

**THE INTERSECTION OF POLICY AND PRACTICE
IN ONE-STAND ALONE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL
*THE ABC STORY***

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative case study focuses on one “special school” to examine the purpose(s) of vocational schooling as articulated in policy *text* (Ball, 1990) and as interpreted and implemented or not, by practitioners working “on the ground” (Ozga, 2000). *The ABC Story* spans a forty-year period to illustrate “the yin and the yang”, the tensions and contradictions, in the purposes of schooling as one “special school” strives to prepare students for both work and life after high school (Carnoy & Levin, 1985, p. 111).

Over the course of the twentieth century, secondary schools expanded literally and figuratively in response to changing demographics and to the demands of the marketplace: the advent of industrialization, urbanization and technology in the post-war economy meant that more students were expected to attend and to complete secondary school (Grubb, 2004). While all students eventually enter the workforce, historically it was those who struggled in school, those who fell behind, those who were disinterested and those who were troublemakers, who were subsequently counselled to “Get a job”. School-to-work functioned not as an educational pathway, but as an accelerated escape route for those students who were failing in the system or those the system had failed. If the context and content for learning are different in a contemporary “new vocationalism” (Ball, 1993; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004), the processes for determining which students fit or fail in school (Fink, 2000, p. 13) are not.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of this study is to explore the complexities of tracking (Oakes, 1992, 1997) and to question what role the ABC School has played as both an agent of equality and a perpetrator of social reproduction. Since its inception, vocational education has served to designate a particular group of students as “different from”, in most cases as “less than” their peers (Curtis, 1992). “*These kids*”,¹ characterized as “other” (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 21), are created and sustained through a tacit “system of reasoning that normalizes, individualizes and divides ... children as populations” (p. 26).

This study explores how one stand-alone vocational school, its mandate and the students it serves, has changed and not changed over its forty-year history. Initially chosen as a placeholder, the pseudonym ABC emerged to poignantly illustrate what this was “a case of” (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 6). Synonymous with the lexicon of the English language, the beginning symbols of the alphabet, and the way in which children first learn language and first construct meaning, A-B-C captures the school as a physical manifestation of what constitutes the fundamental, the “basic”² and/or the “essential”³ secondary school curriculum.

The ABC Story asks the key questions:

- Who are *these kids*?

¹ The expression ‘*these kids*’ is drawn from the data and is purposefully italicized throughout the dissertation.

² In 1982 the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced new secondary school curriculum guidelines, *Ontario Schools: Intermediate and Senior Divisions (OS: IS)*. Courses of study were offered at three levels: advanced, general and **basic**.

³ *Ontario Secondary Schools (OSS, 1999)* offered courses at two levels of difficulty: academic and applied. Where necessary, students could use three locally developed, modified or **essential** level courses to fulfill diploma requirements.

- What is the intent of the ABC program as it is outlined in policy documents and as ABC practitioners understand and describe it?, and
- What tensions and contradictions emerge when the ABC School is viewed through the lens of time?

Using tenets from Carnoy and Levin's (1985) *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State*, the study explores the relationship between education and the economy and expands this theoretical framework to include Popkewitz's (1998) insights on how particular populations of students and teachers are generated and sustained; and describes the processes of schooling that, through both policy and practice, create The ABC School, its students and its teachers in an effort to "understand what constitutes vocational education" (Gaskell, 1993, p. 52).

DESIGN

Texts on research methods speak to the role of the "researcher as an instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39) and the researcher's power to contextually locate and construct participants' life histories (Goodson, 2002). My teaching experiences at ABC left me with a myriad of questions about the purposes and structures of secondary schooling, about who gets taught what (Curtis et al., 1992; Oakes et al., 1997), and about the practitioners' role in the grand narrative (Siskin, 1991; Warren-Little & McLaughlin, 1993).

The ABC Story is structured as a series of case studies to capture the intersection of policy and practice at three distinct points in the school's history: when it opened in the early 1960s, at its historical mid-point in the 1980s and in the contemporary context of educational reform. The description of programs and practices as they evolve through

time constitutes, on one level, a “historiography” (Merriam, 1998, p. 35); however, the intent throughout is to build an “*instrumental case study* ... to provide insights ... to advance our understanding” (Stake, 2000, p. 437) of vocational education.

METHODS

A review of the literature includes histories of vocational education coupled with an analysis of policy documents. Ongoing dialogue with key informants representing distinct perspectives: academic and technical teachers, school and board administrators, support staff and a director of education afforded repeated opportunities to “pilot” (Bouma & Atkinson, 1995, p. 114) interview protocols.

Since the literature suggests possible rifts in the cultures of “academic” and “vocational/shop” teachers (Siskin, 1991; Warren-Little, 1993), the sample in each era was drawn to reflect equal numbers of ABC academic and shop teachers and to include counsellor’s information about admission criteria and programs. All ABC principals were invited to participate. Each participant verified his/her transcript. The study is built on forty-five individual interviews. Data was further triangulated through focused group interviews designed to test emergent themes and to directly question interpretations of policy at particular times in the school’s history.

RESULTS

Although case study findings cannot be generalized, *The ABC Story* demonstrates how *these kids*, sometimes labelled differently in policy text, are discursively constructed in the same ways throughout ABC’s history. *The ABC Story* identifies complex and multiple themes that illustrate how the school functions both as a beginning and as a “dead end” (Curtis et al., 1992, p. 90) for teachers and students alike.

The ABC Story is without pretence. It contains no single all-encompassing solution and it has no end. It comes to a close by returning to age-old questions about the function(s) of schooling for *these kids*, whose educational and economic futures are now more precarious than ever.

CONCLUSIONS

Ironically, contemporary mandates to ensure that “no child be left behind”⁴ and that “students’ needs be put first”⁵ risk perpetuating castes of kids who are destined to take their place as post-modern hewers of wood and drawers of water. Nowhere are these distinctions more evident than under the thin veneer of vocational education programs. *The ABC Story* challenges both practitioners and policy makers to determine how and why these students are constructed before inventing yet another course, program and/or school which stigmatizes *these kids* as other. The study illustrates the complexities inherent in Gaskell’s invitation to look inside the ‘black box’ of vocational education to see what is going on and why.

⁴ No Child Be Left Behind, 2002 <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>

⁵ “Putting students first” was an expression popularized in Ontario by the Progressive Conservative government. It became a catch phrase in a variety of policy documents and reports. The Toronto District School Board has shortened the phrase to ‘Students First’ in documents intended to make board practices transparent and accountable to the public. <http://www.tdsb.on.ca>

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