



The New Schoolhouse: Literacy, Managers, and Belief

Mary-Ellen Boyle

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This unique book describes literacy programs that take place in contemporary workplaces and explores their consequences for the employees (especially the managers), the organizations, and society as a whole. Employing a critical sociological perspective, Boyle argues that literacy education in the workplace has as much to do with organizational legitimacy and managerial ideology as with illiterate workers. Her analysis reveals that such programs can be understood as having a range of consequences: Not only do they increase skills, these programs improve work attitudes and show employer beneficence. They also assimilate immigrants, assure retention and stability at the lowest organizational level, legitimize competitive strategy based on investment in human resources, privatize a neglected public good, and allow middle managers to maintain their position in the hierarchy, among other things. As a result, she suggests that employer-sponsored literacy programs have the effect of perpetuating the inequities experienced by those at the bottom of the organizational chart, despite the rhetoric of egalitarianism and opportunity that typically accompanies educational endeavors.

Through the example of workplace literacy programs, Boyle debunks the commonplace assumption that education is an unmitigated good and addresses fears of corporate co-optation. The phenomenon of employer-sponsored education is revealed to be complex and contradictory, with consequences that extend beyond the classroom walls. Economic inequities are exacerbated by such programs, and the social problems associated with illiteracy are not alleviated. By exploring the boundary-blurring that occurs when market organizations become involved with non market ideas and practices, when public and private sector responsibilities shift, and when the workplace becomes the new schoolhouse, Boyle illuminates the complexities involved at organizational, individual, and societal levels.

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