

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE HISTORICAL ARGUMENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION REFORM

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ABSTRACT

The historical development of vocational education in the 20th century reveals 2 distinct visions on its role in preparing students for occupational and social life. Concerned with the present popularity of instrumental skills curricula in vocational education, this paper proposes an alternative approach that protects democratic ideals while still preparing students for future career challenges. It argues that a morally-appropriate model for vocational education is found within the comprehensive democratic approach developed by Dewey (1916), rather than through narrowly conceived skills-based programs.

Responding to various political, economic, and social forces, current debates on the future of public schooling are increasingly framed within the discourse of occupational relevance, globalization, and international market competition. Reflecting a historical pattern consistent with various market economy crises, governments and corporations from industrialized countries around the world are heralding vocational education reform as a major determinant of economic success within the new global economy (Spring, 1998). The 20th century has witnessed considerable debate on whether instrumental skills-based education better prepares students for their occupational life than traditional academic programs.

This paper traces the historic development of vocational education during the 20th century and evaluates the views of various educators in an attempt to inform current reasoning on the issue. Concerned with the present popularity of instrumental employability skills curricula, this paper further proposes an alternative approach to vocational education that promotes democratic ideals while still preparing students for their career challenges. It argues that a morally-appropriate model for vocational education is found within the comprehensive democratic approach developed by Dewey (1916), rather than through narrowly-conceived skills-based programs.

ECONOMIC SHIFTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Early in the 20th century vocational education was a prominent topic of discussion among American educators as schools struggled to meet the labor force needs consistent with the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economic base (Wirth, 1972). In his 1907 address to congress, President Theodore Roosevelt urged major school reform that would provide industrial education

in urban centers and agricultural education in rural areas (Tanner & Tanner, 1980). Similar to the rationale supporting the current round of vocational education reform, this earlier crusade was predicated on enhancing domestic competitiveness in expanding global markets. Revisionist studies point out, however, that vocational education during this era was also aimed at socializing workers to stabilize American industrial society by creating “a school system that socialized youth for their new economic roles and sorting them into their appropriate niches in the expanding capitalist division of labor” (Kantor, 1986, p. 402).

Although the historical impact of vocational education reform cannot be fully understood outside the class structure characterizing market economy societies, the vocational movement was more diverse in its constituency and interests than the revisionist perspective suggests. A powerful alliance supporting federal funding for vocational education was formed in 1910 when the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who had long opposed such programs as discriminatory, lent its approval to the National Association of Manufacturers’ (NAM) promotion of trade instruction in schools. Formed in 1895, one of NAM’s first projects was to investigate how education might provide a more effective means to help American manufacturers compete in expanding international markets. The AFL joined the vocational reform movement believing its participation would help protect working class interests by providing them with a voice at the table on education policy development within the emerging industrial economy. The strength of the combined lobby was such that in 1914 Congress authorized President Woodrow Wilson to appoint a commission to study whether federal aid to vocational education was warranted (Kantor, 1986).

Charles Prosser, a student of social efficiency advocate David Snedden, was principle author of the commission’s eventual report to Congress. Reflecting the views of his mentor, Prosser considered separately administered, and narrowly focused, vocational training the best available way to help non-academic students secure employment after completing school. In its final report to Congress, the commission, chaired by Georgia Senator Hoke Smith, declared an urgent social and educational need for vocational training in public schools. On February 23, 1917, President Wilson signed the Smith-Hughes Act into law, and federal funding for American vocational education was established (Cremin, 1962). The Smith-Hughes Act specified particular vocational programs, created administrative procedures, and prescribed skills-based training programs for instruction in agriculture, trade and industries, and home economics (Tanner & Tanner, 1980). But to the chagrin of some vocationalists, the programs included in the Act were not compulsory. Further, although Smith-Hughes established a precedent of federal-state financing for vocational education, it did so within a unitary administrative school structure. As a result, the legislation was not an unqualified victory for Prosser, Snedden, and other supporters of self-administered, narrowly-focused, and mandatory vocational education for streamed students.

Snedden advocated a vocational training model that responded directly to the specific labor force needs identified by industry (Drost, 1967). Under his scheme, vocational education would be structured to direct non-academic students into required labor force roles for which they were deemed best suited. He argued that educators should simply accept the industrial social system and its accompanying class structure as an inevitable fact of life, and channel their energies toward ensuring its efficient operation. According to Snedden, the primary purpose of vocational education was meeting labor force needs and preparing students with assumed limited intellectual capacities for immediate employment in industry (Gordon, 1999). Indeed, his social efficiency vocational education framework reflects the Social Darwinian assumption that inherently disparate individual characteristics invariably produce an economically-stratified society.

Accepting social stratification as inevitable, Snedden assumed as an axiom that most students, a group he estimated at 80%, derived little or no benefit from traditionally-organized academic studies (Drost, 1967). Rather than considering the unique academic challenges confronting students from lower strata economic backgrounds, he blamed their early departure from school on an innate inability to understand abstract subject matter. Snedden believed it made little practical sense to expose these students to comprehensive high school curricula—ones including training within general schooling—and viewed such programs as antithetical to social-efficiency objectives. Lacking trade-specific skills, graduates from comprehensive programs were unable to assume the work of a journeyman laborer in any trade and, therefore, represented an additional burden on society (Drost). From Snedden’s perspective the only acceptable vocational education model was one that prepared non-academic students for immediate occupational participation within the existing industrial infrastructure.

John Dewey was the most vocal opponent of Snedden’s social-efficiency framework, warning it would validate class stratification by accepting an educational philosophy of social predestination: “Any scheme of vocational education, which takes as its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination” (Dewey, 1916, p. 318). Dewey rejected the image of students as passive individuals controlled by market economy forces and existentially limited by inherently proscribed intellectual capacities. In his view, students were active pursuers and constructors of knowledge, living and working in a world of dynamic social beings (Hyland, 1993). Diametrically opposed to Snedden’s view, Dewey believed vocational education should be included as part of a comprehensive curriculum to help students develop a greater range of personal capacities that expanded, rather than limited, their future occupational options: “. . . vocational guidance must not be conceived as leading up to a fixed and irretrievable choice” (Scheffler, 1995a, p. 34). Rejecting any educational approach where present pedagogical practices were designed to serve anticipated labor force needs, Dewey maintained, “The only adequate training *for* occupations is training *through* occupations” (p. 310).

POST WAR REFORM IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

World War II and its aftermath engendered various social and economic problems that prompted yet another major round of vocational education debate and reform. In 1943, the National Education Association’s (NEA) 42nd yearbook featured vocational education as the topic of greatest import in American schooling (Henry, 1943). The following year, the NEA’s Education Policies Commission introduced *Education for ALL American Youth*, a program advocating a full range of vocational programs to prepare high school students for perceived labor force needs. Similar to present employability skills programs, the plan included a supervised work experience component to facilitate student transition between school and work. Under the commission’s proposal, however, vocational education curriculum remained broad-based to ensure school sensitivity to local labor market conditions. Unlike the separately administered format advocated by Snedden, students would not be streamed into academic and vocational categories and the programs remained flexible and interrelated (Tanner & Tanner, 1980).

In spite of the NEA’s attempt to assuage concerns among educational traditionalists by integrating vocational programs into existing curricula, Bestor (1956) condemned any attempt, regardless of format, to dilute academic content with occupational training. He launched a scathing attack on vocational education reform, arguing that students should not be permitted to take vocational

courses for academic credit nor should such courses be available to students under age 17. Bestor viewed vocational education as the end product of corporate power politics and deemed such schooling epistemically paralyzing and contrary to sound educational philosophy: “In any vocational school, including a school that provides training in pedagogy, students are rarely called upon to think of knowledge as the fruit of original inquiry. Knowledge is simply fact, a body of established data, stubborn, inert and unquestioned” (Bestor, 1956, p. 78). Condemning vocational education as creatively stifling, Bestor argued it unlikely to generate any original or worthwhile thinking in students. Instead, they would be intellectually crippled by an education that “generates in the student the belief that he cannot deal with any matter until he has taken a course in it” (p. 79).

Tanner and Tanner suggest Bestor’s devaluation of vocational education is predicated on the problematic metaphysical mind/body distinction and the epistemic hierarchy it effects in academic discourse. Rationalist epistemologies, such as those embodied in Platonic and Cartesian philosophy, privilege the mind as the source of immutable truth and understanding and condemn the body as the source of irrational appetite, sensory error, and moral instability. As a result, intellectual activity is afforded a higher epistemic and social status among many scholars than activities involving physical labor. Modern science undermines this dubious epistemic distinction between rationalism and empiricism by revealing the necessary interaction between reason, or mind, and sense data, or body, for the successful acquisition of knowledge (Scheffler, 1995a). Further, when properly conceived, uncoerced and socially-appreciated physical work offers as much insight into human experience as science or aesthetics by satisfying essential and rudimentary human existential requirements. Appreciating the value of physical labor, Weil (1991) argues, “Exactly to the same extent as art and science, though in a different way, physical labor is a certain contact with the reality, the truth, and beauty of this universe and with eternal wisdom which is the order in it” (p. 21).

Tanner and Tanner make the salient point that all education is actually vocational since traditional academic study constitutes preparation for many occupations outside the trades. Scheffler (1995b) echoes this perspective by terming the phrase vocational education a conceptual “redundancy” (p. 47). Such views highlight the role played by all forms of education in preparing students for work and expose the false distinction between vocational and academic education in this regard. Although these observations are noteworthy for underscoring the social and aesthetic importance of uncoerced labor, isolated from systemic reconstruction, they do not diminish the class structuring role played by the division of labor in market-economy societies. Nor do such views, in the absence of structural critique, grapple with the complex ways in which vocational education, as Dewey recognized, can be employed as a means for social control by naturalizing dominant values, attitudes, and entire world views to students.

Congressional action in the early part of the 1960s once again significantly expanded the scope and influence of job training in schools. The Vocational Education Act of 1963 introduced a much broader definition of vocational education into public schooling and provided federal financial support to a greater number of training programs (Tanner and Tanner, 1980). Tanner and Tanner suggest the act was the single most influential piece of vocational education legislation since the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917:

... this legislation encompassed virtually any occupation or occupational cluster short of the professions while also removing the earlier restriction that had allowed schools to

develop integrated programs of vocational and general education so as to improve the learning opportunities of those with socio-economic handicaps.” (p. 584)

Similar to the economic and social anxieties prompting widespread advocacy of Smith-Hughes, the 1963 Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson during a period marked by growing concern with youth unemployment, urban decay, and Soviet success in space (Gordon, 1999). Once again, social and economic conditions far removed from classroom practice and influence, had created a crisis in American public education.

EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL EFFICIENCY VS. EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The debate between Snedden and Dewey during the early part of this century reflects many of the arguments, past and present, on both sides of the vocational education divide. Snedden considered specific skill training an essential educational element to meet existing labor force demands, enhance national competitiveness, and promote economic progress. Advancing an *argumentum ad populum* to support his position, he suggested that if Americans were forced to choose between social efficiency and democracy as the basis for public education, they would invariably select the former (Wirth, 1972). Not unlike current social efficiency advocates and employability-skills programs, Snedden equated successful vocational education with providing students the skills, values, and attitudes identified by industry. From Dewey’s perspective, however, vocational education should be designed to meet student needs rather than corporate demands and prepare learners for the various challenges of social life instead of specific occupational roles.

The reproductive, anti-democratic consequences accompanying narrowly-conceived vocational education, concerns that are equally applicable within a contemporary context, are well articulated in Dewey’s criticism of Snedden. Dewey (1916) did not reject vocational education, but conceptualized it as an enabling force that would allow all students to autonomously choose their vocational life:

The desired transformation is not difficult to determine in a formal way. It signifies a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living and which accordingly makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible— which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. It denotes a state of affairs in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent. (p. 316)

Refusing to view schools as mere adjuncts to industry and students as human means to material ends, Dewey envisioned vocational education as providing all learners with the critical spirit and intellectual capacity to transform an industrial and educational structure designed to reproduce class divisions. Recognizing narrow skills training reproduced class disparity, Dewey suggested his differences with Snedden and other advocates of such approaches were not merely educational, but profoundly social and political:

The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which will “adapt” workers to the existing industrial regime; I am not sufficiently in love with the regime for that. It seems to me that the business of all who would not be educational time-servers is to resist every move in this direction and to strive for a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial system and ultimately transform it (as cited in Wirth, 1972, p. 215).

As social efficiency advocates, Snedden and Prosser neglected to evaluate the moral, social, and political assumptions underpinning their particular brand of vocational education reform. They conveniently ignored that the industrial organization and division of labor in market economy societies is not merely a function of technical efficiency, but also of class stratification and reproduction. As Kantor explains, "In their view, the chief issue confronting vocational education was not the way in which class conflict shaped the organization of the workplace. It was rather one of adjusting individual workers to their appropriate places in the division of labor" (p. 416).

Current vocational education advocates must recognize that preparing students to fill lower strata occupational roles by providing them with instrumental skills and presenting the existing social paradigm as ahistorical, legitimates the class stratification and social inequality inherent in the present economic structure. Instrumental vocational education programs such as Snedden's accept as inevitable that some students, most frequently those from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds (Levesque et al., 1995), are predestined to fill lower strata occupations within the existing division of labor: "Taking its stand upon a dogma of social predestination, it would assume that some are to continue to be wage earners under economic conditions like the present" (Dewey, 1916, p. 317). Within this framework, students become human means to material ends by carrying out the plans of others, that is, industry, under the guise of technical efficiency, while the capacity to pursue their own existential projects is simultaneously restricted (Sheffler, 1995a). Perhaps the most damning criticism of Snedden's social-efficiency approach to vocational education, however, is its neglect of the tremendous impact socio-economic disparities exact on student academic performance and how material circumstances influence educational, social, economic, and vocational opportunities. As early as 1918, for example, an influential study of vocational education for girls suggested that economic necessity was the primary reason for their high dropout rate (Kantor, 1986).

Vocational education that encourages students to accept passively and uncritically existing social and labor market conditions also constitutes inadequate preparation for democratic citizenship. Dewey believed, for example, that vocational education must be consistent with the democratic ideal of developing social understanding and political power in students. Indeed, within democratic societies, encouraging the full intellectual participation of students in the various aspects of social life by fostering authentic belief formation appears a basic educational requirement. As Kelly (1995) maintains, it is not enough for schools merely to teach democratic electoral principles, instead they must practice democracy in the broadest possible sense:

One of the major tasks which education must perform in a democratic society is the proper preparation of young citizens for the roles and responsibilities they must be ready to take on when they reach maturity. For a society will not be truly democratic if the basic principles of democracy are not reflected in every one of its social institutions. And the major threat to the maintenance and development of democratic social systems comes from failure to ensure an adherence to these principles in every area of social living and not merely in the election of government. (p. 101)

Within a truly democratic school structure, students would not be expected to conform their existential or vocational plans with prevailing corporate or bureaucratic needs by mastering skills identified by industrial interests. Rather, a central component in a democratic vocational education is discovering the various assumptions supporting the existing socio-economic structure, generating present labor market conditions, and prompting skills instruction are themselves subject to critique and revision.

By de-historicizing the social and economic circumstances they address, vocational education policies and programs effectively preclude student critique of their underlying theoretical and moral assumptions. The resulting marginalization of authentic belief formation undermines student autonomy, a necessary condition for democratic citizenship. De-historized knowledge typically gets its power from the fact that a one-sided presentation of information is disguised as being in the interests of all or even naturalized as beyond the realm of human control. Indeed, this ideological mechanism is often present in many of the normative assumptions surrounding current vocational education policy advocating the instruction of generic skills to students as a means to improve their future employment prospects.

Historically, vocational education reform is often predicated on the view that it effectively addresses various social and economic problems including urban decay and youth unemployment, and increases domestic competitiveness. According to Kantor, however, there is little empirical evidence supporting the contention that instrumental-skills education reduces unemployment or otherwise ameliorates a range of social problems. Regardless, as evidenced by the current round of reform, it continues to “attract widespread support as a key solution to problems of youth unemployment, job dissatisfaction, and other economic ills” (Kantor, 1986, p. 423). Although history reveals increased corporate interest in education during capitalist crises, the absence of a detectable inverse relationship between enhanced-skills instruction and unemployment render labor market fluctuations a dubious rationale to justify widespread education reform. Indeed, such reform potentially misrepresents labor market conditions to students by implying that occupational success is a function of individual competence, rather than the result of complex interactions between personal capacity, market conditions, and the social structure of opportunity (Kantor, 1986).

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a brief historical sketch of the arguments surrounding U.S. vocational education reform during the past century. In particular, the contrasting views of Snedden and Dewey not only reveal diametrically-opposed positions on desired program format, but on individual existential capacity and the moral responsibility of education in a democratic society. As Dewey suggests, vocational education focused on narrow-skills instruction disregards the role of schooling as a social activity aimed at the general preparation of students for all aspects of democratic citizenship. Even from a social efficiency perspective, there appears little evidence supporting the view that narrowly-conceived skills education significantly affects the social variables it attempts to influence. In the final analysis, teaching skills, attitudes, and values identified by industry may furnish human capital to satisfy labor market needs, but such schooling is morally and democratically distinguishable from educating students to expand both their occupational and existential possibilities.

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