

# **Skilling for Life/Living for Skill: The Social Construction of Life Skills in Ontario Schools**

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## *Introduction*

In 1982, a Life Skills/Management curriculum field test was directed by the Ministry of Education in selected schools in Ontario. More significantly, the Ministry of Education released a policy document which placed the teaching of "life skills" into the curriculum of all school topic areas (Ministry of Education, 1982.)

Typically, the teaching of life skills is regarded by the educational community as a positive step in the evolution of the school. Life skills are considered to be "relevant" to the students' interests and needs; to fill a "gap" arising in the changing relation of the school to the society, to provide curricular material that students have needed but never received in the schooling process, etc.

Over the course of conducting interviews with teachers, administrators and community workers about life skills programs in the school system and in the community, we came to take a stance opposite to that of the educators with whom we spoke. We found the life skills curriculum in both the separate and public education systems to be an ideological process embedded in administrative concerns about student "attitudes" and student "discipline." The concept of life skills assembles a set of understandings which organizes individuals' lives in the conceptual relevances of the labor process. Life skills courses place students' lives and concerns in the curriculum while at the same time providing the basis on which those concerns can be rationalized and fitted to the cultural understandings generated in the capitalist mode of production which characterizes Canadian society. It is a conceptual frame through which the complexity of life processes becomes reduced to a set of skills.

The organization of this paper takes the following form. We begin with an historical description of the concept of "skill" as it is located in the administrative work organization of the labor market. Next, we describe the participation of the education system in the production of a "skilled" labor force, and in the following section take up the shifts in the secondary school system in Ontario which were recommended by the Secondary Education Review Project and implemented by

the provincial Ministry of Education. We focus in the final section on life skills as a curricular form. The inherent tension of life skills is the contrast between the transformation of everyday life into a series of skills and the entry of everyday life into areas of knowledge which have been organized outside of student's lives. This contradiction is located in the context of a re-institutionalization of hierarchical social relations within the secondary school process in Ontario.

### *Conceptualizing "Skill"*

The definition of "skill" is problematic:

One symptom . . . is its wide range of meanings: another is the way it elides qualitative meaning . . . [including] a willingness to organize one's life according to the demands made by employers and to form an element in a mobile, flexible and malleable work force. (CCCS, 1981: 145)

Conceptually, the term "skill" refers to some activities and not to others. As Grahame (1983a) points out, the notion of "skill" implicitly presupposes both something that can be learned or mastered and something that can be taught to an unskilled individual by someone who is skilled. While it is theoretically possible to teach individuals particular skills, conceptually the learning of the skill is seen to depend on the individual's "attitudes," "capabilities," or "potential." In other words, "skills" are teachable/learnable at the general level while the mastery of such skills is subject to individual differences. The grammar is one which includes an abstracted and universal sense as well as a notion of individual responsibility for mastery. Skills are "out there" ready to be mastered by individuals with the "capacity" to do so.

As we shall see below, the administrative and organizational character of the terms "skill" and "life skill" depend on this characteristic of abstracted possibilities with particular or individual responsibility for mastery. The grammar of life skills arises out of the grammar of "skills," retaining the moral features of the concept of skill and conceptualizing life as a series of learnable skills.

### *The History of Skilling*

A brief historical description of an extremely complex process will serve to situate the concept of "skill" in the development of a political and administrative process making visible the structural aspects of capitalist development which provide for the shifting grammar of the concept and establishing the historical character of the "new" life skills curriculum.

Historically, the term "skill" is embedded in labor processes. As Braverman (1974) points out, "skill" takes on a particular character in the context of a capitalist mode of production. The shift in the mode of production from feudalism to capitalism was both a change in the working process and in the form and control of the work process. This change gave rise to two features of contemporary society. First, it provided for the "division between mental and manual labor" which became a feature of the class organization of capitalist society, socially

and economically. Second, the workplace was subordinated to the requirements of the capitalist mode of production and to shifts and changes in capital accumulation. Consequently, the workers became secondary to the necessary production of surplus value. The grammar connected with the term "skill" ceases to hold as the term becomes embedded in the process of capital accumulation which subordinates the "skill" of the worker to the generation of surplus value.

Integral to his change in the productive process has been the development of the conceptual apparatus through which the labor market can be managed and administered (Braverman, 1974; Smith, 1979, 1986). The notion of "skill" is one which is ideological in its usage where the term has been detached from a labor process controlled by the worker and relocated in a work process determined by a "scientific" organization oriented to the production of surplus value. (As Gaskell (1981) notes, the concept of "skill" is socially constructed and politically organized.) The designation of a worker as skilled or unskilled is tied directly to the social construction of a job as skilled or unskilled. Thus, a skilled worker is one who is seen as capable of doing a skilled job where the determination of what constitutes skill has been developed in a classification system used to organize and manage a labor market (Cain et al., 1966; Edward, 1918; Mager and Pipe, 1970; Scoville, 1965.)

The term is not one which is organized in the relevances of the working class nor in the concerns of students who intend to enter the labor market. "Skill" is embedded in a series of ideological practices oriented to the management and administration of the labor market in the interests of capital. While the interests of the workers are not deliberately nor completely ignored, they are embodied in notions of "unemployment," a lack of "skills," the need for further training, etc. (Government of Canada, 1982a; 1982b). As such, the grammar of the concept "skill" is not one which arises in or is embedded in the concerns of people who want jobs, or who want to change jobs. Rather, it is the grammar of administration, a grammar obscured in the language of abstraction or generality (skill shortages) and in the government activities to manage those skill shortages (training individuals to compensate for an individual lack of skill).

### *Education and "Skills"*

Education is one part of a larger social process in which the concept of skill comes to organize the social relations which are fundamental to the labor process under capitalism. The notion of skill organizes the workplace and the work process itself; it organizes the relations between individuals in the labor force; and it organizes both the institutional and non-institutional settings of education and training. Thus, skill serves as a central device in the relations between capital and labor. (Jackson 1981)

The social construction of "skill" (and thus of particular individuals as skilled) is organized in and through education and training programs as well as in the administrative organization of the labor force. The education process is part of the organization of the labor supply either with worker's involvement in the credentialing process as in union training programs or without their involvement as in clerical training in high schools (Gaskell, 1981).

### Reorganizing Schooling

Two recent documents produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education focus the ways in which "skill" has come to co-ordinate aspects of the education system. The notion of "skill" assembles a set of work practices within the managerial relevances of the labor market. In a similar manner, life skills taught in the schools becomes a set of work practices organized in the administrative and pedagogical relevances of the secondary school system. The student and the teacher come to see the world in terms of those skills which "match" those required by the labor market. However, this conception of skills is extended beyond the requirement of the labor market and comes to provide a model for understanding the skills of everyday life.

The documents are those which provide the basis for current changes in the secondary education system in Ontario: the *Secondary Education Review Project* (SERP) and the Ministry of Education response to that document, the *Renewal of Secondary Education in Ontario* (ROSE). SERP was a public inquiry which developed the mandate on which policy change by the Ministry could be instituted. The second document (ROSE) is the policy document prepared in response to the recommendations of the SERP report.

The SERP project, formed in April, 1980, was a government inquiry with the mandate to examine the secondary school system in Ontario ". . . focussing in particular on the credit system, content and organization of the curriculum, standards and discipline and the role of the school in preparing students for employment" (MoE, 1981: 1.) Declining standards, student preference as the basis of course selection and a school system oriented to the requirements of universities rather than the manual and technical labor market were seen to be the major problems confronting the education system. As the report notes, while there is a concomitant concern with "declining standards," there is little "empirical" evidence to support this concern. Thus, a major issue in the SERP Report was the "problem" of the schools' preparation of students for participation in the labor force. It is in this area that the school is considered by the public to be inadequate. The school is perceived as a vehicle through which jobs become available to workers and through which employers can assume that future workers who have engaged in the schooling process will come to them with reading "skills," writing "skills," and with more or less developed numeracy "skills." The critics of the secondary school system point to the failure of the school to organize their credentialing processes within the changing relevances of the "world of work." Thus, the SERP report, its mandate and its solutions are embedded in an historical process of an increasing separation of school curricula from occupational requirements, in a screening for labor market participation on which the capitalist social formation depends, and in a "crisis" in capitalism which is reflected both in the increasing unemployment of young working class adults and in educational cutbacks.

The SERP Report did not address issues of the technical and vocational preparation of students except as their recommendations focus on increased "practical

experience.” No recommendations were made to increase the secondary school involvement (in terms of teachers, funding, or resources) in the production of a “skilled” workforce. The suggested increases in “practical experience” provide for more connections between the school and particular kinds of work, e.g. kindergarten aides, hair-dresser’s assistants, carpenter’s helpers, etc. However, the training site was not moved from the labor market to the school. Rather, the traditional differentiation between school and work was left essentially untouched. This leaves the development of a “skilled” labor force under the jurisdiction of traditional agencies, e.g. federal training programs, technical and vocational colleges, employers.

The ROSE policy document follows the recommendations made by SERP although it is more explicit as to the technical and vocational training available through various federal and provincial government programs (MoE, 1982: 45-47.) But here again, the restructuring of the secondary school curriculum does not include a major shift to vocational and technical education. The ROSE report can be seen as a refusal to reorganize the school/work dichotomy, a refusal to enter directly into the production of “skilled workers” through vocational and technical training processes. Instead, the report re-asserts the credentialing character of the liberal-democratic tradition of the school system. At the same time, the “socialization” of students, the control of the student population, is addressed through the notions of life skills and through the increased control over curricular forms and school attendance.

There are two findings of the document that are of interest here. First, while the expressed concern of many of the submissions to the public inquiry was the relationship of work and school and the preparation of students to participate in the world of work, this does not form a substantial aspect of either the SERP document or the ROSE policy guide. Rather, the difference between the previous curricular policy *H.S. 1, 1979-1981* and the new policy document is minimal. Second, what *is* different in the new documents is the focus on “life skills.”

Moves to “solve” the problems around training for labor force participation within the school setting are constrained by a number of considerations — historically-developed jurisdictions, the current cutbacks in educational funding, etc. Rather than including new training for vocational and technical jobs in the school curriculum, the Ministry of Education’s response has been to develop a life skills curricular area.

The response is not directly oriented to the production of “skilled” workers for the labor market. As Johnson has pointed out:

It is not so much a question that schools . . . are ideology, more that they are the *sites* where ideologies are produced in the form of subjectivities. (1979, p. 232).

The conceptual structuring of life as a set of “skills” imports concepts through which the labor market is administratively managed into the everyday organization of students’ lives.

### Standardizing Schooling

Life skills are embedded in the ongoing political struggle of an evolving education system. The "moral" and "neutral" connotations of "skill" are imported into the curriculum. At the same time, the traditional work/school dichotomy is not changed. The policy recommendations of the Ontario Ministry of Education tie the student and the teacher more directly to an organization of knowledge which originates in an administrative process. Curriculum development becomes further embedded in management of the educational system, subordinating the particular and local concerns of students and teachers to an objectified organization of schooling. As a result of such subordination, curriculum and pedagogy become increasingly standardized.

This has consequences for the shape and tenor of curricular knowledge both historically and socially. The centralization of curricular and evaluative processes cannot be overlooked in its impact on student knowledge. At a time when alternatives to the schooling process are few, the more rigid organizational structure cannot fail to have an impact on the increasing student population. The "problems" isolated by the SERP report, indirectly but consequently have an impact on the development of appropriate student "attitudes to the world of work."

Of course, this apparently implacable process is not implacable at all. The entering of "practical" or "common-sense" knowledge into the secondary school process through the life skills curriculum is a radical departure from the forms of knowledge which, in the past, were considered appropriate to the school mandate. The SERP report recommended:

. . . That curricular guidelines, particularly in the compulsory subjects, include life skills in the core part of the program where appropriate to the context. (MoE, #1981: 7)

In response, the ROSE policy document stated:

Each guideline will provide clear, *consistent statements* of the Ministry's expectations in each subject, as well as across the entire program, for . . . life skills . . . (MoE, 1982: 30)

### Life Skills and Schooling

Life skills is a form of knowledge which claims to be embedded in the relevances and concerns of students' everyday lives outside the classroom. In contrast to other traditional topic areas which rely on a generalized form of knowledge about the world (what Smith, 1980, calls a "documentary knowledge"), life skills relies on knowledge which arises in the local and particular concerns of students. Once entered into the curriculum process, however, life skills, as "practical" knowledge, becomes a mandated knowledge domain which has traditionally been organized outside everyday knowledge and in that of "experts." Life skills, therefore, enters a set of contradictory influences into the education system. To use Foucault's (1982) formulation, they contain within them both

“power over” (ideological transformation) and “power to” (a knowledge disjuncture as “emancipatory potential”).

Life skills courses act to organize the student’s understanding of the social world. Life becomes a series of skills which “anyone” can learn *if they want to* — finding a job, raising a child, solving a problem. The complexity of a student’s life is thus transformed into a series of discrete phenomena which the individual is capable of mastering. While the areas isolated by the concept of life skills (for example, raising a child) are not characterized as *only* skills they become *primarily* skills.

The concept of life skills also trades on the strong moral character of “skill”

as a sign which combined impressively neutral references to technique with some thoroughly positive moral connotations. Who could gainsay the value of ‘skill’ especially if the immediate point of reference was medicine, the conquest of space, or the magic of the computer? (CCCS, 1981: 145)

Life skills retains both the neutrality of “skill” as well as the positive moral connotations of the term. Indeed, who could be against the teaching of skills for increased success in life? As Cohen points out in relation to the the British example, however:

In “life skilling” . . . the image of apprenticeship is used to obscure the fact that one thing most of these courses are not about is the mastery of specific techniques of skills of manual labor. Instead, they are about learning techniques of impression management and social deportment, good interview manners and dress sense, how to find a marriage partner, one’s true inner self. (Cohen, 1982: 46)

As Cohen goes on to describe, the life skills courses act to organize “youth unemployment” as a matter of individual responsibility:

The real effect however, is limited to ideology — to represent youth unemployment as a problem of faulty supply, rather than demand; a failure of the educational system rather than capitalism; a personal problem of joblessness due to lack of maturation, experience of skill rather than the position youth occupies in the market economy. (Cohen, 1982: 45)

The focus on individual responsibility is central to the concept of “life skills.” The individual comes to the life skills setting with incomplete knowledge of everyday life. Mastery becomes a matter of individual “attitudes” or “approaches to living.” Determination of “mastery” rests in the authorized hierarchy. Life skills appear to address public concerns about skills training while in fact focussing on the development of appropriate student attitudes to the labor market.

### The Contradiction of “Life Skills”:

In the context of the current shifts in the education process as manifested by the SERP report and the ROSE policy document, the move to life skills curricula is of particular interest. Life skills are focussed directly on the everyday world

while at the same time teaching "better" or "proper" skills for "managing and directing one's life" (MoE, 1981b:1). They focus on students' personal approach to the social world, the "socialization" concerns of the education system.

The introduction of life skills curriculum into the secondary school system embodies new contradictions in the relation of the education system to the increasingly rationalized mode of production. Life skills curricula enter students' lives and concerns into the curriculum while, at the same time, providing the basis on which those concerns can be rationalized and fitted to the cultural understandings generated in the capitalist mode of production — life as a series of skills. The particular contradictions of the life skills curricula are first, the transformation of students' everyday or common sense knowledge into knowledge organized in the relevances of ruling, and second, the entering of common sense knowledge into the mandated topics of knowledge in the school setting.

The life skills curriculum assembles a set of discrete phenomena within its pedagogical structure. The process of determining what a life skill is, who needs it, who teaches it and how it can be taught is a process which sets up limits and possibilities for the curriculum. Obviously, not all of life can be entered into the curriculum; some selection must be made. The selection process occurs at the Ministry level and is mediated through the teachers' work organization. In the classroom this curriculum is presented to students as "skills" which help one "cope" or "manage one's life" oriented to everyday life and "skills for living."

Because of the all-encompassing character of the concept "life skill," the selection process organizes which activities are skilled and which unskilled in living one's life. The positive moral connotations of "skill" and life skills accrue to some activities and not to others. Our understanding about how life is organized, what is important for a "good" and "successful" life comes to be constituted in the selection of skills for life. For example, 'hanging out' is *not* a life skill, developing a career path *is* a life skill. Life becomes a series of strategies designed to fix problems that arise. The complexity of everyday life, with its contradictions, oppositions and inconsistencies, becomes a "life" problem with individual solutions and individual failures. The local and particular interests and concerns of students become transformed into a series of "skills" which have been selected by the secondary school curriculum and become part of the administrative relevances of the school system. Everyday, practical knowledge becomes subordinated to the technical and organizational concerns which inform all curricular efforts.

In one sense, the ideological character of life skills provides for the designations of life skills curriculum as "relevant" curriculum. It is very clear to teachers and life skills instructors that some of the activities in which students engage will not help them get a job, nor help them be good parents, etc. Some of the activities which teachers can teach in this new curriculum are seen to provide for the increased "success" of the student in their interactions with the job market, other teachers, etc. The organization of life skills curricula within the administrative relevances of the school system implies a congruence between school knowledge

and the ruling apparatus, knowing about one should help to know about the other. While life skills training may indeed provide for increased success in the classroom and in the job market, however, the success is organized in terms of administrative relevances and is therefore embedded in the ongoing reproduction of social inequality. And indeed, while the likelihood of success may be increased, actual success is always predicated on much more than knowing how to behave in a job interview or a classroom. The life skills orientation obscures the social organization of class relations and focuses on the individual mastery of skill.

The life skills curriculum thus acknowledges the relevances of the common sense concerns of students as they live their lives, even as it enters those relevances into the transformative process of schooling. Student lives and concerns take on a mandated relevance to the schooling process in a way that has never been possible before.

Life skills curricula assume, however, that student knowledge, rooted in different social and material conditions, is necessarily incomplete. The definition of "complete" arises in the work organization of the teaching profession, not in the local experience of the student. In the classroom setting, student knowledge of the local and particular features of their everyday lives and of the possibilities open to them in the future contrast with the knowledge that teachers have about what students "need" to know. In schools serving a bourgeois student population, the disjuncture between the two organizations of knowledge will be minimal since the school is organized in terms of bourgeois relevances. In schools serving a working class population, where the courses are seen to be most needed, the disjuncture between the two organizations of knowledge will be irrevocably present. In these schools, the "success" of life skills curricula is likely to be open to question. It is here, however, in the knowledge disjuncture, that the ideological character of the life skills process will be most visible; it is here that the "emancipatory potential" is greatest and where "resistance" is likely to be most active. In other words, entering the everyday lives of students into the mandated curricular forms can reveal the administrative and ruling character of the school curriculum. As such, it provides a basis for political knowledge, inquiry and action.

### *Conclusion:*

There are two contradictory social impulses which emerge from the teaching of life skills in the school system. First, everyday knowledge or common-sense knowledge takes on an importance previously not possible. Second, and in contrast, students' lives become entered into the socially organized processes of class on which the school is based. In the transformative processes of schooling, practical knowledge becomes "technical" or "skilled" knowledge. The relevances of the administrative process are asserted over those which arise in the local and particular lives of students. In other words, the concepts disorganize any understanding of social situations which would have as their basis the class organization of the society.

On the other hand, some of the community courses, although not by any means all, have as their basis a less rigid model of learning, e.g. a life skills course for immigrant women in Toronto, in which the interests and concerns of the student more directly inform the curricular process. The curricular material is generated in the context of social and political analysis. As such, the inherent contradictions of life skills teaching become the basis for action rather than a constraint on possibilities of knowing.

Consistently, teachers described to us their concern over what was available to students in Ontario schools. They felt that "something" was needed. Our analysis indicates what is *not* needed: courses on life skills where the content and process are not subjected to critical review by *all* participants in the education process.

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