

Asian Journal of Canadian Studies

Vol. 21 No. 1

June 2015



한국캐나다학회

The Korean Association for Canadian Studies
L'Association Coreenne d'Etudes Canadiennes

Asian Journal of Canadian Studies

Vol. 21 No. 1

June 2015

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Class and the Crisis of Higher Education in North America

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Abstract

A salient theme in the debate over the challenges facing the educational system concerns the failure to make the basic distinction between *education*, on the one hand, and *training*, on the other. The former speaks to the formation of well-rounded intellects in the tradition of the humanities and classical liberal studies, while the latter deals more narrowly with the technical and vocational aspects of acquiring specific job related skills. Thus, as Randal Collins notes, “most skills are-or can be-learned on the job so given the evidence that job skills of all sorts are actually acquired in the work situation rather than in a formal training institution” (1979:192-93), what needs to be stressed is the

education of students as opposed to their training. This sentiment is captured by James Côté, and Anton Allahar (2011:14-16), who echo the earlier sentiments of Terry Wotherspoon, who states bluntly that: “Formal education is about much more than job training” (1998:133). Thus, if we are to address a key element in the crisis of higher education, we must all guard against the trend which sees universities being converted into pseudo-vocational institutions.

Key words: higher education, credentialism, social closure, grade inflation, McDonaldization, standardization, loss of credibility

Education: a System in Crisis

The charge that the Canadian educational system is in crisis is now commonplace. It seems as though this charge is a daily feature of most news reporting, which usually focuses on a contest between government and school boards over funding. Sometimes there is concern about curriculum content, sometimes about teacher compensation, or extra-curricula duties and activities, or teacher re-training, and the fact that students are not performing up to international standards. But for the most part the reports concentrate on money and funding of

programmes (Côté and Allahar, 2007; 2011).

In this article we argue that attention has been too heavily concentrated on the educational system alone, and in the process we do not have a clear sense of the wider societal impact. When our schools and universities fail, it is not just the students who suffer, but the entire society. But what do we mean by “fail” in this context? The educational system fails when it loses sight of its prime purpose: the production of informed, well-rounded citizens, who will contribute to economic prosperity and who will assume politically responsible roles in society. We argue that this purpose has been subverted or railroaded by the phenomenon of education inflation: obsession with credentialism, which in turn leads schools and universities to engage in grade inflation and the social passing of students. The problem has manifested itself clearly as graduates, those who have come to occupy the key positions in the society, are unable effectively to fulfil the tasks assigned to them.

One of the common descriptions of inflation that is usually given to a non-specialist in economics is as follows: inflation means there is too much money chasing too few goods. Though somewhat simple it is as accurate as a general description can be. Whenever there is a great deal of money in circulation and the production of goods does not keep pace with demand, an inflationary situation is created. Having money in their pockets people will be willing to pay comparatively more for desired goods that are both scarce and in demand. The result is that

the prices of such goods will rise to levels that have little relation to their actual costs of production. And if this is true for economic inflation we charge that it is also true for education inflation, but as will become clear, my use of the concept 'inflation' needs to be nuanced or qualified.

We focus on two closely related aspects of education inflation at the post-secondary (university and college) level: credential inflation and grade inflation. These have had a serious impact both on schooling in general and on economic productivity in particular. Using the metaphor of the automobile factory, Thomas Smith (1997) claimed that "High schools are assembly lines of mass production," whereas David Brown felt that "youths were being overeducated and warehoused in schools" (2001:23). While there is much evidence to support Smith (1997) and Brown (2001), we are specifically interested in examining the situation at the post-secondary level. For in today's highly competitive market economies, where good jobs are increasingly difficult to obtain, where academic credentials have become widely used as short cuts to guide employers in picking good potential employees, and where over-education and underemployment are the norm, new and innovative attempts have been made to package and market success.

At the level of individual job seekers there are attempts to discover formulae for successful job seeking, while employers have increasingly resorted to the use of head hunter firms to find them the right person for the job. Desirous of hiring

individuals who mesh well with their company's *culture*, such terms as 'corporate fit,' 'likeable personality,' and 'good chemistry' are often heard in the recruitment process as job hunters attempt to maximize their chances of being chosen. However, since 'fit,' 'personality,' 'chemistry' and so on are highly subjective criteria, a great deal of uncertainty and luck (being in the right place at the right time) are seen to attend the entire process. This is the notion of the short cut referred to above which led David Brown to concur with Weber and conclude that "credentials are a form of social credit that symbolically facilitates exchanges under conditions of social uncertainty" (Brown 2001:26).

Credentialism and meritocracy

Following Randall Collins we define credentialism as a form of a paper chase, and see it as intimately tied to "the fact that education is part of a system of cultural stratification" (Collins 1979:192). In an age when ascribed status (race, sex, age, religion etc.), inherited privilege and aristocratic breeding are no longer generally viewed as legitimate bases for claiming entitlement, social mobility and access to high status have come to be seen as based on merit and achievement. And the most vital arena in which the achievement drama is played out is

schooling, particularly post-secondary schooling.

What is intriguing, however, is the way in which the ideology of meritocracy is used by those in power to convince the least privileged that they are not to blame the privileged for enjoying what are portrayed as their fairly won privileges. The fact, however, is that the economic system is premised on inequality, for at its very base capitalism is defined by inequality in property ownership and inequality in access to the social fruits. And what is more, these inequalities are never the object of social protest or media criticism. They are seen as normal and natural aspects of the social order and the educational system is cast as the great equalizer whereby the wider societal inequalities are equalized by offering equal access to education. Yet ideologically the existence of such things as costly private schools and the availability of private tutoring for the children of privilege are never seen as violations of the claims to educational equality. It is just presumed that all are exposed to the same curriculum and as students pit their supposedly-natural talents against one another the cream will naturally rise to the top. In the end the ones who do not rise never think to challenge the systemic inequalities that characterize the economic order, social order is preserved and the ideology of meritocracy thus becomes hegemonic.

Because of this, high schools, colleges and universities are touted as places where individuals compete fairly on an even playing field, and those who emerge successful are deemed

simply to be most deserving of the social fruits. And whereas in the past class membership and property ownership served to demarcate privilege, today it is the ownership of credentials that has come increasingly to define those coveted high status and highly remunerated occupational positions in society. As John Meyer writes: “The rise of the centrality of education in the modern society and stratification systems has played an important role in generating credential competition” (2001:157). Given such a situation, where competition is keen and where winners and losers are defined, credentialism is born, and the pursuit and accumulation of educational credentials (degrees, diplomas, certificates etc.), are treated almost as ends in themselves: “Degree holders thus hold power over nondegree holders on the basis of a formal claim to competence or trustworthiness” (Brown 2001:26).

Education versus Training

Missing the connection between *education* and *training* (Côté and Allahar, 2007:183-187), and losing the focus on the requirements of the job market, it is generally presumed that the more credentials one has, the more qualified and educated one is. Whether or not the person in question is *trained* to do a given job is not usually of concern. And very much like

economic inflation, when there is an oversupply of credentials on the market, the worth of any given credential will decline. But there is a parallel problem. In a society where great emphasis is placed on going to school, staying there as long as is bearable, and getting as many pieces of paper (credentials) as possible, attention is not often paid to the demands of the job market. Because the credential becomes an end in itself the result is that one often finds highly “educated” populations with correspondingly high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and low levels of economic productivity. Thus, in a report by the *Economic Council of Canada* (1991) it was asked why Canada, as a nation, did not appear to be getting greater economic returns on its substantial investment in formal education (1991:168)?

Credential Inflation and Economic Productivity

Because it is felt that degrees, diplomas and certificates, what Raymond Murphy calls “currency of cultural money,” are tickets to comfortable jobs and salaries, “increase in the supply of such cultural money can inflate the price of social memberships” (1994:104). In other words, increases in the numbers of credentialed persons in a society will tend to inflate the qualifications required for any given position. The productivity

of the incumbents in the jobs in question, however, is a different matter. As Collins has written: “*Education* is not associated with employee productivity on the individual level, and job skills are learned mainly through opportunities to practice them, as *retraining* procedures for organizational innovations abundantly demonstrate” (1979:48; our emphasis). And this may well be related to the contradictory situation of high credentialism and low economic productivity in Canada, which boasts one of the highest ‘credentialed’ (formally educated) work forces in the world today. Compared to the United States, for example, Paul Davenport notes that:

...labor productivity in Canada has stayed about 15 percent below the US level since 1980. In the manufacturing sector, the gap has generally been greater and has grown in recent years there is no cause for complacency in Canada, however, with regard to our relative performance in either productivity or standard of living compared with the United States (2002:50).

Further, it is well known that the nitty gritty aspects of routine job performance are often unrelated to the educational qualifications of those incumbents. A good case in point is the teaching profession. Fifty years ago high school teachers were high school graduates. Today a high school teacher must have at least a BA and a B.Ed., if not an M.Ed., and it does not hurt to have diplomas in a host of other areas such as Red Cross, Life Saving and so on.

Though related, the two principal aims of schooling and education are quite separable for analytical purposes. The first, the concept of *credentialing* is specific and speaks to the formal transmission and certification of particular skills and knowledge demanded in the work place. Thus Terry Wotherspoon writes that the “most direct and apparent relationship between formal schooling and jobs tends to be in vocational training, certification, and professional degree programs required for entry into specific occupations such as welding, hairdressing, law, and medicine” (1998:134). The second goal of schooling and education, though more general, is very crucial and involves the moulding of a well-rounded and cultured citizen with a measure of cultural capital commensurate with the level of education in question. For along with teaching basic competencies like the ability to read, write and compute, which almost any employer will require, schooling is also expected to introduce the student to the broad “everyday practices, unwritten rules and informal expectations” that define the overall make-up of the social fabric, and that permeate the major civic institutions. In other words, an important task assigned to educators is the socialization of the future citizenry as well as the future work force by ensuring the transmission of “general know-how considered valuable by employers and that therefore makes a person employable” (Wotherspoon 1998:134, 136).

More pointedly, this second goal has been referred to as *the hidden curriculum*, which is defined by Michael Apple as “the

tacit teaching to students of norms, values and dispositions that goes on simply by their living and coping with the institutions and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years” (1979:14). This is directly linked with the broad philosophical debate over the nature of post-secondary learning, the purpose and function of today’s university, and its fit with the wider economy. And, as noted above, it is here that we feel the education system is failing to accomplish its main societal tasks.

A salient theme in the debate over the challenges facing the educational system concerns the failure to make the basic distinction between education, on the one hand, and training, on the other. The former speaks to the formation of well-rounded intellects in the tradition of the humanities and classical liberal studies, while the latter deals more narrowly with the technical and vocational aspects of acquiring specific job related skills. Once more, as Collins notes, “most skills are-or can be-learned on the job so given the evidence that job skills of all sorts are actually acquired in the work situation rather than in a formal training institution” (1979:192-93), what needs to be stressed is the education of students as opposed to their training. This sentiment is captured by James Côté, and Anton Allahar (2011:14-16), who echo the earlier sentiments of Terry Wotherspoon, who states bluntly that: “Formal education is about much more than job training” (1998:133).

The above assertion takes as its point of departure the

contemporary reality which has witnessed the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society. Unlike industrial society, where the production of goods in factories defined much of everyday economic life, today's post-industrial order is one in which the production of knowledge in universities has come to define the shape of the economy (Allahar, 1986:566-569). We now live in the so-called *information age*, where information technology and the acquisition of its related skills have assumed major importance in post-secondary educational institutions. This being the case, Davenport has claimed that insufficient attention is being paid to 'the knowledge economy', which, for him, ought to be geared more to the production of "graduates with the ability to communicate clearly both orally and in writing, work effectively in teams, think critically and creatively, solve problems and exercise leadership" (2002:45-46). It is not that job *training* is no longer relevant, but rather, such training is better left to professional schools and employers, thus freeing up time, money and personnel resources for *education*. And if the education mandate of the university is to be safeguarded, the university must not be made into a pseudo-vocational institution, which is fast becoming the reality.

Capital and Class

To deal analytically with the challenges posed by educational inflation in Canada we must turn to the critical examination of the wider capitalist social structure in which the educational system functions, and make some theoretical observations. We begin with Marx and then move on in the next section to Pierre Bourdieu's reading of Marx and his subsequent elaboration of Marx's concept of capital. This will enable us to understand the complex relationship between education, capitalism, social reproduction, and the maintenance of class inequality in a system where "educational requirements act as a formidable barrier to promotion across the manual-nonmanual caste barrier in organizations" (Collins 1979:47).

In Marx's discussion of capitalism, class was understood primarily as a function of capital or property ownership. He felt that the basic class distinctions were those between the owners of capital (the bourgeoisie) and the non-owners (the proletariat) of private or productive property. For us class is a relational concept; classes only exist in relation to other classes. Thus, one can only speak of a ruling class to the extent that there is a ruled class over which it exercises domination. Classes, further, are seen as *empty spaces* (structures) that are only incidentally occupied by specific human beings. In other words, we are less concerned with the specific individuals who occupy those empty spaces than we are with the structured relations between the spaces (classes).

Under capitalism the ownership of property is integral to the

class structure (Allahar and Côté, 1998:27-52). Property rights are legal rights that are enforced either by society or the state, either by custom or by law (Macpherson, 1978:3). To this extent it (property) is an accepted social contract or agreement that sets and maintains specific relations between and among people. Thus viewed, property refers to “*the right [to] control the use or benefit to which ownership is put [Property] is the right to the use or benefit of things, tangible or not, enforceable by law*” (Clement 1993:5; emphasis added). This is why Marx argued that property relations were synonymous with class relations. For clearly, if the law protects property as a set of rights described above, it will understandably be more in the service of one segment of society (the propertied) than another (the unpropertied).

The law, therefore, which can legitimately call upon the repressive state apparatus (courts, judges, police, prisons and prison guards etc.) to enforce property claims, is in a structurally contradictory position. It is caught between its commitment, on the one hand, to represent fairly all classes in society, and, on the other hand, to defend only those with claims to property. Thus, because class and property are intricately intertwined, and because he felt that the only way to abolish class and class privilege was to abolish the private ownership of property, Marx described the state in capitalist society as a class state.

The fact that the private ownership of capital (property)

guarantees the right to control the fruits of ownership and the right to the benefit of things ‘tangible or not,’ speaks, among other things, to the labour of non-owners of property. Thus, when the very survival of the non-owners compels them to work for those who have accumulated capital and who own property, the owners are said to have a legal right to the labour of the non-owners. Max Weber refers to this as workers who operate under the “compulsion of the whip of hunger” (1968:142). By extension it stands to reason that the non-owners of capital, the workers, will have no property rights or legal claims on their employers. Once more, as Wallace Clement says, the meaning of the term *property* “is not as it is used in an everyday sense, what is owned (an object), but the rights attached to ownership” (1993:5).

Clearly the entire system, whose sole *raison d’être* is the pursuit of profit, will be geared legally to the exploitation of the worker (Allahar 1995:51-54), which is intimately tied to the process of alienation: the worker’s loss of control over (a) his or her own labour power, (b) the fruits of his or her labour, and (c) the very conditions under which he or she labours. As may be appreciated, then, the fundamental division between owners and non-owners of capital, though quite general, is at the heart of a critical understanding of education, class inequality and the maintenance of the structure of privilege in capitalist society. And while the schematic division presented above does not address the full complexities of the concept of

‘capital’, our aim here is merely to highlight how the educational system functions to protect capital and reproduce class inequalities. Thus, the refinements of Marx’s use of the concept (capital) suggested by Pierre Bourdieu are both useful and instructive.

A central element in the debate over credentialism concerns the widespread inequalities that characterize modern, liberal, capitalist societies (Allahar and Côté, 1998:8-22), and the ways in which they may be attenuated. These inequalities have served greatly to politicize both the institution and the process of education. Among politicians and educators alike any attempt to equalize the terms on which citizens compete for access to the social fruits must begin with society’s educational institutions. Viewed as the great leveler, education is accepted as the key to both individual and societal well-being; a well-educated society is a healthy society.

According to Susan Crompton, “education is important for both individual well-being and economic prosperity” (2002:23). Although she does not specify whose prosperity, we presume it is the individual of whom she is speaking for her article discusses those people who feel overqualified for their jobs. While we do not take issue with the statement, we want to broaden the focus and speak of the society at large, for education is as important to individual well-being as an educated work force is to societal well-being.

The term ‘societal well-being’ refers to the general state of a

society's leading institutions and the individuals who manage and operate them. In other words, it speaks to the existence of a vibrant productive economic sector and a political order which guarantees citizens fair access to the social fruits, as well as an efficient health care system and a broad degree of infrastructural development in such areas as schooling, banking, policing, transportation, recreation and public sanitation. Underpinning all of these is the presumption of a sound educational system at all levels from primary to post-secondary. Especially in the fast-paced, modern, globalized world, any society which refuses to invest heavily in the education of its citizens runs the risk of being left behind.

According to Raymond Boudon, who ties together education and economics, it is commonsensical to assume that there should be some kind of relationship between one's level of education and one's income. In other words "an increase in the equality of educational attainment should generate an increase in the equality of income distribution" (1986:261). Thus, the efforts and investments in education which have been made in recent years to promote equality in education rested on a blind belief in the spillover effects of widespread educational access. The thinking was that greater equality of educational opportunity would generate greater equality along other key societal dimensions: income and employment, health and longevity, housing, and even recreation (Ibid:262).

Cultural and Social Capital

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively about the politics of education and social reproduction, and the ways in which social class background will determine rates of educational success. His approach goes further than simply saying that the children of the rich do better than the children of the non-rich merely because their parents can buy them a better education at private schools with private tutors and so on. That much is taken for granted (Collins 1979:32). Instead Bourdieu looks at the latent benefits of being rich; the so-called non-specific and unarticulated benefits of coming from a class background that sets the tone for the culture of the classroom. In short, students from privileged families do better in school than others because the values, assumptions and expectations of educational institutions, their definitions of what constitutes learning and how knowledge is acquired, are the same values, assumptions, expectations and definitions as those found in the families of the privileged classes or what Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1979:22) term “the cultivated classes.”

Then there is Zachary Karabell, who suggests (correctly) that students from the elite classes are the beneficiaries of elite social class reproduction. Having had the benefit of better and more motivated teachers at private schools, a more stimulating

and propitious learning environment, and even private tutors, such students are likely to be better fitted to take on the heavy workload at university, and their greater affluence will ensure that they are able to devote more time to their studies. Elite students thus tend to do better than others, not because they are intrinsically better or brighter, but because of class privilege, which buys them time: “they have more time because they are more affluent and as a result are not under the same pressures to hold down a job while getting their degree” (1998:4).

Schools reinforce particular types of behaviour that are quite consistent with middle and upper-middle class experiences. A certain style of dress (not to mention the cost associated with it), proper decorum and language use, as well as a class-specific type of discipline and an inculcated manner of dealing with authority figures such as teachers. Those who know how to behave appropriately are deemed competent and their success at school is most often assured. It is the wide array of dispositions learned at home, the taken-for-granted middle class behaviours, habits, attitudes, knowledge of high culture (ballet and opera), of classic literature, that constitutes cultural capital.

This can come from family travel abroad that exposes children to new learning situations, different peoples and cultures, and to new personal experiences. It is also to be found in casual family discussions that parents have with similarly middle class relatives and friends, the neighbourhood in which one lives, and the types of friends and significant others who

visit the home etcetera. Such learning and exposure fit the children in question well for the school and university experience given the latter's very middle class assumptions and presumptions.

Once the student graduates he or she is likely to associate with peers of similar social extraction. All will generally have attended similar schools, will have come from similar backgrounds with similar experiences, and will, in every likelihood, get along well. Further, in their fraternities and sororities they are likely to form friendship networks that will prove very useful in later life. This gives rise to social capital, the contacts and links that are developed and that serve so crucially to pass on information about jobs, investment opportunities, promising social liaisons and so on. In this way cultural capital and social capital are mutually reinforcing.

Together with cultural capital, then, social capital speaks to a combination of material and symbolic exchanges and is linked to what is commonly known as 'connections'. These are networks of friends and acquaintances whose family names, job titles, institutional affiliations, golf club memberships, fraternity or sorority ties and so on, are instantly recognizable and can be called upon to enhance one's chances in a competitive market situation. It can take many forms such as securing letters of reference from individuals in high positions, early informal leads on possible job openings, the actual creation of a position for the person in question, admission to a competitive professional

school, or even an introduction to a social club or group where well placed marriageable candidates abound. It goes without saying that while all groups may have social capital or connections, it is the social capital of the elite which is most important in the crucial areas of access to status, occupational and economic well-being and advancement.

Class, Property and Social Closure

It is clear to see how the class privilege of which we speak goes beyond the mere economics of the situation. Extending Marx's discussion of *capital as a property relationship*, Bourdieu defines capital as "the set of actually useable resources and powers" (1986:241) that comes in many forms: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Given our focus on the educational system, his notion of cultural capital is most relevant for it is there that he situates the means by which classes are reproduced and maintained. In sum, then, Bourdieu treats 'capital' and 'power' as synonymous, and "when appropriated on a private, i.e, exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents," it "enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (Ibid). Given the increasing concentration of property ownership (capital) in fewer and fewer hands, the owners of capital are in essence the owners of the general

societal means of livelihood and subsistence. They are thus in a position to call the shots for the non-owners, who have only their labour power to sell and are consequently at the mercy of the owners of capital.

In sum, the economic form of capital is the one with which we are most accustomed. It is the form that is immediately and directly convertible into money and is legally enshrined as a set of private property rights (to be distinguished from personal property as specified by Allahar and Côté (1998:12)). Next there is cultural capital, “which is convertible on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications” (Bourdieu 1986:243). This is closely related to social capital, which is also convertible into economic capital (money) and speaks more to status and such things as titles of nobility (Ibid), and finds its value in social networking.

Viewed through this analytic schema it is not difficult to see how the educational system is able to contribute to the reproduction of the social structure literally by the imposition of what has been called social closure. As Frank Parkin observes: “It is necessary to regard credentialism as a form of exclusionary social closure comparable in its importance for class formation to the institution of property” (Parkin 1979:58). And Raymond Murphy is in essential agreement when he writes that “the monopolization of socially necessary skills would be the very focus of the code of exclusion based on credentials,

and the source of the power of the credentialed groups” (Murphy 1994:109). This of course begs the questions of who has the power to credential or to certify new members of society’s privileged groups, and just how is that power used to impose social closure on those who are not deemed eligible? According to Lesley Bellamy it is nothing more than the “sanctioning of the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (1994:123). Bellamy thus agrees with Bourdieu that “educational institutions, rather than being socially neutral, are part of a larger universe of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relationships. The culture that is transmitted and rewarded by the educational system reflects the culture of the dominant class” (Ibid:122), and acquired credentials can and do serve as important means for imposing social closure and ensuring the prevailing structure of class privilege.

In the credentials pursuit, then, class plays a pivotal role and it is easy to understand how those students with the requisite capital (economic, social and cultural), are able to excel over others, for one of the functions of the school system is to ensure the objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications. This is how cultural capital is converted into academic capital and, unlike the learning of the self-taught person or the person who learns merely by example and apprenticeship, the type of cultural capital we are discussing “is academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications, formally independent of the person of their bearer” (Bourdieu

1986:248). These are not class-neutral considerations. It therefore stands to reason that the interests of those who dominate and control a given system of structured privilege will be reflected, if not enshrined, in the rules and means for gaining access to that system.

The MBA Paradox

Further, to the extent that credentials are tickets to privilege, those who occupy positions of privilege and who wish to protect those positions, will implement rules and standards that support the acquisition and amassing of credentials. And this is at the base of education inflation, which today has spiraled out of control.

But this gives rise to an important contradiction that relates to Karabell's charge that "higher education is becoming mass education and in the process is being radically democratized" (Karabell, 1998:xx). The desire to impose social closure and restrict access to the ranks of the privileged was contradicted by the democratization of higher education. A clear example of this can be seen in the case of the MBAs in the 1970s and 1980s, who, in a period of major economic boom, monopolized the high paying jobs in business and finance, and who boasted the exceedingly, and publicly visible, opulent life styles of the

so-called Yuppies. In this period the MBA had become the degree of choice and overnight universities and colleges all over the country began to mount and offer all variety of certificates, diplomas and degrees in business, finance, accounting, marketing, management and related fields. Predictably, as the numbers of business graduates became inflated, their value declined, and today's dime-a-dozen MBAs (and other business graduates) are faced with serious unemployment and underemployment.

To stem the inflationary trend, which was fuelled by the democratization of business education, and to restore the MBA to its elevated position in the credentials hierarchy, most business schools have attempted to re-impose a traditional form of social closure; one which will give greater advantage to the privileged. Reasoning that an oversupply of MBAs on the market caused the inflation in the first place, the guardians of the supply source, administrators at the elite business schools, have embarked on a project to restrict access to their schools by virtually privatizing them. Thus the more recognized and reputable schools have raised tuition and associated costs to levels that are now way out of the reach of the democratized masses, while the less recognized schools have followed suit, though to a lesser degree. This has served to institute a system of first-class and second-class MBAs, along with a host of other more lowly placed business graduates with undergraduate degrees and college diplomas. Ironically, therefore, the democratization of business education that followed the credential inflation in

business degrees, has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing more clearly a structure of stratification among various business schools and programs.

Grade Inflation and Democratization of Education

Returning to education inflation generally, while university degrees were once the sole property of the elite, the so-called democratization of education, coupled with political correctness, have witnessed the wide conferring of university degrees on large numbers of individuals who are of non-elite extraction. The consequence of this democratization and political correctness is at the heart of educational inflation: credential inflation and grade inflation. But along with these there has also been a lowering of standards and a general dumbing down of the curriculum as was suggested by a recent editorial in a leading magazine: “grade inflation followed the introduction of affirmative action” (*The Economist*, April 14/2001).

This is not to imply or suggest that the elites are somehow naturally superior in intelligence to the masses. Rather, it speaks to the fact that the elites’ economic wealth permits them to afford a better system of education for their children, complete with better trained teachers, better infrastructural resources and facilities, and a generally better learning environment. The result

is students who are better prepared for the challenge of university. For as may be appreciated, the increasingly large numbers of students that have resulted from the democratization of education have not provoked an equally large or proportionate pattern of public educational spending on qualified professors, library facilities, laboratory equipment, computers, state of the art classrooms and so on. Add to this the movement of political correctness and what one finds is a highly competitive and politicized system of higher education in which the possibility of failure is more or less totally removed: “ ... we all have a sense that grading isn’t what it used to be that in today’s academy, the fear of failing has all but disappeared, and that making the dean’s list is no longer a pipe dream for students of the meanest capacities” (Wilson, 3/24/2003). While this politicization has contributed to greater democracy and more access, it has also led to inflation, declining standards, and what we have called the general crisis of the educational system.

As the competition for scarce jobs becomes more keen, education inflation appears to have taken firmer hold of the society. In what is clearly an irrational demand for more credentials, various educational institutions have responded by inventing new programmes that have given rise to the derisive term ‘diploma mills’. Because high grades are the ticket to graduate schools, professional programmes, attractive grants, good jobs and so on, today’s students are under great stress and experience tremendous pressure from family, friends, professors

and potential employers to succeed. And as they have grown increasingly insecure they have become increasingly bold and manipulative: “thanks to student evaluations and the decline in respect for authority, students have learned the not-so-subtle art of blackmail” (Wilson 3/24/2003), which they use against professionally inexperienced TAs and insecure junior professors.

Empowered by the political gains of the 1960s campus radicals, today’s decidedly non-radical students are not averse to demanding that certain materials be included in or excluded from the course curriculum, to requesting that the content, form and weighting of tests and examinations be changed to suit their needs, to challenging professors to have their work re-graded, or simply to breaking down and crying in professors’ offices. Much of this results from the dashing of what two researchers have aptly termed “grade expectations” (Gaultney and Cann, 2001). This current state of affairs, what we have termed a crisis, whether at the high school, college or university level, is seen to stem in part from the revolution of political correctness that has empowered students to challenge professors and to shape the university experience according to the politics of the day:

When only young, affluent white men attended college, the white male curriculum went unchallenged. Now every Latino, African American, Asian American, Irish American, woman, gay, and ad-infinitum wants to learn about his or her roots (Karabell, 1998:xxi).

The crisis is also traceable in part to what has been called ‘the cult of self-esteem’ and the feel-good idea that learning must be seen as fun and enjoyable, or else it is sending the wrong message to the student. The sentiment is well captured in an opinion piece which *The Economist* dubs “the cloying culture of self-esteem”. That culture, it is felt, treats students as fragile entities to be coddled and protected from criticism, from low grades that smack of failure, or from anything else that may cause them discomfort. It is almost as if a “therapeutic philosophy is spreading throughout the educational system” and demanding that high school and university students be treated as if they were in kindergarten (*The Economist*, April 14, 2001).

Along with this there is the fact of professors= apathy and intimidation. As Richard Kamber and Mary Biggs write, while “lenient grading requires less work, thought and courage than rigorous grading” it is also very “painful to watch a student dissolve in tears or to be shunned in a corridor” (1/31/2003). These authors also go on to link their observation with declining higher educational standards: “Most institutions have accepted grading practices that persistently blur the distinction between good and outstanding performance, while they award passing grades for showing up and turning in work B even when that work is poor” (Kamber and Biggs, 1/31/2003). Such sentiments are directly shared by Jane Gaultney and Arnie Cann, who also claim that: “Years of grade inflation in secondary and post-secondary schools may have established an expectation that

class attendance and a good-faith effort should be adequate to generate a good grade” (Gaultney and Cann, 2001:84).

The Disengagement Compact

This, then, is the climate in which many professors face off with many students, and rather than taking unnecessary flack from students or having to put up with the seemingly endless complaining and crying, professors often seek to avoid conflict by assigning grades that are not likely to lead to protests on the part of their students. As Jeffrey Young wrote cynically in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “There is an emerging compact between faculty members and students which goes something like; If you don’t bother me too much I won’t bother you too much BI-II trade you a B if you trade me some piece of mind” (2002:37). Then there was the equally cynical comment in *The Economist* to the effect that “all too many academics are content to hand out A-grades like confetti in return for favourable teaching ratings and more time to devote to research” (*The Economist*, April 14, 2001). And finally:

A ‘C’ used to be the grade for an average performance. Nowadays, it’s a slap in the face. Rather than tell students the truth about themselves, professors choose to flatter their students, and flattery,

Mansfield says, is harmful to students (*Wilson*, 3/24/2003).

In other words, bowing to pressures of political correctness, to challenges from irate parents, and from manipulative students who have become democratically 'empowered', teachers have been known to take the easy way out: avoid confrontation and engage in social passing (also thereby passing the buck). The net result is grade inflation which has progressed to the point where, regardless of ability, almost everyone who enters university or college today is virtually guaranteed to graduate with a degree, diploma or certificate. Thus, Harvey Mansfield writes that: "Students today are still motivated to get good grades, but if they do not wish to work hard toward that end, they can always maneuver and bargain" (*Mansfield*, 11/27/2001). This is what led another critic to conclude that "soon inflated and compressed grades will be the norm and fair grades the exception: a kind of Gresham's Law, you might say, with bad grades driving out good" (*The Economist*, March 9, 2002). It would seem that we have arrived at that point today: "In an ideal world education and credentializing would be compatible, but in the world of higher education today, they are not." (Karabell 1998:2)

Education as a Commodity

There are two general types of student attitudes toward university. One type sees the experience as a business transaction in which students comprise consumers in the education marketplace, with full consumer rights. For these “college is a commodity”, and attending university amounts to buying a product “all because of the presumption that in return for their money, they ought to receive the degree” (Karabell, 1998:11). The other attitude is found mainly among “elite students” from more affluent homes, who see a university education as an “entitlement” and who enroll in programs and take courses “less for the skills acquired in the classroom than for the social cache attached to the degree” (Ibid:5; xx). The first group of students “who take the stance of consumers have an expectation that they are buying a product, namely, a college degree. If 100 credits are required for that degree, and each credit costs \$100, then a college degree costs \$10,000” (Ibid:11). And this is directly connected with the commodification of education and the idea that, like any other business investment, an investment in education should yield cash returns, or returns that are convertible to cash (jobs). For those students who come from the elite, college and university education are regarded more as a stage in the life cycle, and is less directly tied to

future job or career aspirations. Indeed, for this group “college is simply the next in a series of stages leading to membership in a productive society “.... college is just what one does, as automatic as sex, marriage, child rearing, and buying a house” (Karabell, 1998:5).

Empowered by the democratization of education and the revolution of political correctness, students today demand a say in hiring decisions, in who teaches what courses, and in the very design and content of their curricula. Whether it is the recruitment of women sociologists, the inclusion of works written by black historians, the admission of Native voices to politics and literature, or the integration of gay and lesbian perspectives in lecture and reading materials, students are quite politically astute and in many cases will attempt “to define their own work load” and in those cases where they “do not receive the grade they need to pass, they often hold the professor and then the administration responsible” (Karabell 1998:11).

Literacy and Grade Inflation

Because almost everyone is literate (official statistics put Canada’s literacy rate at 99%), and because many Canadians have high school certificates and post-secondary degrees or diplomas, we presume that ours is a healthy society. And sure

enough, compared to most other countries, we are. The idea, however, is not to compare ourselves to most other countries and comfort ourselves with the idea that though in need of change, many others are worse off than we are. Rather, we want to look critically at our resources with a view to suggesting more effective and efficient approaches to, and strategies for learning, the true measure of education success. So, if other countries are not faring well, that should not be our consolation or the measure or comparison group we use. We should have national standards that we seek to meet, regardless of how poorly the rest of the world is doing. The government's campaign of the 1980s which cautioned us that *a mind is a terrible thing to waste*, put the onus on the educational system to get the most out of our young people and students. What has become of that campaign? Have the governments, federally and provincially, followed through on their commitments to stop the wastage of minds? A critical look at the educational system today would seem to suggest that this is indeed the case.

Loss of Credibility

One of the major consequences of education inflation and what has been called the 'credential crisis' is to be seen in the irrational, system-wide trend to removing educational 'standards'

and replacing them with 'criteria'. Standards, we know, are specific to a concrete social environment; they are anchored in a given societal culture and value system. As such, standards reveal a great deal about a wide variety of things that a society and culture hold dear, and also tell much about those things that are eschewed. Criteria, on the other hand, merely tell us how well we are meeting those standards. But in today's educational culture, as standards have become confused with criteria, there is a crisis. At both the secondary and post-secondary levels, there appears to be a blind determination to *satisfy criteria*, which is illogical, for one can only satisfy standards not criteria. The distinction is more than semantic, for according to Benjamin Singer "attempts to meet criteria rather than satisfy standards are symptoms of a society that mass processes experience, converting it into numbers to facilitate decisions" (Singer, 1994:254).

As criteria have come to supplant standards we find that schools rely more and more on such things as test scores as indicators of competence and as criteria for both graduation and secure employment. It is very much a blind or irrational scramble for what is mistakenly defined as educational success, for living "in a criterially driven society, we rarely question the criterial systems in place. They are givens, convenient, possessing an air of facticity and finality, and they are difficult to dislodge, particularly when they are at the service of bureaucracies" (Singer, 1994: 261). This being the case, teachers

who want to be successful and who also want their students to succeed, will teach to the test, i.e., will coach their students on the specifics of taking and passing the test regardless of what, if any, learning takes place. And for their part, faced with increased pressure to demonstrate that they have the criteria for success (high grades), resourceful students also exhibit crass instrumental behaviours as they devise creative ways and “attempts to outwit tests and admission examinations” (Singer, 1994: 256).

McDonaldization and Standardization

It is in this climate that the McDonaldization or standardization of education has occurred. As George Ritzer has noted, “McDonald’s has succeeded because it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control” (2000:11-12). And what better way to control the process and prove one’s success than by developing a formula that, if followed to the letter, will yield the desired results. This is efficient, calculable and will ensure a predictable outcome, all of which makes control that much easier. Once more, however, success defined in this way is not necessarily measured by learning. It is no secret that “...educational standardization dilutes learning by ‘McDonaldizing’ education and encouraging students

to plod mindlessly through degree sequences in pursuit of guaranteed vocational rewards...” (Brown 2001:26). As David Brown continues, “it is important to understand exactly how credential standardization is linked to positional advantages in bureaucratic and professional labour markets” (Ibid). Grades are simply a short-cut to knowing what a student is supposed to know; they don’t tell us much about the student: “Credentials reduce uncertainties about candidates’ abilities to do known tasks that are associated with these positions” (Brown 2001:27). We thus find ourselves in the difficult position of having to take the kind of uncomfortable consolation that Winston Churchill took when he mused on the limitations of democracy as a system of rule: “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Churchill, 1970:78). In other words, while grades are not necessarily the best indicators of a student’s promise, they are perhaps better and more easily obtained than all other presently available indicators.

In recent years there has been the erosion of the private sector’s confidence in our schools and universities. Employers who routinely ask universities to educate the students and leave job training to themselves, also commonly lament the lack of basic literacy skills among graduates. As a consequence an entire, parallel educational industry has grown up alongside the university and college system to accommodate the concerns of professional schools and private sector employers.

We are referring here to the institutionalization of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) in the United States, whereby universities and colleges basically say to the high schools, we don't trust the credentials you have conferred on students and before admitting them to our institution, we reserve the right to test and certify them ourselves. As the *National Center for Policy Analysis* reported in 1998, College Board officials in the US found that "more college-bound students have A averages than a decade ago B but they score lower on their SAT exams" (National Center For Policy Analysis, "Clear Evidence of High School Grade Inflation." (2/27/2003). The same report goes on to point out that: "The College Board said that test takers with averages grew from 28 percent of the total to 38 percent in the last 10 years B but their scores fell an average of 12 points on the verbal portion of the SAT and three points on math" (2/27/2003).

And as if this were not enough, the universities appear not to trust their own standards either, so those students who have earned honors bachelors' degrees are not automatically admitted to graduate programs until they have taken and passed Graduate Record Entrance (GRE) examinations. And there is more, for beyond their undergraduate degrees, we know of no professional schools that do not require students to pass special examinations before gaining admission. Thus, in Canada and the United States (among other countries), admission to law schools requires that one passes the LSAT, medical schools have the MCAT, business

schools the GMAT, dental schools the DAT, pharmacy schools the PCAT, and so on. Commenting on the situation in the United States, Richard Kamber and Mary Biggs write:

With four out of five students graduating with GPA's of B-minus or better, with a college degree ensuring neither knowledge of subject matter nor basic skills, employers and graduate schools have had to rely on other measures to sift applicants. Standardized test scores and institutional "reputation" have become more important than the judgements of teachers and scholars. The discouragement of excellence, the concealment of failure, the torpedoing of our own credibility: harsh accusations, hard to believe, and yet these are the consequences of grade conflation (*Kamber and Biggs*, 1/31/2003).

But if *reputation* of one's school is an effective, short-cut method for separating good students from bad, we are in serious trouble. For even the hallowed halls of Harvard have not been impervious to the virus of grade inflation (Mansfield, 2001; Kamber and Biggs, 2003):

When students leave Harvard, they carry grades as a sort of currency: a pocketful of intellectual capital, to bid for jobs or places in graduate schools against graduates from other universities with other currencies. These positions go to those who can put the most academic cash on the table. Employers and graduate schools must decide on the exchange rate, as it were,

between a Harvard C student and an “student from a less distinguished place” (*The Economist*, March 9, 2002.)

To address the needs of students who are desirous of entering professional school, a whole host of private, parallel, instructional organizations such as Kaplan, Oxford Seminar Series, and Sylvan Learning Centers, now advertize their services on campuses and on the internet. Charging very high fees, they are specifically designed for preparing students, who already have one or more accredited university degrees, to take the admission tests. But much like the other school and university curricula that they are meant to replace, they too teach to the tests so that students don't come away any more informed. Instead the latter can only claim to have done well or poorly on the test in question.

But is the charge that grades are inflated a fair one to make? Could it not be that today's students are simply smarter than yesterday's? This is the most common defence of those teachers and students who do not agree that there is a crisis and who resist major changes to the system. What these defenders miss, however, is that despite “their advanced stage of smartness,” one cannot “ignore the brute fact that over the same period that grades were inflating most rapidly (1965-1980), average SATs, ACTs, and, yes, GREs were in decline” (Wilson, 3/242003; Honan, 1998).

Grade Inflation: a Qualification

In this study we use the term 'inflation' borrowed from economics to describe a pronounced and serious threat to the credibility of our educational system and to the general health and well-being of our workplace. As we explained before, when employed in this context, the term 'inflation' is meant more descriptively to suggest that when we examine critically what is taking place in our system of higher education (and earlier too), there is less than meets the eye. One element of the problem deals with what we have called 'grade inflation' or the current and increasing practice of rewarding academic performance with considerably higher grades than they would have received in the past.

However, since the ceiling for grades is fixed at 100% and price inflation is not fixed, there are those who claim that we cannot apply uncritically this economic notion of 'inflation' to education, and opt instead for 'grade conflation.' For inflation in grades, it is charged, would mean that a given standard of performance would be awarded an ever higher grade time after time. Grade conflation, on the other hand, results from granting too many As and too few Fs, with the result that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish 'outstanding' students from merely 'good' students, from 'mediocre' students and so on:

“When the highest grade ceases to identify a student’s work as outstanding, the grades below it also lose power to recognize and reward appropriately” Thus, we find the phrase ‘grade inflation’ misleading and prefer to speak instead of ‘grade conflation’ (Kamber and Biggs, 1/31/2003). Another critic who is in basic agreement with the above, favours the concept of ‘grade compression,’ which “squeezes information out of the system.” He goes on to argue the case of Harvard university and affirms that: “when all Harvard’s students get As all the time, the university grades will yield no information whatsoever” (*The Economist*, March 9, 2002. 3/25/2003).

Whether we speak of grade ‘inflation’, ‘conflation’, ‘compression’ or any other related term, the point is clear, and for the sake of consistency we will stick with the (admittedly flawed) notion of *inflation*. Like a stack of credentials, transcripts boasting high grades are no longer reliable indicators of what students know and how they will perform on the job. The consequences are felt daily in terms of national and provincial economic productivity figures that belie one of the world’s most highly educated (credentialed) populations, where graduates of scores of post-secondary educational institutions in recent years have been getting increasingly outstanding grades. Once more, a critic writing in *The Economist* says it best: “Living on a diet of junk grades is like living on a diet of junk food. You swell up out of all decent proportions without ever getting any real nourishment. And you end up later in life

regretting your disgusting habits” (*The Economist*, April 14, 2001. 3/25/2003).

Conclusion

In broad strokes of the brush, then, class inequalities are alive and well in Canada. But this is as one might expect in a capitalist society. To this end the educational system is charged with reproducing the work force with its attendant specializations and slotting different individuals and groups into the most appropriate occupational and career categories. In the process the students from the most comfortable classes, those with high economic, cultural and social capital, will be expected to benefit from their class privileges, while the others will be arrayed below them in the various class and occupational hierarchies. And to ensure that those lowest on the social and economic ladders are not disgruntled, they must be cooled out. Hence the ideology of meritocracy is invoked and accepted, even by the most lowly, as a just way of dividing and distributing the social spoils. And this worked well for a long time, but recent changes have occurred and have conditioned the crisis of which we have spoken.

The rise of political correctness and calls for transparency and the democratization of higher education have seen those who

belong to the traditionally marginalized classes issuing challenges to the system that once safeguarded privilege, and in the process a loud and persistent chorus of voices have begun to demand a fairer distribution of the social fruits. And since education is seen as a means to social mobility, those voices have been directed increasingly at the institutions of higher learning. The result has been a flood of new aspirants to higher education accompanied by a politically inept set of intimidated university and college administrators, who have responded to the public outcry by bending over backwards to accommodate the public calls for greater fairness and equity. The result has been a substitution of education for training, a dumbing down of curricula, rampant grade and credential inflation, the replacement of standards with criteria, a general loosening of academic rigour at the higher levels, and the gradual transformation of the university into a pseudo-vocational institution. Therein lies the crisis of which we have spoken. It has spread to envelop the wider societal institutions and culture, and it is evident in so many areas of both the public service and private enterprise where literacy levels have declined and people everywhere can be heard to bemoan the loss of standards.

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Received in April, 2015

Reviewed in May, 2015

Reviewed version received in June, 2015