

'It's Who You Know, Not What You Know!': Penetrating the Credentialling Ideology

Ronald G. Sultana

Faculty of Education
University of Malta

The kinds of messages teachers give students regarding the value of credentials in the job-getting package during a period of high youth unemployment are explored. The response made by students to the credentialling ideology promoted in schools, and their construction of the job-getting formula, are also described. The validity of the two versions of job-getting strategies is considered in the light of evidence provided by a number of empirical research projects. The superiority of student knowledge in this area is used to present a case for a critical and democratic education which appropriates and legitimises the student voice.

One of the most dominant ideologies promoted by schools in defining the link between schooling and work is that investment in education, and the gaining of credentials as a proof of such investment, leads to increasingly better life-chances. Behind such an ideology lies an assumption – what Dale and Pires (1984) refer to as the 'technical functional theory' of the relationship between education and the economy – that there is an ever-changing and increasing need for skills in the economy. These skills can be taught in schools, so that the education system ensures that the economy is provided with appropriately skilled labour on the one hand, and pupils with occupationally relevant skills and knowledge on the other. The credential awarded by the school system theoretically '*demonstrates, or at least indicates, the possession of the required skill or knowledge*' (*ibid*, 1984, p. 51).

In encouraging students to invest in acquiring credentials, teachers promote a view that qualifications ensure *efficiency* because talent and abilities are channelled towards the corresponding jobs, and also ensure *equity* where efforts and achievements rather than such attributes as social class, gender or ethnicity determine the future location of an individual in a segmented labour market (Watts, 1985). Because they supposedly guarantee efficiency and equity, credentials are generally and unproblematically presented as being the primary, if not only, currency which can be, in due course, exchanged for a job.

The fact that schools promote such an ideology does not necessarily mean that students accept it unreservedly. As recent developments in the 'new' sociology of education have clearly shown, schools are sites of contestation in the production of meaning (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985;

Whitty, 1985). While early critical and progressive accounts had emphasised the reproductive function of schooling (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), 'resistance theories' of education highlight the fact that schools do not deterministically respond to the needs of capital, and that students may react in an active manner to accept, resist and/or reinterpret the messages given to them. This contestual nature of the educational endeavour has been described both at the macro-level of analysis (Carnoy and Levin, 1985) and at the micro-level where ethnographers have explored the cultural milieu of the school to note the extent and meaning of students' resistant behaviour (Willis, 1977; McRobbie, 1978; Anyon, 1980).

According to Fernandes (1988), students' resistance can involve first the challenging of the reproduction of the sexual and social division of labour, and second the 'penetration' (Willis, 1977) or unmasking of the dominant ideologies of the school. Ideologies are here considered to refer to socially-generated illusions which encourage specific ways of perceiving the world, so that the *status quo* is promoted as having a 'common sense' and natural, object-like quality (reification). Ideologies in fact jeopardise people's power to 'perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves' (Freire, 1972, p. 56). Within the paradigms of 'resistance theory', however, people are considered to have sufficient agency to penetrate and recognise the falsehood of the world views which dominant classes promote in their own interest. People may thus become aware of the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, an insight which could lead to progressive action to change unjust and inequitable conditions.

It is this kind of agency and ideological penetration on the part of students – specifically their contestation of school-to-work messages given overtly and covertly by teachers – which was explored in a study that the author carried out in three high schools in a provincial city of the North Island of New Zealand (Sultana, 1987). The ethnographic data analysed in the following sections were collected using a sequence pioneered by Osborne *et al.* (1982) which, together with Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory methodology, enabled the generation of formal theoretical propositions regarding the intended and actual messages given by teachers, and the response made by students to such messages.

A number of themes related to work education were explored through the observation of 151 classroom sessions (in social studies, English, history, career and transition education programmes, economics, and secretarial studies), and the interviewing of 50 teachers and 370 students¹. A large amount of data was gathered through observation in staffrooms, recreation fields, and various work-exploration sites. The schools in question are here referred to as All Girls' High (950 students), Co-Ed High (1400 students) and All Boys' College (400 students). While the first two were state schools, and catered for most, if not all, the city's ethnic (namely European, Maori, Pacific Island and Asian) and social class groups², All Boys' College was an

'integrated'³ Catholic school catering predominantly for middle-class and Pakeha (European) students. In this article, the focus is on students' reactions to the schools' promulgation of credentials as the surest path to an occupation.

The presentation of data is organised in such a way as to highlight the difference between teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding the role of qualifications in gaining access to jobs, and that of students. The relative strengths and weaknesses of the two versions of the job-getting package will be discussed in a theoretical context in the final section. It needs to be pointed out at the outset that, while the following sections provide a detailed description of teacher and student *perceptions* of job-getting strategies, the researcher gathered no information regarding the *actual* hiring practices of the city's employers.

Teachers and the credentialling ideology

All the teachers observed and interviewed were generally found to promote a credentialling ideology which gave three messages to describe the link between certification and the clinching of jobs. Students were told in various ways that:

- (a) Effort and investment in schooling and certificates led to increasingly high chances of getting a job, and especially a 'good job', or the job of one's choice.
- (b) Qualifications enjoyed *primary* importance in the job-getting package.
- (c) Certification provided employers with evidence of cognitive and technical skills functional to a modern labour market.

Each aspect of this inter-related set of messages – as well as students' responses to them – will be explored in the same sequence in this and the following sections. Such an exploration needs to be placed in the context of the crisis in capital accumulation and specifically of employment, which characterises New Zealand's present economic situation. This contextualisation is necessary because much of the teachers' and students' understanding of the role of certification in the getting of jobs was observed to be influenced by their knowledge of unemployment. It therefore has to be kept in mind that in New Zealand as elsewhere (*cf.* Ramsay and Sultana, 1986), youths are the worst hit by unemployment. Teenagers in fact represent 16% of the working age population but make up nearly 40% of the registered unemployed (Catherwood, 1985).

Teachers in the three schools were observed using the insecurity young people felt about their future employment prospects in order to promote credentials. As a social studies teacher said to his fourth-form class: 'You must realise what the real world is like out there . . . front up to the situation . . . it's a question of qualifications, and you can't realistically expect to be

chosen unless you have these qualifications' (Fieldnotes, 12/8/86, p. 1114). Under-achieving students were urged to 'Stick at school and get some qualifications, even if they are alternative certificates'⁴ (Fieldnotes, 28/7/86, p. 1028). If these could not be obtained, then they should aspire to get 'a good behaviour report if nothing else' (Fieldnotes, 7/3/86, p. 372).

While unemployment served teachers as a motivation-cum-control device, a useful tool to promote investment in credentials, they also discovered that such a tactic had a double-edge to it, for it led to what Habermas (1976) has referred to as a 'legitimation crisis'. The more students heard about unemployment, the more they wondered if the credentials they were striving for had any real power in the labour market. Teachers were thus observed making decisions to withhold information about the true dimensions of the employment crisis in order to reinforce a credentialing ideology in danger of becoming delegitimised. At All Girls' High, for instance, the school counsellor advised a group of social studies teachers discussing a work education syllabus not to focus on the problem, saying 'If we give them this knowledge, many will just say "Why bother?"' (Fieldnotes, 9/7/86, p. 933). The Co-Ed High Principal insisted that the school should emphasise the positive, that investment in schooling and certification still led to jobs (Fieldnotes, 6/11/86, p. 1623).

In order to safeguard the legitimacy of investment in certification, teachers were even more wary of saying publicly (to students) what they knew in private (as revealed to the researcher), namely that even those who had high qualifications were not immune from the threat of unemployment. On the few occasions when such a message was given, it was to urge achieving students to aim for higher certificates.

Teachers were observed not only highlighting and legitimising credentials, but also giving them primacy in the job-getting formula. They mentioned other factors – such as 'correct' attitudes and personal qualities – which could help students clinch jobs, but such factors were often secondary to, and dependent on, qualifications. Thus, in the competition for 'employment coupons', teachers encouraged students to invest in alternative and school-leaving certificates, for these 'report on attitudes and therefore tell an employer whether you're responsible and can handle a job. You're more worth to him than someone who is quick to understand but who has to be pushed to work' (Fieldnotes, 24/6/86, p. 861). Such messages and certificates were aimed particularly at students who were expected to find work, if at all, in the secondary sector of the labour market. Here, values such as 'self-control', 'discipline' and 'obedience' are of primary importance, and are in perfect harmony both with teachers' expectations regarding classroom behaviour on the one hand, and with employers' lists of *desiderata* on the other.

This formulation of personal qualities as commodities, aspects of the personality package which could be cashed in on the market, were overtly

encouraged and modelled through sessions of interview-skills training in all three schools. Such sessions took up an inordinate amount of time – up to 80% of a work education unit in some cases. According to teachers, self-presentation skills during job interviews would supplement credentials: while the latter would put an individual in the race, the former would put that person at the head of the competitors for the job.

Another way through which teachers promoted certificates as an essential and primary element of the job-getting package was through the picture of work they presented to their students. According to this portrayal, the modern world of work required an increasing amount of 'skills'. In one school Bulletin, for instance, an article written by the Careers Adviser asserted: 'It is very clear that, in future, the demand for skills will increase, regardless of the type of job. You must be prepared to move out into this highly competitive job market, armed with the highest level of skills you can manage' (All Girls' High Bulletin, 2nd Term, 1986, p.7). The imperative was 'to get more education . . . there are no jobs for people without skills' (Fieldnotes, 20/10/86, p.1546). Certificates were evidence of a readiness to invest in learning, an important quality in the modern world of work because 'employers are looking for people willing to learn and re-train' (Fieldnotes, 17/10/86, p.1499).

Teachers therefore gave qualifications primary importance in their version of the job-getting formula. They also made reference overtly, and certainly encouraged covertly, those personal qualities and attitudes appreciated by employers. While teachers believed contacts and networks with employers to be an important part of the job-getting package, they gradually communicated this knowledge to the researcher, but not to their students.

Students and the credentialling ideology

In negotiating meanings, students were found to make use of teachers' messages, but they also appropriated other messages they picked up from their environment, messages given by family, friends, the media, and those that were embedded in their own experience in part-time and casual work, as well as in job-seeking⁵. This access to various sources of information led the students to develop, in contrast to their teachers, a more complete and realistic understanding of how jobs could be gained in a period of high levels of unemployment. In the students' version of the job-getting formula, certificates could have a place, although they rarely enjoyed the necessary – let alone primary – position attributed to them by teachers.

Student reactions to teachers' messages about credentialling were marked, in the first instance, by diversity. The loss of legitimacy of schooling was experienced at different levels by different students, depending on the chances they believed they had for capitalising on their efforts at school. At one extreme were the 'achievers' and the motivated. These generally middle- and upper-middle-class students often declared their intention to

put even more effort into getting even higher certificates, given the fact of increasing unemployment in the community. This investment in certification was marked by a confidence lacking in other groups of students. An academic All Girls' sixth former spoke confidently about her own and her friends' futures: 'We sit back and think: "Yeah, another year at school, six years at Varsity, and we'll be qualified psychologists. We'll get a job at hospital for a couple of years, then go private, make bulks of money"' (Fieldnotes, 6/10/86, p.1414).

At the other end of the continuum of student reactions to the credentialing ideology promoted by teachers were those who felt disillusioned with school and who therefore expressed little interest in striving after qualifications of doubtful worth. These students were often identifiable by their resistant activities to the institution's practices, and by the fact that they were generally working-class and/or Maori or Pacific Islanders. Like Willis' 'lads', these students did not accept the ideology that investment in schooling would lead to better life-chances. For Maori students especially, qualifications could never guarantee access to jobs because they knew that there was racial discrimination in hiring practices. While teachers hardly ever mentioned this fact (except in the sense that the referent to their messages regarding job-interview sessions was Pakeha-style behaviour), students – Maori and Pakeha alike – spoke of what Spoonley (1978) has called the gatekeeping role of Pakeha employers who control which ethnic groups get access to jobs and which do not. A fourth-form Co-Ed Maori student was aware that as soon as an employer looked at her he would say 'Oh! I can't choose a Maori because she will steal' (Fieldnotes, 29/9/86, p.1324). A Pakeha student from the same class told the researcher that his father would never employ Maoris because 'that would give his firm a bad reputation' (Fieldnotes, 17/7/86, p.948).

These 'non-achieving' students used school not to win credentials, but to get access to what they believed to be a major element in the job-getting package – contacts. They therefore joined the schools' transition programmes whose work exploration components placed them on the shop floor, the site where the hiring of and firing from jobs in the secondary sector are often carried out. Their transition teachers knew many employers, and through such networks jobs could be unlocked. The 'social capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) of these students became the networks with employers established by their schools.

Between the high- and non-achievers lay the majority of students who neither rejected nor totally accepted the credentialing ideology promoted by their schools. Like Corrigan's (1979) boys and Jones' (1987) Mason girls, these students accepted the institutional logic that their good behaviour and work would be rewarded by certificates and references which would in turn lead to material rewards. This acceptance was however not as straightforward as it is sometimes made out to be. Rather, it was qualified by a

substantial dose of scepticism, born out of the messages they received outside of school as well as from their experience of the wider social formation. While teachers, as we have seen, chose to play down the extent of unemployment in the community, students did not. As a fourth-form student said:

'I often think: "Am I going to get a job? Is it worth it (i.e. studying)?" There's a lot of us thinking like that, and it's mostly now that it's started to come about, because there's not a lot of chances. Like, I want to be a dental nurse, but what chances have I got if five hundred people apply, and there's only fifty people accepted!' (Fieldnotes, 30/7/86, p.1056).

Another fact that teachers were shown to play down out of fear of delegitimising their credentialling ideology was qualification inflation. Again, this did not mean that students had not received messages about it from outside the school, and such messages provided more fodder for scepticism regarding the value of qualifications. These students expressed concern on various occasions to the researcher, saying 'Sure I worry about not getting a job, especially when you think of those people who get SC and perhaps even a degree, and they still haven't got a job' (Fieldnotes, 8/10/86, p.1439). Others were confused by what they heard on the media, for instance, where it was reported that people were finding it difficult to get jobs because they were *over-qualified*. Then the hard-won certificates could put an individual at a *disadvantage* because 'you've got too many qualifications, and the employer thinks you'll be bored with the job, so he'll choose someone with lesser qualifications' (Fieldnotes, 25/3/86, p.502) or because 'the employer's got to pay you more money if you've got higher qualifications' (Fieldnotes, 18/3/86, p.428).

Such conflicting and contradictory messages confused students who had to make up their minds between believing the ideology promoted by schools, or the messages they received from outside. As a Co-Ed fifth former said: 'You don't know where to stop, where you stand. You're not too sure if you want to go to school and get School Certificate and leave, or if you want to stay on and get more, but then still don't get a job because you're too qualified' (Fieldnotes, 9/10/86, p.1444).

Students attempted to come to terms with their dilemma in a number of ways. The first strategy they used was to avoid concentrating on the problem. As one student said: '. . . and then you think that a lot of people get the qualifications teachers keep harping about, and they don't get the job . . . you sort of think and say "What's the point if you're not going to get a job anyway?" The best is not to think about it!' (Fieldnotes, 24/7/86, p.1008). Another and related strategy was 'positive thinking' by which students hoped to ward off ill-luck. Said one student: 'I am going to get my certificates, and I'm going to go out and get a job. You need positive

thinking' (Fieldnotes, 24/7/86, p.1009). Students who refused to be discouraged, believing that positive thinking and determination would, as if by magic, change common defeat into a personal victory, admitted that their faith was nothing but a gimmick to boost their confidence and keep them going. The same student quoted above in fact added: 'but I suppose if everybody has this positive approach, it will make it worse for us!' (Fieldnotes, 24/7/86, p.1010).

It is not surprising therefore, that while these students, on the surface of it, seemed to accept the institutional logic of certification, they were observed to quickly jettison their investment in schooling to take the first opportunity of employment that came along. Such students also gave less importance to certification than their teachers did in the hierarchy of elements which made up the job-getting formula. Indeed, the differences noted in the typological continuum describing students' acceptance or rejection of credentialing ideology were resolved when it came to putting other elements first in effectiveness in getting jobs. Most, if not all the students, penetrated the ideology that qualifications referred to cognitive skills. According to them, certificates were used by employers as a reflection of attitudes and personal qualities. They were convinced that employers 'don't look as much at the marks as at the comments . . . They've got to know if you're going to fit in with their little hierarchy or whatever . . . if you're going to rock the boat or if you're just gonna go along with what they say' (Fieldnotes, 25/3/86, p.515).

Proof of these compliant qualities came from other sorts of 'certificates', references written by previous employers. These were, again, more important than formal certificates, and were the source of a paradoxical dilemma faced by young people in times of economic crisis. What students referred to as the 'work experience trap' meant that:

'To get a job, you've just about got to have work experience. They all want to see how you've got on in previous jobs. But how can you get work experience if they don't employ you in the first place?!' (Fieldnotes, 18/3/86, p.440)

The way out of this trap lay in what increasingly appeared to be – for all students in the continuum drawn above – the primary element in the job-getting package, namely contacts and networks with employers. As the students put it frequently and succinctly: 'It's not what you know, but who you know.' Students generally felt that teachers' insistence on qualifications was justified only for professional workers like doctors, lawyers and teachers, though even here there was a suspicion that an old-boy network in New Zealand was particularly effective for 'posh schools like King's College which landed students in upper class jobs' (Fieldnotes, 8/10/86, p.1439).

It is not these class-based types of networks, well described by Bourdieu and Boltansky (1977) and Collins (1979), that were observed operating in

the three schools in question. For the students of these schools, two kinds of networks were possible – those established by their own school, and those developed privately in the community. The school-based networks were generally developed by the careers advisers and transition teachers who had extensive contacts with the community's employers. Such contacts were forged by the former through frequent invitations to address students about work during seminars or career conventions; and by the latter through the placement of transition students in work exploration sites. Employers took every opportunity to strengthen such links with the schools, depending on transition students for free labour and on careers advisers to perform a screening and pre-selection function for them (Doogan, 1984). As one such employer informed Co-Ed High students at a school-leavers' seminar: 'If we're looking for an apprentice, we tend to go to schools and get inside information from your guidance teacher, otherwise we're inundated with applicants' (Fieldnotes, 20/11/86, p.1717).

Students knew that 'a lot of jobs came through the school' (Fieldnotes, 4/11/86, p.1588) and that it was wiser to stay on at school not for credentialing or educational purposes, but because school contacts unlocked jobs. Ex-students from all three schools who had become established as employers, or who were in a position to influence employers, were reported by teachers (generally privately to the researcher and not publicly to students) to lobby in favour of job-applicants from their previous schools. Students saw the result of such practices, and hoped to get access to a livelihood through this way.

Even more elaborate were those networks developed at All Boys' College. Students and teachers alike spoke of their school's 'mutual support system', the 'Mafia-type networks', 'the All Boys' club'. Over and above the reasons given for the two other schools, All Boys' networks depended on what Dale and Pires (1984) and Watkins (1984) – the first in a general, the second in a very similar context – refer to as the generation of social capital exclusive to a particular social group, which becomes an important part of the job-getting package. In this instance, the social capital was religious affiliation. Catholic employers, according to a group of senior students, 'think that guys coming to All Boys' College have respect and self-discipline. That's why they ring here first, to get a "good catholic" with manners. And there's heaps of inter-relationships out of the school . . . ex-All Boys' ring up. It's a sort of a network, sort of a Mafia' (Fieldnotes, 1/10/86, p.1343). One of the city's Catholic employers justified these procedures to the researcher, saying 'We're a small minority in New Zealand . . . so we take care of our own' (Fieldnotes, 20/3/86, p.486). For this reason, All Boys' College students generally differed from those of the other two schools in that they hardly ever expressed anxiety about unemployment. They trusted the school's networks, above all else, to get them jobs.

The second type of networks which students believed to have primary

importance – over certification – in the job-getting package were those established privately, namely by parents, relatives and friends. Students frequently referred to such contacts, as in the case of a Co-Ed High fifth former who said: ‘In this day and age when hundreds of people are lining up for the one job, I mean . . . if you know the boss, or his son is in your class, or you know his wife’s cousin, you’ve practically got the job. That’s how my dad got his job’ (Fieldnotes, 8/10/86, p.1440). Students considered such procedures as illegitimate⁶ but effective: ‘It’s cheating really. Teachers go on about not mucking around, but dumb students get jobs dead easy too! It’s contacts, it’s who you know, not what you know’ (Fieldnotes, 1/7/86, p.887). While ‘dumb’ students considered such employment strategies as effective in their bid to squeeze themselves through into a job, those who had decided to invest in certification were less happy. One fifth former considered such procedures ‘really upsetting’, and recounted how two of her friends missed out on jobs even though they were better qualified than their competitors. The latter ‘got the job simply because they knew the employer’ (Fieldnotes, 25/3/86, p.510).

Discussion

It has been shown that students construct their own version of the job-getting formula, appropriating, rejecting, and re-defining messages given to them by teachers, according to their own personal needs and their different experiences of schooling and the wider social formation. We have seen that these students generally contest the simple credentialling ideology promoted by school. Even when some do invest in getting qualifications, they do so with the knowledge that other factors are not only part of the job-getting package but, depending on the nature of the relevant labour market, have *primacy* over qualifications. Among such factors were being Pakeha, having the ‘right’ attitudes, having work experience, and above all, having contacts.

Since, as has been stated earlier, the research from which this paper draws focused on perceptions (of teachers and students) and did not generally and systematically follow students in their job-searching endeavours, or employers in their labour-hiring strategies, one needs to be wary of drawing conclusions as to which job-getting formula has the most validity. However, there is a body of research which does suggest that the perceptions of students are more realistic and reflect more closely the criteria generally adopted by employers. It is to that research that we now turn in order to briefly discuss the data presented above, and to make some concluding remarks.

First of all, there does seem to be fairly conclusive evidence that qualifications are very important in granting access to jobs. In the UK, Payne (1987) draws on the results of her own research, and that of various other colleagues, to conclude that those who get GCE- and CSE-type qualifi-

cations have a much better chance of avoiding unemployment and of obtaining the kind of work they want. Similarly, in her thorough review of American research on the subject, Fitzgerald (1986) marshalls convincing evidence supporting Blau and Duncan's (1976) status-attainment model which suggests that while credentials do not necessarily help people *do* jobs better, they do help them to *get* jobs and to *advance* in them.

However, research also seems to suggest that qualifications are not enough on their own to unlock jobs, and neither do they necessarily have primacy over other elements in the job-getting package. Dore (1976), for instance, discovered that networks established by parents were a powerful factor which worked independently of certification in getting access to employment. Dale and Pires (1984) draw evidence from the research findings of Granovetter (1974), Smith (1980), Murray *et al.* (1981), Maguire and Ashton (1981) and Heath and Ridge (1983) to suggest that the strength of qualifications in the job-getting package is not always constant, but rather is dependent on two factors. First, qualifications have strength in times of capital accumulation because employers tend to use them in selection and promotion. However, in a time of crisis when there are large numbers of prospective employees for the one vacancy, employers cannot afford the time, effort and expense involved in sorting out the 'most appropriate' candidate. In these circumstances, factors other than qualifications come into play. With reference to both the UK and Portugal, Dale and Pires (1984, p.61) conclude that it is social capital in the form of networks – personal contacts with employers or acquaintances of employers – which 'supplement or substitute for educational capital in the job-getting package'.

Secondly, the strength of academic qualifications also depends on the nature of the labour market to which they are addressed. Maguire and Ashton (1981) suggest that while for some jobs the candidate with the highest qualifications does get chosen, in other circumstances qualifications either can be used as a screening device to set a particular threshold and thus eliminate a large number of applicants, or else become secondary to non-academic attributes. For some sectors of the labour market, the authors suggest that qualifications are at best considered irrelevant or useless, and at worst are a hindrance because they reveal ability and ambition beyond the requirements of the job. Hence, different recruitment strategies operate for different occupational segments.

With regard to the teachers' third claim, Hall and Carleton's work (1977) in Canada, and that of Ashton and Maguire (1980) in Britain, suggest that students were closer to the mark in their belief that employers valued qualifications more in terms of *personal* skills rather than, as their teachers thought, in terms of cognitive and technical skills. Both the Canadian and the British research suggest that employers considered qualifications to be evidence of attitudes – such as compliancy, competitiveness, and dedication – functional to capitalist relations of production. Salaman (1979), for

instance, discovered that in the recruitment procedures of a British branch of a Ford Motor Company, selectors were looking for candidates who showed an ability to internalise the values and attitudes the company stressed. Qualifications were either secondary, or important in so much as they hinted that such qualities were, in fact, present in the prospective employee.

Other studies, such as those carried out by Reid (1983) and St George and Smith (1983), have found out that even though the employers they sampled asked for certificates when advertising for vacancies with their firms, they really had no understanding of what skills these qualifications were evidence of. Moreover, given the implications of Braverman's (1974) thesis which relates the development of high technology with deskilling (*cf.* Littler, 1982; Apple, 1982), teachers were also incorrect when they insisted on the need for higher qualifications and skills to function as workers in a modern enterprise.

It would therefore appear that students had a more complete and realistic understanding than their teachers did regarding the role of credentials in the job-getting package. In the larger study from which the data in this article is drawn, it was found that the more developed nature of student knowledge applied to other areas related to work. Their knowledge was, however, hardly ever appropriated or legitimised in the teaching encounters observed. Teachers generally established – and did their utmost to maintain – a hierarchical relationship with their students, and engaged in what Freire (1972) calls 'banking education' – an education which assumes that teacher knowledge has legitimacy and 'correctly' interprets the world, and that it therefore must be deposited into ignorant recipients. A Freirian pedagogy would see teachers entering into a 'dialogic' relationship with their students where both groups engage in teaching and learning, a process of thematic and critical investigation of those realities which affect their lives.

It is suggested that one way by means of which a 'critical', 'problem-posing' education – one which decodes social reality, unmask its power relationships, and works in favour of the transformation of that reality into more equitable and democratic expressions – can enter into the schools is through the increasing realisation that students' knowledge has legitimacy. In a truly democratic and effective educational encounter, the student voice is at least equal to that of teachers. As with the case of credentialling, student knowledge and experiences – especially of those who are marginalised by conservative and traditional schooling – could challenge teachers to examine their often routinised, taken-for-granted knowledge. It has been one of the major insights of the 'new' sociology of education that such 'official' school knowledge is socially produced, legitimated and distributed, expressing as it does particular interests and values linked to issues of power and control (Simon, 1985). Forms of progressive education which appropriate the student voice seem even more plausible as alternative practice because, as

this article has suggested and as students consistently pointed out, conservative schooling's main excuse to justify its rigid syllabi, inflexible, teacher-centred pedagogies and exam-oriented teaching – namely the gaining of credentials – fails in its major intention: the getting of jobs.

Notes

- ¹ Some of these themes have been developed in article form. Among these are a critical appraisal of trade union education in secondary schools (Sultana, 1988a); a study of hidden school processes which direct ethnic 'minorities' to insecure and low-paid positions in the labour market (1988b); an evaluation of a liberal feminist career education model (1989a); and an ethnographic study of the reactions of a group of students to transition programmes (1989b).
- ² Throughout this and the larger study, and following Anyon (1981, p.4), social class was defined as 'a series of relationships to several aspects of the process in society by which goods, services and culture are produced'. Students are considered to belong to the working class, for instance, if their parents had limited access to capital and if they worked in the secondary sector of the New Zealand segmented labour market.
- ³ In New Zealand private schools became integrated into the state educational system in 1975. Under the Integration Act, private schools receive financial aid from the State, are supervised by State school inspectors, and are allowed to keep their 'special character'.
- ⁴ In New Zealand school leavers can get School Certificate (SC is equivalent to GCE Ordinary Level) or University Entrance (UE is equivalent to GCE Advanced Level). In addition, there are two kinds of alternative certificates offered to non-academic students. 'Local Certificates' are given at the end of alternative courses set by individual schools; and 'Regional Certificates' are awarded to students following alternative courses set and controlled by a group of schools in the region.
- ⁵ It is an aspect of New Zealand culture that young people do casual work after school hours, on weekends and during holidays. Over 85% of the students interviewed in this study had experienced work on such a part-time basis in the so-called 'grey economy'.
- ⁶ These kinds of networks seem to work against ethnic 'minorities', for instance. In the US, Becker (1979) has demonstrated that blacks have less access to personal networks which include whites who could act as referees or job intermediaries. McPartland and Dawkins (1985) also found that social networks to which whites are attached are more useful in the US for access to jobs than are the social networks to which blacks are attached. It is plausible to suggest that Maori and Pacific Island people in New Zealand suffer similar disadvantages.

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Correspondence should be addressed to: Dr Ronald G. Sultana, Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, Malta.