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AUTHOR Hyslop-Margison, Emery J.
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ABSTRACT

Early in the 20th century, vocational education was a concern of educators in the United States as schools struggled to meet labor force needs during the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economic base. A 1914 Congress-authorized commission studied whether federal aid to vocational education was warranted. Charles Prosser, a student of social efficiency advocate David Snedden and principal author of the commission report, viewed separately administered and narrowly focused vocational training as the best way to assist nonacademic students in securing employment after school completion. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 specified noncompulsory programs and established a precedent of federal-state financing for vocational education. Snedden accepted social stratification as inevitable and believed most students derived little benefit from traditionally organized academic studies. John Dewey, the most vocal opponent of Snedden's social efficiency framework, believed vocational education should be part of a comprehensive curriculum to help students develop expanded occupational options. The Vocational Education Act of 1963 expanded the scope and influence of job training in schools. The contrasting views of Snedden and Dewey revealed dialectically opposed positions on desired program format and on individual existential capacity and the moral responsibility of education in a democratic society. A morally appropriate model for vocational education would be the comprehensive democratic approach advocated by Dewey rather than separately administered, narrowly conceived skills-based programs. (Contains 20 references.) (YLB)

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An Assessment of the Historical Arguments in
Vocational Education Reform

Emery J. Hyslop-Margison
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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 an 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 last century has witnessed considerable debate on whether vocational skills education better prepares students for future employment than traditional academic programs. This paper traces the historic development of vocational education, and evaluates the views of various educators on the issue. In conclusion, I argue that a morally appropriate model for vocational education is found within the comprehensive democratic approach advocated by Dewey, rather than through separately administered, narrowly conceived skills-based programs.

Early in the twentieth-century, vocational education was a prominent topic of discussion among American educators as schools struggled to meet labour force needs concomitant with the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economic base (Wirth, 1972). In his 1907 address to congress, President Roosevelt urged school reform to provide industrial education in urban centers and agricultural education in rural areas (Tanner & Tanner, 1980). Corresponding to the concerns prompting the current round of vocational education reform, this foregoing crusade was predicated on enhancing domestic competitiveness in expanding global markets. Revisionist studies suggest, however, that vocational education was also aimed at controlling workers and stabilizing industrial society by creating “a school system that socialized youth for their new economic roles and sorted them into their appropriate niches in the expanding capitalist division of labour” (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” (Kantor, 1986, p.403). A powerful alliance supporting federal funding for vocational education was formed in 1910,

for example, when the American Federation of Labour (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 investigating how education might provide a more effective means to help American manufacturers compete in expanding international markets. The AFL joined the vocational education movement believing its participation would help protect working class interests in the emerging industrial economy (Kantor, 1986). The strength of the combined lobby was such that in 1914 congress authorized President Wilson to appoint a commission to study whether federal aid to vocational education was warranted.

Charles Prosser, a student of social efficiency advocate David Snedden, was principle author of the commission's eventual report to congress. Reflecting the opinions of his mentor, Prosser viewed separately administered, and narrowly focused, vocational training the best way to assist 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 to the specific labour force needs identified by industry (Drost, 1967). Under his scheme, vocational education would be structured to direct non-academic students into required labour 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, then, the primary purpose of vocational education was meeting labour force needs, and preparing students with assumed limited intellectual capacities for immediate employment in industry (Gordon, 1999). Thus, his social efficiency vocational education framework contains 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 eighty percent, 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, and viewed such programs, i.e., ones that included training within general schooling, as antithetical to social efficiency objectives. Lacking trade-specific skills, graduates from comprehensive programs were unable to assume the work of a journeyman labourer in any trade, and therefore represented an additional burden on society (Drost, 1967). From Snedden's perspective, then, 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). 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 future labour force needs, Dewey maintained, “The only adequate training *for* occupations is training *through* occupations” (p.310).

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) forty-second 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 labour 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 labour market conditions. And, unlike the separately administered format advocated by Snedden, students would not be streamed into academic and vocational categories since the programs remained “flexible and interrelated” (Tanner & Tanner, 1980, p.577).

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 seventeen. 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, i.e., Platonic and Cartesian, 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 labour. Modern science undermines the traditional epistemic antithesis between rationalism and empiricism by revealing the necessary interaction between reason and sense 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 revealing the essential rudimentary requirements of human life: “Exactly to the same extent as art and science, though in a different way, physical labour is a certain contact with the reality, the truth, and beauty of this universe and with eternal wisdom which is the order in it” (Weil, 1991, p.21).

Tanner and Tanner also point out that all education is essentially vocational since traditional academic study constitutes preparation for many occupations outside the trades. Scheffler (1995b) echoes this perspective by terming the phrase vocation education a conceptual “redundancy” (p.47). These 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 noteworthy for underscoring the social and aesthetic importance of uncoerced labour, these

observations, isolated from systemic reconstruction, do not diminish the class structuring role played by the division of labour in market economy societies. Nor do such views, in the absence of structural critique, grapple with the complex ways in which vocational education may 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 (Thompson, 1973). 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 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.

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 labour force demands, enhance national competitiveness, and promote economic progress. Advancing an *argumentum ad populum* to support his position, he suggested if Americans were forced to chose 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, then, Snedden equated vocational education with

providing students the skills, values and attitudes required by industry. From Dewey's perspective, however, vocational education should be designed to meet student instead of corporate needs, and prepare the former for the various challenges of social life rather than for specific occupational roles.

The reproductive, anti-democratic concerns accompanying narrowly conceived vocational education are well articulated in Dewey's criticism of Snedden. Dewey (1916) did not reject vocational education, but instead conceptualized it as an enabling force that might 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 intellectual disposition and capacity to transform an industrial structure that reproduced class divisions. For this reason, he suggested his differences with Snedden and other advocates of separately administered skill training 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 morally the social and political assumptions underpinning vocational education reform. They conveniently ignored, for example, that the industrial organization and division of labour 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 labour” (p.416).

Schooling that prepares designated students to fill lower strata occupational roles, and presents the existing social paradigm as ahistorical legitimates the class stratification and social inequality inherent in that structure. 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 labour: “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, i.e., 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 labour 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, fostering the full intellectual participation of students in the various aspects of social life appears a basic educational requirement. As Kelly (1995) maintains, however, 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 labour market conditions, and prompting skills instruction are themselves subject to critique and revision.

Historically, vocational education reform is often predicated on the view that it effectively addresses various social and economic problems, i.e., urban decay, youth unemployment, and increases domestic competitiveness. According to Kantor, however, there is little evidence supporting the contention that narrowly conceived skills education reduces unemployment or otherwise ameliorates a range of social problems. Regardless, as evidenced by the current round of education 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). Within the current context of increased skills education, Taylor (1998) has challenged the concept of a skill shortage by pointing out the present education system produces more highly skilled graduates than ever. Robertson (1998) refers to a 1996 report that found over half of all Ontario workers surveyed under age thirty-five are unable to use the skills they possess in their current employment circumstances. The *Times Educational Supplement* reports “Two decades of costly job-training programmes have

failed to stop unemployment spiraling among young people in the U.K.” (Nash, 1999, p.1). In Allen’s (1996) analysis of economic benefits derived from post-secondary education, he found competency in university level literacy and math more conducive to student economic success than possessing the narrow technical skills taught in one and two year college training programs. Although history reveals increased corporate interest in education during capitalist crises, then, the absence of a detectable inverse relationship between enhanced skills instruction and unemployment render labour market fluctuations a dubious rationale to justify widespread education reform. Indeed, such reform potentially misrepresents labour 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).

In this paper I have provided a brief historical sketch of the arguments surrounding vocational education reform during the past century. In particular, the contrasting views of Snedden and Dewey not only reveal dialectically 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, then, teaching skills, attitudes, and values identified by industry may furnish human capital to satisfy labour 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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