

**A Critical Commentary on Lisl Fenwick's Research in  
Curriculum Reform and Reproducing Inequality in  
Upper-secondary Education**

**BY**

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## **A Critical Commentary on Lisl Fenwick's Research in Curriculum Reform and Reproducing Inequality in Upper-secondary Education**

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### **Abstract:**

This critical commentary sheds light on Fenwick's work. It does so in five sections; It starts by discussing the core concepts in this work. Then, the quality of Fenwick's argument is assessed. The third section discusses the theoretical base to which she has referred. The fourth section establishes a connection between the issues raised by Fenwick and contemporary educational issues. The final section is the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Critical commentary, curriculum reform, reproducing inequality.

## **Introduction**

Curriculum reform is a controversial issue which has been discussed by many researchers around the world. Therefore, this essay will also discuss this issue from a critical perspective. Based on the following summary, this critical commentary sheds light on Fenwick's work. It does so in five sections. It starts by discussing the core concepts in this work. Then, the quality of Fenwick's argument is assessed. The third section discusses the theoretical base to which she has referred. The fourth section establishes a connection between the issues raised by Fenwick and contemporary educational issues. The final section is the conclusion.

Fenwick (2011) is against the curriculum reform for upper-secondary education which aims to make the content relevant to the students' lives with the objective of improving outcomes for disadvantaged students. However, she argues that the reform would limit students' learning chances and actually widen the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, because they come from different communities which have different educational backgrounds. She believes that their societies value academic education differently and in certain situations parents prefer vocational education. Thus, she believes that the reform will lead to inequality for students. In order to mitigate this disadvantage, she calls for the application of an 'evaluation based-assessment' strategy which should include clear assessment criteria for both students and teacher. Additionally, she proposes giving both advantaged and disadvantaged students the same tasks while assessing them differently according to their preferences. She also emphasises the importance of setting the disadvantaged students high expectations for the outcomes of their modules.

## **Core concepts**

This section will discuss three significant concepts from Fenwick's article. These concepts are: relevance, inequality and socio-economic. Then, at the end of this section, questions will be raised regarding to these concepts.

Fenwick (2011) structured her article about inequality in upper-secondary education being reproduced by curriculum reform primarily by discussing the concept of relevance for supporting disadvantaged students. This concept of relevance is divided into two parts. The first is the form of presentation which refers to using multiple strategies to evaluate students' performance. The second refers to the content and context which connect the curriculum to the students' lives and experiences, by referring to literacy theories. Fenwick stated that some researchers have suggested that skills and knowledge can be learnt from students' personal life experiences outside the school environment by communicating with their community members and learning from them through their behaviour and interaction.

Fenwick's argues that making the curriculum relevant to students' lives in upper-secondary education level can lead to inequality. This position has highlighted the inequality concept which may be produced from connecting students' knowledge to

their communities. Indeed, Fenwick had explained what she meant by inequality through attempting to prove that it would be unfair to rely on students' communities as sources of knowledge because different students have different opportunities to access knowledge and different attitudes towards valuing education depending on their socio-economic status. She has connected this concept of inequality with her third concept of the socio-economic status as a cause of that inequality within communities. Other researchers adopt a similar position. For example, Garcia (2009) argues that the socio-economic situation can lead to varying educational outcomes within a single society. Indeed, poor students may live within families who do not appreciate education or their parents cannot afford the cost of extra tuition. Consequently, these students may have lower academic achievement (Garcia, 2009). Fenwick's emphasis on social injustice resulting from the system of education reflects the views of sociologists, such as Bourdieu, who believes that the educational system has the power to reproduce inequality and classes within a given society (Bourdieu, 1973). Indeed, in relation to equity, Fenwick refers to Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) Reproduction Theory. This theory argues that decision-makers, through the curriculum reforming process, usually concentrate on improving students who already advantaged, while ignoring disadvantaged students who need to improve their skills and capabilities. Therefore, this policy can reproduce inequality between individuals (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, cited in Fenwick 2011).

The three interrelated concepts in Fenwick's work—relevance, inequality and socio-economic—raised a number of questions regarding to the educational systems and equality: How can the educational system lead to equality within a society? What is the role of curriculum reform in producing educational equity? What or who is to blame for the fact that some students become disengaged, parents, community, teachers, or the educational system?

### **Quality of the argument**

Fenwick's argument was based on examples drawn from educational areas within both the national (inside her country: Australia) and international (England, France, the US) contexts. Her position is that the standard-based assessment should be part of the curriculum reform rather than the use of literacy theory which calls for relating the curriculum to students' lives. The provision of data from government sources such as The Council of Australian Governments COAG and The South Australian council for Education SACE underpins the reliability of her evidence. Additionally, Fenwick's presented examples have been heavily derived from Australian governmental organizations to emphasize that her study was concentrating on a local context. That can support what she was calling for, as a part of her argument, that curriculum reform experiences could not be generalized globally because each society may have its own circumstances. Consequently, the construction of her argument is to a large extent convincing.

However, teachers which are one of the most important inputs into the education system are ignored by Fenwick. Indeed, teachers' performance and the level of their proficiency can be important in understanding students' weaknesses. Crocker (1987) found that teachers' training can affect their performance positively (cited in Darling-Hammond, 2000). Additionally, Darling-Hammond (2000) argues that teachers' knowledge about the subject can interact with their teaching skills in order to improve students' achievement. Therefore, the continual training of teachers should be part of the process of curriculum reform.

Moreover, students' personal motivations to learn and succeed can improve their educational outcomes. However, this important point is ignored by Fenwick. She continually refers to Oakes' (1985) arguments, which is built on Bourdieu's (1973) sociological work and theories. Oakes's position is to blame the educational institutions alone for the unequal outcome among students, while ignoring other aspects.

In contrast, Reiter (2009) indicates that, based on his interviews with principals and teachers in relation to underachieving students, educationalists blamed students themselves, because they believe that some students do not have the motivation to learn. In addition, according to Kariya (2010), when students' hard work combines with adequate teaching, the curriculum can resolve students' learning difficulties (cited in Takayama, 2013). Therefore, Fenwick's critique would be improved if she took in account other aspects such as teachers' performance and students' motivations.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Fenwick's proposed solution is to use standard-based assessment to evaluate students' achievement. Fenwick believes that using criteria for the purpose of students' assessment indicates what is expected from the students (in terms of performance) and their outcomes (in terms of grade or mark) for each level of performance. These criteria can facilitate the teaching and learning processes for both teachers and students. Moreover, it can also provide parents with a reasonable and clear explanation for their children's grades.

Her argument is linked to one part of Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic discourse (which had been discussed during Critical Perspective in Education Module). According to Bernstein (2000), pedagogy is consisting of two types: visible pedagogy and invisible pedagogy. His concept of visible pedagogy refers to those instructions that are always given by teachers to the students and how students meet the assessment criteria regarding to teachers' instructions. This is compatible with Fenwick's argument about the use of evaluation based-assessment in the curriculum reform. However, the concept of the invisible pedagogies which refers to students' inner motivations and intentions conflicts with her argument (Takayama, 2013).

Furthermore, Fenwick's argument can be related to Ball's (2003) interpretation of 'performativity' as "... a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)" (Ball, 2003, p.3). While Fenwick calls for teachers to use specific criteria related to certain expectations during their evaluation of the students' performance, Ball discusses what happens when teachers come under surveillance and have to follow instructions and provide detailed reports about students' performance. He also refers to Blackmore's and Sachs's (1997) terminology 'institutional schizophrenia' (cited in Ball, 2003, p.8). Ball (2003) argues that teachers struggle to balance the needs of the process of evaluating students' performance and providing students with the time and effort during teaching. Therefore, they lack the time to analyse the reasons for students failing behind. Hence, Ball's (2003) article highlights the limitations on the teacher's role in the educational process. Thus, calling for reforming the curriculum solely by tracking students' performance through assessment criteria can negatively affect both teachers (of being under pressure) and students (by following teacher's instructions).

### **Related issues**

One of the significant debates in Fenwick's article is issue of inequality in upper-secondary education. Equality and inequality within the educational system is a matter of intense contemporary debate. In particular, the role of neoliberalism is a controversial topic. Neoliberalism in education can refer to the idea of privatising the educational system and start to deliver it as a service (Jonson & Salle, 2004). Since the neoliberal agenda came to prominence, students can be considered as consumers in the education market (Rose, 1999, cited in Davies & Bansel, 2007). Globally, many schools have been privatized rather than being run by the state. According to Davies & Bansel (2007), the motivation is that privatization and treating schools as a market can secure the future of the country, through raising educational quality and leading to economic prosperity.

However, neoliberalism can impact negatively on society and lead to the reproduction of social inequality by widening the gap between the social classes. According to Rose (1999), neoliberalism is related to normalization that may belong to generalization which assumes that private schools are for students from middle class, while government schools are for students from the working class. Indeed, she indicates that within neoliberal regimes "all aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualised along economic lines" (cited in Davies & Bansel, 2007). Interestingly, Garcia (2009) notes that private schools are usually well-equipped and have well-qualified teachers. Moreover, parents of the students are from privileged backgrounds and have the ability to meet the costs of private schools (Ayalon & Shavit, 2004). However, parents from the working class are usually unable to afford

the cost of private schools. Thus, neoliberalism can lead to unequal educational chances within a certain society.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this critical commentary has demonstrated that Fenwick's position, to a large degree, can be seen as a convincing argument. It has been effectively constructed on a solid theoretical base by referring to educational sociology theories proposed by thinkers such as Bourdieu, Passeron and Oakes. Her argument is also supported by quantitative data.

However, Fenwick has ignored a number of significant factors that can affect the success of any curriculum reform such as the proficiency of teachers and students' motivations. Interestingly, although her standpoint is supported by concepts such as reproduction and the role of the educational institutions, it is also undermined by other concepts such as Ball's interpretation of performativity.

Finally, it can be noted that many educational theories are interrelated (see Figure 1). This interrelationship can be constructed relatively in a circular process: Neoliberalism can be understood as Privatization, which in turn Reproduces the social classes as private schools are mostly be attended by rich students, while public schools are usually be attended by students from the working classes. This generalisation reflects Normalization that may result from Marketization which is employed as an advertisement for private school and supports Neoliberalism.

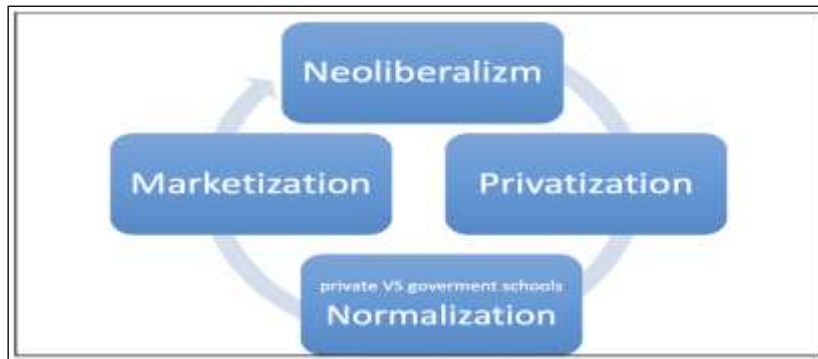


Figure 1

It can be seen how the education process is complicated and how its issues can raise a long-lasting debate. Therefore, Fenwick should not be strongly blamed for seeing the curriculum reform issue from a limited perspective within a wide field such as education.



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