CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In September 2003, the Stillwater, Minnesota school district signed an agreement with Apple Computer to supply every teacher and student in Oak-Land Junior High with a laptop computer. Just one month earlier, Apple Computer had approached the principal of the junior high about using his school as a demonstration site. Apple gave him very little time to decide whether or not to enter into this partnership, and, within only a month, the school board had voted for the plan and he had signed on the dotted line. The agreement stipulated that the district would have to foot $1.7 of the $2.2 million for the new iBook laptops and other equipment over the following five years and that Apple would help to underwrite the project. This agreement became such a controversial issue in the school district that two laptop opponents campaigned together as write-in candidates for the November school board election and ultimately defeated two incumbent board members who had voted for the laptop plan (Boldt, 2003; Draper, 2003).

Given the financial constraints currently facing school districts, school administrators are finding it more and more difficult to allocate sufficient funds for technology. The Stillwater partnership is an example of how administrators are increasingly looking to outside sources for help in funding the hardware and the software necessary to remain competitive in today's educational market. As a result of financial constraints, school-corporate partnerships have become vital in the quest for cutting-edge technology. At the surface, schools benefit from these

partnerships by receiving the latest hardware and software, and corporations benefit from increased profits. The exchange for these materials and resources is often financial gain for the corporation, accomplished through advertising, marketing, and promoting non-educational materials in schools. The exchange also allows businesses to acquire more control over the curriculum and materials to which school children are exposed. While schools are able to acquire resources that they would not have otherwise, the benefits derived from these partnerships have led many to question the ethical practices of corporate partnerships.

School-corporate partnerships are best defined by Brown (1994), who characterized a school-business partnership as “a set of resource exchanges between schools and their environment,” and by McMahon, who added that school-business partnerships are “a collaboration between large or small companies and schools with the express purpose of benefiting one or both of the parties involved” (Cromarty, 1997, p. 33).

While there definitely are benefits of school-corporate partnerships, concerns have been raised about the financial, educational, social, ethical, and/or political costs of business involvement in education. One concern that eclipses those costs, noted by researchers, consumer activists and politicians, is that of commercialism in the schools. According to Molnar and Reaves (2002), the amount of money corporations spend on marketing to children is at an all-time high, and, “this apparent increase in commercial activities probably is the result of both the increase in marketing to children in general and the vulnerability

of the schools" (p. 2). Schools are continually experiencing new demands for academic improvement and accountability from federal, state and local governments and school boards, especially with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. All of these pressures make commercial offers of assistance very attractive.

A second concern about the costs of school-business partnerships is the role that business plays in funding educational programs and materials. This concern reflects a tension between the private and public aspects of educational provision (Benson & O'Halloran, 1987). According to Labaree (1997), "The poles of this debate were defined during the country's formative years by the political idealism of Thomas Jefferson and the economic realism of Alexander Hamilton" (p. 17). Labaree (1997) maintained that the tension essentially was based on the premise that economic freedom leads to an unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control. At the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty and democracy.

Kohn (1999) maintained that "one of the great fault lines running through discussions about education creates two camps that might be labeled 'education for democracy' and 'education for profits'" (p. 118). Labaree (1987) also noted that there is a "continuing tension between two competing elements of American ideology, one that elevates liberty and promotes free markets; and the other that elevates equality and promotes participatory politics" (p. 489). Both of these statements signal the underlying tensions that plague educators who must

choose between 1) accepting and using curriculum and materials provided by the private, for-profit sector which may compromise schools' democratic values, and 2) refusing curriculum and materials which may compromise schools' economic well-being.

Democracy and democratic values in education always have been controversial issues, especially when weighing the values of democracy against the values of market ideology. Technology in schools creates even more controversy when weighing those values because keeping up with the innovations and improvements in computer hardware, software, and connectivity proves to be an expense beyond the scope of many schools. It is indisputable that technology has become a necessary and prevalent way of life. The speed and access of information is at an all-time high. E-mails, faxes, and Internet availability give instantaneous global communication. Yet, according to Boyles (1998), even John Dewey, who envisioned public schools as a microcosm of a democratic society, would concede the advantages of technology and probably would be at the forefront of those advocating technological innovation. However, the limitation for Dewey would be that although computers in every classroom would be desirable, it is not without the caveat that it is as long as the technology would be going toward what he called 'liberal humanism' (Boyles, 1998).

Some of the concerns inherent with technologies include how they are used in schools, how they are integrated into curricula, and how schools ultimately pay for them. According to Boyles (1998),

> corporations are eager to exploit the topic of technology by arguing that unless ‘we’ are ‘technologically literate,’ the United States will be unable to compete in the next century. To assure acceptance of this mantra, corporate interests, via school-partnerships and donations, increasingly control what kind of technology teachers and students face in their classrooms (p. 58).

The educational, social, political, and ethical, as well as financial, questions then lie in where to draw the line between market ideology and democratic values with regard to computer technology. There are those who argue in favor of market ideology, which translates to privatization of schools in a free-market, capitalist society, and those who argue against the privatization of schools and corporate influence and operate along more democratic lines. This argument leads to the debate of whether public education is truly a public good or, with the privatization of schools in the free-market, is it becoming more of a private good. Pisciotta (1984) explains that public goods and private goods do not differ in the nature of their production they differ in the nature of their consumption. He characterizes a public good as: 1) having simultaneous consumption, that is the benefits of the good flow simultaneously to many, but not necessarily all consumers; and 2) being nonexclusionary, meaning a supplier cannot exclude consumers from benefits once the good is provided. Economists view the concept of a public good as one that must be provided for through the public sector because of inadequacies in the private system. One such example of a pure public good is the national defense system (Pisciotta, 1984). A private

good, in contrast, is produced through private enterprise and the producers make the good available to consumers who are willing to pay for it. The producers are also able to deny the good to consumers who are not willing to pay the price (Pisciotta, 1984). Private goods operate according to the laws of supply and demand. If education is a public good, then government must finance the good. If, on the other hand, education is a private good, consumers are free to choose among alternative suppliers (Pisciotta, 1984).

Elmore (1984) argued that education is a “mixed good.” He maintained that the benefits of education accrue partly to individuals, in the form of enhanced income and self respect, and partly to society as a whole, in the form of enhanced productivity and total welfare. A second rationale Elmore (1984) offers for the classification of a mixed good is that the costs of education are borne partly by individuals, in the form of direct expenditures and foregone income, and partly by society as a whole, in the form of tax support for public education. Third, he said, education is provided by a vast and complex array of organizations, including public and private schools, voluntary associations, employers, and units of government at every level. Thus, he concluded, education is not easily classified as a function of government, as it is neither purely public, nor is it purely private.

“In the long course of events,” said Benson and O’Halloran (1987), “the processes of determining allocations of educational resources reflect a tension between private and public aspects of educational provisions” (p. 496). With the increasing expenditures of technology, the market will continue to play a leading

role until the digital divide is closed and all schools are able to receive the funding they need to acquire their own technology on their own terms.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to examine how school administrators think about school-corporate partnerships that involve technology, specifically the criteria and guidelines they consider when entering into partnerships and what they perceive as the benefits and costs associated with their school-corporate partnerships. The study revealed the level of critical consciousness of school administrators; the extent to which school administrators consider the educational, financial, political, social, and ethical criteria, benefits and costs related to school-corporate partnerships.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in determining the extent to which school administrators have an awareness and understanding of the benefits and costs associated with school-corporate partnerships, and the degree to which they consider specific criteria and guidelines when deciding whether or not to enter into particular partnerships. This significance stemmed from what Molnar (1998) described as “the seeming failure of the education community to describe and attempt to understand and assess the impact of commercial activities on the character and quality of schools and their programs” (p. ii). The study ultimately determined whether or not there is a relationship between critical consciousness and commercialism in the schools. Most of the literature that deals with the history of school-corporate partnerships is based on what the business world has

reported as the needs of preparing the future workforce. More recent literature on school-corporate partnerships has noted the ever-increasing commercial presence and funding issues in schools. What has not been as well documented is *how* administrators think about school-corporate partnerships and *what* they consider when entering into and maintaining school-corporate partnerships.

These *how* and *what* aspects of school-corporate partnerships ultimately revealed the level of critical consciousness of school administrators with regard to partnerships. It was important to research this critical consciousness of school administrators for several reasons. First, it was important to understand how school administrators think and what they think about, because their decisions regarding partnerships can have a dramatic affect on the democratic ideals of public education regarding funding, pedagogical practices, and potentially unethical commercial practices. For example, if schools increasingly rely on businesses and corporations for funding, the federal and state governments may be less likely to provide adequate funds for public education and divert the funds elsewhere. This erosion of public funding exacerbates the tension between the private and public aspects of education. Thus, the decisions of school administrators can potentially have drastic effects upon the funding of public education nation-wide. Second, it is essential that school administrators and school districts themselves decide on the curriculum and materials for their students. Not only is this rational from a pedagogical perspective, it is also rational for the status of the education profession that school administrators control the curriculum and materials to which school children are exposed. Giving

up control over curriculum and materials degrades the profession and admits that school administrators need the business executives to define what children should learn. According to Molnar (2005),

> Dewey argued for a pedagogy guided by rational thought and problem-solving practice through which individuals could develop to their greatest capacity and contribute most effectively to democratic civic culture. In every aspect, advertising ideology is the enemy of Dewey's philosophy (p.80).

Third, in the past ten years, there has been growing concern about the monetary gains that corporations seek from school partnerships – not only in terms of net profit but in terms of potential profitability from commercialism and market share aimed at children. According to Boyles (1998), "teachers are pawns in such an economic, quasiscientific game of power and money played by politicians and businesspeople in search of "the" model for ultimate corporate profit" (p. 174). While school administrators are faced with external mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, they need to be aware of the voices they have in becoming more transformative educators and more critical consumers of corporate involvement.

School administrators are decision-makers, not unlike executives of corporations. Peter Drucker (2004) maintained that an *effective* executive makes decisions as a systematic process with clearly defined elements and in a distinct sequence of steps. Drucker (2004) suggested that before any executive springs into action, she needs to plan her course, taking into consideration the desired

results, probable restraints, future revisions and check-in points. A decision to enter into a partnership is one that can have a major effect on the school, both in the short run and in the long run.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Two conceptual frameworks will be used to inform this study. One framework for structuring an investigation into *how* school administrators think is Freire's (1973) model of critical consciousness. According to Freire (1973), critical consciousness enables people to reflect on themselves, their responsibilities, and their roles in society that lead to an increased capacity for choice. A second framework for examining *what* school administrators think about regarding school-corporate partnerships is based on the perspectives of political economy. Political economy in this study is concerned with the perceived economics of the partnerships, as well as the educational, social, political, and ethical questions of the partnership gains and losses.

By employing these frameworks, this study revealed the extent to which school personnel understand the political and economic connections between capitalist enterprises and public systems. There are different opinions by leading educational researchers about which of the students' interests matter most. On the one side there are humanistic goals which help children become content, fulfilled adults with a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. On the other hand, there are more utilitarian goals, which help children grow into consumers with money to spend (Kohn, 1999). According to education historian David Labaree, "the financial success of each child vis-à-vis his fellows

has become the driving force of American education – eclipsing not only happiness and other humanistic goals but also the public rationales for schooling" (Kohn, 1999, p. 119). Labaree (1997) believed that this ideal has turned the school systems into "a vast public subsidy for private ambition, an arena for zero-sum competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities for gaining educational distinctions at the expense of each other" (p. 258). Employing the frameworks addresses political and economic aspects of partnerships, as well as other benefits and costs of school-corporate partnerships.

Benefits and Costs

Benefits and costs in this study were concerned with both the economic and non-economic aspects of school-corporate partnerships. Economic benefits and costs included financial issues: specifically, the dollar amount of goods and services provided to the school through the partnership. Non-economic aspects included educational, social, political, and ethical costs and benefits associated with such partnerships. Educational criteria, benefits, and costs included those associated with student achievement, including computer literacy and skills. Social criteria, benefits, and costs were concerned with whether or not the partnerships extended the benefits beyond the school to affect society at large. The political criteria, benefits, and costs considered whether the goods and services that are part of the partnership contract are those that should be funded

through public sources or private sources. The ethical criteria, benefits, and costs of the partnership included whether or not the school considers aspects of corporate commercialism and profitability.

Political Economy

Concepts of political economy were especially useful for this second model because they addressed various dimensions of the reasons why school administrators consider entering into and maintaining school-corporate partnerships.

Political economy has a long, rich history. It is a term that has been used over three centuries to explain the interrelationship between politics and economics; the interrelation of individual and collective decision making, which involves the functioning of the market process, the political process, and the interaction between the two (Caporaso & Levine, 1992; Meltzer, Cukierman, & Richard, 1991).

Economics emphasizes markets, which rest on the notion of a free-choosing individual, while political science emphasizes power (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). For the purposes of this study, the definition of political economy that will frame the research is the interrelationship between economics and politics: ‘economics’ referring to who gains and who loses, specifically the costs and benefits associated with school-corporate partnerships, and ‘politics’ referring to the mechanisms by which the gains and losses accrue.

Critical Transitivity

Consumer awareness ultimately leads educators to become more critically transitive people who, according to Shor (1992), “make broad connections between individual experience and social issues and synthesize personal and social meanings with a specific theme, text or issue” (p. 127). Examining the extent to which school administrators acknowledged perceived costs and benefits of school-corporate partnerships, and how they used them as criteria with which to assess the viability of a partnership, revealed their degree of critical consciousness.

To become critically transitive, educational personnel need to begin questioning the veracity of national goals assumptions and businesses’ use of these goals, which ultimately elevate capitalistic pretense (Boyles, 1998). Critical transitivity means overcoming consumerist lethargy and disposing of passive acceptance and reliance on imagery. Instead, critical transitivity requires authenticity and understanding of the connections between disparities of power and privilege, their causes, and potential solutions (Boyles, 1998). In other words, to become critically transitive means to continually think of the repercussions of choices related to utilizing corporate-sponsored curriculum and curricular materials.

As Cromarty (1997) indicated, school-business partnerships have been subjected to many heated debates. She maintained that partnerships are very delicate alliances that need to be implemented with much thought and care. Hasty decision-making and profit-seeking individuals, as illustrated by the Stillwater partnership, “require the need for cautious, level-headed administrators

to investigate and determine whether the partnership can be successful based on the needs of the students staff and community" (p. 33).

SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter One has provided an overview of the purpose, significance and frameworks for the research into the critical consciousness of school administrators with regard to school-corporate partnerships. Chapter Two, the review of the literature, describes the previous work that has been done regarding business influence in education, technology in education, and commercialism. This chapter highlights some of the research by leading organizations such as the Committee for Economic Development, the United States Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and influential educators such as Dale Mann, Terry Grobe, Deron Boyles, Alex Molnar, and Alexander Wohl.

Chapter Three describes the design and methodology of this study. This chapter includes the qualitative research design and methodology used to explore the two aspects of school-corporate partnerships: *how* administrators think about school-corporate partnerships and *what* they consider when entering into and maintaining school-corporate partnerships. This chapter also includes the research questions that will guide this study, the research instrument used to gather data, the selected sample, the researcher's role in the study, the data collection process, data analysis and a more detailed discussion of the conceptual frameworks.

Chapter Four describes the results of the study. It includes the interviews conducted with school administrators, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Five summarizes the findings of the study, central themes that emerged from the study, and a discussion of the new grounded theory. The chapter also includes limitations of the study and implications for further research. A bibliography and appendices can be found following Chapter Five.