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The Charter School as a Factory: This is Reform?

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Abstract:

Charter schools have been pushed as a way to reform education. This article is my experience in one charter school. The structural freedom provided charter schools do not necessarily mean an improvement in education practices. Convention, tradition, and banking education may persist. Authoritarian administrative practices may continue and impede true reform which occurs at the classroom level by empowered, professional educators. Computers can assist in the persistence of convention, tradition, and banking education.

This is an account of my work as an instructor in an inner-city alternative charter school. I obtained my teaching credentials in mid-life after a career in the law. The practice of law had convinced me that people really had little understanding of our system. My life experiences and education seemed to allow me the opportunity to really make a difference in students' lives. My college advisor had influenced me by recommending such books as *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. I wanted to be a different kind of social studies teacher.

The regular schools showed no interest in me. A middle-aged attorney is not likely to accept orders without question. An alternative charter school located in a rough area of the city contacted me. I almost backed out of the interview when I saw that the school was housed in some run down church buildings. The interview was fantastic. I would be allowed to teach the way I wanted. Teaching trivia was not required. I was expected to be cross-disciplinary and connected to the world. I was hired after conducting a lesson with some students. I later learned that the only ones required to do a lesson before being hired were those of us with education credentials. We were few. Many people simply walked out of the interview when it was explained that most of our students were involved in the juvenile justice system; half of the students were identified with special education needs; many had been kicked out of the regular alternative schools; almost all were students of color; and all were very, very poor. The low pay, lower than the regular schools, and poor benefits did not aid in recruiting teachers. We were "free" of unions and of state mandated pay and benefit provisions including retirement. My pay would have been much higher had I spent years in the military due to Oklahoma's Troops to Teachers program. The author of "Militarism Goes to School" which appeared in this journal (Volume 4, 2003) would not be surprised (Finley 2003). It

should also be noted that our director made the same as school superintendents in the largest districts in the state with 35 to 45 times the number of students.

Charter schools are free of most of the bureaucratic regulations that are claimed to strangle the schools. We were supposed to be limited to 15 students per class as an alternative school. We were not bound by state mandated curriculum. We were expected to be innovative and not to teach to the test. However, our students were still required to take the end-of-instruction tests. I was the only social studies teacher. The only area where the school improved at the end of my first year was in social studies. My focus on themes, real-world connections, and thinking and reasoning skills seemed to pay off. I connected my class to people in the community and was able to get my students to events off campus.

In April, I had agreed to return. I truly felt that with a year of experience, the second year would be even better. I could build on what had been established. I am the kind of teacher that would likely meet with approval of persons such as Laura Finley (2003). Like her, I believe that the military is pervasive in American society. I used resources such as *The Twentieth Century: A People's History* by Howard Zinn to counter the bias of approved textbooks. I taught the horrors of war. I taught the power of peaceful resistance. I did not marginalize groups but rather included them as part of the whole.

I began to have major concerns after a late May meeting concerning the upcoming year. The director had made some decisions without any input from teachers. First, every class would have enough computers for all students. Each course would have a computer program. Secondly, we would have two shifts of students. The first shift would go from 7:30 a.m. to 11:55 a.m. and the second shift would be from 12:45 p.m. to 5:10 p.m. All core teachers would teach the full day on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and one half day on either Tuesday or Thursday. Thus, our classroom time would be 31 hours per week. We would have no planning time. In fact, we had duties before school, for the entire lunch period, and after school. Thus, total classroom and duty time was 37 hours per week. Planning, grading, calling parents, arranging trips and speakers was done outside of this time. Seventy hour weeks were common. In addition, I was responsible for student council and service-learning projects. We were not allowed substitutes and so if someone was sick, we had to cover two classes. We had to use our phones to call someone to cover us just take a bathroom break.

I had an acute attack of gout. I had not had such an attack in a decade. Gout requires one to drink lots of water. We were not supposed to have water in our classrooms. Why? The computers might be damaged. Human resources appear more expendable than computer hardware.

The computers were a disaster. First, the old buildings simply could not handle a modern appliance like the computer system. The wiring was bad and wires had to be run everywhere. The air conditioning was not modern and it often caused the system to overheat. The software was even worse. Frames of verbal information were to be read

and then an online quiz was taken. The frames were not attractive. The process was not interactive other than simply moving on to new frames. The content was pure trivia. In addition, the system had major flaws. You could have the right answer but often the system was case sensitive or simply would not accept the answer. Sometimes the answer the system said was correct was clearly wrong. In order to issue grades, we had to review every students' process individually and write out the results after our own calculations which took about 30 hours. The system should have been able to do this function. Many students learned how to manipulate the system and could proceed along without learning anything. The computers aided the institutional philosophy that promoted graduation whether learning occurred or not. Even without the computers, I saw students cross the stage at graduation that did not deserve to graduate because they did not do the work. The administration allowed them to circumvent teachers with standards. The computers were a good show piece for the administration. You could see them and that made people feel good. No one cared whether the system worked.

This seems to be reinforced by those studying the charter schools. The U.S. Department of Education included a section entitled "Computers for Instruction" in The State of Charter Schools 2000-Fourth Year Report (January 2000). The entire focus is that computers are used in the workplace and schools need to prepare students by having computers. Tables and graphs in the report simply examine the student to computer ratio and the estimated classrooms with computers used for instruction. There is no evaluation of how they are used.

The director had promised a computer technician in every class. This person would be there to relieve us and to handle the technical side while we practiced our profession working with students in cooperative and enhanced activities. By mid-summer, the promise was a technician for every two classes. When school started, we essentially had one-half technician for six classes. Christopher Conte (2000) states,

Businesses generally assume that computer networks require one technology specialist for every 60 users. By that standard, schools would need the equivalent of one specialist for every two classes. But few schools employ any computer technicians at all, even though schools are less able than most businesses to withstand the disruption that system failures and other startup problems can cause.

Many students struggled. I tried to make alternative individual programs for as many students as possible. I taught 9 different courses. I was spending 20 hours a week making individual plans for students. I scrambled to get books, other materials, and to set up non-computer assessment. There were a lot of students. The two shifts allowed us to have about 220 students on our roll sheets.

I tried the best I could to do the type of activities that special students especially need in order to learn and develop. Yet the computers had become the focus of student activity. They needed to complete the program. They didn't have much time to do it. Classes were 42 minutes long and remember that each student was there only half the day in our two shift high school.

The younger teachers looked at me as if I was insane when I said that we had set up a factory school. The student groups stayed together during their six class journey along the conveyor belt of computer trivia. The bell would ring and it was off to the next station to be filled with the next set of knowledge. These young teachers were not certified. I don't claim that certification makes you a good teacher but a good teacher training program will expose their students to critical thinking. Paolo Freire (1983) described the traditional teaching as banking education. (p.284). But in our school, the teachers didn't "impart truth," the computer programmers and programs did. Teachers were no longer even accorded the respect of being depositors of knowledge. I remember one student struggled with one of the questions on the program. The student thought the answer was C, but I knew the answer to be B. The computer said the answer was A which I knew to be absolutely wrong. The student insisted that I must be wrong since the computer said the answer was A. Even when I provided the student with book research, the computer was the winner, even if it was wrong. The only thing that was important to the student and our school was completing the section and getting the little apple icon that indicated completion of the section. As stated by Sizer and Sizer (1999), there was "little careful thought about the real and lasting quality of what has been accomplished" (p.50).

What statement were we making to the students? Much has been written about the new age, the age of information. According to Conte (2000), "This environment places a premium on workers who are flexible, innovative, self-directed, and able to solve problems collaboratively". Much has been written about the need for life-long learning and teaching people how to learn. Conte (2000) cites Robert Reich's 1991 book *Work of Nations* to support the idea that schools are not teaching life-long learning skills which the new economy requires. We are told that people need to be able to be creative, work in teams, learn to learn and learn more and more (SCANS, 1991). Yet we made our students cogs in a knowledge factory where if you are passive and compliant you succeed. And even worse, this system didn't allow students to learn from people. In a school population with a major need to connect up to the larger world of people, this is exactly the wrong answer.

The question remains: How did we let the school get that way? The structure of our school was highly authoritarian and personal. The director had been a school teacher in the rural part of the state. She was socialized into the highly authoritarian educational system. She was detailed and controlled every aspect of the school. To question was seen as a personal attack. Her goal was growth in numbers. No one dared ask a real question or to dispute with her. She made clear that we were all "at will" employees and could be dismissed anytime for any reason. She became upset when I simply asked a clarifying question during the May meeting. The message was clear to teachers. Finley (2003) claims that patriarchal superiority is visible in schools. Our matriarch director had learned authoritarianism just as well. The teachers were not empowered in my school which is consistent with research (Bomotti, Ginsberg, & Cobb, 1999).

Proponents of charter schools claimed that the competition created by charter schools would force school districts to improve performance of their schools (Education Commission of the States, 2003). However, our school provided a relief valve for the normal public schools. The regular public schools no longer had to confront why they were not able to serve the needs of our students since we were providing the services and they could simply send their “troublemakers” to us.

Policymakers want simple and easy solutions. Teachers don’t need planning time, lunch, or breaks and can be in the class and on duty for 37 hours a week. Computers and trivia programs can replace the professional teacher who demands time for planning and professional activities. We can hire uncertified and inexperienced teachers for less money and benefits. Our students will get diplomas and be happy. Parents and others will visit our school and see our low student to computer ratio and will be impressed.

Computers do not mean the end of banking education or convention. Charter schools, as new structures, do not mean the end of banking education or convention. True reform will come when we decide to make the same commitment to education that we do for our military. Money may not be the perfect solution but when schools are able to hire more teachers so that the teaching load is more like the college, then they will be less like a factory. (Larry Cuban, *Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology Since 1920*, as cited in Conte, 2000).

The end came for me after I sent my principal an e-mail concerning one student's concern with the computer. I made a mistake by admitting that the student was probably right and that I would try to work with the student. The director called me on the phone and pulled me out of my classroom. She began a personal attack. I advised her that I could not defend the schedule or the computer system. She continued and I left the school, for good. I could no longer participate in a system that gave poor kids a poor education and a diploma. I had become frustrated as a businessman and a professional in hiring and dealing with high school graduates that had little knowledge of the system and few skills. I could not perpetuate the fraud on others.

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