

Schools for globalized business: The APEC agenda for education

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Comment by Susan Ohanian: This article was written in 1997. It informed my thinking in *What happened to recess and why are our children struggling in Kindergarten?* and *Why is corporate America bashing our public schools?*, and continues to inform it today. I wonder why teacher unions in the U.S. don't talk about this sort of threat to public education.

The globalization agenda for education has seldom been laid out so clearly as in a paper published in May 1997 by the Ministry of Labour of the Republic of Korea. This Ministry serves as the Secretariat for the 2nd Human Resources Ministerial Meeting of APEC, being held in September 1997 in Seoul. The source of the paper, its content, and the process of which it is a part exemplify the reshaping of education rampant everywhere in support of the globalization of capital.

How can a paper produced in Korea be directly relevant to education issues in Canada and the U.S., Malaysia and Indonesia? It can happen because there is a very high degree of consensus among an international elite of corporate executives, government officials and bureaucrats in international agencies such as the OECD. The paper from Korea could have been written by any one of a hundred or more other agencies, and it would have differed only in detail, not in substance.

The common themes—so well-laid-out by the Korean officials—will be identified here and analyzed. First, however, it is important to provide the context of the production of the Korean paper.

APEC stands for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, a grouping of eighteen “economies” with borders on the Pacific, both in Asia and the Americas. It describes itself as “economies” rather than countries, partially to deal with the political sensitivities of containing China, Hong Kong and Taiwan as separate entities. It also is not a formal organization, but a group of leaders, ministers and officials who meet for “dialogue” to attempt to reach a consensus.

The nature of APEC and its processes shape the possible results.

While other international agencies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) also have an economic focus, their members are nations, not “economies.” Since nations are concerned about more than the economy, it may be easier to expand the content of the mandate of these other organizations beyond a narrow definition and to touch on social and cultural contexts within which an economy exists.

Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs makes the nature of APEC clear in a description on its website: "APEC's mandate can be summed up in a single phrase: 'APEC means business.' Although APEC is an official dialogue between Asia-Pacific economies, it has been driven by the needs and interests of the private sector from the start." Just in case anyone missed the point the first time, the Foreign Affairs Web article later reiterates that "If APEC had a single motto, it would be this: 'APEC means business.' "

Unlike the other major international trade liberalization initiatives, APEC's process is not one of negotiating and signing treaties.

It thus differs from NAFTA, GATT/WTO, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the like. APEC is a talk shop aimed at reaching a consensus. If any one of its participants disagrees with an action, then that "economy" is free to ignore it, even if all others agree.

In addition to an annual meeting of the leaders of the APEC economies (in fact, the official political leaders of the countries), Ministerial meetings are held, bringing together heads of like ministries, such as environment, transportation and trade. The Korean paper has been prepared for the second Human Resources Development Ministerial Meeting.

All involved in APEC have identified "human capital" as an important part of economic development. A Human Resources Development Working Group of high level officials from all the countries had already held 16 meetings by 1997.

Since APEC is not an organization, but rather a "dialogue," the lead on discussion is taken by the country that hosts the meeting. Since the APEC leaders meeting is in Vancouver in 1997, Canada heads the Secretariat and formally sets the agenda—with lots of talk to reach a consensus. Similarly, since the Human Resources Ministerial meeting is being held in Seoul, it is Korea that develops the "concept paper" for the education discussion, although other "designated member economies will prepare a concept paper of their own."

With that background, let's take a look at the content of the Korean paper. Like much of what is written about education and the new demands of the global economy, this paper is filled with clichés, false promises, and identification of the interests of the people with the interests of capital. I will highlight here the common globalization premises repeated in this APEC paper, with an explanation as well as a critique of the claims.

Globalization is inevitable and education must comply with its requirements
Education means preparing workers for business
Business should determine the content of education
The content of education should be work ethic, attitudes and skills
We have an oversupply of the educated; an undersupply of the trained
Training will eliminate unemployment
We are developing a common culture as a result of globalization
Labour should be co-opted into helping reshape education to serve globalization
What is to be done?

Globalization is inevitable and education must comply with its requirements

This APEC theme paper identifies three elements in the environment that require economies to change: 1) industrial restructuring due to technology; 2) a "new international order with increased competition;" and 3) globalization. It is not clear what globalization means to the authors, but a commonly-held meaning is that governments are powerless to act in ways that

bring under control either technological change or the nature of competition freed by trade liberalization.

The very nature of APEC—a dialogue of economies, not an agreement of states—both reflects and feeds this sense of powerlessness of government. The “compliance” language of the APEC paper carries this same sense of inevitability: “At an economy level, the economies must work on a system of education complying to the changing environment.”

This powerful sense of inevitability silences any consideration that education should serve the social and cultural needs of a particular people, not just the economic needs of a world economy that is out of control. It also makes incredible and unthinkable the view that groups should be getting together on an international basis to figure out how to bring the global economy under control so that it meets the needs of people, not the other way around.

Education means preparing workers for business

If “APEC means business,” then—as set out in this APEC paper—“Education means preparing workers for business.” This core concept is explicit:

The emphasis on education for itself or on education for good members of a community without a large emphasis on preparations for the future work are no longer appropriate. In other words, the idea that work is only an instrumental part of one’s life is no longer appropriate. Such a dichotomic view on education and work cannot be justified in the world where economic development is emphasized.

It should not come as a surprise that a collection of economies that includes a number of repressive states would not place a high value on education serving to prepare people to participate in a democratic society.

In fact, even in those APEC countries that are nominally democratic, issues of international trade are clearly considered outside the purview of the people. This is clearly indicated in the secrecy of the negotiations around the negotiation within the OECD of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and the refusal of the Canadian government to debate it in the 1997 federal election. Focusing on education as preparing workers for business not only serves the economic interests of transnational corporations. It also reduces the capacity of people to demand that governments take action to limit the power of corporations over their lives.

Business should determine the content of education

Once the job of the school is defined as preparing workers for business, it logically follows that business should have a central role in determining the content of schooling. Again, the APEC paper could not be more explicit. It says “that decisions must be taken by a school system for good business reasons with maximum business intervention.”

The authors condemn existing schools because curricula have been developed by “intellectual elites with emphasis on learning for the sake of learning without much emphasis on outcomes.” These impractical intellectuals also focus on concepts and theories, rather than applications and work experience in the field. Where work experience does exist, it is dismissed as superficial.

These problems will be fixed up, they suggest, by business-school partnerships, a code phrase for letting corporations shape the schools.

They want employers to share the role of educating students, an exchange of personnel between industry and school and to have industry personnel “take part in the curriculum development pertinent to their industry to make the curriculum realistic to the needs of the industry.”

The content of education should be work ethic, attitudes and skills

The narrow frame of education, as seen by the APEC meeting secretariat, is made explicit in the “broad principles and expectations on a school system that integrates business practices” that they offer for consideration of the other APEC economies. These include:

- A school system should have an integrated framework on education based on standards and expectations set by a society.
- Students should acquire a breadth of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for adjustments into work environment.
- All students are expected to develop work ethics and attitude appropriate for a working life.
- Schools should provide a comprehensive skills-based achievement record to better inform the employers of a student’s social skill development level and width and depth of a student’s knowledge and skills. This will aid the employers to better select and recruit workers.

We have an oversupply of the educated; an undersupply of the trained

When education is viewed from the “human capital” perspective, the current situation can be seen as the classic problem that creates a crisis in capitalism—overproduction. The capitalist’s choices for dealing with excess supply over demand are two:

- 1) shut down production until inventories are down, or
- 2) shift production to another product for which the demand is greater than the supply.

If these are applied to education, the options are either to reduce the participation rate in schools or to shift the students to training programs for specific jobs that are in demand.

The APEC paper’s authors use the example of Korea to illustrate the problem as they see it. They point out that unemployment among youth is much higher than in the workforce as a whole, a situation common to all the developed economies as well as the Asian “tiger” economies. At the same time, a high percentage of high school graduates are receiving college education. This is leading to the majority of college-educated taking jobs below their qualification level, again not unique to Korea, as my son with a B.A. working part-time as a clerk—and many others in his situation—will attest.

The authors do not expect this situation to change: “Since demand for the highly-educated are not rising, this tendency is predicted to continue into the future.” Of the capitalist choices of shutting down or shifting production, the APEC paper opts for a shift. It bemoans a situation where “general high schools are highly over populated compared to vocational high schools.” It complains that vocational and technical subjects don’t gain the enrollments of the humanities, and that workplaces and technology are not at the centre of all study.

These shifts in education production can be imposed in a number of ways. As an example, in Mexico City a standardized test—the Examen Unico—was created to channel more students out of programs leading to university and forcing them into vocational/technical programs.

Although not explicitly advocated in the APEC concept paper, shutting down production is a policy implicitly followed, as well, through reductions in education funding and increases in tuition costs, as well as privatization—actions being taken in a long list of countries. These policies are generally explained as necessary because of the reduced capacity of the state to raise revenue in the era of globalization. This, in turn, results from governments submitting to the blackmail of threats of capital strike—moving production and jobs elsewhere.

Training will eliminate unemployment

The claim that training will eliminate unemployment is the most misleading of the many claims of those who place the blame for unemployment on the unemployed rather than on an economy that does not produce enough jobs.

In the face of persistent unemployment—especially of the young—both developed and developing countries make the claim that training is the solution to unemployment. This APEC paper is no exception. It claims that “the strengthening of the workforce will increase employability...and resolve unemployment, under-employment and other problems in the labor markets.”

The only way in which this would be a credible solution is if the main cause of youth unemployment were structural—a mismatch of training and employment opportunities. This is, in fact, the claim that is made: through “smooth transitions from school to work, the economies can lower the level of unemployment among young people and cut the inefficiency associated with frequent job changes.”

While the paper claims there is a shortage of craftsmen and technicians within the Korean economy, the more general experience in the more developed as well as less developed economies is that the real shortage is of jobs, not skills. As the experience of Malaysia has shown, workers drawn from rural areas, working at low pay, can be trained to produce in the most high tech factories. It is the combination of low pay with high skill, not the high skill itself that means that the jobs will temporarily locate there.

The problem of lack of jobs is centred not in workers, but in the two characteristics that the APEC paper says will characterize the 21st century as the century of globalization: “severe competition, and rapid changes in technology.”

Severe competition in the cost of labour means that industry moves from country to country, without constraint, to take advantage of a still-lower wage and higher tax incentives being offered elsewhere. William Greider’s book, *One World, Ready or Not*, describes these peripatetic corporations, jumping from one Asian economy to another, from establish factory to southern maquiladoras, with no responsibility to any interests other than their own profit. Low-cost production of athletic shoes in Indonesia loses out to lower cost production in Vietnam. This movement is facilitated by technology that requires fewer and fewer production workers, as well as puts legs on the jobs that do exist.

The central promise of the APEC education strategy is that more training will produce jobs. Since a better match of improved training is all that is offered to produce more jobs, it will inevitably fail. The purpose of APEC—to liberalize trade by eliminating government intervention and control over corporate power—means that an important tool has been given up: government action to mitigate the social impact of cutthroat competition and rampant technological change.

We are developing a common culture as a result of globalization

This is the most puzzling of the assertions made by the APEC meeting secretariat. In fact, the first copy of the paper that I received had a big question mark beside the paragraph that says:

The globalization of economies show up as the following: The present business strategies focus on cultural integration; all economies are in the race with different economies to gain and develop new markets.

This doesn't make much sense if we think of culture as practices, language and beliefs which a geographically defined group of people share in common and that distinguish them from people who have a different set of practices, language and beliefs.

But we are, of course, dealing here with globalization defined according to a neo-liberal, trade liberalization view. From this perspective, culture is a particular set of products that can be sold and consumed, just as hard goods can be sold and consumed. The objective is to commodify culture and to find the biggest market.

Homogenization of tastes and desires will produce the biggest market for “cultural products.”

Communications technology and global media corporations are certainly at work advancing homogenization in the process of creating markets and integrating production for these markets. This is not really, however, a race between economies, as the authors describe it, but a race between a handful of corporate giants who have no particular interest in one economy—as the term is meant in APEC-speak.

While the pressures for cultural homogenization are powerful, counter-forces also exist. Some of these counter-forces are within education systems where many still believe that developing skills to democratically influence the nature of their society is a worthy educational objective.

Because globalization is creating a global economy and integrated culture, we should develop a common curriculum and educational practices.

Given the nature of APEC, proposals for commonality in schools are not based on formal agreements. Rather, the strategy is one of information—sharing, exchanges, conferences, and research. Specific suggestions include (no surprise) promoting the benefits of business-education links and sharing experiences with school-to-work transitions. Developing curriculum also gets thrown into the mix, with a proposal to exchange experts and experiences among APEC member economies.

Two structures already exist to pursue this convergence in education. One is a number of university-based APEC Study Centres that receive funding to carry out research aimed at advancing the trade liberalization agenda. In times of limited research funding from governments, the academic research agenda is more susceptible to shaping by the availability of these resources.

The other is the “APEC Education Forum,” a sub-group of the APEC Human Resources Development Working Group. It undertakes projects that range from “Mutual Recognition of Qualifications in the Region” to “Performance Monitoring of Educational Systems: Framework Conference.” Education officials from all the APEC countries attend these meetings.

Increasingly the framing of education policy issues is taking place in this international arena, rather than in the schools and communities that the education system is supposed to serve.

Labour should be co-opted into helping reshape education to serve globalization

An interest in involving labour is a relatively new element on the APEC discussion agenda, and it may not survive critical scrutiny from a number of the “economies.” On the other hand, when unions see the role assigned in this proposal, they may well not be interested, either. The concept paper definitely does not suggest minimum labour standards or observance of the International Labour Organization Conventions on the right to free association and organization. Rather, it says:

To meet the strong requirement for qualified, flexible and motivated human resources, employers’ and workers’ organizations are expected to play as the effective promoters of change with various activities which facilitate training programs.

While unions have and will remain advocates of training for workers, the emphasis here is not on meeting the interests of workers, but that of the corporate globalized system. While the authors of the paper may see those interests as the same, many labour activists do not.

What is to be done?

How should those who value equity and the basic principles of public education respond to this APEC paper and the many similar proposals and programs. Should we accept that globalization and its implications are inevitable and identify some areas that can mitigate the worst impact on public education? Or should we undertake the larger challenge of resisting the fundamental premises on which it is based? Three considerations seem of primary importance in making that choice.

1. Globalization only benefits the minority.

While some have benefited from trade liberalization and globalization, most have not. Income disparities have increased within and between societies.

A primary function of modern government has been to create a more equitable distribution of a societies resources, which has been of benefit to all, not just those who directly benefit.

Globalization—as currently practiced—is an abandonment of that positive function.

2. Human wants and needs are more than just economic.

While education definitely has an impact in the economy as a whole and on the economic well-being of individuals, it must respond to much more of what it means to be human. Individual growth, social and cultural development and cohesion, democratic participation and the interests of the whole community must be important elements that public education continues to address.

3. The developing globalized system is not invulnerable.

The current crisis in the “Asian tiger” economies demonstrates some of the vulnerability of this developing globalized system. While there is some chance of a collapse of the system with global repercussions reflecting the current level of integration, it is more likely that it will be changed by many small actions and challenges, based on local acts of resistance that affirm the principles of equity, democracy, social justice and public education. Repeated and varied actions to support the public purpose of public education is the necessary antidote to the domination of the economic goals an business interests encouraged by APEC.

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