Translator]

24 of Answer Booklet (Short Answer Section) – June 2008
Final Exam

Note: To obtain 3 marks for Question 24, you must place the numbers of at least 3 of the 5 documents in the appropriate spaces.

(Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 2 of Answer Booklet)

24.



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