Patterns of Curriculum Change

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PATTERNS OF CURRICULUM CHANGE

Historical studies of school subjects show that the secondary school curriculum, far from being a stable and dispassionately constructed unity, is in fact a highly contested, fragmented and endlessly shifting terrain. The school subject is socially and politically constructed and the actors involved deploy a range of ideological and material resources as they pursue their individual and collective missions.

Behind this focus of inquiry lies an alternative conceptualization to mainstream views of schooling. In many ways, this conceptualization accords with the views of Meyer and Rowan who describe education systems as “the central agency defining personnel – both citizen and elite – for the modern state and economy” (Meyer & Rowan, 1983, p. 83). In this view of schooling, standardized categories of graduates are produced through the use of standardized types of teachers, students, topics and activities. These graduates are allocated places in the economic and stratification system on the basis of their certified educational background. Through this certification role the ‘ritual classifications of education’ (i.e. student, teacher, topic, school, grade, etc.) have value as currency on the ‘social identity market’. This market calls for a standard, stable currency of social typifications. “The nature of schooling is thus socially defined by reference to a set of standardized categories, the legitimacy of which is publicly shared” (Meyer & Rowan, 1983, p. 84). This is a constraint on what is possible in education and what will be accepted as conforming to the norm of schooling. But on the other hand “the rewards for attending to external understandings are, an increased ability to mobilize societal resources for organizational purposes.” (Meyer & Rowan, 1983, p. 86).

The social function of schooling by this view sets parameters, perspectives and incentives for those actors involved in the construction of school subjects. In our investigation, the activities of these actors can best be understood as individuals or collectives with ‘careers’ and ‘missions’ who are dependent for resources and ideological support on external sources. The interface between ‘internal’ subject actors and their external relations is mediated through the pursuit of resources and ideological support. Resource dependency has two faces: it is experienced as a constraint on strategies of action but can also be viewed as a mode of promoting and facilitating particular versions and visions of school subjects.

The great strength of Meyer and Rowan’s characterization of schooling and of

linking it to an analysis of resource allocation is that our study can focus on aspects of stability and conservation as well as on aspects of conflict and change. This provides an antidote to the dangers of internalism and givenness noted earlier. It also provides a response to Steven Luke’s critique of what he describes as ‘one-dimensional’ or pluralist views of power that focus only on conflict. He argues that the most effective and insidious use of power “is to prevent conflict arising in the first place”. Hence to focus solely on conflict is to miss crucial dimensions of power, moreover ‘conflict, according to that view, (i.e. pluralism) is assumed to be crucial in providing an experimental test of power attributions: without it the exercise of power will, it seems to be thought, fail to show up’. A further problem relates to issues of consciousness for pluralists ‘are opposed to any suggestion that interests might be inarticulated or unobservable, and above all, to the idea that people might actually be mistaken about, or unaware of, their own interests.’ (Lukes, 1974, p. 14). Lynd long ago addressed this issue in a forward to Brady’s book Business as a System of Power, a system which he argues is:

an intensely coercive form of organization of society that cumulatively constrains men and all their institutions to work the will of the minority – who hold and wield economic power; and that this relentless warping of men’s lives and forms of association becomes less and less the results of voluntary decisions by ‘bad’ or ‘good’ men and more and more an impersonal web of coercions dictated by the need to keep the system running (Lynd, 1943, p. xii)

By analogy, it is therefore important in our studies of curriculum conservation and change to monitor those ‘impersonal webs’ which keep the education system running and which provide parameters and maybe indeed ‘coercions’ as well as ‘facilitations’ for those involved in the construction and promotion of school subjects.

SCHOOL SUBJECTS: INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The process model developed by Bucher and Strauss for the study of professions provides some initial guidelines for the study of the internal affairs of school subjects. They argue that within a profession are varied identities, values and interests. They characterize professions as loose amalgamations of segments pursuing different objectives in different manner and more or less delicately held together under a common name at particular periods in history.

They note that conflicts arise at particular points, notably over the gaining of institutional footholds, over recruitment and over external relations with clients and other institutions. At times, when conflicts such as these become intense, professional associations may be created, or, if already in existence, become strongly institutionalized.

The Bucher and Strauss model of professional change suggests that the belief in a subject as monolithic and unified is unlikely to resonate with the reality of the