



## Towards reclaiming the high ground in the discourse on vocationalism in developing countries

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### ABSTRACT

The literature on vocational education in developing countries has for decades been one of gloom, as commentators from the developed countries have offered arguments leading to the same conclusion, namely, that investment in the subject is futile. I contend that the reason why the discourse has been so predictable is epistemological rigidity—manifested in an unwillingness to accept work as a valid basis of knowledge. I offer a way to think about vocationalism that transcends familiar economic arguments and that instead point to more holistic attributes of the subject.

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### 1. Introduction

Vocational education has been an area of contest in educational discourse mainly because it comes up against hardened epistemological stances. There are antagonists who do not see work as the basis of anything ennobling, and on that count cannot see a place for vocationalism in the curriculum. For them, *episteme* not *techne* should underpin schooling. There are others who cannot conceive of vocational education beyond instrumental purposes. For them the subject should lead only to economic ends—they can see it only through these lenses, and not through intrinsic ones. These rigid stances lead inexorably to questions about who the subject is for, and here too the lines are drawn. It is for the children of the working classes, not those of the elite; for those who intend to go directly to work after secondary schooling, not those who intend to go on to university.

No where have these hardened stances been more evident and have prevailed more, than in the literature on education and economic development, and especially in relation to the desires of developing countries to diversify their school curricula. Here the dominant voices tend to be that of economists from the developed world, whose rationalism leads them to see the worth of education no differently than they do the worth of tractors, or fertilizer. Their primary metric for determining the value of vocational education is whether money spent upon it can yield a return, and how does such return compare to that for other uses to which that money could be put (see especially Psacharopoulos, 1987, 1991 for classic exhibits of this). I contend in this article that vocational education will continue on this tortured path until there is a more general epistemological awakening in the community that makes

decisions about whether or not developing countries should be supported by donor agencies such as the World Bank, in their attempts to establish vocational education programs in secondary and post-secondary institutions. This aspect of the vocationalist discourse tends to conform to the dictates of dependency theory (see Chase-Dunn, 1975; Frank, 1969) in that it is a decidedly one-way, center-periphery account, with third world voices almost absent, while those of the developed world are privileged. But whether we have had complete objectivity in this is questionable, in that the strongest voices against the funding of vocational education projects have tended to be that of scholars with affiliation to the multilateral agencies. The disclaimers notwithstanding, the positions taken by these authors, and the arguments they advance, are often indistinguishable from that set forth by these agencies.

I contend that the literature on vocational education in the developing world, except for rare instances where authors take an holistic view (e.g. Castro (1988) has tended to be doctrinaire, with those with direct influence on the funding policies and practices of lending agencies making clear to policy makers in these countries how futile and ill-considered are their desires. For example George Psacharopoulos (1985) pronounced in a well-cited article that: "Because of its inherently logical and simplistic appeal, vocationalism will be with us for years to come, and more countries will attempt, in vain, to tune their formal educational system to the world of work" p. 203.

The epistemological awakening of which I speak would require vocational education to be viewed more broadly, not just as a means to supply employers with trained workers, but a way to add missing experiential dimensions to the curriculum, that in turn can have tertiary effects upon creativity, inventiveness, and craft consciousness. The prospect of complementarities between the vocational and general education curricula would be afforded

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fuller consideration in the new mindset I envision (see Oketch, 2007). If it is the case that vocationalism in the curriculum can lead to ends that extend beyond the economic, it means that lacunae of not insignificant proportions now beset the discourse on investment in vocational education in developing countries. For example, missing from the conversation have been grander notions of the value of vocational skill, to be seen in Aristotle's (1984) *practical judgement*, or Gilbert Ryle's *intelligent practice* Ryle (1949), or in Gerard Lum's *constitutive understandings*.

## 2. Ideology and vocational education in the developed world

Vocational education is difficult to do, and it should not be a surprise that this is especially the case in developing countries seeking to establish it in schools. The subject is by nature didactic and requires laboratories. There is need for properly maintained equipment, for competent, experienced instructors, and for sustained effort to build experience. Otherwise programs will fail, as they tend to do in these countries. Psacharopoulos (1991) has provided a typology of the many reasons why the subject fails to take hold, and offers the following by way of advice to policy makers in these countries:

You cannot really plan vocational-technical education, as you cannot plan anything else in life. Sometimes you might think you are planning, but really you are not. If what you plan is against the strong driving forces we have discussed, such as market mechanism or the introduction of obsolete technology, which is later upset by technological change, your plan will fail. (p. 198).

It is the case that attempts to establish vocational education in poor countries often fail, but is such failure sufficient evidence that could be marshaled against vocationalism itself? Here is where the decidedly economics-oriented discourse comes to its limits, failure of projects ending the conversation, without reflection on the possibilities, were these countries somehow able to find ways to start having successes. Bennell and Segerstrom (1998) have raised questions here, in their reflection on negative World Bank disposition to VET. They wrote:

... the World Bank's reluctance to fund VET in the context of an expanding education sector budget is essentially an ideologically driven over-reaction that has been justified on the basis of a serious mis-reading of the evidence concerning the role of public sector VET at all stages of economic development." p. 286.

I contend here that failure of vocational programs anywhere ought not to be taken as an indictment of the subject in its essence. In the developing world there is need still to see the educative virtues of vocationalism, and to include in conceptualizations of the curriculum what the subject can be.

We may look to the developed countries to see that vocational education as an idea is not in peril, even though vigorous debate attends it, especially in these times where the dictates of a knowledge economy cause questions to be raised about the continuing relevance of traditional practices. Vocationalism thrives, among other places, in Germany and the United States, countries where it features in secondary as well as post-secondary settings. In these two countries vocational education grew organically as a natural concomitant of industrialism and societal progress, and was backed by supportive ideologies. In the German case, Christopher Winch has been pointing out that that vocationalism is linked with liberal education via the idea of *Bildung* a character forming notion in which, much like the Benedictine ideal, work is central. Thus, German

vocationalism has a different coloration than in Anglo-Saxon countries because from origin it has been grounded in holistic notions of progress that are traceable to the thought of Friedrich List. According to Winch (1998) at the core of List's conception of political economy was the notion of *Productive Powers*, that is "all the means by which a nation generates, preserves and develops its ability to produce" p. 369. Thus, "The economy cannot be understood as a separate entity from the law, morals, religion and the state. They all affect it profoundly as well as being affected by it." p. 369. German vocationalism therefore, has a strong civic dimension. Thus more than technical competence, skill confers on its holder a special badge of citizenship. In assessing the contribution of Georg Kerschsteiner to German Vocationalism, Winch (2006) sees elements of List's philosophy in this. Kerschsteiner was interested in the whole person. Vocationalism had a social dimension. Practical experience was a way of uniting propositional and practical knowledge.

In the United States, vocational education at its origins at the dawn of the 20th century was an outgrowth of the social efficiency movement that connected the subject with societal progress (Kantor, 1986; Kliebard, 1999). Social efficiency was an ideology of competence. While there was debate (notably the contest between John Dewey and David Snedden) around the perceived undue influence of industrialists upon the curriculum and schooling, the place of vocational knowledge as knowledge belonging in the curriculum was never at issue. While Dewey challenged the vocationalist establishment of the day, far from rejecting vocational education as education, he embraced it on the ground that schools had to reflect movements in the society at large. Children had to come to gain industrial intelligence. In his *Democracy and Education* he devoted a chapter to vocational education in which he set forth a transcending conception of it, suggesting that it should be based not just on economic work, but also on the work of being a parent, or a contributing member of one's community (Dewey, 1916). Dewey framed his conception of vocational education in terms of social reconstruction. Students would not meekly accept the industrial status quo as presented in the curriculum, they would challenge it. It is the case that secondary and post-secondary vocational education today in the United States receives funding and political support based on a succession of laws that began with the passage of the historic Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 that mandated its presence in schools.

Vocational education is more likely to thrive in countries where it has enjoyed long historical tradition anchored by transcending ideologies that shape the thinking about skill and nation building. This is not to say that there are not controversies in these countries. In Germany for example, there has been some concern about whether the skills of the Dual System are in keeping with the demands of the contemporary global knowledge economy (e.g. Idriss, 2002). In the United States, there has been a new appreciation of Dewey's ideas, leading to a *new vocationalism* that blends academic and technical content (e.g. Grubb, 1996; Lewis, 1997). Further, there remain issues relating to persistence of class and race as determinants of who gets the subject in schools (see Lewis, 2007; Lewis et al., 2006). The debates here have been good for American vocationalism. The subject today is much more responsive to critique and to change than it had been for most of the 20th century.

## 3. Scholarship on vocational education in developing countries

Unlike the discourses on vocational education in Germany and the United States, as described above, where grand principles that have civic or sociological undertones color the exchanges, and where epistemological considerations feature, that relating to developing countries tends to be sure and strident, with almost no debate. The outcomes of treatments of the topic tend largely to be

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