

Quarterly Journal of Ideology

A Critique of Conventional Wisdom

An electronic journal at:

www.lsus.edu/la/journals/ideology

Attitude, Attendance, and Appearance: Manufacturing of the “Good Worker” in the Welfare-to-Work Legislation.

James H. Adams and Mabel C. Okojie*
Mississippi State University

In 1996, legislation was passed that ended welfare as we know it in the United States. Many educational opportunities were abolished in favor of “work first” initiatives and in 2003 the House approved yet another bill by a margin of 229 – 197 which would increase the work hours of welfare recipients. The rhetoric of this legislation is evidenced by the statement of Rep. Wally Herger who chairs the ways and means committee. He states “Work is the only true path from poverty to self-sufficiency.” In praising this new legislation, President Bush states that the legislation “will help millions of Americans realize a life of hope, dignity and independence. Although there is evidence to support the staggering decline in the welfare rolls since the 1996 legislation, evidence also suggests that the women leaving these rolls are finding low paying jobs without benefits and still struggling in poverty. This paper is situated from a critical theoretical perspective that addresses the pedagogy employed by one welfare to work site in its attempt to manufacture the “good” worker.

Introduction

The 1996 welfare to work reform has been both applauded and demonized. While statistics clearly indicate a major drop in the number of women on welfare, the not so clear statistics indicate that most of these individuals are now living below the poverty threshold. The original operational mentality of the 1996 legislation which has been even more regimented by the current (2003) legislation is that if you work you will be ok, and that will solve the problem. Although race, gender, class, or capitalist societal features most certainly contribute to welfare in the United States, this legislation in its original and current form dismisses these issues with the rhetoric that all can be solved if “these” people would just go to work. By using this type of extremism, most educational opportunities have been forgone in the attempt to move people into work, any type of work. An examination of the preferred *Work First* approach and rationale why it is the accepted format of welfare reform while the once highly regarded *Human capital* approach has experienced an extremely spiraled decline will be examined.

In examining the type of pedagogy used in one particular Welfare-to-Work site at a vocational institution, this paper, which is situated in a critical perspective, chronicles the attempts of the teachers and administrators to manufacture the “good worker.” In fairness to the teachers and administrators at this site, time constraints were always present and there was constant pressure from outside the confines of the vocational surrounding to get jobs as soon as possible. However, because of these external constraints as well as their own values and beliefs about the best way to achieve a life out of poverty, the teachers and administrators fell short in delivering a program that fostered critical and reflective praxis.

Work First Versus Human Capital

In order to fully conceptualize the urgency and apparent need for this particular welfare-to-work site to manufacture the “good” worker as quickly as possible, a full understanding of the philosophy guiding this legislation must be rendered. Although the personnel at this welfare-to-work site were upper middle class women attempting to construct what they thought to be a plan for success, they were caught in the time constraints and quantitative analysis of what was deemed as success. They did not have the luxury of critiquing which philosophy they wished to employ, and their perceived construction of the good worker was the most efficient way to gain entry into the workforce, which they assumed, would lead to success.

Work First

"Work First" initiatives were enacted in most states with the primary focus being centered on getting welfare recipients to go to work--any type of work. This signals a shift away from education and training to placing “welfare recipients immediately in jobs whenever possible, even if these jobs pay wages below the poverty level. These ‘Work First’ proponents argued that welfare recipients learn more from an actual job than from any educational program” (Cohen, 1998, p.1). Butler & Deprez (2002) contended that the work first philosophy promotes quick entrance into the labor market rather than an investment in future marketability through education as the best route out of poverty and into long-term economic self-sufficiency. It is based on the following assumptions that job are available for welfare recipients and that these jobs will pay a living wage.

One of the advantages cited by proponents of this type of design is the seemingly low cost factor. Welfare recipients are put into a work situation as quickly as possible as illustrated by a manager of a welfare to work site in Riverside California.

I've got to keep my investment in service restricted to the most minimal level it could possibly take in order to get a person a job. So how few services can I render and still get somebody employment, so that we can reach out and touch many more welfare recipients lives? We had to become a kind of Wal-Mart organization. We had to keep our costs down, our overhead down, and deal in volume. (p. 86)

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) has been strongly in favor of the work first design and has had great influence on legislation with its apparent outcomes of the number of people leaving the welfare rolls; however, Theodore & Peck (2000) stated that work first has an obvious appeal to policy makers because it represents a relatively low-risk approach to policy delivery since unit costs are kept low and overall employment growth is maximized in positive outcomes. Peck (1996) further stated that a critical flaw of work first is its wider objectives of social inclusion, in that too often the welfare problem of today is allowed to become the working poverty problem of tomorrow.

Human Capital Approach

But sense-or reams of research numbers-is not the point. The plan's unfortunate logic reflects the changing priorities of the economic elite. Corporate America's interests are not served by educated workers who demand higher wages. I don't believe there's a concerted right-wing conspiracy, but it's obvious that women on welfare-and their access to education- are directly in the line of fire (Abramovitz, 1997 p.16).

In the US in haste to find what works, there has been a tendency to be seduced by premature orthodoxies and quick fixes; however, the underlying problems which are being addressed - poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, welfare dependency- are deep seated and often

intractable owns. More often than not the defining principle of welfare to work has been compulsion. (Theodore & Peck 2000 p. 88).

These two quotes express the sentiment of advocates of the cultural capital design. The philosophy underlying this approach is that substantial “front-end” investments of this kind will not only prepare participants more comprehensively for work, but that raising levels of human capital will actually broaden the range of jobs open to welfare recipients. It does not simply deliver individuals to bottom of the labor market, but instead aims to secure relatively stable and well-paid employment. However, the high unit cost (education and training may take a long time and be expensive) is viewed as a negative in the conversation concerning welfare-to-work in which many have convinced themselves that the way to a “great” future is through immediate employment. Scholars such as Peck (2000), Kincheloe (1999), and Lakes (1994) contended that work first initiatives offer short-term employment with little or no upward mobility; hence, the problem may be shadowed for a short while, but it does not go away. Albelda (2001) goes on to state:

Ironically, just as more and more middle-class white women are feeling the very crunch of trying to earn income and raise families, the US has passed legislation that makes that task mandatory and substantially more difficult for poor mothers. Welfare literature places so much emphasis on employment that the impact of reform on families is rarely of much concern. While childcare is identified as a key issue, it almost always is viewed as a requisite ancillary support service for moving women off welfare into employment. Quality is not an issue. Welfare reform is dedicated to reducing welfare reliance, but has not made poverty reduction a goal or concern.

The theory of investing in human capital is well established and rarely questioned in this society until it is applied to the welfare population and prior to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) there was

considerable documentation that higher education was one key predictor of leaving welfare forever. Although the majority of states subscribed to the work first philosophy, the southeastern state this study was conducted in eliminated the *Work first* approach during the fiscal year 2001 (Kickham, 2000) due to an in state study. The following remarks report the following:

Our results show that falling caseloads are probably not the result of altered incentives. Leavers, who typically incur expenses associated with employment, are watching their total resources shrink after leaving TANF. This is troubling because the logic of the “work first” movement assumes that leaving welfare improves a family’s situation. If the improvement does not materialize, the logic of reform falls apart. As people shift from admittedly bad situations to more challenging employment situations, we are likely to find an erosion of faith in the labor market among these economically marginal parents. Although it is beyond the scope of ODHS authority, adequate wages and benefits, particularly health insurance, would enhance the attractiveness of employment. Ultimately, labor market realities will determine the success or failure of welfare reform. (p. 40)

Although evidence exhibits serious deficiencies with the *Work first* approach, it is the clear choice and due to the work first approach to welfare reform, vocational and adult educators have been faced with the tremendous responsibility for training a large number of people for jobs in a much shorter period of time

Critical Work Education

A critical approach to vocational and adult education is not a new one. John Dewey, although typically categorized as a progressive, embodied a critical orientation in much of his work. Dewey (1916) believed that preparing students with only entry-level job skills was insufficient. In order to enjoy a life of adaptability and self-reliance, Dewey advocated a transformative curriculum that allowed for integration of vocational and academic subjects and placed the needs of the students before the needs of the employer.

Dewey asserted that learning does not take place just by thinking, but rather by living and by doing. Education should be dynamic and have some type of relationship with the learner. Dewey was also highly concerned about the socioeconomic class divisions and the inequalities of the status quo. Writing in 1916, Dewey stated, "it is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetrate them" (p. 13).

A growing number of educators have begun to question workforce training programs based on what Freire (1973) has called the "banking model" of education in which the job of the teacher is simply to dispense knowledge. Programs based on notions of critical pedagogy incorporate curriculum opportunities that encourage students to analyze the social, political, and economic conflict of their work with the intent of transforming their position in it. Educators such as Gregson (1994), Lakes (1994), and Schultz (1997) have pioneered the need for adult and vocational education to be based on notions of critical pedagogy. According to Lakes (1994), in a critical perspective, learners not only gain an understanding of the sources of injustice in their own work lives, but more importantly acquire the analytical tools in which to collectively challenge and act on the origins of their marginalization or oppression in the labor market. Similarly, Gregson (1994) asserts that vocational educational classes that incorporate critical pedagogy promote active citizenship, encourage reflective thinking, make learning experiences relevant, and involve students in the learning and decision making process.

Since the Welfare-to-Work legislation restricts the amount of time one can spend in preparing for work, workforce-training programs, which aid workers looking for a job and provide training on the job, will become more and more prevalent. Typically, these

programs translate into a series of short-term classes focusing on teaching literacy skills that are occupational context specific. Scholars such as Grubb (1996) have argued that this type of instruction is faulty and does not provide for the kinds of critical thinking and reflection needed to be an active citizen in today's society. The basic premise is that workforce training programs must take seriously the definition of "workplace literacy" cited in the 1983 SCANS (the Secretary of Labor's Commission of Achieving Necessary Skills) report which includes a wide range of basic skills (e.g., reading, speaking), thinking skills (e.g., problem solving), and personal skills (e.g., responsibility, honesty). This is particularly important in light of the focus of the Welfare-to-Work initiatives that pay little attention to developing critical and reflective thinkers. The job of critical adult and vocational educators will be to reform the curriculum and pedagogy of workforce education programs so that individuals, many of whom will be welfare recipients, can learn not only the skills needed to be successful on the job but also the skills needed to be critical, active agents of social change.

Research Methods and Procedures

This study, a qualitative interpretive case study, was conducted at Red River Technical Institute (RRTI), one of 22 vocational schools in a southwestern state that housed a Temporary Need for Needy Families (TANF) program. In the summer of 1997, Red River's Life Off Welfare (LOW) program hired two people to begin the program: Tracy, the job coordinator and teacher, and Marilyn, the director and teacher. Later, Jody, the remediation teacher, was hired. The first class began with an enrollment of three students; by December 1997 there were eleven students, and in March of 1998, 50 were added making the total 83. By 1999 that number had increased to 139 students.

Different from other programs in the state, the LOW program does not offer short-term job specific training for welfare clients, and they do not place students in jobs. This program's goal is primarily to filter students through the regular Red River school offerings. No special training classes exist solely for TANF students. They are part of the regular student body and matriculate into the various vocational programs offered at RRTI after the initial two week orientation and remediation time if needed.

Data for this study were collected over a nine-month period, which extended from the summer of 1999 through the spring of 2000. Data collection consisted of four methods, which included one-on-one interviews, group interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Participants were solicited from three categories: TANF recipients involved in the program, teachers in the program, and administrators. For the purpose of this article, data gathered only from the teachers and administrator will be presented. Marilyn (director), Tracy (teacher), and Jody (teacher, job coordinator) were all White women ranging in age from 30 to 45.

In addition to interviews and observations, data was also collected through document analysis. Documents included the "Hard Choices" curriculum, the student handbook, attendance contracts, orientation agendas, information guides, course catalogs, financial aid applications, special project applications, information specific to this TANF program, Spring Break activities booklet, statistics reports, academic calendar, GED information packet, informational data about Welfare-to-Work in this state, student writings, and numerous handouts given to students. A total of 63 documents were examined, analyzed, and categorized.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used in this study was based on Marshall and Rossman's (1995) five step procedures of analysis: (1) organize the data, (2) generate categories, themes, and patterns, (3) test the emergent hypotheses against the data, (4) search for alternative explanations of the data, and (5) write the report.

In developing coding categories, salient themes were identified in two ways. After reading the transcripts, field notes, and documents several times, key terms and repeated phrases were highlighted and categories were formulated in the right hand margin. Secondly, coding categories based on six of Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) list of coding families were developed: perspectives held by subjects, subjects' ways of thinking about people and objects, activity codes, strategy codes, and pre-assigned codes. Based on this first round of coding, 76 themes were derived, which ranged from GED testing, to drugs, to welfare stereotypes.

In the second step of the coding process, these 76 themes were collapsed into 23 taxonomies: bad work, good work, good workers, bonding, self-esteem, testing, TANF legislation, orientation, description of site, drugs and abuse, expectations, past work experiences, family life, vocational classes, remediation, children, fears, DHS, prejudice, obstacles, and attitude.

In the third step of the analysis process, the data in terms of asking how the emergent data related to the purpose of the study and research questions were evaluated. When "holes" were discovered, original interviews, field notes, and documents for clarification had to be reexamined, and in some cases, returning to the site for further clarification from participants was needed.

In the fourth step, it was necessary to “engage in the critical act of challenging the very pattern that seems so apparent” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 116). This step of the process was very important for it forced reflexive thought concerning personal biases against the recent welfare reform and helped in analyzing the data from the perspectives of my participants.

In writing up the data, the administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives are highlighted and their viewpoints provide the framework for this report. Many direct quotes rather than summaries of their quotes have been included. This was important so that the reader could gain an understanding of their tone and use of language.

Manufacturing the “good” Worker

This is a personal philosophy for me. It doesn’t matter what you go in to, that if you are a good worker and have good work ethics and if you are there everyday and dependable and reliable, You do your job well...It doesn’t matter whatever it is you are doing you are going to climb.

Administrator

You can see that it was partly luck, partly was education, partly was skill, but we have all become successful because of the things we have done and mostly that is that we have been a good employee from start to finish. People look for that, and you climb because of those things too. Many of them [participants] have had short-term employment opportunities if at all or maybe in families where maybe nobody worked. They don’t know what it is like to be a good employee.

Administrator

As evidenced from the above quotes from Marilyn, the administrator, the rationale for the dire condition these women find themselves in due to the fact that they have not been good employees. The not so underlying theme is that if you will work, you will be ok. Many researchers tend to disagree with this commonly held assumption; however, the women of this study, who are a mixture of both white and black low socio

economic status (ses) , are taught that if they will take charge and become the “good employee”, then you to can achieve the American dream. The social class system in the United States is not at fault, only their desire to work.

Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody believed that sometimes a person may have to begin with bad work, but if they are a good worker they can move into a career.(These statements are obviously in the context of the TANF clients rather than in the context of their own lives.) In other words, bad work can lead to good work, but the focus of responsibility lies on the individual as illustrated by Marilyn’s comment that “we are all captains of our own ship,” meaning we determine our own future. Tracy asserts:

Where you are the low man on the totem pole, and you have to pay your dues and sometimes that means that you have got to be the first one there and the last one to leave. Sometimes that means you take the hours that nobody else wants. Sometimes that means that you are making less than everyone else, that you are starting on your way of building seniority for yourself, of getting experience on your resume..that coupled with education is going to give you advancement in the future, and it depends on the career. Sometimes that experience can give you more advancement than education.

Jody echoes Tracy when she stated, “Sometimes “bad work” may lead to “good work”. It can be a step in getting to the end result that we want.”

Although Tracy, Marilyn, and Jody all found the focus of Welfare-to-Work misguided with its emphasis on work rather than career, in many ways their comments represent similar sentiments of the TANF legislation policy makers. That is, the welfare reform bill offers people a chance to work that leads to them feeling good about themselves as productive wage-earning citizens. This feeling of self-confidence, according to Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody, can lead to a life of meaningful work if the individual proves himself/herself to be a good worker. In other words, the Horatio Algier

story is very much embedded in their beliefs about welfare and the potential to rise from “rags to riches” if one simply cultivates and enacts a good work ethic. Tracy elaborated on this:

If I had to flip burgers, and I knew that I was going to be flipping burgers until I was 55 years old, I would be very depressed; however, if I was doing it for \$6.25 an hour and I knew that after a few months I was going to move up to the register, and after a few months there, if successful, I was going to move to the window, and then I could be manager of that back cooker, and I could see the progression and the building, I would not mind flipping burgers at all. It wouldn't be so much work because I would see it is kind of a means to an end. I know that it is possible for everyone to find something out there that they really enjoy. I don't think that I am one in a million thing.

Tracy goes on to illustrate that a lot of the students cannot focus on the future because of immediate concerns. (Is it possible to be “captain of your own ship” when the threat of being evicted is an ongoing possibility?)

Seems like, and this is just strictly observation, nothing written down, but it just seems like a lot of our students have a very limited reality in those life areas [budgeting] and that sometimes their goals are so short term, day to day, feed their family, that they are not thinking about a year from now , 5 years from now, 10 years from now,...buying a house or a car, getting a job an being able to move to another part of town. It is so immediate, food and clothing, and shelter. It is the kind of hierarchy of needs that we are so concerned about today and tomorrow the we can't look past it, and most of our students don't have bank accounts.(Tracy)

In producing the “good worker”, much attention was given to attitude, attendance, appearance and cultural capital. If one was not willing to have a good attitude, attend regularly, groom her appearance for the projected job market, and be a compliant employee, work could not be expected. Students were taught that to be successful, one must adapt to and become a part of the cultural situation they may find themselves. Due to this belief held by the teachers/administrators at this site, the teaching of cultural capital was an important component of the manufacturing of the “good worker.”

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital includes such social practices as dressing, acting, thinking, and speaking (Kincheloe, 1999). Typically, the workplace is a site in which the cultural capital of the dominant society is prized. For example, workers are typically expected to dress and speak in a way that reflects the values and beliefs of the dominant society. As Kincheloe (1999) argues, “workers who do not possess the cultural capital of the dominant culture are in big trouble. They are viewed as rude and uncouth, not the type of people a ‘cultured’ person would want to have around” (p. 222).

One of the ways in Marilyn, Jody, and Tracy are preparing the TANF clients for good work is by helping them acquire the cultural capital of the dominant society. Through such lessons as the proper way to dress, correct table manners, and effective interviewing skills, the TANF recipients are being inculcated into the culture of the dominant society in hopes that this will help them gain a job which will lead to good work.

Resume Writing and Cover Letters. Tracy spent considerable time discussing with the TANF students the importance of having a good resume and cover letter. In emphasizing the importance of resume writing, Tracy told the women during one class period:

You learn all these other things, and how much did we learn about the Five Civilized Tribes? So much time went into that alone. Can I tell you any piece of history that I learned in high school, and just quote it to you? No, I don’t think I can, but if they taught me something like resume writing, I would have remembered it. Most of us don’t get what we need to have as far as job searching or company searching. No one told me about what it’s like to move up within a company. Climbing the career ladder.

Students were given detailed information about the importance of a resume looking professional with correct spelling, grammar, and mechanics. Handouts were

distributed with sample resumes. Tracy told the students, “I don’t care if you apply at Best Buy or McDonald’s or wherever. If it looks like it would be acceptable to an attorney’s office, then you’re good to go everywhere.”

In a several paged handout on resume writing guidelines, the TANF students were given the edict “remember you are selling yourself, attract attention to your skills and abilities.” Further instructions such as use high quality off-white paper and use action verbs are also given.

As important as the resume is, Tracy told them that the cover letter was even more important because it offered the first glimpse of a person’s ability to write and make a good impression. Thus, Tracy spent a good deal of time instructing the students about the proper way to write a cover letter:

Cover letters are often perceived as last minute additions that have to be completed before your resume can be sent. But that shouldn’t be the case. It should be something that’s real methodical, planned out, and that you, kind of like the icing on the cake, but it’s the very first thing an employer reads, that’s his first perception, his first impression of you. To understand the importance of cover letters, just put yourself in the place of a senior executive in a major corporation. You’re busy. You have a few cover letters with attached resumes. You pick up the first cover letter and quickly read, Dear Sir, I am interested in employment with the XYZ Corporation. The second letter, to whom it may concern; this is no longer acceptable. Then you pick up the third cover letter. “Dear Mr. Hanson, you were recently quoted in Business Week as saying that your company objective is to first or second in market share in all your market segments by the fourth quarter of 1999. I congratulate you and your company on its aggressiveness and confidence.” I want to keep reading.

Later in the year, the TANF students were taught how to use the computer to find out information about companies, such as Taco Bell, so that this information could be incorporated into the cover letter. They were also given instructions on how to write a cover letter that presented a personal mission statement that was parallel to that of the

company's. Finding this information was quite easy, according to Tracy, since almost all companies, even "mom and pop organization" had web pages that could be easily assessed.

Interviewing Skills. Tracy continuously impressed on the students that finding a job was a competition. They would be competing against perhaps hundreds of other employees. Thus, how one presented herself in the interview might be the deciding factor for an employer to hire her. Tracy told the women "interviewing is an art, and it takes practice."

One of the activities designed to help the women acquire interviewing finesse was mock interviews. Tracy explained to the class one day:

We'll do mock interviews. We'll start with each other. That'll be fun. And then I'll have few folks from DHS and from temp agencies to come in. They'll set up their booth, and we'll alternate. And you'll have three interviews in a day. And then we'll have a little evaluation from, and then we'll evaluate you.

Another activity used in the class to help students in their interviewing skills was videotaping mock interviews. Tracy explained how this works:

We will, and have in the past, brought video cameras in and videotaped interviews. No one enjoys it when it's happening. However, it has been one of the best tools our students have had. We will not show it to the class. But it's for you to look at yourself. You don't know all the times you say "whatever" or "uh."

Students were given various handouts related to interviewing. One of these was entitled "the 22 most frequently asked interview questions" which gave responses to each of the questions. For example, under the question "Do you get angry," the advice was to respond "There is just no use for it in the workplace. My skills allow me to effectively deal with frustrating situations." and to the question "what is your ideal job," the advice is to respond with "you offer much of what I would consider ideal. I want to be part of

team where I can utilize my skills for the best interest of the company.” After the interview, the handout instructs students to write a thank-you note which should be written within 24 hours and on nice paper or stationary and put in a matching envelope.

Tracy also provided pragmatic advice about things to say and not to say during an interview. For example, she told them you should never say during an interview, “my past supervisor was the biggest bitch.” She explained to them that the interviewer would think she has a problem with authority figures. She also instructed them to look around the interviewer’s office to find topics for discussion. She told them,

Yeah, they’ve interviewed everybody else, and their answers were great, but you noticed this fish that they caught in whatever river. Little things like that that are just social skills, and they really can make a big difference as far as impressions go.

Etiquette. Because these women live in poverty and had not been exposed too much of the knowledge that upper middle class people have, Tracy, Marilyn, and Jody felt that the TANF students needed instructions about proper etiquette. Frequently these lessons took place in the informal discussions in the afternoon classes facilitated by Tracy. For example, Tracy relayed to the students that she often felt uncomfortable herself when she knew there was a rule governing what she should do, but she did not know the rule. Thus, she asked her mother to give her a book on etiquette. The same book she received from her mother, Everything Etiquette, was one of the books adorning the bookshelves in Tracy’s class. During one three hour class period, the entire focus was on topics included in this book. These include dating etiquette, etiquette at home, how to teach your children proper etiquette, public displays of etiquette, meal etiquette, and party etiquette. Tracy explained the importance of knowledge of etiquette to the class:

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't know what to get somebody, or how much to spend? That's hard. Things like simple courtesy. This is empowering information. I always felt awkward not knowing what to say. Writing to senators, dinner parties, and then faux pas, which are etiquette tips you can't live without. Personal hygiene, eating like a human beings, the rules for inanimate objects. So we'll go through some of those. But the book's over there, and you guys can look through it any time you want to. It goes through stationery. Things you don't use everyday. There are different types of stationery and different ways to address people, and there are certain types of inappropriate stationery. Did you know there was such a thing? One should never mix business and pleasure.

During one class period, the students watched a film on a formal dinner party. The film instructed the viewers on such items as what eating utensils to use, the way to dress, how to show that you are finished with your meal, and the proper order of courses at a meal. Tracy told them that even though they may not go to a formal dinner party such as the one portrayed in the movie, they needed to have the knowledge of such matters as what forks to use so they would feel comfortable in any eating situation.

Students were also instructed on the proper way to make introductions. Tracy explained to the students that this was very important knowledge for the workplace. For example, she told the women that whoever has the highest rank, for example one's boss, should be introduced first. "You should never introduce your friend to your boss; you introduce your boss to your friend," she instructed them.

Tracy informed me during one of the interviews, "they know how to do a resume, they know what an employer, what their expectations are going to be and how to look at it from the employer's perspective." Obviously, Tracy believed that the employer would be a representative of the dominant society. Thus, representing one's self in a manner that reflected dominant society's values was very much part of the LOW program. The students were encouraged through tips on writing a resume, to interviewing skills, to

dressing properly to having the right manners to adopt a persona that would make them more acceptable to the employer. However, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the LOW program's goal, above all else, is employment for their students, and the values being presented to them were firmly believed to better prepare them for the world of work.

One may possess the needed cultural capital for successful employment, but without the "right" attitude, failure was eminent.

Attitude

It all goes back to attitude and everyone is in control of their own attitude. We all have to be responsible for it. (Jody)

The ones that drop out, they come in with the attitude that they have to be there. They use all their energies still trying to beat the system. Not thinking it's fair that attendance is important, I can't really think of anyone that has that attitude that has made it for very long here. (Tracy)

Repeatedly, the phrase "having the right attitude" emerged in the various components of the LOW program. Having the right work attitude was reflected in the participant requirements which are printed in the LOW student handbook. These six requirements include:

1. You must want to be here.
2. You must consider this your job
3. You must commit to 100% attendance
4. You must follow all rules
5. You must understand the goal is to go to work in your vocational training area.
6. You must try to do your best, be your best, each day.

Attendance

I think each orientation is improving in the fact that we are more up-front. They know that it is going to be strict and if they don't abide by the rules, attendance policy and those kind of things; they will not be here. (Jody)

The administrators and teachers believed that if you are a good worker, "good work" can be obtained by toiling patiently and subserviently in "bad work;" however, this transition, according to Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody, can never materialize if attendance is sporadic. Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody all suggested that attendance is a major problem at RRVT for their clients, and acknowledge that in order to become a good worker, good attendance is imperative. Each TANF client is given an attendance policy sheet that states among other edicts, "Your attendance is not a personal issue, it's the law. Please remember: an empty desk is an empty future." All recipients sign an attendance contract with the LOW program, and students who do not comply with it are likely to receive a "nasty gram" from Marilyn. Although this is typically a warning, it can lead to expulsion from the LOW program and ultimately closure of the TANF case if compliance is not met. When asked if attendance in school is the same as going to work, Marilyn admitted that it was not; however;

What clients will tell us, students will tell us is, Oh no, I would not be this way at work because I get paid, so they themselves perceive attendance in school as very different than attendance on a job and money being the primary motivator. My response is that you receive a TANF check, and you receive \$6 a day. You receive benefits and food stamps. All of those things are because you are participating.

The major emphasis on attendance by the staff at RRVT stresses that if one can not or will not go to work on a regular basis, one cannot expect a career. Although issues such as childcare and transportation were mentioned, students were told that their most

important purpose was to be at work every day and on time. Failure to do this put the blame on them as unwilling to support themselves. Due to these hegemonic influences, the women in this program supported what the teachers told them and accepted their role as social and economic failures.

In one of the classes, Tracy asked how this course will help them be more effective in work, and the two most common answers given were to follow rules and to be punctual. Tracy then asked the group if it was important to be on time to work, and they again responded in a positive manner. One of the students told the story about Hertz, the rental Car Company:

The way many companies determine if they have made the right choice is by the attendance records. Big companies like Hertz, the only way they judge is if you come to work.

Appearance

One of the employability skills taught during the LOW program was the importance of personal appearance and knowing how to dress properly. In the student handbook under “Guidelines for LOW participants,” one of the guidelines specifically addresses dress code/personal appearance. This guideline is worth quoting at length, particularly when one compares the rigidity of this dress code to the non-existence of dress codes at other educational settings for adults, such as the college classroom:

Students have the right to choose their own grooming and clothing styles. However, students must be aware of health, safety, and morality issues in that the manner of dress does not interfere with work or create disorder in the learning environment. Clothing articles which include profanity, references to drugs and alcohol, or have sexual connotation are not permitted. No hats or caps of any kind are allowed in class. Shoes must be worn at all times, as per State Health Department. Dresses, skirts, and shorts must not be shorter than finger-tips length (when hands are down at side). PAGING devices must be kept on silent alert.

Note: This is a Training and Employment Readiness program. It is difficult to find employment for people who go to extremes in dress or

appearance. Prospective employers visit our school frequently and are very conscious of the appearance of our students. Therefore, we require students to be neat and clean in appearance at all times.

To aid the women in gaining knowledge about the proper way to dress, RRVT had an agreement with a local thrift shop to buy each woman an outfit. Although not explicitly stated, the intent was to help the women in putting together an outfit that was appropriate for an interview.

During one class period, the students were given a handout entitled “Succeeding in the world of work: Living without welfare” prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor. One of the categories included in tips to succeed is “look your best.” The handout read, “You represent the company to customers and clients, dress accordingly. When in doubt about how to dress, ASK!”

Tracy informed me during one of the interviews, “they know how to do a resume, they know what an employer, what their expectations are going to be and how to look at it from the employer’s perspective.” Obviously, Tracy believed that the employer would be a representative of the dominant society. Thus, representing one’s self in a manner that reflected dominant society’s values was very much part of the LOW program. The students were encouraged through tips on writing a resume, to interviewing skills, to dressing properly to having the right manners to adopt a persona that would make them more acceptable to the employer. However, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the LOW program’s goal, above all else, is employment for their students

An underlying belief of the TANF educational program studied in this research is that any job can lead to upward mobility (i.e., good work) if an individual inculcates the habits of a good worker. The primary goal of the program then was to teach TANF

recipients the habits of a good worker, such as personal responsibility, ethical decision-making, team building, marketable skills, and acquiring the cultural capital of the dominant society.

If one takes the premise of Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody that any job can lead to good work, then one could argue that what was being taught in the LOW program was how to be a good worker. This manifested itself in five primary ways. The students were taught personal responsibility with an emphasis on the qualities of punctuality, having the right attitude, and dedication. The students were also taught that a good worker is able to reflect on her own values and make ethical decisions for the good of herself and her employer. They were being prepared to be a good worker by being taught the importance of bonding and teamwork and through help in gaining marketable skills. Finally, they were being taught the habits of a good worker by adopting the cultural capital that the employer was believed to possess.

One of Kincheloe's (1999) assumptions about bad work was embedded in the administrator's and teacher's understanding of work - that is, those who succeed at work are the fittest. Kincheloe argues that traditional understandings of work operate under the assumption that "the strongest and the most resourceful will gain the rewards and privileges; the weakest will fall by the wayside into demeaning situations" (p. 70). Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody echo this, although using somewhat different language when they discuss the idea that if TANF participants work hard and embody the habits of a good worker, they can find good work. The unsaid is that those who do not work hard or do not inculcate the habits of a good worker will find themselves in the low waged, low skilled, "bad work." Kincheloe goes on to state that the ownership of "cultural capital,"

the knowledge, skills, and practices deemed worthy by the dominant culture (e.g., using correct grammar, dressing professionally), inherently puts some people in a position of privilege which makes the acquisition of good work easy while others, because they lack the cultural capital, are inherently marginalized. Tracy, Marilyn, and Jody do not speak of such things as resume writing as cultural capital, however, they do recognize that one of the requisites for getting good work is having those skills deemed worthy by the dominant culture. Part of the intent of the LOW program is to help aid these women in gaining some of this cultural capital. For example, the women were taken to a second-hand store to buy an outfit for interviewing. They were instructed during this outing about the “proper” way to dress for an interview. Not surprisingly, the “proper” way to dress included conservative power suits. No attention was given to how one might dress professionally while retaining her own cultural heritage. What is lacking in the program is that the women are not taught to critique the notion of cultural capital. Hence, the status quo is perpetuated by buying into cultural capital as being the domain of the White elite. However, if one looks at the idea that good work is above all else good pay, knowing how to get that good pay through the enacting of cultural capital is essential. In other words, academics such as Kincheloe (1999) who will get good work precisely because they possess the cultural capital of the dominant society because of their race, class, and gender can critique the notion of cultural capital much easier than a Black woman or a low SES woman who does not possess cultural capital by virtue of her birth.

Like many educators with good intentions, Marilyn, Tracy, and Jody find themselves in a contradictory space that does not always promote critical pedagogy. They were pressured to equip these TANF clients with job readiness skills which would make

them immediately employable and they had to do this under a time constraint of 12 months. Thus, the everyday realities of providing the women with such skills as resume writing, interviewing, and dressing for success, became primary to those of teaching the women to challenge an economic system that marginalizes them because of their social class, gender, and in some cases, race.

Dewey (1916) believed that preparing students with only entry levels job skills was insufficient. In order to enjoy a life of adaptability and self-reliance, Dewey advocated a transformative curriculum which allowed for integration of vocational and academic subjects and placed the needs of the students before the needs of the employer. Dewey's notions have much relevance for TANF programs in that too much of the focus has been on "work" regardless of the kind of work and not enough on notions of a life of adaptability and self-reliance. In many ways, the LOW program has tried to incorporate practices and curriculum which promote this, but the reality is that this TANF program, as all programs, operates under a time constraint and a political agenda which situates job readiness as being the number one priority. The question then becomes how can programs, such as LOW, "take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them" (Dewey, 1916, p. 13).

The LOW program studied in this research offers a glimpse at the possibilities for vocational and adult educators who seek to embody pedagogical techniques more in line with a student-centered, constructivist model of teaching. Yet, constructivism void of the purpose of social change is limiting, as pointed out in this study. Adult and vocational educators involved in TANF programs must take seriously Dewey's (1916) assertion that "it is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and

unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (p. 13). The challenge then for adult and vocational educators is to assist TANF recipients in attaining not only the technical skills needed for good work, but also the critical skills needed to participate in a true democratic citizenship.

References

- Abramovitz, M. (1997). A not so hidden agenda: Why the Rights and wants the end of welfare. Women’s Review of Books, 14(5), 16-17.
- Albelda, R. (2001). Welfare-to-work, farewell to families? US welfare reform and work/family debates. Feminist Economics, 7(1), 119-135.
- Butler, S. & Deprez, L. (2002). Something worth fighting for: Higher education for women on welfare. Affilia, Vol. 17(3)Pgs. 30-54.
- Cohen, A. (July 13,1998). Dressed for success. Time,(2) 38-39.
- Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy in education. New York: The Free Press.
- Freire, P. (1973). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Gregson, J. (1994). From critical theory to critical practice: Transformative vocational classrooms. In R. Lakes (Ed.), Critical education for work (pp. 161-180). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Grubb, W. (1996). Phi Delta Kappan, 77 (8), 535-546.
- Kickham, K., Harnden, A., Sasser, K., Effendi, N. & Bently, R. (2000) Leaving Welfare Behind: The Oklahoma TANF Leavers Report. Oklahoma City, O.K.: Oklahoma Department of Human Services.
- Kincheloe, J. (1999). How do we tell the workers: The socioeconomic foundations of work and vocational education. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Kincheloe, J.(1995). Toil and trouble: Good work, smart workers, and the integration of academic and vocational education. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Lakes, R. (1994). From critical theory to critical practice: Transformative vocational classrooms. In R. Lakes (Ed.), Critical education for work (pp. 161-180). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co.

Schultz, K. (1997). Discourses of workplace education: A challenge to the new orthodoxy. In G. Hull (Ed.), Changing work, changing workers: Critical perspectives on language, literacy, and skills (pp. 43-83). Albany, NY: Suny Press.

Theodore, N. & Peck, J. (2000). Searching for the best practice in welfare-to-work: The Means, the method and the message. 29(1), 81-98.

*Direct correspondence to:

James H. Adams, Assistant Professor
Instructional Systems, Leadership, and Workforce Development
Mississippi State University
Box 9730
Mississippi State, Ms. 39762
Phone: 662-325-7563
Fax: 662-325-7599
jadams@colled.msstate.edu

Mabel C. Okojie, Assistant Professor
Instructional Systems, Leadership and Workforce Development
Mississippi State University
Box 9730
Mississippi State, Ms. 39762
Phone: 662-325-7598
Fax: 662-325-7599
mokojie@colled.msstate.edu

©2005 Louisiana State University in Shreveport