Work, Youth, and Schooling

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VOCATIONALISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Edited by Harvey Kantor and David B. Tyack

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, American reformers saw vocational education as a promising way to cure many of the nation's economic and social ills. But the ensuing educational reforms had disappointingly little effect on the problems they were supposed to solve. Today we are still distressed by the extent of unemployment among young people, especially blacks and other minorities, and our doubts about the effectiveness of schools in preparing young people for work have never been greater. Did vocational education go wrong? Or were the problems so deep-rooted that the schools could not solve them? These are the questions these nine essays address.

They consider such topics as the changing economic and political context of vocational education, the role of federal legislation, the various ideas of early vocationalists, the growth of the idea of school as the primary route to employment, the theoretical relationship between schooling and work, the special problems of vocational education for blacks and women, and the directions that future research must take.

Harvey Kantor is a graduate student in education, and David B. Tyack is Vida Jacks Professor of Education, at Stanford University.

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Historical Perspectives on Vocationalism in American Education

HARVEY KANTOR AND DAVID B. TYACK

I

At the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of using schools to train young people for work captured the imagination of American reformers. Convinced that schools had failed to keep pace with changes in the nature and meaning of industrial life, they proposed a radical reorientation of purpose and curriculum in American education. The central task of the school, they argued, was to integrate youth into the occupational structure. To accomplish this required not only differentiated programs and courses, but also a new spirit of vocationalism. As one advocate remarked, school life should be permeated with "the idea that school is to prepare for a vocation and that vocation is to be wisely selected."[1]

Both contemporary observers and later scholars generally agree that this movement marked a significant turning point in the social history of American education. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the turn-of-the-century ferment has been the permanence of the changes that were introduced. Over the years the idea that school should prepare youth for work has become a common rationale for schooling and has provided support for numerous vocationally oriented programs, many of which continue to attract a good deal of financial support from state legis-

latures and Congress and to employ large numbers of teachers and administrators. They enroll students in a variety of courses, ranging from career awareness in elementary grades to specific skill training in high schools.[2]

There is little evidence, however, that these reforms have actually eliminated the conditions they sought to address. Early advocates promised that vocational education and guidance would solve a host of economic and social ills. Vocational schooling, they claimed, would integrate immigrants into the labor force, slash worker turnover, lessen labor conflict and social alienation, reduce unemployment, and increase occupational opportunities for poor and working-class youth. Yet during the last fifty years, major evaluations of vocational programs have repeatedly questioned the benefits of vocational training. Although some studies have found that vocational graduates have lower unemployment and receive higher wages than other comparable students, the majority of studies have concluded that there is little economic advantage to vocational training, as opposed to non-vocational, at the high school level.[3]

Even allowing for the rhetorical oversell that usually accompanies educational reforms, the hopes for vocational education appear to have been misplaced. As several scholars have recently pointed out, the sources of poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality are primarily rooted not in the nature of schooling but in the organization of the economy. Consequently, by focusing on educational reform rather than on the structure of work and the labor market, vocational reformers attacked the symptoms rather than the sources of the conditions they hoped to eliminate.[4]

What then accounts for the rise and persistence of vocationalism in American education? Why did turn-of-the-century reformers turn to schools to ameliorate the social and economic ills plaguing American society? How did these initial efforts shape the subsequent relationship between school and work? Until recently, these questions provoked little debate. Historians of education, following the lead of Ellwood Cubberley, generally applauded the rise of vocational schooling, viewing it a democratic movement to liberate the educational system from outmoded practices. Only by adding practical, relevant courses, it was ar-

gued, could the high school meet the diverse needs of an expanding clientele without abandoning public education's commitment to equal opportunity for all members of American society. Indeed, house historians of vocational education and guidance, eager to promote their cause and celebrate its democratic promise, have portrayed the rise of vocationalism as an almost inevitable development in a democratic and heterogeneous society.[5]

In the last fifteen years, however, a number of scholars have reexamined the history of vocational reform and have painted a different picture of these events. Revisionist historians have argued that vocational education was part of a middle- and upper-class movement for social control and order in a corporate state. Vocational education, they say, was hardly the product of democratic sentiments, but was shaped by businessmen and efficiency-minded educators interested in using schools to adapt young people to the unjust nature of the corporate-industrial society emerging at the turn of the twentieth century.[6] In a similar vein, neo-Marxist writers on the history of education have contended that vocational programs were designed to turn out docile, efficient workers who were well adjusted to the demands of large-scale industrial production. Vocational education, they argue, operated not to liberalize opportunity, but to teach working-class youth their proper place in the expanding capitalist division of labor.[7]

Criticism has come from other sources too. Today there is once again considerable concern about youth unemployment and the connection between school and work. Numerous reports and studies have identified the transition from school to work as a major social problem, and have advanced a variety of programs to bridge what is believed to be a major gap between the classroom and the workplace. Yet contemporary policy analysts often differ markedly from reformers at the turn of the century. Whereas child labor was seen by earlier advocates of vocational education as a problem to be solved by additional schooling, some analysts now see compulsory schooling as a problem to be solved by exposure to the workplace. The Coleman panel's *Youth: Transition to Adulthood* (1974), for instance, argues that secondary schools segregate youth by age and shelter them from work and useful contact with adults. The panel proposes that much of the

responsibility for socializing young people to work be shifted from the school to the workplace itself. Work, the panel maintains, is a preparation for life; school only reinforces an irresponsible youth culture.[8]

In retrospect, it is puzzling that vocationalism in education appealed to such a wide spectrum of groups, including some—such as business and labor—that generally regarded each other as adversaries. As Harvey Kantor indicates in his essay, people of widely differing ideologies and interests agreed that vocational training might bring schools into better alignment with the economy. To be sure, advocates of vocational training often differed among themselves over who should control the new programs and what should be their form and purpose. John Dewey, for example, challenged proposals for a separate system of vocational schools, arguing as some radicals do today that such a plan would create a stratified school system. Some reformers called for highly specific skill training; others were more interested in a "life-career motive" that would permeate all instruction. Some wanted to turn out docile employees willing to adapt to routine factory labor; others questioned the whole notion of a profit economy and wanted to restore, in Helen Marot's words, the "creative impulse in industry."[9] But whatever their ideologies or specific plans or interests, a wide spectrum of leaders agreed that vocationalism in education was a key to the restructuring of American society.

II

The essays in this collection explore these and other related issues. Larry Cuban suggests that one explanation for the rise and persistent popularity of vocational education lies in an analysis of interest group politics, especially the lobbying power of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE) and its successor, the American Vocational Association (AVA). Founded in 1906, the NSPIE lobbied vigorously for over a decade to win federal support for vocational education. In 1917 it played the decisive role in securing congressional and presidential approval of the Smith-Hughes bill, which mandated federal aid for vocational training in home economics, agriculture, and trade and

industrial subjects. But the group's influence did not stop there. When the Federal Board of Vocational Education (FBVE) was established in 1917, its members were drawn largely from the ranks of the NSPIE. Moreover, by 1926 the NSPIE had been transformed from a single-purpose but broad-based reform coalition into an active professional association (the AVA) dedicated to maintaining the victory achieved in 1917. This task has since been performed with only minor setbacks.

Indeed the power of this group, Cuban argues, has extended far beyond "what one would predict from the size of its staff or membership." Using lobbying techniques honed in the decade-long struggle to win approval of Smith-Hughes, the AVA has for over fifty years thwarted opposition to vocational education legislation and consistently won higher federal appropriations for vocational programs. Even in the face of persistent criticism from blue-ribbon panels, federal studies, and academic evaluations, the AVA influence in Congress remained exceptionally strong. In fact, one recent study ranked the AVA fourth among the most effective Washington education lobbies.

Legislative victories, however, did not guarantee that vocational programs would be implemented effectively. At best, Cuban suggests, the evidence on implementation is mixed. Although state-level implementation appears to have been successful—by 1918 all states had submitted vocational plans to the FBVE and had begun to receive federal funds—the picture at the local level is much less conclusive. Although some early studies indicated that high school offerings in home economics, agriculture, and trade and industrial subjects increased dramatically after the passage of Smith-Hughes, other studies showed that the time students spent in vocational courses was quite limited. A 1931 study, for instance, revealed that in some urban school districts vocational courses constituted as little as 1 percent of the time students spent in school.

What accounts for the apparently limited impact of federal vocational education legislation? Cuban suggests that federal efforts were impeded by a variety of organizational factors within local and state school bureaucracies, such as the diversity of local school districts and the traditional resistance by teachers to outside meddling in the classroom. Joseph Kett, however, suggests

that we search elsewhere for an explanation. Like Cuban, Kett seeks to understand how a movement that generated such high expectations could have produced such meager results. Where Cuban finds clues to this puzzle in how laws were passed and implemented, Kett suggests that we look at the ideas of the first generation of vocational educators, particularly those who led the drive that culminated in the passage of Smith-Hughes. By analyzing their ideas about work, unemployment, and economic mobility, Kett argues, it is possible to gain a clearer conception of why vocational education seemed so plausible to its early advocates, as well as how many educators may have misunderstood the economic conditions they confronted.

Most vocational educators, according to Kett, combined recent ideas about science and professionalism with traditional ideas about work and the work ethic to forge a powerful intellectual justification for vocational education. Eventually this ideology blinded them to the nature of work and the labor market in the early twentieth century. They shared with Frederick Winslow Taylor the idea that skill meant the application of organized knowledge, and were influenced by emerging conceptions of professionalism that linked jobs to one another in a smooth, steady career ladder, from lower to higher occupational rungs. Thus many vocational reformers ignored accumulating evidence that work was requiring less and less skill, and they did not perceive that many "blind-alley" jobs were probably only temporary youth jobs, rather than permanent barriers to occupational mobility. They hoped to reform work and eliminate "dead-end" jobs by shaping all occupations to professional models. By misperceiving the nature of the conditions they faced, vocational reformers, according to Kett, often proposed educational solutions when other responses might have been more appropriate.

Did the turn-of-the-century furor about youth and work, then, reflect changing cultural perceptions more than it reflected changes in actual labor market conditions? Perhaps. Although evidence on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labor markets is scant, most working youth in the United States have probably always been concentrated in the least desirable occupations. In addition, as Burton Bledstein and others have shown, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the culture of

professionalism was beginning to exert a powerful influence on middle-class social thought.[10] Yet as the essay by Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson and that by David Hogan point out, the early twentieth-century concern about youth, work, and schooling involved more than faulty perceptions of work and labor market conditions.

According to Grubb and Lazerson, in the first decades of the twentieth century the relationship between work and schooling was fundamentally transformed. Rooted in changes in labor markets, stemming largely from changes in the organization of work, this transformation inextricably linked education to employment and altered the primary purposes of public education. For the first time, Grubb and Lazerson assert, school became the primary route to employment; and preparation for a place in the labor market became the "raison d'être of public education." Only by examining these institutional changes—which involve considerably more than the growth of federally assisted vocational courses—is it possible to understand the impact of vocationalism on American education.

Indeed, the consequences of these changes were enormous for youth, schooling, and social policy. First, as schools increasingly became a major path to employment, young people withdrew from the labor market and went to school. Between 1900 and 1920, the percentage of fourteen- to eighteen-year-old males at work dropped from 43 to 23 percent, and females from 18 to 11 percent. At the same time, the high school enrollment of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds rose from approximately 8 percent in 1900 to over 44 percent in 1930, and the proportion of high school graduates increased from 6.4 percent of seventeen-year-olds in 1900 to 16.8 percent in 1920 and to 29 percent in 1930. During the depression the ratio of graduates almost doubled. Second, schools themselves were transformed in order to prepare youth for entry into the labor market. Differentiated curricula, vocational courses in the trades and business, guidance, and testing were introduced as schools assumed responsibility for integrating youth into the occupational structure, often sorting students according to class, race, and sex. Finally, by removing young people from the labor market and certifying them for future occupational roles, this transformation has defined the character of