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Do teachers perceive that change is possible through critical thinking?:  
A look at the Quebec Reform

Alison Beever

A Thesis

In

The Department

Of

Education

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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## ABSTRACT

Do teachers perceive that change is possible through critical thinking?:

A look at the Quebec Reform

Alison Beever

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how teachers view the importance of critical thinking in regard to the learning process. The focus on teachers' knowledge of critical thinking is inspired by an examination of the cross-curricular competency advocating the ability to exercise critical judgment outlined in the Quebec Education Program. A cross-curricular competency is defined as learning acquired in a particular context that can be applied in other areas of activity; therefore, critical thinking is intended to be encouraged in all subjects taught. The Quebec reform defines critical judgment in terms of a student's ability to form an opinion and express and qualify his/her judgment based on authentic consideration of issues surrounding the problem to be considered. Comparing the definition of exercising critical judgment, as advocated by the Quebec reform, with the views of critical pedagogy's leading proponents, will aid in determining what constitutes an educational experience in which critical judgment can be exercised. Finally, because the role of the teacher is fundamental in fostering students' critical faculties, information gathered in one-on-one interviews with teachers at the elementary and secondary levels in public and alternative settings, reveals to some extent whether the Quebec Education Program can achieve its goal.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how teachers view the importance of critical thinking in regard to the learning process. The focus on teachers' knowledge of critical thinking is inspired by an examination of the cross-curricular competency, defined as learning acquired in a particular context which can be applied in other areas of activity, outlined in the Quebec Education Program. The Program defines critical judgment in terms of a student's ability to form an opinion and express and qualify his/her judgment based on authentic considerations of issues surrounding the problem to be analyzed. Comparing the definition of critical judgment, as advocated by the Quebec Education Program, with the views of critical pedagogy's leading proponents, helps in determining what constitutes an educational experience in which critical thinking can occur. This comparison is relevant if one assumes that critical thinking cannot be realized in the absence of critical pedagogy. Finally, because the role of the teacher is fundamental in fostering the development of critical thought, information gathered in one-on-one interviews with eight teachers at the elementary and secondary levels in public and alternative settings and four students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education Program, provides important insight that determines to some extent whether the Quebec Education Program can achieve its goal.

My interest in this topic generates from both my upbringing and personal educational experiences, but in particular, from the obstacles I faced when teaching my first university class in the Education Department at Concordia University in May of

2003. Many of my friends refer to me as ‘the professional student’, which is a title I feel epitomizes who I am. From an early age I was encouraged to develop a passion for learning which inspired an inquisitive nature and the need to ask ‘why?’ As I progressed through my educational career and entered the teaching profession I quickly came to realize that for many students, school is seen as a means to an end and acquiring knowledge is just one of the many steps along the way. Now, more than ever, knowledge is the primary source of economic productivity. Hence there exists a critical relationship between education and the capitalist economy: schools produce workers. This reality is the cause and perpetuating force behind an educational system that encourages the development of unreflective, compliant, and competitive individuals. From this perspective education promotes the belief that those who attain the highest grades, get the best jobs. Therefore, one must work hard, listen to the teacher, take in and reproduce the knowledge given to them, get the grades, get the degree and start working in the *real world*.

This concept of education as preparation for the real world has long been the motto and primary objective of educational practices. What I find alarming is the tendency on the part of students, to view this notion of the real world as some far off, mystical place, where all their dreams of economic prosperity and happiness will be fulfilled. If what I previously purported is true, that education is preparation for one’s future role in the job market, then students must come to realize that this is as good as it gets. Moreover, if they dream of days where they will be financially independent and able to live the “good life”, they will be rudely awakened by the harsh reality of limited job opportunities and the need for increased qualifications required for contention with other applicants. As an

educator I feel it is important to awaken the minds of students about the reality of the world in which they live. They must be encouraged to accept their role as active participants in the creation of their social reality and become aware of their ability to bring about change. The need for liberating education practices, which fulfill such purposes, is a pressing concern for many educators. The problem to be resolved is how such change can come to fruition.

My experience teaching a philosophy class to a group of sixty students was pivotal in recognizing that being passionate about a theory or pedagogical practice is quite different from its realization. I wanted the class to be dynamic and interactive; I wanted to learn as much from the students as they were to learn from me. Unfortunately, being active participants in the construction of knowledge appeared to be a foreign concept to these students. They were content to sit passively, ingest the information given to them, fulfill the class requirements, and move on to the next class included on their To-Do list. The faces that greeted me on the first day of class were those of prisoners required to serve their punitive sentences. My role, in the eyes of the students, was that of both judge and warden. As warden, I was to dictate what rules they were to follow, the tasks they were to perform, and what behavior I deemed appropriate. As judge, I would ultimately determine whether their sentences had been fulfilled adequately and award them a passing grade or condemn them to serve additional time within the four walls of the educational institution. This unproductive, apathetic relationship was contrary to the reasons I had decided to pursue a career in education. I wanted to instill in my students a thirst for knowledge and a love of learning. I did not wish to transfer meaningless facts

to them but create the possibilities and desire for participation in the construction of knowledge.

Including students as active participants in the learning process requires a change in the traditional teacher-student relationship. This relationship transforms from an authoritarian dynamic, in which the teacher narrates and the students listen, and becomes a partnership of mutual respect in which all participants are simultaneously teachers and students. Reciprocal learning is achieved through dialogue, which enables students to bring forth knowledge based on individual experience. As thoughts are no longer controlled, students learn to control their own thinking. Controlling one's thinking empowers one to control one's decisions and therefore the path one chooses to take in life. If conducted in such a manner, school would not be perceived by students as a task but as an ongoing process of discovery about themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, because education would now acknowledge and value the opinions of the students, they in turn would come to value the importance of education.

Getting students to value the importance of education has been the quest of many ongoing reform initiatives within our educational institutions. Despite the fact that the above-mentioned solution seems simple, the relationship between education and the socio-economic structure proves to be a complex obstacle to overcome. An examination of the social functions the school is required to perform, reveals that bringing about such change is far from a simple task. Encouraging students to become critical thinkers, who learn to question and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of social reality, would threaten the existing ideology that regards students as compliant, manageable beings who must acquire the skills that will enable them to adapt to an immutable, inevitable reality.

As an educator who refuses to accept such a fatalistic vision of education, I feel it is important to examine reform initiatives that value the importance of critical pedagogy and encourage the development of informed individuals capable of bringing about change. The current education reforms taking place in Quebec are attempting to bring about such change. Concerned by the increased demands placed on individuals living within today's knowledge-based society, the Quebec education program highlights its goal as the democratization of learning. Within this reform curriculum is an element that stresses the need for students to be able to exercise critical judgment. As critical judgment is a prerequisite for the democratization of learning, it is this element that will serve as the focal point of this paper. Furthermore, because the starting point for the realization of critical thinking is the teacher-student dynamic, it is essential to begin with an examination of how teachers define the purpose of education, how they define their roles within that purpose, and what their knowledge of critical thinking entails.

### Importance and Timing of This Study

The importance of this study relates to the current changes occurring within the Quebec education system. The Quebec Education Program represents a major change from current policy and practice in curriculum which has been the dominant model for the past twenty years. Faced with changes in family life, social relations, economic structures, and the role of technology in everyday life, individuals involved in the education process realize that the necessity for educational change is a priority. Acknowledging the need for such change, the Quebec Education Program proposes a

curriculum that is comprehensive and diversified, has a long-term perspective, and is open to the world (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a). In today's advanced technological society individuals are encouraged to embrace individualism, mass production and consumption. We therefore learn to derive our identity in accordance to disposable goods and as a result have lost a sense of permanency and belonging. The mandate of the Quebec Education Program, namely to prepare students to contribute to the development of a more democratic and just society, thus becomes ever more vital.

If democracy is to be practiced then democracy must be learned. The Quebec Education Program by claiming that the school must now "expand [its] goal from the democratization of education to the democratization of learning" (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 2) acknowledges the validity of the former statement. It is not the intent of this study to examine the Quebec reform in its entirety. Nevertheless, the focus on the ability to use critical judgment is fundamental in determining whether the democratization of learning is achieved. Implementing critical pedagogy in the practice of education must begin with an examination of the power relations within the teacher-student relationship. If democratic relations are not achieved at this level, then there can be no hope of them extending into other areas of social life. Hence a microanalysis of teachers' knowledge of critical thinking is an important focal point.

The ability to exercise critical judgment is defined by the Quebec Education Program as a cross-curricular competency and is grouped in the intellectual category. Cross-curricular competencies are described as being generic in nature and are used in various subject areas. Although the program highlights the essentiality of their implementation, these competencies are described as complimentary to subject-specific learnings.

Therefore, it is important to ensure that they are not taking a backseat to academic content. Not only is it important to ascertain that exercising critical judgment is indeed being incorporated into subject-specific learnings, it is most imperative to ensure that its definition and use is not of a narrow and formalistic vein.

The term critical thinking has become a dominant buzzword in many current reform initiatives within North America. In some cases the development of critical faculties has unfortunately been reduced to a student's ability to structure, compare, synthesize, and evaluate data. It is important for teachers to recognize that critical thinking differs dramatically from problem-solving skills. If defined and promoted as a skill, the result is a learning experience in which method takes priority over theory and the acquisition of skills replaces the critical examination of what is being taught. Thus, under the guise of progressive rhetoric, critical thinking aids in the perpetuation of oppressive educational experiences and reinforces the exclusion of viewpoints that differ from the mainstream.

Finally, the timing of this study is also of significance due to the recency of the reform's implementation, as well as a renewed focus on decentralization within this shift. Because curriculum decisions are being transferred from the ministry and to a lesser extent from school boards to individual schools, it is the philosophy of education valued by the staff members that will ultimately affect the student body and determine what course the reforms are to take. Hence, gaining insight from individual teachers will reveal to what extent critical thinking is valued within distinct school communities. Some schools may be commendable in their application of critical pedagogical practices and could therefore be promoted as exemplars for other schools. Furthermore, this study may accentuate the need for additional courses that focus on the importance of critical



pedagogy within teacher training programs. This reform initiative is an ideal opportunity for much needed change to come to fruition. Addressing the opinions and concerns of teachers directly involved in the reform process is an essential starting point for an informed implementation and a new orientation.

### The Social Functions of Schooling

In a report presented by the Estates General on Education (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 1995-96) among the many reasons given for redefining the mission of our schools in Quebec, the one which achieved the most consensus was the requirement for schools at all levels to ensure that the needs of the students take precedence. Many of the opinions expressed called for the creation of “schools as communities” in which students of all ages feel they are respected, that their needs are taken into consideration, and that their input is welcome (p.9). Schools must serve as places where communication and respect for others are promoted, where basic human values serve as ethical guidelines and encourage an atmosphere of trust in which students feel they belong. If such an educational mission is to be realized then critical pedagogy, which considers the empowerment of the student as a central goal of education, becomes integral to success. Nevertheless, implementing critical thinking into curriculum is not the same as introducing a new way of doing long division. It requires recognition that education is a site of struggle and compromise. All participants must concede that education is not neutral in regard to political and economic interests and must learn to challenge its social functions, as well as who these functions serve. Hence, discussing the political agenda

within which the Quebec reform is situated lends credence to how critical thinking is defined, and what purpose it is intended to serve.

Over the last twenty years there has been an ongoing educational debate in which both conservatives and radicals unite in their denunciation of the state of public schooling. Though both sides share a common discourse of critique and crisis, they differ dramatically in how they define excellence in education. Critical pedagogues reject the notion that excellence in education means producing alienated, anti-intellectual individuals who contribute to an elevated economy. Conservatives, on the other hand, argue it is because schools fail to recognize their commitment to the market economy that we lack the excellence to improve the quality of life for all citizens. The differing viewpoints on what constitutes excellence in education come down to one essential question: What is the purpose of education?

The debate about improving the quality of schools in North America is entering a new phase. Since the early 1980s conservatives have dominated the debate over public education and have been successful in linking schooling to the ideology of the marketplace through a programmatic policy of school reform based on jargon-filled and undifferentiated conceptions of authority, citizenship, and discipline (Giroux & McLaren, 1989). This success can be attributed to the conservative's ability to consistently put progressives in the uncomfortable position of defending failed, abandoned, or unpopular policies and programs initiated in the 1960s. Progressives have attempted to justify such failure by suggesting that many programs and policies were never properly implemented and were not given an adequate chance at achieving expected results. Although this may be the case, it is time to recognize that the failure of progressive philosophies is in part

due to an absence of public discourse on schooling. Much of the discourse on critical pedagogy has remained in the language of the academy. Although this literature is valuable, without being vernacular it fails to incite the very people it aims to affect. Thus, acknowledging and learning from past mistakes serves as an important reference for the transition from a traditional to critical approach to education within the schools of Quebec.

Before a transition is possible, it must be determined if it is desired. The Quebec reform initiatives are grounded on two underlying reasons for the necessity of educational change. The first revolves around the fact that we now live in a “knowledge-based society.” As a result, schools must acknowledge that knowledge now plays a dominant role in the material and social organization of our society. In order to feel at ease in this society, students must master more knowledge, and be able to assimilate it on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, because of the relation between academic failure and social standing, the knowledge base of each individual will increasingly determine his or her place in society.

The second reason for reform discusses the roles schools are to play as agents of social cohesion. Due to Quebec’s multicultural makeup its schools must aim “to help students find their place in society by transmitting a common cultural tradition . . . , by sharing common values based on common needs, and by providing for real equality of opportunity”(Ministry of Education, 2001b, chap. 1, sec. 1.1). Schools must pursue democracy inside and outside the four walls of the classroom, and ensure its maintenance by citizens who are aware of the collective stakes and who wish to play an active role in democratic life. Thus, the Quebec Education Program if sincere in its objectives must

consider the following questions: What knowledge and skills are essential? How should schools develop these skills? How is democracy defined and demonstrated? How will this reform differ from previous reforms and what will ensure its success?

Addressing the above-mentioned questions may reveal whether the Quebec Education Program does indeed differ from previous reforms. Apple (1999), McLaren (1998), Giroux and McLaren (1989) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) provide macro analyses of how education is used as a function of society rather than society as a function of education. They warn of the threat of an encroaching ideological shift toward the conservative New Right and a neo-liberal political agenda within virtually all modern industrialized democracies. This agenda, which serves as the backbone for widespread transformations now occurring inside and outside of education, is most concerned with the relationship between schooling and the material and ideological conditions of economic life. It has gained popularity precisely because it has been increasingly able to win the battle over common sense. By portraying public education as a “black hole” into which money is poured and adequate results are not achieved, they have managed to infect public opinion with the notion of economic rationality (Apple, 1999). Values such as efficiency and an “ethic” of cost-benefit analysis have become the dominant norms and people are persuaded to act in ways that maximize their own personal benefits. In light of this literature it is important to consider to what degree the neo-liberal agenda has infiltrated the current Quebec reforms.

The complexity of today’s modern society coupled with the inefficacy of former reform initiatives to resolve issues concerning academic achievement has resulted in a new aim for Quebec schools to achieve the goal of the democratization of learning.

Quebec schools view their primary responsibility as developing students' cognitive capacities and mastery of knowledge so as to ensure that they achieve success in school beyond the elementary level. But they also recognize the importance of helping students take their place in society, by familiarizing them with basic social knowledge and values and giving them the tools they need to play a constructive role as citizens. In order to achieve this latter goal the Quebec Education Program utilizes a competency-based approach which views learning as an active, ongoing process of knowledge construction. The focus on competencies is a great improvement to traditional forms of education, as it encourages a different relationship to knowledge and puts emphasis on teaching students how to think. The program also intends to ensure that students' learnings serve as tools for both action and thought. This differs from the acquisition of skills, which are typically used in isolation, for a competency makes use of several resources and is itself used in fairly complex contexts (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a). The proposal of introducing a competency-based approach does appear to have the interests of the students at heart as there is an attempt to correct traditional practices that teach students to think in a fragmented manner, isolated from the flow of everyday experience. Nevertheless, the necessity of higher order cognitive skills is currently endorsed as a mandatory prerequisite for the increasingly complex nature of today's labor market. Thus, it is important to determine whose interests are genuinely considered to be a priority: the students or the socio-economic structure.

Canada is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and therefore its provinces and their social institutions are largely influenced by the research and innovation it oversees. Over the past ten years the OECD has exerted a

great deal of influence over curriculum reforms undertaken in a majority of its member countries (Ministry of Education, 2001b). Graham and Hyslop-Margison (2001) discuss how the OECD legitimates education on the basis of its contribution to economic growth. Their research points to striking similarities between the OECD's definition of cross-curricular competencies and that outlined in the Quebec Education Program. In the Quebec Education Program cross-curricular competencies are defined as being "valuable tools for people who have to live in a society of complex, unpredictable, and continuously changing situations and interactions"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 6). In a 1977 publication on education policies, the OECD defines cross-curricular competencies as the "ability to learn and go on learning" and "the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity" (as cited in Graham & Hyslop-Margison, 2001, p. 347). The two definitions are almost verbatim. Graham and Hyslop-Margison also point to a connection between the OECD's cross-curricular definition to that included in the Conference Board of Canada's 1992 publication, *Employability skills profile: What employer's are looking for*, and its 2001 publication, *Employment Skills 2000+*. These documents speak of an adaptability skill that enables individuals to cope with uncertainty. Hence the OECD's close ties with business expectations and the Quebec reforms admitted association with the OECD suggests that the forces of human capital education are indeed at work within our educational institutions.

Although it is important to consider the political and economic influences on education from a macro-perspective, it is the inner-workings of individual schools that may force change to come about. An analysis of these inner-workings must consider what may appear to be a game of semantics between the terms curriculum and pedagogy.

The Quebec Education Program puts forth several meanings surrounding the word curriculum. It describes it broadly as “those activities designed to provide students with learning in a given education system” (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. one). More precisely, it defines curriculum as “the system for establishing programs, the evaluation of student learning and the certification of studies” (chap. one). It cannot be denied that curriculum design plays an important role in the development of critical thinking; nevertheless, critical thinking cannot be realized in the absence of critical pedagogy. The term pedagogy is given little attention throughout the Quebec Education Program. It speaks of the influence of behaviorism and constructivism on pedagogical practices and makes a quick reference to the importance of analyzing how learning takes place. Nonetheless, the lack of discussion on the issue of pedagogy may suggest that what is learned, presupposes how the learning takes place.

The term pedagogy in its most general sense is defined as the act or process of teaching (Gore, 1993). Because the act of teaching involves first and foremost the teacher and the student, it is this area that is of central importance to this study. There is no doubt that the social functions of schooling require teachers to perform pre-defined tasks, or that their own educational experiences have not had a significant impact on the way they themselves conduct their classes. Nevertheless, the quest of most teachers is to make a difference in the lives of their students. Hence, it is within the four walls of the classroom, that the possibility for change is most likely to occur. Freire (1973, 1993, 1998) outlines direction for specific classroom practices that encourage student liberation and create the conditions for genuine learning to occur. Freire encourages a pedagogy that challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, and

advance democracy and equality. He urges teachers to refrain from domesticating their students through traditional teaching practices and instead insists on a problem-posing method, which enables students to experience education as something they do, not as something done to them. Thus, it is by examining the politics that reside within the classroom, the way teachers and students talk to each other, the material that is discussed, and the value given to the contributions of the students, that hope for critical thinking can come to fruition.

This study commences with an overview of the meaning of educational change. In Chapter 2 the socio-economic conditions that determine and bring about reform initiatives are taken into consideration. The Quebec Education Program is then situated within this context to determine how it defines the functions of education and whom these functions are intended to serve. In Chapter 3 the potency of capitalist ideology and its deleterious impact on educational practices is revealed through an examination of critical theory. Evidence is presented which suggests that the welfare of teachers and students is secondary to the imperatives of the marketplace. Chapter 4 provides a much-needed opportunity for teachers to be heard. The findings from interviews conducted with teachers reveal whether critical pedagogical practices are incorporated into the daily interaction of classroom practices. Presenting the teachers' opinions of the Quebec reform affirms whether the implementation of the new curriculum has affected their classroom activities or altered their perceptions on how students learn. The opinions of prospective teachers currently enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in education program offers valuable insight in regard to the values and philosophy of education encouraged in teacher training programs. The knowledge of critical thinking put forth by these



individuals highlights the extent to which this subject is addressed or neglected in training programs. Chapter 5 submits that educational change is most successful and most needed within the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. It is suggested that such change can only be realized in the presence of critical pedagogical practices.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

This chapter examines the past and current purposes for educational reform in a general context, as well as how these purposes relate to the present reform initiatives in Quebec. The arguments presented suggest that although former reform initiatives have influenced change within the education system, the core of educational practice, defined as how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student's role in learning, has invariably remained intact. Thus it is important to ascertain how the proposed objectives of the Quebec Education Program differ from previous reform projects and if they can achieve the long sought-after goal of the democratization of learning. The solutions offered by critical pedagogy that encourage a democratic learning experience are explored in detail in the next chapter. However, the information presented here will determine if the Quebec Reform provides an environment that is conducive for critical thought to occur.

#### An Ongoing Debate: The Progressive and Conservative Platforms

Throughout history the education system has served as an arena in which competing solutions to the problems of personal liberation and social equity are tested and social struggles fought out. As a tool of social policy it has been used both positively and negatively to ensure social order is maintained. Education has been bestowed with magical healing powers as can be seen by Andrew Carnegie's statement: "Just see,

wherever we peer into the first tiny springs of the national life, how this true panacea for all the ills of the body politic bubbles forth—education, education, education” (as cited in Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 19). Underlying the notion of education as “panacea” is what Bowles and Gintis identify as two intellectual schools of thought. The first is represented by John Dewey and his followers—the “democratic school”—and the second stems from functional sociology and neoclassical economics—the “technocratic-meritocratic school”(p. 20). The ideology behind both strands has contributed to what is commonly referred to as the progressive and conservative platforms of educational thought. In order to gain a clear understanding of these approaches it is important to consider how each defines the functions schools are expected to perform as well as the extent to which the power of schooling is able to accomplish these functions.

According to progressives the education system must fulfill three primary functions. The first, which focuses on the socializing aspect of education, is referred to as the “integrative” function (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In this aspect schooling is responsible for integrating “youth into various occupational, political, familial, and other adult roles required by an expanding economy and a stable polity”(p.21). Secondly, the “egalitarian” function as Dewey states, must “. . . see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment . . . “(as quoted in Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 21). Not only is this function to provide the possibility for upward mobility, it additionally aims to equalize the vast extremes of wealth and poverty. Finally, the third function addresses the personal development of its students. It is imperative that schooling tends to the emotional and moral development of individuals. Thus, the

“developmental” function assumes that personal fulfillment depends to a large extent on how one’s physical, cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and other potentials are encouraged to develop.

Bowles and Gintis discuss how Dewey views the association of these three functions as imperative for equality to persist in a capitalist society. Because personal development is economically productive the capitalist structure benefits from educational practices that ensure its fulfillment. Personal development can only be financially lucrative if the egalitarian function of education is guaranteed. If each individual is genuinely presented with the opportunity for improved social status then he/she becomes an educated worker whose natural desire and ability to share in social control benefits the greater good of social development. Dewey’s view of the education system as a central social corrective though compelling raises the issue of the efficacy of equal schooling in promoting social equality. The political implications of achieving such a goal can be seen in the proposed solution put forth by the technocratic-meritocratic or conservative view.

In this view, personal development is primarily concerned with the enhancement of one’s cognitive capacity. The premise of this perspective is based on a conception of the economy as a technical system, where work performance is based on technical competence. It can best be described as a ‘survival of the fittest’ point of view as it claims that inequality of income, power, and status is a reflection of an unequal distribution of mental, physical and other skills (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As a result, the more successful individuals are logically the more skillful and the more intelligent. The role of schooling in providing democracy to this inevitable social hierarchy is to provide equal educational opportunity. With the rise of modern industry, the occupational

opportunities required increased mental skills on the part of the labor force. Hence, from this perspective mass education was the first step in achieving equal opportunity.

Education, once the privilege of an elite few, was now extended to the masses.

Therefore, social advancement by means of education could no longer be viewed as exclusive or undemocratic. This politically neutral view of schooling assumes that poverty and inequality are the consequences of individual choice or personal inadequacies, not the normal outgrowths of economic institutions. Moreover, it promotes a simplistic solution to the existence of inequality; “the problem, clearly, is to fix up the people, not to change the economic structures which regulate their lives”(Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.26).

The simplicity and false justice of this perspective mask the true intentions of those who were leading industry and educational policy at the time. Although claiming neutrality, the covert function was very political. Education was a means by which social control could be maintained within an unequal and rapidly changing economic order.

This purpose is blatantly expressed in early reformer Horace Mann’s Fifth Report:

Education, then beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery. . . . It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor. (as cited in Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.28)

Thus, inequality and its deleterious effects are not denied. What was to be remedied or at least defused was the hostility and potential upheaval of the underprivileged masses.

Hence free education became a means by which social stress was alleviated without redistributing wealth and power or changing the economic institutions. The resulting impact, which persists even today, is a successful attempt to persuade the “many” to make the best of the inevitable (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 30).

The potency and persistence of the conservative agenda can be attributed in part to the failed attempts of progressive educational reform of the 1960s and 1970s. The shortcomings of progressive practice were embellished and used as ammunition by conservatives to exalt the compelling logic of the marketplace that equates increased cognitive capacity to increased chances of economic success. The progressive reforms of the 1960s and 1970s helped to bring about a number of important legislative programs regarding equal access to higher education, and funding for those in disadvantaged positions. In addition, they helped to promote the importance of individualism and human development, which are features still prevalent in educational practices today. Nevertheless, they were critiqued for exaggerating the concept of personal freedom, promoting behavior that was anti-intellectual, and legitimating infantile as opposed to theoretically mature forms of scholarship (Giroux & McLaren, 1989). Their child-centered pedagogy was often portrayed as a romantic celebration of student culture and experience, which failed to achieve academic credibility. Thus, the conservatives, in highlighting progressive policies as counterproductive, found allies in the parents of many minority and working class parents whose aspirations depended on the ability of the education system to provide a better life for their children.

An example that demonstrates the efficacy of equating academic excellence to economic prosperity is the decline of the welfare state in Canada in the 1970s. Citizens, who had been affected by the damaging consequences of economic recessions, were both vulnerable and malleable to arguments that undermined welfare state assumptions. Rising unemployment rates, and increased lending rates offered by chartered banks, resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Canadians who lost their homes and

property to personal bankruptcies (Graham & Hyslop-Margison, 2001). Public opinion became aggravated with the Canadian government's inability to appease the impact of economic decline and hostility toward welfare state policies ensued. Examples such as this one reveal how economic instability has been used as fuel for the conservative debate. As welfare state policies coincided with progressive reform initiatives occurring within the education system, public opinion was easily persuaded to reject the student-centered approach and its emphasis on the development of the whole child, and endorse a 'we know what is best for them' perspective, which focused on enhanced cognitive capacity.

Equating economic trends with educational practice may seem irrelevant to the topic of promoting critical thinking skills within the Quebec Education Program. Nevertheless, the information provided thus far reveals that the relationship between education and the economic structure of society is not accidental. Although the goals of education have repeatedly focused on instruction, socialization, and preparation for the job market, it is the latter of these that has been given preferential attention. Now more than ever, academic excellence is equated with economic prosperity. As a result, a majority of current reform initiatives promote the importance of career motivation and school/business partnerships in efforts to link youth to the corporate imperatives of the international marketplace. When education is seen as an adjunct of the marketplace the term "critical thinking" is neutralized, removed of its political and cultural dimensions and its analytic potency is reduced to the acquisition of "thinking skills" (McLaren, 1998, p. 165). Because today's society is rapidly adopting an ethos of possessive and baneful individualism, debilitating privatization and self-seeking careerism, it is essential that

critical thinking be equated with an examination of political power relations and the social functions of knowledge.

In order to determine the role critical thinking is intended to perform within the Quebec Education Program, it is important to consider the underlying reasons for the current reform and the educational goals it expects to achieve. Contrasting the Quebec Education Program with the neo-liberal political agenda, which is currently pervading a majority of educational practice within many modern industrialized democracies, aids in determining if marketplace ideology presupposes an educational experience which encourages the development of individuals with the capacity to critically reflect upon the reality of the world in which they live.

#### Neoliberalism and The Quebec Education Program

The leading force behind current reform initiatives is the fast-paced emergence of today's knowledge-based society. The urgency for educational institutions to change is directly related to transformations in the overall context of society that have occurred over the last thirty years. According to those who endorse a neoliberalist perspective, changes in the areas of technological progress, the organization of work and intensified global competition, require a shift from manual work to 'thinking' jobs. Emerging employment opportunities necessitate the development of individuals with a whole new range of skills, from problem solving and communication to information and risk management and self-organization (Bentley & Seltzer, 1999). The pressing concern lays in the fact that although the economic structures of society are undergoing a dramatic



transformation, educational structures are lagging behind. Neoliberalists claim that schools are not producing students with adequate knowledge for survival in today's job market, which has resulted in a lagging domestic performance of the North American economy, and a shrinking preeminence in the international marketplace (Giroux & McLaren, 1989). Thus, as was referenced earlier, the neoliberal agenda resounds with the same familiar tone as the conservatives of the late 1970s and early 1980s: it is time to fix up the people so that they can adapt to the economic structures that regulate their lives.

Perhaps the most influential document responsible for the renewed emphasis on economics in education is the notorious *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This American publication has virtually become the bible for a majority of current educational thought. Its basic claim is that society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. The economic underpinnings of such accusations are emotionally revealed in the opening paragraph of the document:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1)

Although education is not blamed entirely for the Nation's social and economic ills, it is revered as the sole cure. Thus, if education is to alleviate economic decline, it must operate in terms that are economically compatible. Education is no longer referred to as a cost, but as an investment. As the educational bible says, "learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the "information age" we are entering" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1).

The same motto appears within the findings of hearings held by the Estates General on Education in their publication, *The state of education in Quebec* (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 1995-96). As the topic of government funding arose in regard to redefining the educational mission, the notion of education being a worthwhile and imperative investment was at the forefront of discussion. The report notes, "the telling phrase 'If you think education is expensive, you should try ignorance' was heard more than once" (p. 9). In addition, excellence in education as a prerequisite for social advancement is captured in another popular slogan heard at the hearings; "It is not because we are rich that we have invested in education, but it is because we have invested in education that we have been able to develop"(p. 9). Viewing education in economic terms leads to what has been termed human capital education (Graham, & Hyslop-Margison, 2001). What this basically means is that if students are given the requisite skills to become productive citizens, they will be the vanguard and continued success of economic revival.

Graham and Hyslop-Margison (2001) discuss how the neoliberal emphasis on meeting the labor market demands of industry ensures that human capital education plays a major role in curriculum reform design. In human capital education the learning process entails the acquisition of the forms of knowledge, skills, social practices, and entrepreneurial

values necessary to produce a labor force capable of aggressively competing in world markets. Thus, the purpose of schools becomes that of preparing students for their occupational lives. Education becomes a process by which value is determined in terms of inputs and outputs. In this sense, both industry and students are considered self-interested individuals seeking to maximize return on their respective financial investments. The production of skilled workers increases industry's profits and in turn, students optimize return on their education costs by improving their own marketability. As a result, "students are regarded as future workers who believe the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skill translates into enhanced economic return" (p. 344). What this view implies is that unless students become lucrative producers and consumers, the economy, which ultimately serves their financial well being, will suffer and so will they. Thus, students bear a large burden in terms of the development of their country. They must prevail and cannot fail.

The affiliation of students as a source of capital is present in many of the contributing documents which serve as the basis for the Quebec Education Program. In regard to assessing the importance of cognitive enhancement in curriculum reform, the Quebec Education Program asserts that knowledge now plays a dominant role in the material and social organization of society. Because of this reality students must have the intellectual skills needed to use technology and various media. Moreover, the program confesses that the economic vitality and prosperity of a country are no longer contingent on whether it possesses raw materials. Because of new forms of competition resulting from the advent of globalization, "knowledge, along with scientific and technological expertise, has become the key to wealth and power"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 1,

sec. 1.1). Thus, the point to be debated is how to best prepare students to become economically productive.

In hearings conducted by the Estates General on Education many participants voiced the importance of a 'back to basics' approach. They emphasized that the primary mission of schools should be to instruct and train students. Moreover, they expressed that schools have "strayed away from their primary mission and would like them to go back to providing 'a place and time for supervised learning'"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 1995-96, p. 10). As evidence of their claim, they discuss the prevalent influence of reforms made in the 1970s. The document *The schools of Quebec: Policy Statement and Plan of Action*, published in 1979 determined that the ultimate objectives of schooling should focus on personal growth, the instilling of values, and individual independence (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 1, sec. 1.1). Current opinions suggest that it is now time to renew the mistrust of intellectual qualifications that dominated the previous reforms and recognize that an ultimate objective of individual development is no longer a viable function for modern education. In defense of placing the mastery of knowledge and intellectual development as the priority of educational goals, advocates state that the need for higher-level intellectual skills has now become a system-wide universal norm. Furthermore, due to the intensifying demands of a knowledge-based society, it would no longer be acceptable to define the mission of Quebec schools, without specifically assigning precedence to cognitive development.

The emphasis on higher order cognitive skills is a predominant theme within the Quebec reforms. Nevertheless, in order to present an unbiased perspective, it should be noted that the reform also recognizes the importance of developing qualities not solely

related to cognitive enhancement. Individuals who addressed the question of the overall development of the whole person were equal in numbers to proponents of a back-to-basics approach (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 1995-96, p. 10). Those of this mindset contend that attitudes are as important as knowledge, if not more so. They concede to the importance of acquiring essential basic skills, but argue that such skills must not supersede the development of creative, self-confident, independent, and responsible students who learn to become actively involved in their communities. They address concern about increasing tendencies to focus on the utilitarian goal of education. Such a focus neglects the importance of the intrinsic value of education over viewing it as a means to achieve other ends, namely economic prosperity. They point out that the common saying “*qui s’instruit s’enrichit* (he who studies grows rich)”(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 2, sec. 1.3) has perpetuated the belief that education provides an opportunity to earn a living at the expense of the riches gained from broadening one’s mind. Thus, the importance of human relationships and an educational experience that addresses the heart as well as the head is essential for the development of well-rounded individuals and must receive equal attention within the educational process.

Having good intentions and making those intentions a reality is quite a different matter when considering reform objectives as compared to their implementation. Although the Quebec Education Program recognizes that education must be considered as more than an adjunct of the labour market, the importance of preparation for occupational roles is a dominant theme. Emphasizing a shift towards a result-based management framework, the Quebec reforms aim to establish programs that “meet current and foreseeable labour needs in terms of the number of graduates and the quality of their training and keep pace

with advances in industry and technology” (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2000, p. 9). The program acknowledges the importance of establishing closer ties with businesses in order to determine the necessary occupational qualifications that will enable students to enter and stay in the labour force. The discussion of qualifications is dominated by evaluative procedures that aid in determining whether students have obtained the necessary credentials for entrance into the labour market. The predominance of measurement as a determinant of success questions the sincerity of giving equal importance to those aspects of individual development that cannot be measured, such as values and attitudes.

Reform that is oriented to job preparation equates values with the language of technical proficiency. Orientations focused on objectives relating to ‘achievement’, ‘aptitudes,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘goal orientation,’ ‘learning as much as [one] can,’ and ‘management efficiency,’ are clearly expressed in the Quebec Education Program (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2000, p. 11). References to ‘excellence’ in education tend to imply the need for rigorous science and math curricula. This emphasis is based on the belief that scientific know-how and technical proficiency are equivalent to industrial progress (Giroux, & McLaren, 1989). The Quebec Education Program addresses the importance of these fundamental subjects and boasts of the excellence its schools have achieved in each area. In reference to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study it is pointed out that Quebec students scored an average of 67.5 percent in comparison to an average of 58.7 percent recorded for the rest of Canada (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2000, p. 8). Inclusion of such data within the Ministry’s strategic plan, suggests a need to justify excellence within these subject areas.

Whether to appease educational stakeholders or public opinion, Quebec's Ministry of Education is wise to the importance of mastery in math and science.

In addition to promoting the importance of math and science, contemporary human capital education emphasizes a need for a new approach to learning in the form of generic skills. In comparison to former specific technical abilities generic employability skills address current labour-market needs by producing individuals who are versatile and can easily adapt to change. The Quebec Education Program refers to such skills as "cross-curricular" as their development is encouraged across a range of subjects. These skills attempt to eliminate a narrow focus on subject matter and produce an organic approach to instruction and learning. As a result, they require a different orientation in regard to knowledge construction and the teacher-student relationship. An analysis of these cross-curricular competencies, in particular the one dealing with critical judgment, reveals what changes such generic skills do promote.

#### Cross-curricular Competencies: The Value of a Critical Mind

Cross-curricular competencies address the need for the integration of subjects. A common concern within current reform projects is the need to instil students with the foundation, methods and commitment they need for lifelong learning. Because of the rate at which knowledge now evolves educational practitioners suggest that time spent in formal schooling is inadequate for preparation for gainful employment. Therefore, students must be encouraged to 'learn how to learn' and be motivated to go on learning. The implementation of cross-curricular competencies is partly in response to the new

demands of occupational realities. Neoliberalists suggest that the labour market now requires that individuals possess a broad range of cognitive skills and abilities; therefore, schooling practices that focus on a narrow, stereotyped, mechanical application of acquired knowledge, are no longer sufficient. Hence, the integration of generic competencies enables students to transfer what is learned in one subject to a new field of knowledge and allows students to progress beyond what they already know.

The Quebec Education program asserts that cross-curricular competencies are essential and valuable tools “for people who have to live in a society of complex, unpredictable and continuously changing situations and interactions”(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 6). Furthermore, the acquisition of flexible, transferable intellectual tools will ensure that knowledge can be adjusted to suit the needs of a fluctuating economic market. It would thus seem that life-long learning and cross-curricular competencies are analogous to labor-market adjustment. There are two concerns with such a perspective. The first relates to the inference of an inevitable future of occupational uncertainty. Equipping students with skills that are flexible suggests that students should adjust to labor-market demands, which undermines their democratic right to transform working conditions that preclude a reasonable measure of occupational security (Graham & Hyslop-Margison, 2001). Reference to adjustment skills is present within the objectives of the Quebec Education program. School is regarded as a place where students pursue an understanding of the world and the meaning of life and develop new ways of adapting to society (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a). Moreover, a focus on life-long learning is a necessity, whether to adapt to change in the workplace or to fully participate in society (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2000). Such



implications fueled with the need for mastery and assimilation of knowledge suggests that the culture of schooling aims to produce what Andre Gorz calls adapted individuals:

exactly the kind of people that capitalist industry needs . . . those who will put up with regimentation, repression, discipline and deliberately unattractive programs . . . [those who] are ideologically reliable, and who will not be tempted to use their technical knowledge to their own political advantage. (as cited in Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. xv)

As a result students are encouraged to become passive producers as opposed to active constructors of society. An educational experience that encourages adaptability neglects students' creative and critical capacities and thus their minds and knowledge within them are subject to control and manipulation.

The second concern in terms of relating cross-curricular competencies with occupational preparation involves how the higher order cognitive skills they purport to develop are defined. The Quebec reform regards training the mind as the cornerstone of educational objectives. Training in this sense refers to the acquisition of structural knowledge, the organization of information and the integration of different areas of study, as well as the development of the methodological skills needed to reason, analyze, synthesize, criticize, and solve problems (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b). Meeting such an objective is largely the responsibility of the successful implementation of cross-curricular competencies. The Quebec Education Program contains nine cross-curricular competencies grouped in four categories and defined as follows:

1. Intellectual: to use information, to solve problems, to exercise critical judgment, to use creativity.
2. Methodological: to adopt effective work methods, to use information and communications technologies (ICT).
3. Personal and social: to construct his/her identity, to cooperate with others.

4. Communication-related: to communicate appropriately.

It was previously suggested that many current reform initiatives, which covertly or unknowingly advocate aspects of human capital theory, reduce the ability to exercise critical judgment to the ability to gather, recall, understand and interpret information in order to logically solve problems encountered in the learning process. In such a context critical thinking is approached as an instrumental and decontextualized problem-solving strategy. The focus of critical thinking becomes that of acquiring higher-level cognitive skills rather than questioning the purpose to which these skills are to be put (Graham & Hyslop-Margison, 2001). Thus, to determine the signification of critical judgment as advocated by the Quebec Education Program, it is important to consider the intellectual objectives it is intended to achieve.

The fact that the competency described as the ability to exercise critical judgment is grouped within the intellectual category may be viewed as having both positive and negative implications. The Quebec Education Program values the importance of an educational experience in which students are active participants in the learning process, as this results in knowledge that is meaningful and relevant to their personal lives. In keeping with this view, the purpose of the intellectual competencies is to encourage even the youngest of students to go beyond superficial memorization of content and mindless conformity, and to aim for a higher level of skills (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a). This new orientation for intellectual competencies attempts to deal with the discontent expressed during the Estates General on Education in regard to the present mechanical method of instruction and its narrow focus on subject matter. The result of such an educational experience results in students' boredom, frustration, and contributes

to their failure to succeed. Thus, the goal of the intellectual competencies is to foster “attitudes such as open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, willingness to make an effort and intellectual rigour”(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 15). Furthermore, these competencies are described as being fuelled by the love of learning, the desire to succeed, and the need for autonomy and creativity.

If these positive objectives are achieved, then the intellectual competencies create an educational environment which is complimentary to the inherent principles of critical thinking. Acknowledging the agency of the student in the creation of knowledge implies respect and stimulus for the creative capacity of the learner. In this sense, knowledge is no longer viewed as something transferred to students in a random fragmented manner. The students’ active participation in the learning process encourages the inclusion of academic content that is no longer detached from students’ realities or disparaging to their concept of self-worth. Critical theorist, Paulo Freire, discusses the consequences of educational practices that transform learning into a matter of simple technique. Educating in such a manner “is to impoverish what is fundamentally human in this experience: namely, its capacity to form the human person”(Freire, 1998, p. 39). Student experience is validated when the assumption that truth belongs only to the teacher is proven to be not only preposterous but also false. Developing a critical perspective to learning demands profundity and not superficiality in the comprehension and interpretation of the facts. According to Freire, critical thinking “presupposes an openness that allows for the revision of conclusions; it recognizes not only the possibility of making a new choice or a new evaluation but also the *right* to do so”(p. 39).

Attempting to develop students' critical faculties requires that thinking refrain from being disconnected from ethical principles and that the right to change one's opinions be not simply rhetorical. The importance of establishing an ethical perspective in regard to the development of one's critical faculties is acknowledged in the profile of the competency outlined in the Quebec Education Program. The ethics and individual values are reflected in the judgment used to orient his/her actions, and influence those of others. Because there is no area of human activity in which people do not make judgments, it is essential to ensure that these judgments are based on a valid understanding of the consequences involved. Thus, schools in Quebec define the ability to exercise critical judgment as a student's ability to "weigh all the facts, to take into consideration their own emotions, to use logical arguments, to take context into account, to allow for ambiguity, and to weed out preconceptions"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 20). The competency outlines three key features: the ability to form an opinion, to express his/her judgment, and to qualify his/her judgment.

The feature that involves the forming of an opinion highlights the need to define the question under consideration and weigh the logical, ethical, or aesthetic issues involved. Students are then encouraged to verify the accuracy of the facts, contextualize them, and consider various options in light of existing or possible points of view. At this point a student is capable of adopting a position and the second feature, which entails expressing his/her judgment, comes into play. The most important aspect of expressing one's point of view is to ensure that the student is able to justify his/her position through enlightened reasoning and legitimate arguments. The final stage, qualifying his/her judgment, requires that a subjective opinion be compared with and evaluated by those of others. It

is here that the student is presented with the opportunity to reconsider his/her position, examine the respective influence of reason and emotion on decision-making, acknowledge the impact of personal biases and accept the need to repeat the whole exercise if necessary. If such an approach is applied to the development of critical faculties the Quebec Education Program hopes that students will be capable of distinguishing arguments based on emotion from those based on reason (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001a, p. 21). Most importantly, students will be able to formulate the values, principles, rights, and duties on which their judgments will be grounded.

The definition and features of critical thinking outlined in the Quebec Education Program appear to reflect the elements deemed necessary by Paulo Freire. Nevertheless, the exclusion of discussion relating to the political, cultural and historical reality in which the students are immersed, risks limiting critical thinking to a logical method of analyzing problems. Freire (1973) distinguishes between the act of ‘problematizing’ and a problem-solving skill. In the latter approach, an individual “takes some distance from reality, analyzes it into component parts, devises means for resolving difficulties in the most efficient way, and then dictates a strategy or policy”(p. ix). Using such an approach, according to Freire, “distorts the totality of human experience by reducing it to those dimensions which are amenable to treatment as mere difficulties to be solved”(p. ix). In contrast, to problematize is to involve an entire populace in a process of acknowledging how the difficulties of reality have come to be thereby generating a critical consciousness that empowers them to alter their relations with nature and social forces. The reflection required in such a process can be realized only if all participants engage in dialogue and value the shared goal of becoming agents of their social reality.

Mention of students' abilities to alter undesirable social conditions is virtually non-existent within the Quebec Education Program. In one statement there is a suggestion that "if students are not fully aware of the complexity of their world, if they do not have an overall sense of their era, and if they have not developed their critical faculties, they will, at the very most be able to conform"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 3, sec. 3.3). Following this statement is a resolution that asserts schools must prepare students to take their place in our ever more complex, but all the more so human society. It is difficult to ascertain how conformity differs from the notion of taking one's place. Both imply a passive role on behalf of the individual. Moreover, there is no discussion as to what constitutes a more human society, which raises the issue of whose values are deemed worthy of advocating.

The profile of the competency the ability to exercise critical judgment fails to clarify what facts it proposes to examine. Graham and Hyslop-Margison (2001) identify the need for critical thinking strategies to emphasize the crucial distinction between brute facts and social facts. Brute facts are characterized as independent of social relationships because they convey empirical, propositional truths about the natural world. The temperature at which water freezes and the theory of gravity are examples of brute facts. Social facts, on the other hand, consider how social reality is constructed as a result of intentional human actions. An example might be laws governing the legal drinking and driving age. The examination of such facts is an inherent aspect of critical thinking, for it encourages recognition "that social facts are always contingent propositions because they describe situations that can be changed through social critique, human agency, and political action"(p. 356). The absence of such clarification leaves this competency open

to critique in regard to its intentions. In fact, the positive elements of its association with the intellectual grouping may be seen as secondary to its function as a problem-solving skill. The other skills described within this category include systematic methods and are identified as follows: analysis, synthesis and problem-solving skills, the capacity to undertake a project and follow it through to completion, development and use of the memory, creativity and exercise of the aesthetic sense, communication skills, and assessment and self-assessment skills (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, appendix 2). One is left to wonder whether critical thinking is viewed in the same vein as the other skills it is grouped with. Thus, due to the lack of concrete examples expressing how becoming a critical thinker leads to action, the intentions of this competency remain open to interpretation. Furthermore, such inconclusiveness does not determine whether the efforts of the Quebec reform initiate fundamental changes in the way knowledge is constructed, nor to the division of responsibility between teacher and student. In other words, the core of educational practice invariably remains intact.

#### Changes to the Core of Educational Practice Within the Quebec Reforms

The core of educational practice as defined by Richard F. Elmore (1996) entails “how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student’s role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and class work”(p. 2). Determining how knowledge is viewed is reflected in the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, relations among teachers and students, as well as processes for assessing student learning. Examining the impact reform initiatives have

had on altering the dynamics of core practices, Elmore concludes that change in contrast to stability has been minimal and is usually unsuccessful on anything more than a small scale. He continues to suggest that what has passed for change comes in the form of innovations that often embody vague intentions of changing the core through modifications that are weakly related, or not related at all to the core. Changes in the forms of lengthening or shortening class periods, distributing content in different ways or attempting to change how learning occurs by means of cross-curricular competencies, does not ensure that the core of practice has been affected in any way. Such changes are often implemented in hopes of giving teachers additional time to organize activities that they would not otherwise be able to do. Nevertheless, due to an already existent lack of time, teachers end up using this additional time to complete corrections and lesson plans. In addition, alternative forms of teaching or special projects within the classroom are viewed as secondary to the acquisition of basic skills. Thus, academic obligations contribute to the neglect of learning that may encourage the development of heightened critical faculties.

The Quebec Education Program suggests that pedagogical processes stem from different beliefs about the way in which the human mind works. Those who endorse a 'blank slate' perspective, which views the mind as something on which messages are imprinted, value teaching approaches based on rote learning, repetition and structured exercises. Those who view the mind as active, selective, and designed to solve problems advocate methods based on intellectual activity in which discovery and construction replace the mere reception of knowledge (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b). The first conception is advocated as essential for the acquisition of elementary or basic



knowledge. Such methods are viewed as beneficial and necessary in terms of memorizing multiplication tables, learning the rules of arithmetic, and grasping basic grammar. More complex forms of teaching based on intellectual activity, according to the Program, will be implemented as students progress through the higher levels of education.

This perspective raises an important issue. An examination of subject-time allocation as outlined in the reform reveals that the acquisition of basic knowledge comprises a majority of teaching time from grades one through nine. In grades one and two, sixteen hours of a twenty-three and a half hour school week are dominated by learning math and the language of instruction. The focus on basic skills is highlighted as essential throughout the entire schooling process, whereas the start of more formal learning is introduced in grade 4 gradually reaching its peak in the last two years of high school. Thus, if methods based on rote memorization and repetition are endorsed for the teaching of elementary knowledge it would be logical to assume that this is the format of teaching students are predominantly exposed to. Such educational practices perpetuate an experience in which the teacher imparts the knowledge that is to be taught and the students receive, learn, and reproduce the facts required of them. The Quebec reforms, then, appear to legitimate Elmore's argument that practices which aim to challenge the basic conventions of the core of schooling are often defeated, or at best implemented haphazardly.

The information presented in this chapter depicts a dismal image of current educational practices. The indoctrination of conservative and the more current neoliberal agendas have resulted in educational practices whose primary function is seen as

preparing students for occupational roles. I concede that this objective is an important and logical reality of the purpose of schooling. Nevertheless, I suggest that the continual return of reform initiatives is due to an inability to achieve the ultimate goal of increasing the student success rate. The reason for this failure stems from the oppressive nature of educational practices in which the students' opinions, desires and aspirations are strictly monitored and altered to suit the needs of those in power positions. It cannot be denied that socio-economic influences have in many ways shaped the objectives outlined in the Quebec reform program. Nonetheless, periods in which change is occurring serve as ideal opportunities for alternative practices to be initiated. Thus in order to determine how positive change may come about it is essential to consider whether the Quebec reform perpetuates a teacher-student dynamic of domination and subordination or whether it encourages a relationship based on mutual respect in which critical practices serve to benefit all participants involved. Critical theory will aid in identifying institutional features that stifle the development of critical thinking and will present alternative practices that contribute to the empowerment of both teacher and student.

## CHAPTER THREE

### NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SUCCESS: IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE OF CONFLICT WITHIN THE TEACHER-STUDENT DYNAMIC

The catch phrase of the current Quebec reforms is ‘New Directions for success.’ Capitalizing on this slogan in the title of this chapter it is argued that success stems from creating a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student. My interactions with fellow educators have revealed a common goal in terms of how they define educational success. For many teachers their choice of vocation and continued motivation hinders on making a difference in the life of their students. Often this difference is not defined in terms of high grades, graduation, or gainful employment. More often than not, a teacher’s pride and satisfaction is the result of a student’s enhanced sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, the influence of economic, social, and political forces, and their impact on school structure, governance, funding, and ultimate objectives, impede the possibility for democratic learning to occur.

Critical theorists highlight the oppressive nature of educational practice as a result of political, cultural, and economic forces. Thus, using the tenets of critical pedagogy to examine the objectives of the Quebec reforms, problematic aspects will be identified. The teacher-student relationship, which critical theory views as the initial departure point from which democratic educational experiences develop, will be considered within the context of the Quebec reforms.

## The Root of the Problem: the Reality of Teacher-Student Relationships

Successful educational change depends on what teachers do and think; it is as simple and as complex as that. Perhaps reform would be easier “if we could legislate changes in thinking”(Sarason, 1982, p. 193). The quality of working conditions for teachers is fundamentally connected to the chances for change to occur. At the present time, these conditions have taken a drastic downturn. Growing discontent within communities and public opinion has resulted in the role of the teacher to be less valued than it was in the past. The increasing ambivalence of youth about the value of education coupled with expanding responsibilities of familial and social roles assigned to schooling has resulted in intolerable working conditions for teachers. This situation leads to teacher dissatisfaction, frustration and ultimately leads to many competent individuals wanting to leave the profession.

National opinion polls of teachers in the United States conducted by the National Education Association in 1967 and 1979 validate the former assertion concerning the despondency of teachers with their choice of occupation (Fullan, 1982). The question presented to the teachers asked them to consider the possibility of starting over again. What was to be determined was whether or not they would still choose to become a teacher. The findings are indicated in the following data:

	<i>1967</i>	<i>1979</i>
Certainly would become a teacher	53%	30%
Probably would	25%	29%
Probably would not become a teacher	7%	22%
Certainly would not	2%	10%
Not sure	13%	10%

The results reveal that the situation of teachers is not getting any better. In 1967 over one-half of the teaching force were positive that they had made the right choice. In 1979 this proportion declined to less than one-third. What is even more surprising is that over a span of twelve years one out of every three teachers “probably” or “certainly” wished that he/she had never become a teacher (Fullan, 1982, p. 111). A more recent survey conducted in 2003 by the MORI Social Research Institute reveals findings that are discouragingly similar to the findings listed above. When asked to consider the possibility of choosing an alternate career path the probability of choosing the teaching profession is expressed as follows:

Yes, definitely	21%
Yes, probably	29%
Not sure either way	17%
No, probably not	21%
No, definitely not	11%
Not stated	1%

These statistics show that a third of the teachers currently working in the profession would not choose this career path if they had their time again. Additional data presented in the study shows that one in three teachers expect to leave teaching within five years and more than half (56%) state that their morale is lower than when they joined the profession. Thus, despite twenty-six years of education reform the situation and morale of the teachers has invariably remained the same. Such facts do not prove that beneficial changes have not come about. Nevertheless, as has been reiterated throughout this study, changes have been unable to alter teacher-student power relations. The predominant method of teaching, and the one with the longest history, can best be described as being overwhelmingly factual and managerial. Furthermore, a majority of teachers view the idea of engaging students in more interactional higher-order cognitive tasks in classrooms

with thirty or more students as highly impractical, if not impossible (Fullan, 1982). It cannot be denied that teacher-student ratios play an important role in determining what instructional methods are incorporated into the classroom. The issue to be resolved is how and why such conditions continue to prevail.

### The Social Implications of the Role of the Teacher

In a discussion concerning the relationship schools bear to society Quarter (1972) argues that teachers are unable to be stimulating educators because their role in the classroom is incompatible with education. The evaluative and socializing responsibilities assigned to teachers force them into a punitive relationship toward students thereby stifling the fulfillment of the educative function. In order for change to come about it is essential for teachers to identify, recognize, and work to eliminate those elements that result in them being both the cause and victim of alienation within the classroom. The primary source of teacher frustration and discontent can be attributed to three specific roles they are required to perform: socializing agent, vocational selector, and educator (Quarter, 1972). The teacher is the school's agent for performing these functions, and it is these functions that define the teacher's role and his/her relationship to students. A brief description of these roles will allow for a more in-depth discussion of how the nature of this relationship contributes to undesirable educational experiences for both teachers and their students.

### *The teacher as a socializing agent*

Schooling plays an important role in terms of its socializing function. Because children spend a good part of their formative years within classrooms the values endorsed by teachers can exercise a decisive influence on the way students choose to construct, alter and develop their personal identities. Teachers are responsible for inculcating students with the “proper” values and characteristics that will enable them to become productive, responsible citizens who contribute to the wellbeing of the larger society. The potentially harmful aspect of this function is due to the absence of an explicit curriculum that defines what socialization entails. As a result, many of the regulations are subtle and are carried out by means of a “hidden curriculum”(Fullan, 1982, p. 50). Perhaps the most prominent feature of the hidden curriculum is its mission to instill in students the value of doing well as determined by academic achievement. The importance of this aspect is reinforced by its extension into a student’s home environment where parental pressure serves to validate the necessity of academic success as a means for social advancement. Once this objective is attained the role of the hidden curriculum in the process of socialization can proceed without resistance. As students learn to accept the value of academic achievement they become more receptive to the rules of compliance endorsed by the hidden curriculum. Regulating features such as lining up in the hall, sitting in designated seats, raising one’s hand for permission to speak, thinking correctly and obeying the teacher, become accepted as the norms of daily school behavior.

The ethical considerations of the hidden curriculum are extensive and deserve authentic consideration. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study it is sufficient to

define its general role as “fulfilling society’s need for a relatively standardized human model who will function smoothly in the great industrial machine”(Fullan, 1982, p. 51). Values such as punctuality, neatness, diligence, competitiveness, achievement and submission to authority are in actuality more relevant to the demands of the business world than they are to course content. Employers recognize that entry-level employees may not know the first thing about how the company functions. The fact that they have undergone at least thirteen years of formal schooling, however, demonstrates that this individual is able to follow instructions, has a respect for authority, and is able to follow a task through to completion. Hence, the industrial and classroom setting are very similar and, more important, so are the characteristics required to succeed.

#### *The teacher as a vocational selector*

The affiliation of schooling and the realities of industry suppose the exigency of maximizing profit in terms of production. As a result, the teacher is required to orient students towards occupational roles that make the best use of their talents. The complications that arise from such a duty are related to the aspirations of the students and the reality of available occupations. A study conducted by the Carnegie Foundation in 1959-60 within City of Toronto schools, found that approximately eighty percent of grade seven and eight students interviewed expressed high aspirations in terms of educational and work plans (Fullan, 1982, p. 50). The reality of the situation is that by the time the students in this study reached university age there were places for approximately thirteen percent of their age group in Ontario’s universities. A more recent study conducted by Looker and Thiessen (2004) presents findings that are strikingly similar to those of the Carnegie study. This study reveals that educational



aspirations among Canadian 15-year-old youth are remarkably high. Almost all aspire to complete high school, and over nine in ten say they want to go on beyond high school. University is clearly the post-secondary pathway of choice, being named by over two thirds of the youth, whereas less than one in ten say they want to pursue an apprenticeship or attend a post secondary trade or vocational school. These aspirations stand in opposition to the fact that there is very little room at the top of Canada's very elite educational system, resulting in a majority of students being left with no other choice but to settle for enrolment in trade or vocational schools.

The desire of the many and availability for the few means that decisions must be made as to who will be permitted to achieve his/her objective. It is the teacher who is entrusted with this managerial decision. Those children who have been raised by the same values advocated in schooling should be channelled into vocations and social roles that are appropriate to their capabilities (Fullan, 1982). Competition and discrimination are natural offshoots of this selection process. Because students are not aware of the social pressures placed on teachers to perform this function, they take their frustration out on the person they view as directly responsible. Naturally they come to resent the teacher who denies them the chance to play in the game; eventually this hostility evolves into indifference and they give up on the entire educational process itself.

#### *The teacher as an educator*

In addition to performing the roles of vocational selection and socialization, the teacher is responsible for the most obvious function: education. Although education is a complex term to define, it is generally accepted that without its hidden curriculum it can be sub-divided into two categories: technical and general (Fullan, 1982, p. 53). Technical

education relates to the acquisition of skills directly related to occupational task. Although this aspect is present throughout the entire educational process, it is more specifically related to trade or professional schools. Before entering into technical programs, students are required to complete a general education. Varying conceptions of general education exist, however, it is primarily viewed as learning how to reason, and think creatively, and independently. This type of education occurs in the teaching of core subjects such as mathematics, science, languages, and the humanities. As students progress through their general education and achieve success they are expected to be knowledgeable and rational. According to this perspective, those who have been involved in the schooling process longer have logically become more knowledgeable and more rational. Thus, the more prestigious positions require more years of schooling. The source of conflict in this process is the absence of practical application and the dominance of irrelevant course content. As a result, students who have lost their passion for learning cope with the monotonous routine in hopes of fulfilling their vocational ambitions. At the end of this expensive and inefficient process, however, they are often unable to find a stimulating job due to their lack of experience. Teachers, by fulfilling the role of educator, become the focus of student frustration. The resentment expressed by students toward the teacher and schooling is so strong that most students would vacate the hallowed halls at a moment's notice, if the appropriate qualifications could be obtained by alternate means (Fullan, 1982).

From the above-mentioned discussion it becomes clear how teachers and students are forced into relationships that put them in direct opposition to one another. For the student, the teacher is viewed as nothing more than a powerful and punitive evaluator

whose authority ultimately decides their success or failure. This is not to say that all teachers conduct their classes in an authoritarian manner; however, their social obligations as defined by the school system require teachers to inculcate students with survival skills dependent on adaptation as opposed to innovation. Teachers are not immune to the resentment students have towards them and quite often attribute the cause to their own inadequacies. Blaming themselves for an inability to reach the students results in a loss of confidence in ability and character deterioration. Searching for an outlet for their frustration teachers in turn point the finger of blame at the students. What both parties fail to recognize is that whenever there is a widespread malaise among the participants involved in the process of schooling, the source of the problem cannot be analyzed solely from the viewpoint of the individual (Quarter, 1972). It is necessary to examine the social context within which a given relationship is situated. Paulo Freire (1993) offers a detailed analysis of the social conditions that encourage a tumultuous teacher-student dynamic in order to ensure the maintenance of a passive, manageable citizenry.

### The Banking Concept of Education

The repressive nature of the teacher-student relationship as described above is the result of what Paulo Freire (1993) refers to as ‘the banking concept of education.’ Educational practices that adhere to this concept involve a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students) (p. 52). The process of narration excludes the active participation of students and thus the task of the teacher, as narrator, becomes one

of filling the minds of the students with facts detached from their individual realities.

When contents are irrelevant to the lived experiences of students, words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating rhetoric. According to Freire, "the outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power"(p. 52). As knowledge is deposited into the minds of the students, lessons become based on memorization and one's success is determined by one's ability to expel the appropriate facts upon demand. Knowledge, in this view, is regarded as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others is a characteristic of the ideology of oppression and its purpose is strategic in nature.

Excluding students in the process of inquiry results in an oppressive teacher-student relationship. Strategically placing teacher and student in opposition to each other is beneficial for those in dominant positions. As previously discussed, the process of schooling requires teachers to perform societal tasks that prevent relationships of mutual respect from developing. As a result, both become the focus of the other's frustration and the ensuing discontent brings about alienation. The alienation experienced by students results from a desire and need to receive the teacher's approval and praise. Because the banking concept of education denies students the opportunity to become co-creators of knowledge they are left with only one option: obey and abide by the rules of those who are the disseminators of reward and punishment. Once students come to accept that the teacher is the executor of society's material rewards, all ideas and behaviours assume an importance in proportion to the favourable reaction they might elicit. It is natural for people to desire autonomy in terms of how their thoughts and feelings are developed.

Thus, conflict results when the need to curry favour with the teacher presupposes the desire to maintain the ideal of a free-thinking human (Quarter, 1972). Conformity results in the development of students whose actions and thoughts are divorced from their true feelings, which ultimately results in self-alienation. Freire suggests that as long as individuals live in the duality of which “*to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor*”(1993, p. 30), they remain unable to contribute to their liberation.

Conformity is not required solely on the part of the students. Many teachers resent their obligation of evaluating students’ performance and enforcing school regulations. If presented with a feasible plan to implement change a majority would welcome the opportunity to abandon this role. Unfortunately, they are bound by regulations established by the school board and principal which they themselves must meet if they are to aspire to professional success. Ironically a teacher’s success is judged by the academic competence of his/her students. Viewed from the perspective of banking education, the value of the teacher is determined by the amount of information he/she is able to deposit into the minds of the students. Hence, the more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better the students are (Freire, 1993). The school system does not look favourably upon teachers who are unable to “shape up” their students. As a result, a less than satisfactory evaluation given by the principal may eventually lead to a teacher’s replacement by a more “competent” contender (Quarter, 1972, p. 56). The implications of the word competent in such a situation refers to the teacher’s willingness to conform and their ability to achieve conformity within their classrooms. Teachers, then, find themselves in what appears to be a no-win situation. Due to the fact that many individuals in top ranking positions within the education system

have been receiving promotions for thirty or forty years suggests that they are more than likely staunch supporters of the system. Thus, the teachers' desire to engage their students in meaningful learning experiences is thwarted by the necessity of self-preservation. What results is active consent by both teacher and student to accept the disparaging conditions of their prescribed roles.

Victory for the oppressors depends on the teacher and student's failure to recognize that resolving the contradiction that forms the basis of their relationship is the key to ending oppression. If the teacher-student relationship was transformed so that both parties were simultaneously teachers and students, education would become a mutual process of revealing the contradictions of society, and together they would engage themselves in the struggle for liberation. Nonetheless, this transformation is far from an easy task to accomplish. The oppressors who desire to preserve their profitable situation, have been very successful at "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"(Freire, 1993, p. 55). The nature of the entire education system has created educated individuals who are nothing more than adapted persons. The passivity that results from such a process successfully ensures that both teachers' and students' critical faculties and creative powers are annulled.

Another effective strategy of those in dominant positions is to appear as though they desire to help those in oppressed situations. Disguised under the pretense of democracy, the oppressors aim to alleviate the suffering of those in disadvantaged positions, by allowing them the chance to compete for upward mobility by equipping them with the requisite skills provided by educational opportunity. Such a strategy is what Freire refers to as 'false generosity'. It is important to consider how the notion of false generosity

coupled with the view of education as the equalizer of social injustice, has resulted in a politically neutral image of schooling that encourages the reproduction and legitimization of capitalist ideologies.

### False Generosity: the Myth of Equality in Education

The success of banking education in deadening the creative faculties of students has not only resulted in the ability of those in dominant positions to inculcate the importance of mechanistic cognitive style approaches to learning; it has managed to influence public opinion to accept a view of schooling as a vehicle for the equalization of economic status and opportunity. The myth of equal opportunity purports that success is the result of individual intelligence, hard work, and creativity. Despite the fact that this myth has been continually proven untrue its glorified promises of economic stability and social mobility has enabled it to become part of commonsense reality. Advocates of the myth of equal opportunity justify their arguments based on claims of “meritocracy.” In this view justice prevails by providing “students who are more capable –who try harder and have more innate intelligence – with their rightful rewards and excludes those who are less able”(McLaren, 1998, p. 214). Those who are less able, according to this perspective, are usually minority and working-class children whose failure is often attributed to a deficient gene pool. Heralding themselves as heroes, defenders of educational practices based on capitalist ideologies graciously offer free educational admittance to those who have been dealt a rotten hand in life. Here, those who are

disadvantaged will be offered solace through the acquisition of knowledge that will enable them to compete for economic prosperity.

When schooling is viewed as an instructional site, void of any cultural or political influence the consequences are deleterious. Those who are unable to succeed shamelessly equate their academic failure to intellectual inferiority and thus come to accept the fate into which they were born. In actuality, research has proven that one of the greatest determinants of academic success is parental socio-economic status. Those endorsing a neoliberal perspective discredit such a determinant of academic success on the basis of free-schooling and additional funding for those in disadvantaged positions. Free schooling, however, does not equate equal schooling. Many inner-city schools whose student population consists primarily of children from low-income neighbourhoods are substantially lacking in adequate resources. For example, consider how technological competency has virtually become an essential prerequisite for success in today's society. Even though most children are gaining access through schools and public libraries, it still remains that people with more resources have more access. To further this point one must only consider the fact that telephone companies have plans to bypass many of the poor urban neighbourhoods as they lay the cable required for access to the "information superhighway"(Huitt, 1995). Therefore, the myth of equal opportunity "masks an ugly truth: The educational system is really a loaded social lottery, in which each student gets as many chances as his or her parents have dollars"(McLaren, 1998, p. 214). Such obvious truths are not shocking revelations to those in dominant positions. It is their cognizance of these issues that promotes the notion of false generosity.



Freire asserts that “any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed it never attempts to go beyond this”(1993, p. 26). He further suggests that continued opportunities to express such generosity requires the oppressors to perpetuate injustice, as death, despair and poverty are the foundations of this charitable unselfishness. Perpetuating such injustice places the dispensers of false generosity in a precarious position. That is why they become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. In order to ensure the security of false generosity’s longevity, neoliberalists, who represent the role of oppressor, have generated an alternate plan to aid in the perpetuation of inequality. This plan expresses itself through cultural uniformity. From this perspective schools are now defended as both cultural and industrial sites. Critical theorists Giroux and McLaren (1989) suggest that the resounding “call for more curricular content and increased standardized testing is a thinly disguised attempt to impose cultural uniformity on the schools . . .”(p. xviii). The result is school content which is irrelevant to the culturally specific traditions, experiences, and histories the students bring to schools, and a deskilling of teachers by forcing them to concentrate on delivering a curriculum that is pre-packaged and intellectually bland.

Evidence of the oppressor’s urgent need for cultural uniformity is advocated by what is poetically described as common culture. E. D. Hirsch (1992), an advocate of the Core Knowledge Movement, elaborates on the necessity of establishing a common culture in terms of what he refers to as cosmopolitanism. Hirsch contends that there are two kinds of multiculturalism: “There’s a progressive form that will be helpful to all students, and a retrogressive kind that . . . tends to set group against group”(p. 1). The progressive form

which represents a universalistic view is what Hirsch calls cosmopolitanism. Conversely, the retrogressive form is a particularistic vision that stresses loyalty to one's local culture and thus is referred to as 'ethnic loyalism.' The central issue, Hirsch asserts, is "do we define ourselves as belonging to a particular 'ethnos' or . . . a broad 'cosmopolis'?"(p. 2) In order to promote the benefits of belonging to a cosmopolis Hirsch argues that public education is the only institution available for creating a school-based culture. This culture serves as a common language and is therefore the means by which citizens living in a multicultural society are able to communicate in the public sphere. Hirsch's urgent plea for membership in a cosmopolis reveals a fear of difference, the need for its subversion, and its close association with the disintegration of tradition and social cohesion.

It seems difficult to believe that such manipulative strategies have not been admonished for the injustice they attempt to impose. Nevertheless, the prevalence of establishing a common culture is alive and well as evidenced in the Quebec Education Program. The need to define common values based on common goals, namely, preparing students to exercise their citizenship, integrating students into a common culture based on both past and future experience, and maintaining equality of opportunity, is regarded as an antecedent for social cohesion (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b). The common goals are described as a commitment to democracy, solidarity, and responsibility. There are several mentions of the fact that in today's modern society democracy is in a fragile state. Thus, the importance of social cohesion becomes all the more pressing. Solidarity is promoted as the solution to achieving social cohesion. Although reference is made to the importance of individual liberties, it is

stated that personal freedom must not be exercised to the detriment of social cohesion. The Quebec Education Program suggests that presenting a unified cultural perspective enables students to better adapt to, and join, a cultural system that has been built up over the centuries. By learning about past and present cultural perspectives, the program aims to encourage the development of students' personal identities as well as the desire to contribute to the greater society. The message students must receive in the curriculum is described as follows:

In school, you will learn how to become more human. How? By being brought into contact with the most significant human achievements, since the world in which you live is the result of human achievement. By seeing what humanity is capable of, you will learn that you too are an enterprising, inventive, cooperative being continually searching for something better. You too can now make a contribution to improving our world, like those who have gone before you. The instruments you will need to participate actively in the construction of the world will be developed within you: reason, imagination, a critical faculty, and the open-mindedness that stimulates the intelligence. (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 2, sec. 1.3)

This objective seems to contradict the evidence presented in Chapter 2 which revealed the importance placed on the acquisition of basic knowledge. The instructional technique predominantly used in its acquisition is that based on rote memorization and repetition. This approach is strikingly similar to the banking concept as described by Paulo Freire. Hence, it can be argued that the achievement of the goals outlined in the above-mentioned message is incompatible with the passive role into which the student is forced. Although this objective may be well intentioned, there are contradictions in regard to what democracy aims to be, and what the reality of the situation is.

The Quebec Education Program includes improved educational achievement as one of its main objectives. It suggests that although past reforms have made progress in this area, too many students still do not pursue the studies for which they would have the

potential. Perhaps the potential is there, but the reality of the situation is higher education cannot accommodate all those who desire this path. The evidence is provided by three graduation target rates set as institutional objectives. The projected target is that “85 percent of students of a given generation earn a secondary school diploma before the age of 20, 60 percent, a college diploma and 30 percent, an undergraduate degree”(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2000, p. 11). Evidence presented earlier suggests that a majority of Canadian youth have aspirations of going on to university. The considerable drop in percentage of those going on to university as indicated by the Quebec Education Program is more indicative of limited opportunity as opposed to limited desire. The high percentage of those expected to earn a college diploma is contradictory to the constant references made for the increasing need for students to acquire higher-order cognitive capacities due to the increasing complexity of current job realities.

The Quebec reforms suggest that many of the decisions made in terms of renewing the mission of Quebec’s schools are based on the consensus reached at the Quebec Youth Summit held in February 2000. One of the major issues raised by students concerned the topic of funding. The government announced that in order to meet its objective of greater equality of opportunity and maintaining democratic accessible and quality educational services, it would invest \$1 billion in education before the end of the term. Five years later, students anticipating the increased funding, staged a protest upon hearing the Quebec Premier’s decision to repeal the initial promise. The students are not the only ones expressing their frustrations with the state of schooling. Teachers who participated in sessions for curriculum development did not hesitate to voice their opinions. In discussions concerning the renewed mission of instruction a great deal of resistance was

encountered among those working in schools. Many teachers expressed discontent about the fact that the goal of providing instruction should be made the primary mission of schools. Concerned with the need for greater emphasis in areas such as personal and social development, teachers expressed that a preoccupation with instruction has been to the detriment of students' more human qualities (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b). Although their voices were acknowledged the Ministry asserts that the debate as to which mission should take precedence over the others, based on an examination of the nature of the school as an institution, appeared to be sterile. According to the Ministry, once the primary functions performed by schools have attained a certain degree of permanence, "a given society, at a given moment in its history, will decide to place more importance on one function, and then on another"(Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001b, chap. 2, sec. 1.1).

Based on the former discussion it would appear that despite claims of putting the needs of the students first and granting more professional autonomy to teachers, the nature of schooling is designed to serve the interests of those in dominant positions. Those directly involved in the process, are granted the opportunity to voice their opinions, but ultimately what is required of them can best be described by the following statement: sit down, be quiet, and do what is expected of you. Both students and teachers are beginning to understand the hypocrisy of false generosity and the deception behind the notion of equal opportunity. Teachers and students are becoming restless. The promise of greater things to come has been heard too many times before. Objectives outlined on paper promoting a desire for critical learning experiences that reject the notion of mindless conformity and memorization of content, do not appear to be

promising prospects for classroom application. Nevertheless, without concrete evidence these hypotheses are nothing more than speculation. Therefore, this study now turns to the domain of actual experience. Information gathered through interviews with eight teachers working within the Quebec education system, and dealing with the implementation of the current reforms, in addition to the perspectives of four individuals currently enrolled in a teacher certification program, sheds light on the reality of the actual situation. Comparing the practices espoused by the teachers with the tenets of Freire's problem-posing education, will determine to what extent critical pedagogy has been successful in infiltrating classroom dynamics.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PRIMACY OF VOICE: TEACHERS SPEAK OUT

#### Overview

In the commotion of accountability schemes, management pedagogies, and competency-based curricula, there is a menacing silence regarding how teachers and students produce and reconstruct meaning in everyday life. Although reforms currently being implemented in the schools of Quebec claim to have the students' interests at heart, the individuals who engage in discussion with the students on a daily basis, who other than the students themselves, can best attest to their desires, their strengths, and their weaknesses, are ironically left out of the decision-making process. The arguments made in the previous chapters reveal striking similarities between the Quebec Education Program and the neoliberal ideology prevalent in a majority of reform initiatives taking place throughout North America. The Quebec reform's rhetorical implications of teacher as mediator as opposed to instructor do not provide grounds for an argument suggesting that dramatic change in regard to the core of educational practice has come about. The reason behind the absence of such change can be stated quite simply: socio-economic stakeholders who benefit from the current structure of educational practices do not want change to come about.

There are, however, individuals who long for change. Under the restraints of the current system teachers are growing weary. Required to meet multiple national, provincial and local mandates while continually being under funded, under paid, over

scrutinized, and over criticized has resulted in a general sense of indifference in regard to current reform initiatives. Well aware of the fact that if a new program works teachers get little of the credit, and if it fails they receive most of the blame, this group of individuals may be ready to surrender the fight. Though a small percentage are formally invited to participate in the preparation of curriculum design, more often than not their opinions are taken as little more than suggestions. Their attempts to question the intentions of supposed experts are dispelled as narrow visions that focus only on teachers' needs within individual classrooms and lack an understanding of objectives deemed imperative for the larger social climate. As a result, their shouts of desperation, 'what about the students?,' are silenced by self-proclaimed authorities whose expertise entitles them to have the last word. This being said, is it any wonder that countless teachers throw their hands up in the air and proclaim, 'I can't take it anymore!' What teachers desperately need is a forum in which their frustrations are voiced and acknowledged, their experience regarded as valuable, and their suggestions seriously considered. This study serves as that forum.

## Methodology

The qualitative paradigm disputes the existence of an objective reality that can be studied, captured, and understood. For the qualitative researcher, an understanding of the world can only be gained through conversation and observation in natural settings (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). This paradigm focuses on gaining insight from multiple perspectives within a real world context by interpreting phenomena in terms of the



meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An ideal way to gain an understanding of the thoughts, opinions and beliefs of those participating in the study, is by means of dialogue. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how teachers view the importance of critical thinking in regard to the learning process. According to Freire (1993), “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education”(p. 73). Hence, if learning is to be meaningful and genuine, it must begin by means of conversation. Because of the qualitative paradigm’s compatibility with the theory of critical pedagogy, and due to the importance placed on dialogue, this study is informed by means of key informant interviews.

Twelve interviews were conducted in total. Eight of these were with teachers working at the elementary and secondary levels in public and alternative schools. The additional four were conducted with students currently enrolled in and recent graduates of a Bachelor of Arts in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education Program. In order to avoid confusion in regard to the opinions presented in subsequent pages the first table included below highlights the schools represented, the names of the teachers interviewed within each school, and the grade level assigned to each teacher. The second table describes the students interviewed, their status within a four-year Teacher-Training in Education Program and their current involvement with the teaching profession. It is important to note that for the purpose of confidentiality the names of the schools and of the participants interviewed have been changed.

Table I

## Description of Schools and Grade Levels Associated with Teachers Interviewed

Teacher	School	Cycle <sup>1</sup>	Description of School
Suzanne	Cherry Wood	Cycle 2 (grade 3 & 4)	Public Elementary School
Mr. Lamb	High Park	Cycle 3 (grade 5 & 6)	Public Elementary School
Sarah	Algonquin	Secondary III (grade 9)	Public High School
Mr. Richardson	Northern Collegiate	Secondary V (grade 11 & 12)	Public High School
Barb	New School	Secondary V (grade 11 & 12)	Public Alternative High School
Jennifer	New School	Secondary IV (grade 10)	Public Alternative High School
Johanne	Borders	Secondary IV (grade 10)	Public Alternative High School
Ray	Borders	Secondary V (grade 11 & 12)	Public Alternative High School

<sup>1</sup> The Quebec Reform is based on a cycle program which involves levels of schooling based on larger units of time. The elementary level includes three cycles each of which comprise two years of schooling. The secondary level is divided into two cycles. The first cycle includes secondary I, secondary II, and secondary III which represent grades 7, 8, and 9 respectively in a grade-based system. The second secondary cycle includes secondary IV or grade 10, and secondary V equivalent to the two final years of high school, grade 11 and 12.

Table II

Status of Students Interviewed

Student	Status in Program	Current Involvement with the Teaching Profession
Angela	Recent Graduate	Substitute Teacher
Kim	Recent Graduate	Substitute Teacher
Nancy	Close to Completion	None
Monica	2 Years Completed	Private Tutor

The decision to interview teachers at both the elementary and secondary level was based on two primary reasons. First, the age difference in regard to the student populations coupled with a distinction in terms of curriculum content to be covered may reveal how particular concerns at each level are not being addressed. Secondly, reform implementation commenced at the elementary level in September 2000 and should have therefore, been well underway upon conducting the interviews in March 2004. As reforms are not expected to be incorporated at the secondary level until September 2005, the contrast between these two levels of schooling may provide valuable insight in terms of assessing how successful the reforms have been in generating change.

The significance of incorporating the views of educators working in both public and alternative educational environments stems from the different student populations each school caters to. Many of the students studying in alternative settings have typically been labeled as 'at risk' in terms of achieving success within the traditional education system. As a result, teachers working within these schools have had to adopt different teaching

strategies which are closely attuned to the tenets of critical pedagogy. Hence, these interviews may offer insight in regard to the differences and similarities of alternative and public schooling and why critical pedagogy flourishes or fails.

Finally, the relevance of conducting interviews with students currently enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in Education program addresses the common belief that the number one factor affecting student success is teacher preparation. Thus, if the Quebec Education Program encourages teachers to instill in students the ability to exercise critical judgment, it follows that programs responsible for the development of prospective teachers incorporate courses on critical pedagogy. Furthermore, as the students in this program are required to take a course focusing on the Quebec reforms, they are reasonably familiar with what will eventually be expected of them. The insight provided from these perspectives will reveal the values that have been instilled in them and will serve as a valuable comparative tool in regard to the difference between experienced and inexperienced points of view.

### Limitations of The Study

This study is limited precisely because of the limited population it addresses: the perspectives of eight teachers working in the field of education and of four students currently enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in Education program make up a small percentage of those affected by the reforms. The sample included in this study may appear to present a generalized image of the opinions of teachers working within the field of education. It is important to note that it was not my intent to select individuals whose

perspectives would strengthen the argument put forth in this study. If given the opportunity to conduct this study again, I feel it would be beneficial to extend the sample of teachers interviewed, thereby allowing for a more varied perspective of opinions.

An additional limitation results from the recency of the implementation of the reform initiatives. Because the reform is still in its infancy there is a limited amount of literature discussing its successes and failures. Information on teacher preparation and continued support throughout the transition period has not yet been published. Nevertheless, the information provided in this study is a starting point. Gaining insight from a few individuals involved in the reform process may offer valuable suggestions as to how the reforms can achieve their mandate of offering a new direction for success for all stakeholders involved. In addition, much of the literature discussing critical pedagogy is restrictive in that it primarily has a theoretical focus. Much critical discourse lacks discussion on how teachers can incorporate critical teaching practices within their classroom in terms of specific content and form. The same problem exists in the Quebec Education Program. Quite often the teacher's role is defined in terms of what he/she must and must not do, but the how becomes the responsibility of the teacher. The lack of clearly defined methods serves both as a positive and negative aspect to the development of critical thought. Without proper guidance in terms of teaching strategies, teachers may continue to utilize the techniques they know best, which is most likely very instructional. Nonetheless, because there are no restrictions placed on the teacher, the how of the learning process serves as an ideal opportunity for teachers to incorporate problem-posing methods in their classrooms.

A final limitation that I feel is important to note is related directly to my own lack of experience in conducting interviews. The interviewing process went well and the teachers had a lot to contribute; Nevertheless, I failed to ask questions which may have provided more insight in regard to the implementation of the Quebec reforms. The dialogue primarily focused on the teachers' individual teaching practices and although this resulted in valuable and pertinent findings, I feel that more time spent on addressing the specific functions of schooling as endorsed by the Quebec Reform may have resulted in a stronger argument in regard to the reform's expectations of both teachers and students.

For each of the interviews conducted I had the pleasure of meeting one-on-one with the participants within the setting of their personal school and classroom environments. Although these environments are not determinants of what philosophies of education are endorsed during classroom interaction, there is much truth to the saying, 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' Critical theorists hold that learning can become meaningful only if it is relevant to the lived experiences of the students. Therefore, the ambiance of the classroom does, to a certain degree, reflect whose interests are being served. Before discussing the findings of the study I feel it is important to present a portrait of the different school and classroom environments I observed. The climate of a school environment, in my opinion, allows for a greater understanding of the inter-personal dynamics between the staff, teacher-student, and student-student relationships.

## An Outsider's Perspective: Physical Descriptions of School and Classroom Environments

### *Cherry Wood and High Park elementary schools*

Cherry Wood is an inner-city school catering primarily to the needs of children from minority and working-class families. On the outside the red brick walls and asphalt schoolyard enclosed by a steel chain linked fence portray a general ambience of institutionalization as opposed to a welcoming environment conducive for meaningful learning to occur. The first thing that caught my attention was a line-up of rambunctious students half-heartedly listening to a teacher whose attempts at controlling their behavior with a whistle appeared to be in vain. When permission was granted the students disobediently broke from their formation and charged through the doors, leaving the exasperated teacher in their dust. As I introduced myself to the teacher and explained the purpose of my visit, the teacher regained her composure and though unconvincingly, tried to enthusiastically give me a brief tour of the school as she escorted me to Suzanne's classroom. The interior of the school did not differ dramatically from the image projected outside. Fortunately, as the door opened and I stepped into Suzanne's third grade classroom the world through which I had just walked suddenly seemed miles away. The walls were cluttered with student art, maps, posters, and student photos, a CD player gently hummed the melody of Spanish guitar, desks were arranged in groups of two and at the back of the room, contently snuggled in the lap of a human-sized teddy bear, was a little girl quietly reading a book. The moment I stepped through the door Suzanne welcomed me with open arms; 'can I get you an herbal tea, perhaps a cookie or some crackers?' 'Make yourself at home! Here, I'll clean my desk off for you.' Shortly after the bell rang, students came in quietly, took their places and a majority could be heard

humming to the music. After I was introduced and given a warm welcome the students eagerly presented their homework to Suzanne and one by one were directed to a podium to share the stories they had written in their journals the night before.

High Park, like Cherry Wood, is situated within an ethnically diverse neighborhood. More than 50 percent of the student population is dependent on the lunch program offered by the school and for many, this is the most substantial and healthiest meal of the day. The school grounds resemble those of Cherry Wood, however the asphalt playground houses two portables that provide much needed space for a constantly expanding student body. The noticeable difference between the two schools is that the colorless, barren exterior of High Park extends into the classroom. As I walked down the corridor trying to find Mr. Lamb's classroom I had to be quick on my feet to avoid the pushing, wrestling and to my surprise, skateboarding that was carrying on. Upon arriving at Mr. Lamb's classroom, unescorted and to be honest, a bit shaken up, I found him alone, sitting at his desk, reading a newspaper occasionally looking up at the door with nervous anticipation. At first I equated his agitation to my sudden appearance at the door. Nonetheless, seconds later the school bell rang, the classroom door was swung open and I quickly came to realize that I was the furthest thing from his worries. 'Hey Mr. Baa, Baa black sheep, get yerself a woman yet?' As I watched him rise to take control of the class I was sure the students were just as cognizant as I was that this man was trembling inside. 'Take your seats and take out your math books.' As he turned to face the board and commenced his lesson the students wandered about from desk to desk chatting to friends, the boys from the hall recommenced their wrestling escapade and many just put their heads down to get a bit of shuteye. The extent of the interaction



between teacher and students was either in the form of instructional explanations or berating insults. Although I could see Mr. Lamb in body, standing with his back turned to the class for a good portion of the hour I was there, I began to wonder if his mind had vacated the premises altogether. It seemed like an effective coping strategy for as I came to understand during the interview, he had been working at this school for almost twenty-five years.

### *Algonquin and Northern Collegiate High Schools*

Algonquin high school is located within a suburb whose residents are lower to middle class backgrounds. The cultural make up of the school is ethnically diverse as it caters to needs of at least two hundred students from a neighboring first nations reserve. The physical environment of the school was neither bleak and miserable nor bursting with color or student activity. Unfortunately, due to conflicts in schedules my time spent in the classroom was minimal. I arrived just as class was ending where I found Sarah sitting at a student desk surrounded by three frustrated yet inquisitive individuals. Trying not to intrude on the in-depth discussion taking place I kept to the back of the classroom. 'But I just don't understand why people would do that to each other and over nothing!' 'You seem upset by what you learned today' I heard Sarah say to the obviously affected student. 'Perhaps you should discuss how you feel with the class tomorrow. You could present it in the form of a debate, or group discussion activity. I have some internet links that might get you started, but it will require a bit of research.' As Sarah got up to go to her desk, the eager student jumped up and headed straight for the computer, followed promptly by her two classmates. 'I'm going to the teacher's lounge for a bit so I can talk

to this nice young lady who has been so patiently waiting. Let me know if you're ready tomorrow and let me know if there's anything I can do to help.'

Northern collegiate out of all the schools was the one whose student body was primarily comprised of individuals from affluent backgrounds. Although I would define the socio-economic status as middle-upper class, the cars in the student parking lot seemed to resemble an upper class orientation. As I walked through the doors and was greeted by Mr. Richardson, I felt as though I was experiencing something out of a teen movie. The girls' and boys' soccer teams were heading in from practice, members of the student council were busily hanging posters promoting the next school dance, and believe it or not, the chess club was congregated in the school cafeteria. Mr. Richardson took me to his classroom which was plastered with posters of well-known literary authors. The desks were arranged neatly in rows and the blackboard was spotless. He sat down at his desk and I took a seat at one of student's desks directly in front of him. He was more than happy to participate in the interview and answered my questions thoroughly. Nonetheless, I could not help but feel like I was back in high school receiving after school help. Just as the interview was about to end there was a knock at the door. It was not opened until permission was granted and there stood a young man inquiring if he might come in early before class the next day to clear up some questions he had. The respect for authority and need to ferret approval from the teacher was a blatant reality.

#### *Borders and New School Alternative Schools*

As my taxi pulled up to Borders Alternative school I was pleasantly shocked to find it resembled a rustic house as opposed to the sterile institutions I had previously visited. I walked through the door at 7:30am and to my surprise found the place to be bustling with

activity. I was greeted by Johanne who quickly introduced herself paired me up with a student who was to be my personal tour guide and rushed off to meet with one of the parents whose child attended the school. My tour guide was a delightful young man, who was more than happy to show me around his humble abode. The pride with which he talked about his school and his obvious love for learning made it difficult to believe that only one year before he had been kicked out of his traditional high school for beating up one of his teachers. As we entered one of the classrooms I was introduced to Ray, the second teacher who had so kindly accepted to participate in my study, who was having an early morning guitar jam session with three of his students. In other rooms students were eagerly finishing homework, engaged in leisure reading or simply having a chat with some of their friends. I was pleasantly shocked by the familial feel to the school and even more impressed by how the students embraced the school as an important part of their lives. Each classroom was set up in a different manner, so as to suit the needs of the individual students and teachers. Some were traditional with the desks setup in rows; others had desks piled in the corners with only chairs left in the middle of the room. The walls were plastered with inspirational quotes and pictures of the students. Behind the secretary was a small kitchenette where students came and went or chatted over mugs of herbal tea. After the interviews had finished and I was on my way out, I sincerely wished I had had the time to spend the day there.

The New School is an alternative program situated within the larger context of a comprehensive high school. The student population it caters to can be described as living at or slightly above the poverty line. Its cultural makeup is diverse and the needs of its students unique. As I walked through the doors of the wing reserved for this program I

was relieved to find its environment was much more inviting than that of the larger high school in which it was situated. I conducted my interview at the end of the school year and as a result many students were in the process of writing exams. Just as in Borders, students who had completed their exams and hence their academic sessions, were quite content to spend their free time hanging out with their teachers and fellow classmates. The classroom arrangements were varied according to personal preferences of both teachers and students, but all of them included what I would describe as a comfortable space, where students or teachers could spend time reading or talking. Barb's classroom, for example, was equipped with two low-lying, easy-boy type chairs, that were situated beside the regular desks and provided a clear view of the blackboard. I conducted two interviews at this school both of which were held in a common space. Thus, anyone who was interested in the topics being discussed was welcomed to give their own opinions on the questions being asked. As most of the teachers preferred the one-on-one interviews to be conducted in a private room free from interruptions, Barb and Jennifer, the two teachers I interviewed, were more than happy to extend the discussion to anyone who showed interest.

## Reflections

My experiences with the individuals described above forced me to consider the truth behind a deep cultural norm about teaching. Many regard inspired and engaging teaching as an individual trait, much like hair color or shoe size, rather than as a professional norm (Elmore, 1996). Throughout my interviews I had the opportunity to meet wonderful and

outstanding individuals. I agreed with the philosophies of some more than others, but the majority, Mr. Lamb excluded, appeared to have healthy relationships with their students based on mutual respect. In regard to the cultural norm mentioned above, I would suggest that what is defined as inspired and engaging teaching depends on the student body the teacher is engaging with. Johanne's, Ray's, Barb's and Jennifer's students who benefit from an alternative environment, would fail horribly in a class conducted by Mr. Richardson. Mr. Richardson's students, however, would more than likely enjoy and benefit from the learning conducted in an alternative environment but would fail to see the value in such educational practices. After all, a CV with graduate of Borders Alternative School written on it would not result in one's being accepted to any affluent post-secondary institution.

The students from Mr. Richardson's class are a classic example of the traditional system which represents the norm in teaching practice. Students arrive at class promptly, respect the authority of the teacher, value his/her knowledge as superior and valuable, and ultimately are successful in surviving the system by playing the game right. The smooth running managerial machine, otherwise known as school, is successful in this case, in terms of instilling in the students the dominant norms which govern and produce an efficient future work-force. What concerns me, however, is that education conducted in this manner only serves to benefit the few lucky enough to come from families who endorse the same values, and thus prepare their children to act in appropriate ways. What happens to the others? In the case of Suzanne's class, luckily these students were rescued by a teacher who knew how to work within the confines of the system and still maintain an environment in which meaningful learning could occur. This environment

was restricted to her classroom. I found it very interesting to note that the rules that were in place behind the closed door of her classroom, were very different from those that were expected to be followed in the halls and school yard for example. At recess, Suzanne's students were required to line-up in the hall, speak only when given permission, and obey authority at all times. I learned that the doors to all the classrooms in this school remained closed during class time, and were only opened when it was necessary for the students to engage in an activity required of all members of the school. The principal was very nervous about my visit. He interrogated Suzanne as to the kind of information I was seeking. I was only granted permission to come if I agreed to change the name of the school and the teachers. It appeared as though he viewed my visit as a conspiracy on behalf of the Ministry of Education to ensure his school was adhering to their objectives. My overall experience at Cherry Wood leads me to conclude that Suzanne's classroom is the exception and not the norm within the school. This leads me to wonder what the educational experiences of Suzanne's students may have been like had she not been their teacher. Although it is unfair to generalize in a school run by a principal who so ardently adheres to the Ministry's guidelines suggests that an educational experience more akin to Mr. Lamb's class is a possibility.

Eventually the students from High Park may either drop out of school or be recommended for a program like those offered at Borders or The New School. If given the opportunity for participation in an alternative program the students would come to respect themselves, those around them and may even go on to complete a post-secondary education. Nevertheless, programs like these are few and far between. The majority of students who are not lucky enough to become part of such programs simply leave the

system. If critical pedagogical practices like those used at Borders and The New School were incorporated into not only individual classrooms but entire school communities I believe the benefits would be substantial. In theory this sounds wonderful, however, putting the idea into practice takes a lot of effort, dedication, and passion on behalf of the teachers. The findings presented reveal how the theory of critical pedagogical practices is incorporated in educational practice from the voices of experience. The interview questions were organized under three main categories: education, critical pedagogy, and critical thinking and the Quebec Reforms. The first category discusses the participants' opinions about the general nature and purpose of education. It also presents insight in regard to the personal educational experiences of the participants and the reasons surrounding occupational choice. This information highlights how they define and value their role as teacher which in turn defines the nature of the teacher-student relationship.

#### Teachers' Reflections on Education

A necessary character trait of an educator in Freire's view is to have a profound love for humanity. The very purpose of educating is to inspire individuals to make informed choices and take the necessary action to create a world in which a concern for equality and social justice becomes a fundamental goal. Few teachers enter the teaching profession for purposes relating to prestige or economic wellbeing. For many, the desire to make a difference in the lives of their students is the essence of what it means to be a teacher. Although a noble proposition, it is important to consider what teachers

constitute as being in the best interests of their students. Thus, examining the teachers' reasons for entering the profession reveals their motives as an educator.

*Why did you go into the field of education?*

Some responses to this question reveal that teaching and the need to help others was a calling for many of the participants:

*Barb (alternative high school):*

There was never another career choice for me!

*Jennifer (alternative high school):*

I thought if I could help kids understand math and if I was good at explaining and helping them understand it maybe they would feel better about themselves.

*Sarah (public high school):*

Teaching was my second choice. . . but during my stage, once I was in the classroom I knew that this was where I was supposed to be.

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

I pursued other career choices, but eventually came to realize teaching was what I was meant to do!

*Kim (recent graduate of BA in education):*

When I was little we used to play school and I was always the teacher. . . I always loved it! I've always loved school!

*Nancy (close to completion of BA in education):*

I'm a mother and I'm worried. Children seem to be frustrated and angry. I don't think the need to do well academically in school is as important as caring about something. That's why I want to become a teacher. I want kids to care again.

*Angela (recent graduate of BA in education):*

I love working with children . . . it's something I always thought I would like.

The above responses demonstrate an element of passion, a need to educate and inspire.

These teachers view their career decisions as a destiny, not as an option. Other opinions reflect the need to perform a required social function; namely, the need to qualify students for the work force:



*Mr. Richardson (public high school):*

I became a teacher because it is essential that students today are instilled with the desire to succeed and taught to have the discipline success requires. Too many students show indifference to the great accomplishments of our times. This lack of respect for authority and 'I don't care attitude' concerns me. What kind of future are they heading for?

*Mr. Lamb (public elementary school):*

Sometimes I ask myself the same question. I always thought of teaching as an important profession. Teachers help students achieve something in their lives. But after all the years I've spent in the field I've come to wonder if they really want to make anything of themselves?

It appears as though the reasons given suggest that the participants entered the teaching profession believing that their efforts would improve the students' situations. As was previously stated, what qualifies as improvement is all in the eye of the beholder. Everyone can remember one or two teachers that made a difference in our lives and those teachers who we felt were there to make us endure an eternal punishment. Thus, examining the personal educational experiences of each participant highlights the kind of teaching practices they revere and those they disdain and how this exposure has influenced their own teaching style.

*When you were a student in elementary, secondary school and university, how would you describe your educational experiences?*

Many of the responses indicate experiences similar to Freire's banking concept of education. Little opportunity for dialogue, classes based on facts to be memorized, and no recognition of the students' knowledge or needs. These negative descriptions are often followed by counts of one or two teachers who differed from the rest and whose classes produced learning that was memorable and influential.

*Sarah (public high school):*

I was spoken to. There was little opportunity for discussion or debate. Opportunities that did so stood out. I remember an Intro to Shakespeare course,

the teacher entered the lecture hall and told us to go home until we were ready to talk and then left. The next course she came back with discussion questions and challenged us to justify and analyze our thoughts.

*Barb (alternative high school):*

All traditional. Event to the point that in the McGill program the drama teacher taught traditionally. We took notes and we didn't do drama. We were practicing to be teachers of drama but we were sitting there taking notes.

*Ray (alternative high school):*

In high school one word comes to mind: complacent. I can't think of any classroom interaction at all. There was one teacher in my first year of university. He said 'I give one assignment all year, one 200 word essay. Go out and explore a country from a political, historical point of view.' So I did my paper and thought to myself, 'I want to have the same enthusiasm in the way I practice.'

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

In elementary I was taught by nuns. One teacher stood out. She didn't make me feel better than anybody else, she just made me feel special, so I ate up everything, I was eager. In high school I had two that maybe got me excited and in university I'd be lucky if I had one. Once again, it brings you back to who connected with the learner. I took a billion courses and I can't remember half of them.

*Jennifer (alternative high school):*

For the most part my classes were very teacher-centered. I like this style as long as the teacher gives the student credit where credit is due. Students have to be self-motivated. A tough but caring teacher can be very influential.

*Mr. Lamb (public elementary school):*

Students were taught to obey the teacher. Questions were permitted when permission was granted and the teacher always knew best. It wasn't overly exciting but it served its purpose. I graduated and went on to university. Besides, you'd do anything to avoid the paddle.

*Suzanne (public elementary):*

Until I went to McGill all of my teachers let me do what I wanted. When my opinion was finally challenged and I was asked to justify my response it gave me a certain degree of humanity in my teaching which I didn't have before taking the program.

*Mr. Richardson (public high school):*

Many of my teachers introduced me to the great minds of our times. I was encouraged to read Shakespeare, Wordsworth and many of the Classics. The reading was difficult at times, but it taught me discipline and perseverance. The teacher always discussed the important themes and explained why the works were of such importance.

*Kim (recent graduate):*

In general, it was traditional, the teacher stands in front of the class and tells you what to do and you do it and you do it their way and if you do it well and give them what they want you do well. If you do it your way and try and think outside the box, you don't do well.

*Angela (recent graduate):*

I was one of those kids who didn't benefit from traditional teaching. I was visual and in the classes that were traditional I didn't do well. Luckily my elementary school had a lot of good teachers who incorporated group projects and self-learning so I remember everything from those classes. Sometimes knowing that this type of learning exists is negative. If you have a few teachers who think outside the box and 20 who are pessimistic and tell you what to do, it's frustrating.

*Monica (2 years completed in BA in Education):*

For the most part the teacher could be found standing at the front, all-powerful and all-knowing. High school was pretty much the same. There was one teacher who stands out in high school. She incorporated group work, class discussions, had a 'do your own thing attitude' and I learned so much. These teachers are few and far between. It's easier for teachers to give multiple-choice tests than to ask for students' opinions.

A majority of the responses suggest that classes conducted in a traditional manner, whereby the teacher teaches and the students are taught, produced learning that was void of meaning and quickly forgotten. Others, however, express the importance of structure and recognition of the teacher's wisdom, as declared by Jennifer's statement. Suzanne notes that too much freedom resulted in boredom and once challenged by a teacher her enthusiasm for learning reached a new level of understanding. Thus, it would appear that the teaching method should be judged solely on the educational experience it encourages. A totally unstructured milieu can be as unstimulating and uninteresting as a highly structured one; and both of these can be meaningful if the strategies of learning comply to with the needs of the learners. Within each person is a tendency to explore, a disposition to be curious, and a desire to know and learn. Uncertainty and conflict begin as starting points for inquiry. If students are denied the opportunity to question this uncertainty and

resolve this conflict then learning becomes nothing more than memorization. Freire states that true knowledge “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other” (1993, p. 72). Where does this leave Mr. Richardson and Mr. Lamb? Their responses indicate that the classroom interaction was what Freire describes as ‘narrative’. The teacher’s task as narrator is to fill the students with the contents of his/her narration. The students are to listen, accept, and adopt the teacher’s values. As a result, the more completely the students “accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (Freire, 1993, p. 73). Thus, the educated individual is the adapted person whose inability to question and initiate change fulfills the needs and ensures the security of those in dominant positions.

*In your opinion what is the purpose of the institution of education?*

When asked this question the above-mentioned notion of education as an adaptive mechanism that produces individuals who fulfill the demands of the labor market was a recurring theme:

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

Be a cog, fit into the system, don’t question, get in line, walk and get with the rhythm. This three-fold purpose of socialization, instruction and occupation is so Orwellian. For 80 percent of high school graduates there’s no room for them in university. So get a job means get a trade. How come there’s no room? Why aren’t we changing that part?

*Barb (alternative high school):*

I think the goals of education reflect the needs of society. Initially schooling was setup to be custodial. During the war when women had to go to work they needed someone to look after their kids. Later it became vocational and now they want everyone to get even more educated and go to university. But most of them don’t make it that far.

*Mr. Lamb (public elementary school):*

I think its main purpose is to give the kids skills so they can get jobs. You have to be familiar with basic math concepts and know how to write in order to function. I'm not sure if its doing a very good job though. Many of my students drop out before they graduate. It's sad.

*Suzanne (public elementary school):*

I think the purpose of education can best be summed up in a few words: reading, writing and arithmetic, A=success, and don't bother with those who aren't going to amount to anything.

*Ray (alternative high school):*

It's a highly successful system; The one's at the top are happy.

*Nancy (close to completion of BA in education):*

Unfortunately, what I've found at the university level is the purpose of education revolves around getting good grades to get into a field and become a professional of some sort.

*Kim (recent graduate of BA in education):*

Be competitive! It doesn't matter how well you do as long as you do better than everyone else. Schooling tries to weed out those who don't belong, those who can't hack it in the professional world. Keep those who are extremely bright, they will set good examples. The goal is to create professionals!

*Angela (recent graduate of BA in education):*

The nature of the system is competitive. Even in elementary the students feel threatened by failure. Teachers tell them if they don't do well now, they won't do well in high school and then they won't get into university and it's like this whole cycle ingrained in them at such an early age. . . do well, compete, and compare yourselves with others; it's all about grades!

*Mr. Richardson (public high school):*

Education is needed to ensure that order is maintained. If we all learned what we wanted to learn then culture as we know it would disappear. It teaches individuals how to think and keeps our society running smoothly.

All, but one of the responses, suggest a distaste for the generally accepted truths surrounding the purpose of education. The one response that differs from the rest, Mr. Richardson's, suggests that education is necessary for the maintenance of social order. Why would he be forced to consider its purpose as anything other than this? The school environment in which he works is pristine, his students are compliant, his knowledge is

revered as superior, and his community regards him with prestige. The education system as it currently functions serves his best interests. For the others, however, education whose sole purpose is utilitarian denies students the opportunity to grow as individuals, which inevitably prohibits the main reason many of these individuals went into the field of education: to make a difference in the lives of their students. Thus, they begin to rebel against the banking education that seeks to maintain them and search for alternative means to liberate both themselves and their students.

### Teachers' Reflections on Critical Pedagogy

The second category addressed in the interview discusses the concept of critical pedagogy. In this portion of the interview it became clear that critical pedagogical practices were incorporated by many of the teachers in an attempt to counteract the dehumanizing effects of the predominant banking practices endorsed in many schools. As discussed in Chapter 3 traditional education forces the teacher to perform functions that prevent the development of a reciprocal teacher-student dynamic. The teachers' roles are defined as socializing agent, vocational selector, and educator. In performing these prescribed functions the teacher is viewed by students as a powerful and punitive evaluator whose authority ultimately decides their success or failure. Thus, it is important to consider how those participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of education work to redefine the roles they perform.

*How would you describe your own teaching methods and philosophy of education?*

*Ray (alternative high school):*

The whole purpose of education is focusing on the whole person. You can have

great mathematicians walking out the door, but if they can't socialize if they don't feel good about themselves, what's the point?

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

The most important goal of education is to teach your students how to question everything. There's all this talk about intellectual skills but students are never asked to consider what they're going to do with that knowledge? Where's the doing part? Where's the breathing, being people part of it? There's no recognition of anything that cannot be measured. What makes life worth living are the things that can't be measured.

*Suzanne (public elementary school):*

Teaching methods is important to a certain degree, but in terms of classroom functioning there has to be flexibility. It's important to ask yourself, 'how am I going to get these children to learn to develop an optimism about their lives.

*Jennifer (alternative high school):*

I believe my role as a teacher is to make my students feel like they count. I want them to realize that they have the ability to achieve anything they put their minds to. Grades don't define who a person is they define how well they can play the game. It's time to change the rules.

*Sarah (public high school):*

Schooling should create well-rounded individuals who realize that there are many paths they can choose to take. Leadership is important and there's not enough focus on this. The traditional system wants compact little kits that don't challenge the status quo. Some teachers don't want to be challenged. I live for a challenge!

*Kim (recent graduate of BA in education):*

I think education should be student-centered but they shouldn't be the crux of everything. The teacher should be a guide and a motivator, but there needs to be a combination of both. You should provide them with things that encourage them to say 'wow! I hadn't thought about that before!' Spark their imaginations and encourage them to investigate the unknown. No extremes.

*Angela (recent graduate of BA in education):*

There has to be a balance. You can't have a class without some sort of lecture. Even optimistic progressive educators need this. It should be both the old and the new mixed together.

Performing the role of socializing agent requires that teachers inculcate students with the "proper" values and characteristics deemed acceptable by the dominant society. The potential harm of this function is the absence of an explicit curriculum that defines what

socialization entails. Often, the values deemed worthy by the teacher, who is also a product of his/her environment, are those projected onto the students. Thus, by means of a “hidden curriculum” students are instilled with the value of doing well academically and taught to adopt the regulating features of punctuality, neatness, diligence, and submission to authority. Although there are many students who comply with this routine, there are just as many who do not. Some of the situations described by the participants indicate that punitive methods used on children exposed to abuse, neglect and discrimination on a daily basis is futile. What these students need most is trust, respect, and dignity.

Johanne and Ray, teachers at an alternative high school, describe a deteriorating situation in terms of their students’ lived realities. Twenty-five years since they started their careers they describe the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse and dysfunctional families among the lives of their students as having increased by 95 percent. These students are suffering from emotional trauma and are hurting inside. Ray describes their perception of reality as skewed. He acknowledges that most of them are extremely bright, but adds the egocentrism has increased dramatically over the last ten years: “I’ve seen a shift, they’re hardened with an egocentric attitude which assumes the world owes them something. Why should they care? No one cares about them!” Both teachers expressed their frustration with the general neglect of such children in the education system. If students are not able to fit in the system they are cast aside and left to fend for themselves. They are often regarded as marginals who deviate from the general configuration of a “good, organized, and just society”(Freire, 1993, p. 74). Johanne notes that when visitors come to the school they comment on how well mannered the students



are. Johanne emphasizes that it is important to recognize that these children are not animals, they are hurt children: “If you could read their personal lives line by line, you would approach these children differently. . . they aren’t mentally ill, they’re just teenagers who have been wayward, wayward, wayward, till their wayward ways become their norm.”

Cherry Wood, a school that caters to an ethnically diverse student body from a low-income neighborhood demonstrates how the inequality of the education system at the elementary level contributes to the continued cycle of failure and neglect. Suzanne, a teacher at the school, describes how her last five years of teaching have involved working with out-of-control children. She was always the teacher assigned to these classes, as she was the only one who could somehow reach the students. Therefore these examples show that engaging rebellious students in meaningful learning can be achieved. The how begins with bringing the lives of the students into the classroom. McLaren (1998) suggests that learning cannot become meaningful unless teachers develop an understanding of the various ways in which student perceptions and identities are constituted. Teachers must acknowledge “the different voices students employ to give meaning to their worlds, and consequently to their existence in the larger society”(p. 218). Thus, this process begins by giving students control over how their school environment is set-up, what issues are relevant to their lives and a chance to assess their own shortcomings and strengths. The following responses indicate how this is accomplished:

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

The school didn’t always look like this. The students got things out of the garbage, they learned how to wallpaper, and over the years we’ve accumulated a

lot of stuff. The students find it and bring it in; they do everything. It's a student-based school and in that way it becomes theirs; they connect to it.

*Ray (alternative high school):*

On 9/11 the students wanted to have some kind of memorial. We decided to place two huge blue boards in front of the school with the words peace and paix. They've been hanging out there for four years. No graffiti on them! That's so uplifting! People from the neighborhood have stopped in to say what a wonderful addition the signs are. The students are proud of their accomplishment and glad to have given something to the community.

*Suzanne (public elementary school):*

It is important to create an environment which the students come to respect and cherish as their own. They choose who they would like to sit beside. They decide when it's time to clean up, or where artwork should be hung. They must decide as a group which requires discussion and compromise negotiated solely by the students.

One of the fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy is helping students analyze their own experiences so as to illuminate the processes by which those experiences were produced, legitimated, or disconfirmed. This requires addressing issues that are problematic in the lives of the students. Johanne and Ray discussed how the issue of drug abuse became a challenge to be overcome and how the students initiated the resolution. As opposed to having solutions forced upon them, the students decided to organize their own youth symposium. The event was organized by the students and setup by the students. They brought in professional speakers who included counselors and police officers. This event according to Ray "got the students fired up! They realize that they are the solution to their own problems." Thus by bringing the values of the students into the classroom the socializing aspect of the education process is re-defined and renegotiated by the combined efforts of those involved.

Addressing the functions of teachers as vocational selectors and educators is also mediated in different terms within the classes of many of the participants. Emphasis is not placed on the importance of grades, the politics governing social behavior are

revealed and the future is not portrayed as something that is inevitable and static. The following responses reveal how the teachers encourage their students to question the social functions of knowledge:

*Suzanne (public elementary school):*

I incorporate activities that encourage self-confidence, in my classroom no child is ever scared to give an answer. I never give my students their test results [to take home]. Believe me I have some pushy parents and I simply tell the students to tell their parents that if there is a problem that needs addressing I will contact them. Students should not feel that their performance is based on testing.

*Sarah (public high school):*

The lessons in my class are always negotiated by my students. It's always about what they think and is based on what is important to them. They do a lot of the teaching in class, 100 percent of my class is co-operative: think, pair, share, and I add what I think they've neglected to consider. My class is never quiet, it's chaos.

*Barb (alternative high school):*

I tell my students how it is. I tell them about the hidden curriculum and now it's not hidden anymore so they know exactly what the game is. They're empowered and they're making informed choices. I show them the evaluation document for the end of year English exam, I give them the documents the teachers get. We practice writing the exam. I'm not going to set them up to fail. The documents are public knowledge so why should I keep them from them.

*Jennifer (alternative high school):*

I bring in a lot of guest speakers who discuss current events that impact the lives of the students. In one of the discussions a speaker from a local Native reserve raised a lot of important issues surrounding Native rights. The students were so eager to ask questions and express their own opinions. This conversation became heated but the atmosphere it generated resulted in empathy and the affect it had on the students was unbelievably positive.

*Ray (alternative high school):*

Our starting point is different from what theory would say is correct. We contextualize events by having a person bring their stories into the classroom and then we go into the facts and the history. Doing it this way allows students to attach meaning to it right there and then. If we start with history and facts we lose them.

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

We have a course called critical thinking. We teach them to analyze information, extract the biases, consider from whose perspective this is being told, what their sources are etc. etc. Adolescents love to discuss, it's like frenzy when conversation begins. They want to learn, you just have to give them the opportunity to do so.

In addition to placing importance on personal development and discussing the political nature of society, these educators encourage their students to have hope and recognize the possibility of taking control over their destinies. Revealing the hidden curriculum and the reality of the limited places in higher education uncovers the truth behind the myth of equal opportunity. The following responses indicate how the teachers encourage students to take the paths that had previously appeared closed to them:

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

Every year we send a group of students to attend lectures at Concordia to learn how to take notes, ask questions and take in all the knowledge of the university experience. One year after a couple of classes my students came back and told me that the university students were really misbehaved. They described how they came in late, left to get coffee and actually asked to borrow my students' notes. This debunks a myth. When you say to these dropouts one day you might want to go to university now they realize they can. For them it's just a bigger room.

*Suzanne (public elementary school):*

I use a lot of cultural elements to reach my students. I bring in art from various artists and equate the works with the personal lives of the artists. I say to them 'when you go, if you decide, if you would like. . .'. I use a language of possibility with them. They have to know that they can do anything they set their minds to. It's learned optimism.

These teachers not only provide an educational experience which instills students with hope, but one which de-emphasizes the rightness or wrongness of learning and presents a form of learning that addresses the why. Thus, the social functions of teaching are no longer punitive as the evaluative function does not exert such a controlling force over the lives of the students. The students come to learn that it is they who control the outcomes of their futures. The questions that I had originally intended to ask in this portion of the interview became blended as the participants discussed the inner-workings of their classrooms and described the techniques they incorporated to address the unique needs of their students. The question addressing the need for a reciprocal teacher-student dynamic

in which both educator and pupil must learn together becomes an obvious necessity as expressed by the opinions presented above. The presence of dialogue in the classroom, also an important aspect of critical pedagogy, was by far the most dominant teaching strategy incorporated by almost all of the participants involved in the interview. Hence, the last section to be considered is that dealing with critical thinking and the Quebec Reform.

#### Teachers' Reflections on Critical Thinking and the Quebec Reform:

It is obvious that many of the teachers interviewed were incorporating critical practices in their classrooms well before the introduction of the recent reform. Thus, it is important to determine if the Quebec Education Program helps to eliminate the obstacles that hinder critical practices to occur. The Quebec reform purports to include teachers in the decision-making process and grant a greater degree of professional autonomy. These responses suggest otherwise:

##### *Sarah (public high school):*

We're confined by a system. I don't like boundaries. There's no funding, no materials, we can't do the things we want. Many of my colleagues have different philosophies of education, therefore when we have to make group decisions I'm always being told no, when I know I'm right. Classifying kids frustrates me and the Board setting rules without experience, I can't even talk about that.

##### *Suzanne (public elementary school):*

The view of the board is let's teach all the teachers the same thing. So the consultants come in and say let's teach them guided reading. Let's not let anyone discuss the issue too much. God forbid anyone should ask a question as to how that relates to that because this so-called expert only knows about what's going on in his little box.

*Barb (alternative high school):*

I'm so frustrated with the funding aspect. They're going to cut the position of the teacher who organizes our community program. This program is crucial to these kids and crucial to the whole curriculum reform what they advocate. The program encourages being involved in the community, being an entrepreneur, knowing yourself and your awareness of the world; that's what the reform advocates and that's what this program does and their removing it.

*Jennifer (alternative high school):*

The system has to change, but the schools are not physically equipped to handle it. They have to change all the furniture in traditional classrooms; some of the desks are nailed to the floor. This isn't conducive to co-operative learning. But there's no funding for furniture, and that's nothing, that's just a minor change.

Aside from the issue of funding some participants discussed the emphasis placed on evaluative procedures within the reform:

*Johanne (alternative high school):*

The reforms include all this talk about intellectual skills but this relates to intellect that can be measured. That's what the reform is about, measuring and checklists and if you can't measure it, it's not worth teaching. Nobody gets through their grade going, 'I'm so glad I had a really sterile, narrow existence packed with intellectual skills.' No company is a stagnate environment. Yes! Everyone has their dossier, but we live, we're interconnected. These issues should be the focus of education.

*Ray (alternative high school):*

The reforms haven't thought through how they are going to marry the competency-based checklists with the academic requirements needed to be accepted into higher education. If students leave this cocoon called Quebec and try to compete for acceptance into Harvard, or the University of Toronto they're not going to be considered on the basis of a competency-based checklist. They started this thing without seeing it through to completion and its going to produce a mess if it evokes any change at all.

*Angela (recent graduate of BA in education):*

During my stage I worked with a teacher and both of us were frustrated with the curriculum format. There are so many things that you must do that it doesn't leave much time for creative activities. There's never enough time. The parents are also frustrating. They want their child to succeed academically, regard them as a little angel and have no idea of what it's like in the classroom. Interactive learning would be beneficial for many children but the parents don't think it's productive.

*Kim (recent graduate of BA in education):*

The new reforms require an exit exam in math and language arts, I don't know

if you've seen it, but it takes up an entire month of the curriculum. During my stage last year so many kids looked at the exam and said 'I can't do it! I don't know what I'm doing!' They get so stressed out. There are so many things you have to do. Reporting guidelines, rubrics, they just add new columns for the teachers to fill in and if you're more concerned with where you're supposed to place a child with special needs, it just gets lost in the mess! It doesn't seem to matter.

*Nancy (close to completion of BA in education):*

I have a son currently in the elementary system. I took a course on the Quebec Reform and was excited by the concepts of active learning and cross-curricular competencies. What I've come to realize is that they've changed the report cards but the classroom still thrives on competition. My son is confused. At home we emphasize the importance of learning as a means in itself and at school is being judged by how he performs on tests. I realize I'm in a minority in comparison to the other parents and I feel I have to conform.

Thus, the message is clear. The Quebec Reforms while advocating the desire and need to promote students who are critical thinkers fail to eliminate the features which perpetuate the importance placed on academic excellence values based on efficiency, compliance and passivity. The ability to exercise critical judgment as advocated by the Quebec Program does infer the ability to analyze, synthesize and organize logical arguments. Mr. Richardson's voice was not included on the section dealing with critical pedagogy as this was a foreign concept to him. When asked about the relevance of using critical thinking in his class his answer reflected a very narrow description of what is outlined in the Quebec Education Program: "I teach my students how to examine elements of the readings I present to them, organize them in a coherent manner and develop them thoroughly in an essay format." His response makes no indication to the importance of the students' interpretations of the text. In addition they are not presented with the opportunity to select texts which are relevant to their own lives. My interview with Mr. Lamb was relatively brief. When I asked him to elaborate on aspects of the reform such as the competency-based approach, or the importance of critical thinking he informed me

that the reforms had not really been discussed or implemented into his school as of yet. I took his reason for the lack of familiarity with the reforms as a legitimate one, which raises the issue of how the reforms are being introduced into individual schools. It may be suggested that only those schools who are fortunate enough to have passionate teachers on staff who are determined to bring about change that realize the significance of critical pedagogy and the difference it makes in both their own lives and the lives of their students.

The interviews I conducted were extremely enlightening and inspirational in regard to the possibility that meaningful learning and caring relationships can be a reality in the classroom. Although Mr. Richardson's class serves the purpose of contrasting traditional practices with those based on critical pedagogy it is not my intent to criticize schools like Northern Collegiate for excelling or using lecture-based teaching approaches. Many great people come out of schools such as these and are equally as kind and caring, as the students that graduate from alternative schools. My concern stems from a general observation made during my interviews. Of all the schools involved in the study, Northern Collegiate's student body was the exception. Regardless of the small percentage of the population who do not fit into the standards set by schools like this, their philosophies of education continue to be the norm for all schools. The competitive nature of our society requires that all people be exposed to the same academic content, even if it is completely irrelevant to an individual's life. The danger of this tendency is that we end up with a lot of classrooms like Mr. Lamb's. The students eventually dropout of school, the teacher learns to cope with the reality of the classroom by disassociating him/herself from the students, and the hopes and desires of a large



percentage of our youth fall to the wayside. What is more, when frustrated youth act out in violent ways, or when tax payers have to dig deeper into their pockets to pay for what many consider to be the lazy people sponging off the social service system, the finger of blame is pointed at the schools, the teachers, the individuals, the culture, anywhere besides where it truly belongs: at those responsible for endorsing neoliberal agendas in our schools and in society. Nonetheless, change is happening! Therefore, we must remain hopeful and concentrate our efforts where they will be most effective.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTHER STUDY

#### Contradictions within the Quebec Education Program

More often than not the stories that make it to our newspapers, or that are voiced by our politicians in regard to education, assert that schools are failing miserably to prepare students for their futures. The issue to be considered in regard to this accusation is whose futures are we really talking about: our students or the economy's? The new reforms encourage the notion of results-based management and accountability schemes. What this translates to is if students fail to produce satisfactory grades on mandatory tests it is the teacher who is held responsible. If the teacher succeeds and is able to teach to the test, she/he has sacrificed the opportunity for meaningful learning to occur. So desperate are those in dominant positions to ensure their educational machine continues to run smoothly that the tests they administer are guaranteed to take up a majority of the school year in terms of student preparation.

A system that functions in this manner is incompatible with the development of students who have an active relationship to knowledge and are able to relate to, grasp, interpret and understand reality. Students are not encouraged to develop an intellectual curiosity, or become fuelled by the love of learning, the desire to succeed, and the need for autonomy and creativity. The quest of instilling students with the desire to encourage life-long learning is dominated by students' impatience to end the monotony and boredom experienced in the classroom. Many students are willing to accept any job available just to avoid the necessity of returning to the educational institution. As a

result, many individuals end up in low-paying jobs that do not encourage their full potential or satisfy their personal aspirations. However, those individuals in charge of reform initiatives equate such bleak realities to a lack of individual drive and motivation. They boast of the unlimited opportunities being provided by current marketplace demands. They purport that gaining higher cognitive skills will enable any individual who so desires to establish a place for him/herself on the social ladder. Once again the individual serves as a scapegoat for society's limited opportunities.

The reality of current labor market demands reveals an entirely different truth. According to Apple (1999) the growth in proportion in high-tech related jobs does not reflect the kinds of paid work that will be increasingly available to a large portion of the population. The majority of jobs will not require highly skilled individuals; just the opposite will be the case. Apple suggests that the paid labor market "will increasingly be dominated by low-paying, repetitive work in the retail, trade and service sectors"(p. 207). He goes on to state that by the year 2005 "there will be more cashier jobs than jobs for computer scientists, systems analysts, physical therapists, operations analysts and radiologic technicians combined"(p. 207). Thus, the emphasis on learning elementary knowledge based on methods of memorization and rote learning that dominate much of the Quebec curriculum well into the later years of high school, appear to be in line with the demands of the labor market. These contradictions must be exposed. The popular belief that schools are fundamentally democratic institutions is brought into question when we see the nature of individuals they are producing. Our society has become based on possessive individualism, debilitating privatization and fierce competition. As a result, we learn to place our personal needs before the needs of others regardless of the

negative impact it has on ourselves or on our communities. The problem with our egocentric society is that none of us are happy. We have lost our sense of community and belonging, and have become skeptical of the actions of others. We are becoming social isolates. The solution to these deleterious social realities comes in the form of educational practices that force us to consider the reality of the power relations that govern our society.

### Education as the Practice of Freedom: Reconciliation in the Teacher-Student Dynamic

Critical theorists have discussed the benefits of critical pedagogical practices, that encourage critical reflection, in detail. The teachers who participated in this study demonstrate that incorporating critical learning in the classroom is a feasible goal. The evidence presented throughout this study shows that education continues to focus on the importance of mastering intellectual skills to the detriment of inter-personal skills. This must be realized as a cause for alarm. As indicated by the teachers working in alternative schools the incidence of drug and alcohol abuse is rising. Students are becoming more complacent and more hostile towards the society in which they live. This situation becomes all the more serious when we consider the advanced technological power we as human beings now possess, which enables us to destroy entire nations by pushing a button. It is critical that we establish relationships built on trust and instill in our students the desire and ability to realize that if we are the cause of our current situation, we too can be the solution.

Freire's declaration that to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge, appears to be a motto of all but two of the schools I visited. The teachers' perspectives indicate that meaning and purpose can only be achieved when the empowerment of the students is realized. The notion of reciprocal learning is an essential component of critical pedagogy. As Freire states, "although the teachers or the students are not the same, the person in charge of education is being formed or re-formed as he/she teaches, and the person who is being taught forms him/herself in the process"(Freire, 1998, p. 31). Thus the empowerment of the student ultimately results in the empowerment of the teacher.

Another essentiality of critical pedagogy is the notion of making learning relevant to the lives of the students. Any emancipatory curriculum must emphasize student experience, which is intimately related to identity formation. The techniques promoted by the teachers demonstrate their desire to making learning relevant to the lives of the students; journal keeping, creative writing workshops conducted by students, youth symposiums, setup of classroom environment, all of these techniques allow the students to feel as though what they have to say or what they want to do is important. Once teachers are made aware of their students' lived realities they come to realize that survival and not learning multiplication tables is the number one item on their priority list. As previously stated, schools that value and endorse critical pedagogical practices are exemplars and must be commended for their efforts. Nonetheless, the problem of scale, namely encouraging such change to occur within the school structure and to the core of educational practice, has yet to be accomplished. It is imperative that these teaching

practices become the norm. It is the teachers in this case who possess the ability to encourage these changes to occur.

### Suggestions for Improvement and Further Study

The benefits of incorporating critical pedagogy into the education system is for obvious reasons a difficult goal to accomplish. The very nature of the current system is set-up to ensure that those in dominant positions win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression. This oppressive force is what McLaren (1998) refers to as hegemony. When students are not encouraged to question the prevailing values, attitudes, and social practices of the dominant society in a sustained critical manner, teachers help to preserve the hegemony of the dominant culture. Ironically, hope springs from the students' efforts to defy these hegemonic forces by resisting authority and disrupting classroom practices. Viewed as menaces in the traditional system these students are at times directed to alternative programs. In such programs the teachers have no choice but to resort to alternative teaching strategies, and when success is achieved the possibility of change is no longer viewed as an impossibility. It is my belief that the number of students being asked to leave the traditional system will increase. When alternative programs are forced to turn students away, which is already happening, teachers in the traditional system will have to find ways of coping. This is where the role of those teachers currently incorporating critical practices within their classrooms becomes of utmost importance.

As has previously been stated in this study the main weakness of critical pedagogy is the fact that its discourse has remained in the language of the academy. The lived experiences of the teachers serve as exemplars for a public discourse to be established. Teachers such as those involved in this study must gather their resources together and discuss the benefits of critical pedagogy with parents, community members, and fellow teachers. The objectives put forth in the Quebec Program may serve as ammunition. The program encourages a different relationship to knowledge, one in which students are active participants. According to the perspectives of those individuals involved in this study this is not currently happening. Teachers and students must come to realize that they are the ones who have the power to implement change. They must no longer be confined to their classrooms. Teachers can provide examples from their classrooms and students can present personal success stories. Change can come about if collective action is established.

Another area which requires further development is in terms of teacher-training. The individuals enrolled in a Teacher-training Program in Education expressed great disappointment with the rigid focus on content and theory presented in their program as opposed to the minimal hands-on practice they received. They suggest that it is the hands-on learning that provided them with valuable opportunities to apply the theory they had learned into practice. According to Kim, a recent graduate of the BA in education program, the professors teaching methodology courses, in which the objective is to teach teachers how to teach, quite often tell the students not to use multiple choice exams in their classes, yet this is the predominant means of testing in their own classes. She described many of the courses as having a 'do what I say, not as I do' approach. Angela

echoed this feeling when she stated that professors defend their neglect of classroom discussion based on a lack of time and an overwhelming amount of material to cover. Because the same hypocrisy exists at the elementary and secondary school levels it is more than likely that without support from fellow staff members these students will revert to the same coping strategies employed by their professors. All four of the students interviewed suggest a need for courses which focus specifically on the tenets of critical pedagogy. The girls could not name one which dealt specifically with this subject. Thus, just as much as the academy must enter into the public domain to espouse the virtues of critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy must enter into the actual programs of teacher-training.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the Quebec Reforms would be able to achieve their task in regard to helping students become critical thinkers. The answer is a resounding, YES! The reforms are responsible for the development of critical pedagogy within the school system, but not because it is endorsed in the curriculum. Critical thinking cannot and should not be outlined as a competency or skill to be learned. It must be lived. It is my belief that the dominant presence of capitalist ideology throughout our school system has helped to encourage critical pedagogical practices. Teachers who desperately try to reach students who are slipping through the cracks by the handfuls have had no other choice but to turn to alternate styles of teaching. When they manage even if only to a slight degree to get through to these individuals they try a bit more and a bit more, until the entire classroom dynamic has changed. It is impossible to attempt to change the entire structure of the educational system. The change must begin with those who are all too often neglected in reform initiatives. If the power of critical



pedagogy becomes the new cultural norm, then and only then will the Quebec Reforms achieve their goal of establishing New Directions for Success.

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## APPENDIX A:

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### Teachers' Reflections on Education

1. Why did you go into the field of education?
2. When you were a student in elementary and secondary school, how would you describe your educational experiences?
3. Discuss the courses, teaching methods and philosophies you were exposed to during your teacher certification.
4. In your opinion, what is the purpose of education?

#### Teachers' Reflections on Critical Pedagogy

1. How would you describe your own teaching methods and philosophy of education?
2. According to Paulo Freire, a leading proponent of critical pedagogy, education must be a liberating experience, not a domesticating one. In order for this to occur the teacher-student relationship must be reciprocal; both educator and pupil must learn together. What is your opinion on this view?
3. Dialogue is central to critical teaching strategies. According to Freire (1970), "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (p. 73). Do you encourage dialogue within your classroom, and do you feel it is essential in order for learning to occur?
4. Do you feel current educational practices encourage or hinder reciprocal teacher-student relationships?

#### Teachers' Reflections on Critical Thinking and the Quebec Reforms

1. The Quebec Education Program advocates a competency-based approach to learning. Describe how this differs from traditional approaches.
2. Do the reforms advocate an educational experience that is student-centered? If so, what changes have been implemented to ensure this materializes?
3. One of the underlying reasons for the Quebec curriculum reform highlights the need to promote intellectual skills that will enable individuals to function within today's "knowledge-based society." How would you define intellectual skills?
4. How do you incorporate critical thinking in your classroom?