LEARNING ABOUT WOMEN'S WORK: CANADIAN THOUGHTS ON CRITICAL PRACTICE IN SECONDARY SCHOOL CO-OP EDUCATION[1, 2]

JANICE AHOLA-SIDAWAY
MARGARET McKINNON
CHERYL SIMSER
PETRA SPLETZER

Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Ontario

During the past several decades, women's participation in the recorded labor force worldwide has steadily increased. Despite economic recessions in the early 1980's and 1990's, overall trends in waged work among Canadian women have followed a similar pattern. From 1975 to 1993, the percentage of all women aged 15 and over who were working outside the home grew from 41% to 51% (Statistics Canada, 1994a). Young Canadian women today can expect to spend a major part of their lives in paid employment. One government source suggests that a twenty-year-old Canadian woman will likely spend thirty-seven years in the workforce (Ontario Women's Directorate, 1990).

Although a large minority of today's young women will likely continue their formal education into the postsecondary level, the majority will not. For that non-college/non-university- bound majority in particular, Canadian secondary school educators need to play a central role in helping prepare female students for the world of waged work.

This challenge is by no means easy or straightforward for educators in general and it becomes even more complex for educators who attempt to critically examine women's work education issues. Current trends suggest that many women wage earners will face difficult social and economic conditions (Lindgren, 1994). For example, it appears that unemployment rates will remain high despite growing signs that parts of the country are crawling out of the current recession. Global competition will continue to provide

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a compelling rationale for organizational downsizing, off-shoring of jobs, creating larger and larger contingent workforces, and the like. Technology will continue to rapidly change the way some work is conceived and done, as well as the kinds of jobs that will be available. These newer trends, together with long-standing ones such as low-paying, contingent, sex-segregated work for Canadian working class women may easily translate into even greater job vulnerability and lower job value (and pay) than in the past (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994; McKinnon & Ahola-Sidaway, 1994).

Given these realities, the purpose of this paper is to examine some of the tensions and contradictions that arise when one tries to think about critical pedagogy in terms of secondary school work education for young non-college/non-university-bound women. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part provides a short overview of the Canadian scene. We briefly describe Canadian schooling and students, work trends among young Canadian women, and the kinds of popular work education initiatives currently in existence in Canadian secondary schools. The second part of the paper offers a critical pedagogy perspective on work education in general and on the popular cooperative education project in particular. The discussion identifies some central tensions and contradictions facing work educators in cooperative education and then goes on to explore pedagogical possibilities within that context for helping young non-college/non- university-bound women prepare themselves for participation in the adult workforce.

Secondary School Work Education in Canada: An Overview

In this section of the paper we offer a thumbnail sketch of the Canadian context by highlighting some recent statistics on Canadian adolescents at the secondary school level and on work-related trends among young Canadian women. We then briefly describe the trends in Canadian secondary school work education initiatives, and conclude with a more in-depth look at one very popular initiative, the cooperative education program.

Canadian Schooling. Of Canada's 27.3 million inhabitants, approximately two million are secondary school students. Somewhere between 60-85% of students complete their secondary schooling, with fewer than half of them going on to post-secondary level studies (Gaskell, 1991; Lindsay, Devereaux, & Bergob, 1994; Tanner, Krahn & Hartnagel, 1995).

The major responsibility for and jurisdiction over developing and delivering education at the secondary school level rests with Canada's provincial and territorial governments. Although there are similarities across these jurisdictions, each province and territory has its own department or ministry of education, which sets curriculum policies, teacher qualifications, expenditure ceilings on per pupil costs, and the like (Leslie, 1995). What is more,

provinces differ radically in their fiscal ability to provide educational services, in their unemployment rate, and in their regional economies.

Young Women and Work. Many young Canadian women work, whether as participants in the informal or formal youth labor force. They may work as babysitters, newspaper carriers, snow shovelers, lawn cutters and so on. Older teens are, of course, more likely to be formally employed. In 1992, approximately 42% of 15 to 19-year-old females were officially employed (Lindsay et al., 1994).

Trends in the youth labor force mirror trends in the larger labor force. For example, young employed 15 to 19-year-old women spend more time per day on unpaid work and are more likely than their male counterparts to hold part-time jobs (75% versus 66%), are more likely to hold jobs within female-dominated occupations (84% versus 57% hold service, clerical, or sales jobs), have lower annual incomes, and are less broadly represented across occupations. Economic downturns also affect young women (and men) disproportionately than other age groups in that they are most likely to be unemployed (Lindsay et al., 1994; Statistics Canada, 1994b; Krahn, 1996).

Canadian Work Education at the Secondary School Level. Current work education initiatives that are found in various parts of the country can be divided into three types. A first type are the long-standing courses and programs that are offered in secondary vocational schools or in vocational programs within the more numerous small or comprehensive secondary schools. All or most of the course or program is delivered in secondary school classrooms. Examples of courses include keyboarding, data processing, entrepreneurship studies, accounting, clothing/fashion, cabinet making, construction technology, and automotive mechanics.

A second type of work education initiative is the short-term school-workplace partnership, which includes such initiatives as visits to nontraditional career fairs; mentorships involving at-risk students and members of the business community; one or several days of job shadowing, job observation, or career exploration; and work placements of one or several weeks duration.

A third type of work education initiative is the cooperative education course or program in which students typically spend lengthy periods of time at a worksite while they are still enrolled in full-time study. Although official enrollment statistics for all secondary school cooperative education courses are lacking, national sources suggest that between 3-4% of high school students were enrolled in government-funded cooperative education programs in the early 1990's (Economic Council of Canada, 1992; Krahn, 1996). The following discussion of Ontario's cooperative education project provides a more in-depth look at this popular and growing type of work education initiative.

Cooperative education: A Popular and Growing Trend in Ontario. Most of Canada's secondary school cooperative education participants are found in Ontario, Canada's largest province in population and second largest geographically. From 1979 to 1994, the number of Ontario secondary school youth enrolled in cooperative education rose from 600 to more than 66,000 (Thibault & Chouinard, 1990; Ministry of Education and Training, 1996). In other words, almost 10% of Ontario's 700,000 secondary students are currently enrolled in a cooperative education course. Most of these students are at least 16 years old. Ontario's well-developed initiative (Ministry of Education, 1989) implies the following basic tenets:

- Work education is best accomplished through explicit school-work-place linkages;
- Work education requires relatively lengthy worksite placements;
- Educational growth is derived from the interaction of real-life work experience and academic study/reflection, with each aspect informing the other;
- All students, whatever their level of learning, are potential cooperative education participants, although those in the older grades are generally more suited to participation;
- Work education can help students with the transition to the world of work and with their future education endeavors.

A typical cooperative education program in Ontario may extend more than one semester or for an entire year. Some programs have half-day work placements, with the students studying three or four additional subjects during the other half day. Other programs offer students full-day placements, usually four days per week, with the fifth day spent in school with the cooperative education teacher.

Ontario's cooperative education program follows a job experience-reflective seminar curriculum model, which includes both in-school and out-of-school activities. Unlike many of their American counterparts (Stern, Finkelstein, Stone, Latting, & Dornsife, 1995), co-op students in Ontario are not permitted to earn wages and they are not necessarily enrolled in vocational or basic level programs. Co-op program selection processes in Ontario appear to be rigorous and some researchers have even expressed concerns that some schools may select their best students to participate (Thibault, 1994). Public and teacher perceptions of the co-op program seem to be generally positive.

The in-school component of the program consists of at least twenty hours of classwork prior to work placement followed by periodic "integration" sessions. Pre-placement classwork is intended to introduce stu-

dents to the work/study process, to ease their introduction to the workplace, and to clarify the possibilities and limitations inherent in the program format (Thibault, 1993). In principle, it should include instruction in self-assessment and job readiness skills, and information related to health and safety, labor unions, confidentiality, ethics, and school and workplace expectations.

The periodic integration sessions are intended to help students unify the two parts of the cooperative education process by illustrating the relationship of theory to practice. They are designed to provide support for students and to encourage an open exchange of feelings and ideas. In this way, the process of teaching and learning "flows" continually in both directions: TO the workplace for observation and application, FROM the workplace for description, clarification, interpretation." (Piker, 1990, p. 56 [emphasis in original])

The out-of-school component of the program, the workstation placement, is intended to provide opportunities for the development of work-related and problem-solving skills, and enhancement of self-confidence and maturity in an adult environment (Ministry of Education, 1989). Cooperative education teachers try to find placements for students that are compatible with their interests, abilities, and skill levels. Most students are interviewed before being assigned to a placement (Thibault, 1993). Ideally, students help the teacher and employer in developing a training plan of outcomes that can be achieved during the work placement.

The Cooperative Education Project: Tensions and Possibilities

This part of our paper brings to bear critical pedagogy perspectives on work education in general and on the cooperative education project in particular. The discussion turns first to the issue of what we mean by a critical pedagogy perspective within secondary school work education for non-college/non-university-bound females. We then go on to identify some central tensions/contradictions facing work educators in that context. We conclude by exploring pedagogical possibilities within the cooperative education context for helping these young women prepare themselves for participation in the adult workforce.

A Critical Pedagogy Perspective. Current mainstream secondary school work education discourse in North America stresses the importance of preparing students to effectively meet the needs of the workplace. Generic skills and attitudes such as effective workplace literacy, critical thinking, leadership and teamwork skills are seen as central to accomplishing this goal (Conference Board of Canada, 1992; Stasz, McArthur, Lewis & Ramsey, 1990).

We agree that work education projects should prepare students to fulfill workplace needs, and that fostering these generic skills and attitudes is an important dimension of this preparation. At the same time, a critical pedagogy perspective on work education recognizes the importance of helping students to problematize workplace realities that perpetuate or create inequalities and injustice affecting their lives and the lives of other workers. According to many critical pedagogues (e.g., Gaskell, 1992; Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991; Sultana, 1990; Weiler, 1990) secondary school work education preparation often glosses over this latter perspective.

In our view, effective work education adopts both perspectives. Unfortunately, such a stance raises major tensions and contradictions as to what critical pedagogy work educators can responsibly advocate. As shown below, these tensions and contradictions get played out in interesting and unique ways for non-college/non-university-bound females enrolled in cooperative education projects.

Tensions and Contradictions in Cooperative Education. As the label suggests, secondary school work education brings together two of society's principal socializing agencies, the world of the school and the world of waged work. What is more, in "cooperative" education programs in particular, a primary goal of this rapprochement is to develop partnership relationships between these two agencies that result in a major portion of the student's time and energy being spent at and under the supervision of the worksite.

In general, the successful implementation of a co-op model such as the one being used in Ontario is a difficult and complex undertaking, in part because it requires a heavy investment of internal resources (e.g., meaningful opportunities for students to reflect, adequate organizational support for cooperative educators) and external resources (e.g., extensive business and industry support). Yet from a strictly functional perspective, successful implementation appears to be relatively unproblematic in an ideological sense. The school-workplace linkage helps guarantee that what is learned by students in the school "system" will, in turn, help ensure the survival of work "systems" by providing valuable resources in the form of appropriate worker values, attitudes, skills and expectations.

This functional perspective often pervades all levels of educational discourse, but it becomes a particularly compelling and attractive way to see the world within the cooperative education project. For example, because Canadian business and industry do not receive direct financial incentives for their (voluntary) participation in co-op partnerships, descriptions of cooperative education understandably point out the "functional" benefits to potential employer participants, as suggested by these comments:

Employers benefit because cooperative education:

- Develops a work force of young people who have employment skills and on-the-job experience;
- Helps to identify potential future employees;
- Encourages students to have a positive attitude toward productivity in the workplace;
- Enables employers to participate directly in the education of students and to keep educators informed of their requirements with respect to future employees;
- Develops supervisory skills in employees. (Cooperative education: Partnerships that work for employers, 1995)

Pointing out such benefits is not merely a rhetorical exercise, if for no other reason than the fact that co-op educators and programs are so heavily dependent on the continued participation of local business and industry. This functional perspective also implies worth for individual students; students become socialized to accommodate or "fit in" to existing work systems, thereby optimizing their chances for later employability within the adult labor force.

From a more critical perspective, school-workplace partnerships such as cooperative education initiatives need to be also understood in terms of the distribution of and struggle over power within and across school and work systems. This perspective is particularly important to acknowledge within work education initiatives that are available for non-college/non-university- bound females, because this population enjoys very limited power within Canadian society in general and in Canadian secondary schools in particular. Our school systems tend to serve the interests of the high-tracked and/or university-bound (Krahn, 1996; McLaren, 1989), and our co- educational classrooms tend to discriminate against females (Eyre, 1991; Larkin, 1994).

Our workplaces in turn reflect and reinforce inequities among those who hold lower status jobs and who are female. For example, if current workplace and social trends continue in the same direction as they are headed, most of today's Canadian females who complete high school may well face a similar set of workforce constraints that many of them currently experience as working youth (Krahn, 1996; McKinnon & Ahola-Sidaway, 1994). "Nonstandard" work forms (part-time, short-term, temporary-help, self-employment, at-home employment) are growing rapidly, and with them declining wages, benefits, and basic employee power (Lindgren, 1994).

As good-job/bad-job polarization increases, there is a strong likelihood that non- college/non-university-bound females will repeatedly find

themselves in jobs within female- dominated niches, in jobs that pay little, in jobs that have few benefits and little security, in jobs that fall far short of their aspirations, expectations, abilities, interests, and potential (Krahn, 1996). Further complicating this scenario is the possibility — some say probability — that unemployment among workers in general, and younger workers in particular, will remain high throughout many parts of the country and continue to soar in other parts of the country.

Some educators might see a promise of greater empowerment for high school educated females in the growing interest in nontraditional job and career options for women. Such initiatives are seen to expand students' choices beyond the limited and low paying traditional occupations that are female-dominated. They offer a promise of access to well-paying, higher status jobs and entry into a wider choice of career options than is available within traditional options. Cooperative education curriculum guidelines in Ontario, for example, urge teachers to encourage female and male students to participate in nontraditional occupational areas.

Although we agree that the trend toward nontraditional work has potential merit for offering genuine occupational possibilities, we also feel that the nontraditional "solution" is fraught with tension and contradiction. Viewed from a functionalist perspective, cooperative education projects that encourage young non-college/non-university-bound women into nontraditional jobs and careers may well be seen by organizations as a way to expand valued environmental resources by tapping into the expanding female labor market. Viewed from a more critical perspective, however, the past has shown us that women have often entered nontraditional occupations only to find their positions realigned to keep the work defined as less skilled and less remunerated than that of "men's work" in the industry (McKinnon & Ahola-Sidaway, 1995). For example, gendered occupational or job niching has been observed in so-called "integrated" jobs such as bartending, baking, and bus driving as well as in occupations where women have made few inroads (e.g., carpenters, electricians). Occupational and job niching, it should be noted, is but one of many workplace manifestations surrounding the nontraditional "solution."

Critical work educators are, therefore, presented with a major dilemma. On the one hand, employers and students alike recognize the importance of helping students adapt to workplace needs and realities. Student accommodation can ease transition into this world of work, help individuals keep jobs in a situation of high unemployment, and also help them become and see themselves as valued employees. On the other hand, critical educators also recognize the intractable social structures that

perpetuate workplace inequities for women, as well as the importance of nurturing agencies within those structures, so these same students will be better placed to contest inequalities (Gaskell, 1992). It seems to us that by helping non-college/non- university-bound females to both accommodate to and contest workplace realities we will help them build more satisfying lives for themselves and other Canadian and global workers.

Within this context, how can co-op educators best prepare young women for the world of work? How do they provide adequate support for those considering either traditional or nontraditional options? How do they help students adapt to work realities in female-dominated jobs yet also help them to recognize and address injustices in these positions? How do they promote the expansion of job options without abandoning or devaluing traditional options? And how do they also help young women to recognize and address barriers and inequities that prevail within non-traditional settings?

Pedagogical Possibilities in Cooperative Education

The basic structure of cooperative education, as it has been developed for secondary school students in Ontario, Canada, provides a potential opportunity for educators to help students recognize the importance of accommodation and agency in their preparation for participating in the world of work. Although not all jobs are either equally desirable or accessible, some occupations and jobs offer more pay, higher prestige, and better working conditions than others. Since access to more attractive occupations and jobs depends in large part on successful school completion, cooperative education can be empowering in this regard. It can enlighten individuals by encouraging them to aim for occupations and jobs that require higher education and that offer higher pay; to recognize and create job situations that do not compromise their health; to value work contexts that offer opportunities for professional development that will help them seek better jobs later on; and to generally recognize, use, and even create resources to enhance workplace cultures for those who enjoy less social and organizational power.

The job experience-reflective seminar curriculum model such as the one offered in Ontario schools presents exciting possibilities for critical work educators. For example, the fostering of generic skills such as critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork can be incorporated within cooperative education arrangements in ways that serve the interests of employers and workers alike. We briefly consider some specific opportunities that demonstrate the potential strength of the co-op model regarding these two issues.

The job experience aspect of cooperative education gives students opportunities to participate in the workplace. First-hand experiences in the world of work provide more authentic opportunities for critical examination of issues than contrived and sheltered school-based settings. Assignments such as photographing what students see as meaningful aspects of their workplace, journal keeping, identifying the visible and invisible skills making up their jobs, and interviewing employees and union officials (Simon et al., 1991) can provide opportunities for personal and group inquiries into how workers adapt to and transform their workplace. Toward that end, the Ontario Federation of Labor's policy on secondary school cooperative education occurring in unionized workplaces, for example, states that 20% of the student's work placement is to be spent with local union representatives, including union health and safety representatives, in order to give students "the opportunity to learn about the work of the union, the role of elected union officers, and the job of the union steward" (Durham Board of Education, 1993, F-8).

Reflective discussion sessions can offer pedagogical possibilities to focus on questions to ask when applying for jobs and when deciding between opportunities, no matter how limited those opportunities may be. By encouraging students to talk about the visible and invisible skills that make up their jobs, these discussion sessions can offer opportunities for students to learn to dissect a job according to its skill components and, in the process, to question what constitutes a valued skill. Discussion sessions can also provide a forum for examination of gender-related social and occupational issues within and across traditional and nontraditional work and between unionized and non-unionized workplaces. In addition, they can offer opportunities to meet with full-time, part-time, contingent, and nontraditional workers in order to explore with other women workers the social and economic benefits and liabilities of different working arrangements. Finally, discussion sessions could encourage students to draw on their school, community, and family experiences, and on their own formal and informal work experiences within the youth labor force to derive personal meaning and empowerment about workplace issues.

Cooperative education also offers the potential for helping young non-college/non- university-bound women to acquire generic skills that can serve their own and other workers' needs and interests, and the needs and interests of their employers. They can learn to become agents of change, regardless of the nature of their jobs. Critical thinking and leadership skills have been identified as important goals of cooperative education (Ministry of Education, 1989) and important needs of employers (Conference Board

of Canada, 1992). Such skills can help young women to not only successfully accommodate to workplace constraints and demands but also to recognize, analyze, and change those constraints and demands (Mainquist & Eichorn, 1989). For example, young female workers could suggest work station improvements that improve both worker productivity and worker satisfaction. In their reflective discussions, they could study equity legislation to learn about their rights in different types and sizes of organizations. They could learn about how to set up a workplace day care that may reduce worker absenteeism and help individual women to balance their waged and unwaged work.

In terms of leadership, they could learn about the activities of women's caucuses to promote leadership roles for women within unions. They could examine pivotal past events, individual life histories, and current newspaper and magazine stories of working women to learn how individuals before them have changed and are changing the course of history, both from the point of view of workplace effectiveness and worker empowerment.

Teamwork skills are also an important focus in Ontario's cooperative education program and for Canadian employers alike. From the point of view of the employer, teamwork skills become very important as new working arrangements call for worker coordination and cooperation. Teamwork skills can also be pivotal in serving the needs of workers. The synergistic effect of reflective, supportive, coordinated behavior can potentially empower individuals by reframing personal struggles and victories into collective ones, by exploring alternate ways of seeing and doing things, and by jointly pushing for needed changes. Opportunities to learn about historical and recent advances made by working women and their advocates could help students recognize the collective gains made and the struggles that continue to improve working conditions. By including worker advocates as part of this discussion, work educators can try to broaden the agenda of teamwork skills so that it also includes the interests of current and future workers and of society as a whole, as well as the interests of those who sign the paychecks.

Concluding Comments

We recognize that the goals that we are presenting are lofty goals, and we are not pretending that what is being suggested here is easy or straightforward. In our enthusiasm to foresee exciting possibilities within the cooperative education model being used within Ontario, we must remind ourselves that curriculum models are just that, models. To date, we simply know very little about how the cooperative education model in general

translates into real experiences for students (Krahn, 1996; Sheasby, 1992; Thibault, 1994), let alone how it might or might not be serving the interests of non-college/non-university-bound young women.

As critical educators, we must also not lose sight of the historical lessons demonstrating that power is never equally shared, and that justice is often not served, despite attempts to the contrary. What is more, we need to remind ourselves that the entrenched and hegemonic nature of these unequal and unjust social patterns and processes make them difficult to identify and harder still to overturn. These challenges may be particularly difficult for critical educators working with and for non-college/ non-university-bound young women. Education in general, and work education in particular, will not necessarily lead to equal status for women. However, without education, especially promising forms of education such as cooperative education, women's inferior socioeconomic status is guaranteed. Projects of possibility are all about what "could" be; they give us hope and direction.

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