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**Vocational Education
in Ontario's
Secondary Schools:
Past, Present – and
Future?**

by

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Vocational Education in Ontario Secondary Schools: Past, Present – and Future?

Introduction

It is the practice of the workplace that means the most. Lots of theory is well and good, but how to work independently cannot be learned at school. I have always liked working. The neighbours call me a workaholic (Carpentry apprentice).

At quite an early age my daughter Christine began to get bored and frustrated with formal education. After trying a number of different schools, she finally gave up and dropped out, even before she reached sixteen. She began working in an entry-level office job, but soon realized she lacked the necessary skills. One day she asked me where she could take a typing course. Her father (ever the teacher) suggested that she might consider enrolling in a high school credit evening course in typing, offered through the local board of education. Thus (I reasoned), she would be able to simultaneously earn another credit towards eventual graduation. She looked at me, with one of those frustrated daughter-father expressions, and retorted, "Dad, you just don't understand. I want to learn to type!"

I mention this incident as an introduction to this chapter for a specific reason. For almost a century now, public secondary schools in Ontario have offered courses and programs in a wide variety of vocational subjects. Over these years, countless thousands – indeed, millions – of students have acquired useful technical and commercial skills by having participated in these programs. However, one is certainly left with the distinct feeling that all is not well with these programs – past or present. Government documents, program reviews, student achievement and graduation rates, press releases, newspaper articles – all leave the reader with a strong feeling that something considerably less than perfection existed. During recent interviews, while most vocational teachers and many students were initially quick to defend their turf, it did not take long before concerns began to arise, and soon overshadowed much of the positive discourse which was initially expressed. If Ontario is any example, there has been a rapid and continuing decline in the numbers of students enrolled in vocational courses in secondary schools over the past decade. Canada does not seem to be alone in this regard. At the global level, a recent series of studies published by the OECD begins with the statement, "Throughout the industrialized world, vocational and technical education and training ... faces a crisis of identity and purpose" (McFarland and Vickers 1994, 7). A blue-ribbon American study is even more condemning.

Many 'vocational education' programs are almost worthless. They are a cruel hoax on young people looking to acquire marketable skills. So many different and, in many cases, unproductive programs in our public schools have been called 'vocational education' that most existing programs need to be disbanded and reshaped (Committee for Economic Development 1985; quoted in Raizen 1994, 87).

Why is this the case? Whether or not my daughter's beliefs about the efficacy of vocational programs are valid ones, the fact that she holds such beliefs is intriguing in itself. Where did she get these ideas? Why do many others – teachers, parents, schooling administrators, education ministry officials, politicians, trade unionist, the corporate elite – mount these, or other critiques of vocational education?

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, I wish to explore these tensions – to attempt to understand the history of vocational education in our public secondary schools, and to understand why it is that such a seemingly ‘well-meaning’ educational project continues to be afflicted with such tensions, adverse publicity and doubtful future. Secondly, I wish to explore whether, and if so, how, vocational education within the public school system might be conceptualized and undertaken differently. To the extent that this latter exploration is optimistic, it will invoke the possibilities of bringing schools and the ‘real world’ somewhat closer together – incorporating ‘alternation’ as a framing concept.

While the concept of ‘alternation’ may be complex, and mean different things to different people, it can be said to be grounded in the importance of bridging what has historically been known as the ‘theory-praxis divide.’ In the context of vocational education, this hoped-for bridging may come about, on the one hand, by combining (or alternating) student experience in the classroom and in the workplace. Additionally, however, this bridging must also happen at the conceptual level – in the understandings of both students and teachers. Simon, Diplo and Schenke, in their study entitled *Learning Work, A Critical Pedagogy of Work Education*, draw on and combine two concepts to ground their approach to bridging the divide – reflective learning and alternation.

It is important to consider reflective learning as a process that moves back and forth between in-school sessions and workplace experiences. The energy for teaching and learning flows continually in both directions: to the workplace for observation and application, and from the workplace for description, clarification, judgment, and interpretation. Neither direction is more important than the other. It is this regular and ongoing interaction that makes possible a conceptually informed practice and a practically informed understanding of work (Simon, *et al* 1991, 14-15).

Background of the Study

This study has been developed out of a two-year research project, involving two York University graduate students working on research assistantships – Greg Sharzer and Stuart Lee. On the one hand, we reviewed historical and contemporary documents and reports from various levels of government, as well as those from a number of quasi-governmental organizations, and groups and organizations representing the corporate sector, labour, parents, teachers and other educational groups. Secondly, we surveyed at least some of the immense secondary literature in the area. Finally, we undertook a number of interviews and focus groups involving vocational teachers, education and

training officials at the provincial and municipal levels, and educational consultants working at the school and school board levels.

In the interests of ‘situating’ this study, I should state that it clearly arises out of my own interests related to understanding the overall nature of state schooling, past and present. At one level, I have been particularly interested in the ‘intersections and interfaces’ of the system, and the concomitant relations and tensions within and between the various sectors and strata of our society – governments and government officials (elected and appointed), workers and their organizations, and other relevant groupings in our society, such as professional associations, post-secondary institutions, social service providers, social advocacy organizations, etc.

At another level, I am interested in the ideologies, processes and cultures which have evolved in and around schooling, and particularly the ways in which the institution of schooling has worked to produce and reproduce social relations in our society at both the macro and micro levels. Of especial note in this context are the ways in which streaming works to sort and divide the youth of our nation. Ironically, this social force is supported in large part through the ideology of ‘scientifically’ determined, ‘objectively’ measured, levels of ‘intelligence’ or ‘ability’ – supposedly neutral, objective criteria which, nevertheless, result in significant social separation in our schools and in our society on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and physical ability. As will be suggested in this study, vocational education has done little, if anything, to ameliorate these social divisions in our community.

Thirdly, I am interested in teachers themselves – who they are, and particularly how the structures, contexts and social relations of their workplaces continue to shape who they are, what they say and do, and the attitudes and values which they develop and hold, individually and collectively.

It is these interests and understandings, then, which I bring to bear on this examination of vocational education – in the hopes of furthering my understandings of the roles it has played in the overall development of our state schooling system, within the larger social, cultural, political and economic contexts of our society.

I am indebted to those who have developed the ideas inherent in the overall theme of alternation in the volume in which this is scheduled to appear (Schuetze and Sweet forthcoming). Having undertaken this exploration, I am certainly left with the belief that having our school system seriously consider adopting such a model of alternating between school and work experiences. As the opening comments from one apprentice suggest, this approach might be a major factor in ‘saving’ vocational education programs – if in fact they are to be saved at all.

Definitions and Limitations of the Study

There is no question that ‘vocational education’ means many different things to different people and organizations. There is usually general agreement that it means something different than ‘academic’ education, or ‘general’ education. Among other differences, vocational education often connotes a teaching/learning process that is less demanding, or intellectually less rigorous, than academic schooling.

Another complication to defining ‘vocational education’ is the fact that all forms of schooling usually lead one way or the other to work. In the words of a Canadian Teachers' Federation,

All branches of knowledge are ultimately vocational for some people, at least, and all have some aspect of technique involved. Moreover, skills associated originally with specific vocations have, under the impact of technological change, shown some tendency to become part of the generic base for general education. Typing, for example, has become as essential to certain professions as it is to stenographers and secretaries (CTF 1987, 5; see also Coffey 1992, 187).

Given the purposes of this study, however, I have chosen to begin with a much more narrow definition, again one which has been developed by the CTF. Vocational education will be defined as that which "is specifically directed toward the teaching of skills and knowledge which are useful in occupations for which post-secondary education is not required and which may help graduating students qualify for entry-level positions in those occupations" (CTF 1987. 5).¹ However, within these constraints, it is intended to be a broad definition, to include programs such as technical, business and commercial studies. It will also be broadened, to include programs which can also lead to further training at the community college level. In comparison to ‘vocational education,’ I will refer to the other aspects of secondary schooling as ‘academic education’ or ‘academic programs.’

A very specific limitation is that this study concerns itself only with an examination of vocational education programs which are located in, and funded by, the public secondary school system of the province. Clearly, this is but one of many sites in which people engage in vocational training – in the past and present. Apprenticeship programs (formal and informal), non-government schools and programs (both private enterprise and non-profit), post-secondary institutions, and programs within industrial, commercial and corporate settings, have all played a role in vocational training. This study, however, confines itself to programs funded and operated within public secondary schools.

Why Vocational Education – and Why the Tensions?

Perhaps a good way to frame the content of the study is to begin with the words of one of our interviewees – a vocational teacher who, at the time of the interview, was serving as a vocational education consultant for a large school board in Ontario. At one point in the interview, he was asked how parents in general felt about the vocational programs in the school system where he worked.

... attitudes of parents. Now that is a battle. I guess we have been facing [that] since I started in education. I can remember my own parents saying that they wanted me to go to a certain school in Toronto, a collegiate. I didn't want that, I wanted to go to a technical school, which I did. And I am glad I did too. It is an ongoing battle. ... We work very hard at promoting the good positive aspects of the skilled area....

This administrator clearly saw his own parents as being problematic with regard to vocational education. Similarly, he continues to see many parents that way today – leaving him and others to ‘work very hard’ at convincing them that vocational education is worthwhile for their children. I would suggest that this is a good insight into how one group (schooling officials), with a particular agenda in mind, struggles to change the opinions and values (and behaviour) of another societal group (parents and students), concerning the worth of vocational education.

These differences and tensions in our communities over vocational education can be seen in many different ways. The following extract from a Toronto Board of Education document provides another glimpse at the ways in which state structures worked to effect social/educational change desired by those in control. This transcript is part of a policy paper written by board officials in 1959, for the purpose of convincing politicians about the need to expand vocational education in the city at that time. In the introduction to this treatise, they drew on earlier historical antecedents to make their case.

The opening of Central Technical School in 1915 ... reflected a growing conviction that the rapid industrial expansion of Canada demanded a major change in the secondary school educational system, which up to that time was predominantly academic in character. The dearth of skilled artisans to meet the demands of the First World War furnished additional proof of the need of change, and in 1919 national concern was expressed by a federal grant of \$10,000,000 for the erection of technical schools.

The players are certainly well depicted here. We are presented with the ‘growing conviction,’ at least among those representing the ‘national concern,’ that there was a dramatic ‘need of change’ in the ways in which students would be schooled in Canada. The document then goes on to describe the manner in which this ‘need of change’ was fulfilled in post WWI Toronto.

... three succeeding technical schools ... were built in established city areas of concentrated population during a period when secondary school enrolment was generally expanded owing to factors other than growth of population. Hence large enrolments in the technical courses were at once assured.

As this passage suggests, the methods of the board at that time were not necessarily those of the present day, as described by the educational consultant earlier. Rather than 'working hard' to convince parents and students of the value of vocational schooling, early schooling officials simply built vocational schools in areas of the city which, up to then, were under-serviced by secondary schools. They were then offered to the local population as the (only) schooling available. Thus, "large enrolments ... were at once assured."

To be sure, providing vocational schooling in working class and immigrant areas where parents and their children had no other option, proved at least somewhat successful in meeting 'national concerns.' However, this same document goes on to reveal even more to us – to suggest that, in fact, that there were some complications with this overall project in the immediate post-WW1 era.

No doubt the rapid growth in technical education in the eastern and western sections of the city under the favourable conditions of the 1920's led the Board to expect a similar response in North Toronto. The *overbuilding* of shop accommodation in the Northern Secondary School resulted from following the same pattern *without taking local conditions into adequate account* (Beattie, *et al* 1959, 5; italics added).

The reference to 'local conditions' is clear. As compared to the immigrant and working class populations in the neighbourhoods where the first two vocational schools were built, North Toronto was different. Here, social-class issues came into play. Middle-class parents had no intention of enrolling their children in vocational schools. Further, they clearly had the savvy and political leverage to ensure that their children were not going to be bureaucratically streamed into those programs, even if such schools had been built in their area. 'National needs' may have been important, but specific class interests clearly dominated in this context. The city fathers had certainly miscalculated in this 1920's instance. As our 1959 document attests, later generations of movers and shakers would certainly be more astute about such matters.²

Why were vocational programs developed and promoted – in the state school systems of Canada and other nations? For a number of differing – sometimes even conflicting – reasons, depending upon which historian or educator you ask. During the 1980s, as a result of his extensive study of vocational education across a number of nations, American sociologist Aaron Benavot developed a general schema outlining these various assumptions and beliefs about why vocational education programs exist within state schooling systems.

"The first and most common perspective," Benavot states, arose directly out of the "demands for skilled workers generated by industrialization," and industry's need for "a technically proficient labor force." These beliefs certainly seem to reflect those enunciated by schooling officials in the documents quoted above – and indeed, are widely held by policy makers and others in educational and political arenas everywhere.

However, as already suggested from our Ontario examples, when one goes beyond the public statements of those representing 'national industrial needs,' these purported 'common perspectives' become much more complicated indeed. As compared, or in addition, to the meeting the 'needs of industry,' Benavot posits a second overall perspective on why vocational education was advocated. There were also wider 'societal interests' at stake. For example, Benavot postulates that some observers saw vocational education as a "natural outcome of expanding democratic societies bent on integrating and socializing new citizens." This interest in the 'proper' socialization of citizens was aimed particularly at recently arrived immigrants, as well as working class youth. For others, somewhat more equity-conscious, larger 'societal interests' were also at stake in the way in which vocational education was promoted in the context of "upholding basic moral commitments to equal educational opportunity," as well as appealing to 'progressive' educators concerned about 'problematic' students, and looking for other ways in which they could continue their education.

In direct contrast to the 'positive' aspects of vocational education which seem to underlie these first two sets of assumptions and beliefs about the origins of public vocational education, Benavot also posits a third set of explanations, in many respects (although not all) very much in opposition to the former explanations. As compared to 'industrial' and 'broad social' needs, this third set of interpretations is based on a belief in the stratified nature of our society, and the differing interests which pertain as a result of this stratification. For these observers, the development of vocational education was "a class-based solution invented by capitalist businessmen and industrial managers to consolidate their power over the emerging corporate capitalist economies." Vocational schools were developed as an inexpensive (to capital) way to produce "semi-educated workers sensitive to capitalist work values." In addition, introducing vocational education into the public school system also could serve to diminish "the discretionary powers of skilled workers and union-controlled apprenticeship programs by placing the responsibility for job entry and job training in either public or managerial hands" (Benavot 1983, 66).

One could certainly argue that there is no one overarching 'truth' to be gleaned from this schema. For example, whether schools, and vocational programs in particular, have been effective, either in serving the interests of industry, or in enhancing social equity in society, has been a matter for much debate over many years (cf., for example, Berg 1970; Jencks, *et al* 1972; Li 1981; Shilling 1989). However, this array of hypotheses can certainly play a useful role in helping to understand the themes and events which have transpired over the past and present of vocational education in Ontario and beyond – and even to assist in formulating new hypotheses about what might transpire in future years.

There is no question that these (strong) differences over the *raison d'être* of vocational education and training have existed throughout the history of vocational education – particularly among those instrumental in planning, promoting and proselytizing for these programs. For many the arguments were more stark and oppositional – those in favour of vocation education for the betterment of national economic interests, as compared to those in favour of individual and social human development and growth. One well-known debate occurred early in the twentieth century, between David Snedden, the head of education for Massachusetts, and John Dewey, educational philosopher and schooling reformer. For Snedden, "the controlling purpose of vocational education is to produce fairly definite forms of skill and power which shall enable the learner to become a successful producer of a valuable service." Dewey's response, in a later issue of the same journal, was informative indeed. He argued that vocational education should emphasize

the development of such intelligence, initiative, ingenuity and capacity as shall make workers as far as possible, masters of their own industrial fate. ... The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which will 'adapt' workers to the existing industrial regime ... but one which will alter the existing industrial system and ultimately transform it (quoted in Simon, *et al* 1991, 5).

As we shall see, these same differences existed among educators and policy makers in the Canadian context.

Origins of Publicly Funded (Vocational) Education in Ontario

I want to begin by placing the historical development of vocational education within the larger context of the overall rise of the centralized, state schooling system in Canada during the past two centuries. This is important for at least two reasons. First, most would agree that vocational programs developed in tandem with the development of the more academic sites of the state system, albeit at somewhat later stages. Further, they were usually initiated, funded and directed by the same elected and appointed bodies responsible for the overall schooling system.

The second reason for the usefulness of examining vocational and academic programs together is also straightforward. As I hope to demonstrate here, to a large extent, both were established for the same general purposes – those outlined in the second of Benavot's series of explanations. Both academic and vocational programs, whatever their respective explicit natures may have been, were intended to meet larger 'societal interests' – socializing young people into 'proper' norms and behaviours.

Traditionally, educational historians have argued that centralized state school systems were established in North America and elsewhere as a result of public pressures from parents for the provision of good schooling for their children. While this may be true to some extent, other historians have more recently argued that there were other reasons,

and other agents, involved in promoting compulsory, universal, tuition-free schools. They point out that, when one examines Eastern Canadian communities in the first half of the nineteenth century, in fact education and schooling was quite well established – long before there was any real organized government involvement in this domain. Classes and programs were abundant – held in local homes, schoolhouses, churches and other premises, organized and run by local parents, teachers and others. To be sure, they were very diverse programs, depending for the most part on local resources and the local economy, with a curriculum which was directed by the varying interests of each community. However, as a number of historians have pointed out, from early European settlement times, community schooling was alive and well in many parts of Ontario and beyond, with virtually no state involvement.³

It was only in the 1840s and 1850s that things changed, and governments in eastern Canada (and elsewhere in North America) began their direct – and energetic – involvement in developing a centralized schooling system. It was no coincidence, many argue, that this was also a time of serious social disruption – severe economic recession, high unemployment, dramatic increases in European immigration, increasing discontent with the un-representative nature of the British colonial government in Canada, and even armed rebellion in both Ontario and Quebec. Given this context, revisionist historians have argued that the development of our centralized state school system came about, not mainly from parents and local communities, but from the strong efforts of ‘school promoters’ – members of the economic, political, religious and academic elite who were very interested indeed in developing a universal, compulsory, standardized schooling system which would serve to socialize the youth of the community into proper attitudes of respect for authority, colonial government, and traditional gender relations. In the words of one of these school promoters,

... unless the provision for the support of education is made certain and permanent, this great country must rapidly sink deeper and deeper in ignorance and vice. No man possessed of property in this Province, who attends for a little to the state of ignorance which pervades the great mass of the many thousands in which our native youth are growing up around us could hesitate for a moment to pay any reasonable tax for the support of education, as he would be thereby increasing the value of his estate, and securing himself and his posterity in the possession of it (Murray 1843, quoted in Houston 1982, 261).

One could easily conclude that for the Reverend Robert Murray, Ontario's first superintendent of schools, ‘education’ had a very particular meaning indeed. It was not necessarily the provision of programs to stimulate the intellectual and academic interests and knowledges of students. Rather, what seemed to lie at the forefront was the importance of changing the values and behaviours of youth, to ensure the perpetuation of the wealth of those already ‘possessed of property.’ Indeed, one major conclusion which many, who have examined the inner workings of our state school systems over the past century and a half, have come to, is the extent to which they have developed into bureaucratic, authoritarian, and normalizing cultures, with the effect (if not the intent of

everyone working within the system) of socializing youth into 'proper' obedient behaviour.

To be sure, as a number of historians have documented, at different times many people attempted to alter, resist or oppose schooling and schooling practices which they saw as detrimental to their children. As I have suggested above, vocational as well as academic programs have been the subject of incursions, tensions and resistances within and between various sectors of our community, and continues to be so. However, it is difficult not to conclude that state schooling today consists of highly defined, and bureaucratic, forms.

Along with the establishment of common schools, vocational education programs were also advocated by the elite in Ontario from early times – indeed, many of the early school promoters saw vocational subjects as part and parcel of the development of an overall centralized schooling system. Mahlon Burwell, a early legislator in Toronto, presented a lengthy report to the Assembly of Upper Canada in 1832 on the needs for a centralized schooling system. In this report, he also emphasized the need for "superior schools in the higher branches of science" (what we would call today the practical sciences). Otherwise, he warned, the country would "fall behind the age in which we live" (quoted in Hodgins 1898, 78). Similarly, in his famous education report to the Assembly in 1836, fellow legislator Charles Duncombe stated that his proposed common school bill should give local school trustees the power

to purchase or lease any shop, workhouse, mechanical tools and materials, for the purpose of enabling the scholars of the school to employ a portion of their time in acquiring a knowledge of such mechanical skill, art, business or profession as the trustees together with the teacher shall think fit (quoted in Hodgins 1898, 322).

In spite of these exhortations however, little was done in this regard during the ensuing decades of the 1800s – in spite of the development of a massive schooling bureaucracy in Ontario during the last half of that century. Even provincial school superintendent Egerton Ryerson's exhortation in 1871 – that "One grant object of the new School Act, was to make our Public Schools more directly and effectively subservient to the interests of agriculture, manufactures and mechanics" – did little to promote vocational programs in this regard. As he further lamented in his annual report that year, one of the needs "in our system of Public and High Schools has been facilities for growing boys' instruction in matters relating to commercial and business transactions" (Ontario Department of Education 1871, 48) Similar exhortations by other educational leaders during this time – J. George Hodgins in 1876 ("A Plea for Elementary Science and Industrial Training in our Schools"), and James L. Hughes in 1884 ("Industrial Education") – did little to advance the vocational cause during those times (Hodgins 1904, 354; Ontario Education Association 1884, 57). At best, bookkeeping was added to the Ontario secondary school curriculum as an optional subject, to be followed by stenography and typewriting some time later. In 1885 the province allowed willing boards of education to establish separate, one-year commercial education programs, which met with some success in the largest

towns and cities. By the turn of the century, slightly less than one-half of the province's high school population were taking an optional bookkeeping course, but within twenty years this number had dropped to less than fifteen percent.⁴

At the turn of the century, at a time of intense economic recession and social unrest, private sector interests began lobbying in earnest for changes to technical education. In 1899, the Board of Trade of Toronto petitioned the federal government that it "most heartily endorses the movement in favour of a broader and more thorough technical training in all its branches in this country, and pledges itself to forward the movement by all means in its power" (Seath 1911, 351). A year later, in a move to promote vocational education, tobacco millionaire Sir William MacDonal established the MacDonal Manual Training Plan, under which twenty-one manual training schools were established across the country and maintained for three years, including three in Ontario (Brockville, Ottawa and Toronto).

Pressure on federal and provincial governments continued, and by this point trade unions began to take up the call as well. In 1901, representatives of both the Dominion Labour Council and Boards of Trade met with the prime minister in Ottawa to present resolutions on the matter, including a request that a royal commission be established to study technical education needs in Canada. Five years later, the Canadian Manufacturers' Association again sent a very pointed petition to the federal cabinet.

Be it resolved that the Dominion Government be requested to appoint a commission to report on the best method for establishing a comprehensive national system of Technical Education to provide Canadian industry and commerce with trained assistants from amongst the Canadian people, and thereby aid in developing Canadian industry, and do away with the present condition of affairs, which compels employers to go abroad for men to occupy the more responsible and more remunerative positions in Canadian enterprises (quoted in Seath 1911, 351).

In 1910, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada passed what seem at the time like an equally pressing statement on the matter

Resolved, that inasmuch as the natural resources of Canada in its rivers, in its forests and in its farm lands, are of immeasurable extent and commercial value, and are urgently calling for the best and most approved means of development and utilization; and, whereas the present methods of production require further scientific stimulus – more especially in the mechanical branches – of a broadly national character, through a proper and special educational system; be it resolved, that this Trades and Labour Congress of Canada place itself on record as in favour of the establishment of industrial technical schools throughout the Dominion, and it is hereby an imperative instruction to the executive of this body to use its best efforts at an early date in urging the importance of the subject upon the serious attention of the Dominion Government, with a view to the

establishment of such a system of special education throughout Canada (quoted in Seath 1911, 352).

By this time, both the Ontario and federal governments were sufficiently moved to begin responding to these persistent requests. In 1910, a federal Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education was established. In the same year, John Seath, Superintendent of Education for Ontario, submitted his own 400 page report, *Education for Industrial Purposes*, to the Ontario Government. In this report, he proposed a significant expansion of vocational education in Ontario's secondary school system, through a series of differentiated technical and industrial programs and schools, for both males and females. The federal royal commission report, tabled in 1913, also advocated for the establishment of vocational education programs across the nation, and in the ensuing six years, three federal acts were passed in this regard – the Federal Agricultural Instruction Act (1913), the Technical Education Act (1919) and the Youth Training Act (1919).

In spite of this flurry of activities, little actually happened on the ground. For example, as a result of the 'success' of the Macdonald plan with the three experimental vocational schools operated in Ontario, in 1904 the Department of Education placed Manual Training in the revised school programs. Seven years later, however, the superintendent of education had to report that

Since then the subject has been taken up in a considerable number of schools; but, as its value is not yet fully appreciated, and as like household science it is optional, it is has not yet been generally introduced (Seath 1911, 145).

There were a number of reasons why vocational education was slow to be taken up by local boards of education, and by parents and students themselves – in spite of its apparent support by capital and by government officials. First, while officials in the labour movement did support innovation in this area, they were also very clear about what forms of vocational education they would – and wouldn't – favour. Their official statements, such as the 1910 document reported above, were clear: they were looking for the 'scientific stimulus' provided by specialized 'industrial technical schools.' However, the manual training classes offered in Ontario high schools after 1904 as an alternative to academic programs in regular high schools were certainly not an acceptable substitute. Even Superintendent Seath had to admit that it was seen by many ('unthinking') people as simply 'fads and frills.' More to the point, Seath also felt obliged to note that these courses were "looked upon with disfavour by some of our labour organizations, because a few years ago, in the United States, some who had received advanced training in the subject foolishly allowed themselves to be used in breaking up a strike." Certainly, the American Federation of Labour took a strong line on matters of industrial education during that time, stating clearly that, while strongly advocating for Technical and Industrial Education, it "must be supplementary to and in connection with our modern school system. That for which our movement stands tends to make better workers of our future citizens, better citizens of our future workers" (quoted in Seath 1911, 268-9, 280).

Within the educational establishment itself there was also strong antipathy, for a number of reasons, to the introduction of vocational programs into what had traditionally been an academic system. As early as 1902, for example, Seath was forced to admit that his push for more vocational programs in schools was meeting strong resistance. In a speech to the delegates at the annual meeting of the Ontario Education Association, he stated forcefully that he

regret[ted] to hear that in some of your sections the latest product of educational evolution, – Manual Training and Domestic Science and Art, was last year, and, I fear, is even this year, spoken of in a somewhat inconsiderate way. Permit me to say that indifference and hostility, no less than the advocacy of the thoughtless enthusiast, is much to be deprecated. These new subjects have come to stay and it would be well for all of you – Classical, Mathematical, Science and Moderns men – to realize the fact and to use the movement, as it may be used, for the proper ends of education (quoted in McQueen 1934, 21).

During the 1920s and 1930s this antipathy continued, both within and outside of the school system itself. To be sure, during the depression years of the 1930s interest in expanding these programs once again developed, and across the province a number of new programs were initiated. Overall however, by the beginning of World War Two, only 18% of all secondary students in Ontario were enrolled in vocational programs.

Changes in the Post World War Two Period

In the immediate post-World War Two period, enrolments in secondary schools began to expand dramatically. During the first decade and a half, from 1945 to 1961, the secondary school population increased almost 150% – from 121,000 to 299,00 students. While overall population increases (through birth rates and immigration) accounted for part of this expansion, in fact the participation rate of the 15 to 19 year-old group had also increased significantly in that time period – from 37.4 to 62.6 per cent of that age group's overall population. In this time of economic expansion, more children of working class and minority backgrounds were being given the opportunity to remain in school. What is also interesting is that these students were enrolling in academic programs in the same proportion as the more elite schooling population had been doing in earlier decades. In fact, in the sixteen years since the end of the war, the proportion of high school students who were participating in non-academic programs had actually dropped – from 27 to 24 percent of the total school population (Fleming 1972).

Whatever the resistances might have been to vocational education in public schools during the first six decades of the twentieth century, after 1960 they were certainly overtaken to a great extent. To be sure, a number of new, or renewed, pressures came to bear on the matter. First, as a result of the 'baby-boom' era, huge increases in the youth population began moving through the school system. While the secondary school

population had increased by 150% in the fifteen years immediately after the war, it was to increase by a further 200,000 students between 1961 and 1967 – to over half a million. By the end of the 1950s then, with this large ‘bulge’ of students approaching secondary school age, provincial officials were being pressed for planning decisions – how many, and what kinds, of new secondary schools should be built? It was also clear that whatever decisions were made in this regard, they would also have serious ramifications when it came time to consider the necessary expansions in the post-secondary field – universities, community colleges and/or other training programs.

The late 1950s saw another significant change; following a decade of growth, severe economic stagnation, recession and rising unemployment had begun to afflict the nation. In an attempt to counter this trend, the federal government under Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker passed the Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act (TVTA) in December 1960. Under this act, significant federal funding was made available for training and employment related programs. While most of the funds were intended for the post-secondary level, an estimated \$90,000,000 was earmarked over the following six years for increasing the numbers of secondary school technical-vocational programs across the country. Thus, for the first time since Canada was ‘united’ under Confederation, federal money would be available to assist with secondary level schooling in the provinces – albeit, under very specific criteria related to the expansion of technical and vocational (distinguished from academic) education.

There is no question that the TVTA act effected significant change on the structure and composition of Ontario secondary schooling. Within six months of its passing, Ontario had signed a contract with the federal government, making available ‘free’ money to local school boards to undertake needed building and expanding of secondary schools. However, this money had one very significant string attached – "at least one-half of the school time [must be] devoted to technical, commercial and other vocational subjects or courses designed to prepare students for entry into employment by developing occupational qualifications" (Fleming 1971, 354). The minister of education, John Robarts, declared this federal money a "heaven-sent opportunity" and announced an entire revamping of the province's secondary school syllabus (soon dubbed the ‘Robart's Plan’) in order to allow for the streaming of students into vocational programs.

This financial incentive for local boards, suffering from economic recession and the need to expand schooling capacity, was paramount. In the six years from 1961 to 1967, the \$90 million which had been earmarked had burgeoned to expenditures of \$805 million – in Ontario alone. Here, 335 entirely new secondary schools were constructed, along with significant additions to 83 existing schools – all devoted to vocational education. In this six years the percentage of all secondary school students enrolled in non-academic programs had almost doubled, from 24 to 46 percent of the total school population. In absolute terms, their numbers had more than tripled, from 72,000 to over 232,000 students. In fact, in spite of the dramatic increase in the secondary schooling population overall, the number of students remaining in academic programs actually dropped! Academically, and socially, the historic purpose of secondary schooling in the province

had been turned on its head, and during the 1960s, many more students were being funnelled into non-academic programs.

Was the Robarts Plan 'successful?' Understandably, the answer to this question depends upon defining what counts as 'success.' If success was ensuring that less numbers (relative and absolute) of students were graduating from university-preparatory programs, and therefore creating less demand on (expensive) provincial university capacity, there is no question that the program was a success. If, on the other hand, success was defined in relation to the numbers of highly trained and employable students graduating from technical and commercial programs in the province, unfortunately there has been very little systematic study undertaken in this area – beyond simple collection of school registration and completion data. One such study was anything but supportive – it found that, within the higher of the two vocational streams delineated by the Ontario secondary school syllabus, 62% of all students dropped out before graduating. Among the students in the lower of the two levels, barely 20% remained in school long enough to complete their studies – a 79% drop-out rate, compared to a graduation rate of 88% for students in the academic programs of the province (King and Hughes 1985).

However, in the context of social equity, the Robarts Plan was anything but a success. It soon became apparent to many that these new vocational programs focussed overwhelmingly on certain kinds of students – clearly defined on the basis of their gender, class, race and ethnic backgrounds. One Toronto study undertaken at the end of the decade, for example, found that children of the city's working and unemployed poor were twenty times as likely to be found in the lowest streams of the school system, as compared to their counterparts from families of professional and managerial occupations (Toronto Board of Education 1969). Given the low graduation rates associated with these programs, it was understandable that concerns were soon raised – non only by working class and minority parents and students themselves, but also by the public media, concerned educators, politicians, and so on. One inner-city mother, quoted in the Toronto Star, compared the Robarts Plan to "the same sort of separate-but-equal education offered to Negroes in the United States" (Toronto Star 3/3/1968). In a talk given to city high school teachers, reported in the daily press, an educational researcher stated that the "clash of middle-class and working-class attitudes is one of the most serious problems in schools" where students were divided into separate programs on the basis of their school achievement levels (Toronto Telegram 2/4/1968). As the decade progressed, these concerns began to be voiced in the provincial legislator. In July of 1968, for example, the education critic of the New Democratic Party declared that "millions of dollars were poured into the provincial system [but] ... there was no one who made any philosophic decision as to the effect this would have on the educational experience of the children of the province" (Stamp 1982, 204).

By 1970 the criticism had become shrill indeed, with articles and editorials appearing in the daily press, under such headlines as "Charges of racial, economic bias in Toronto's education system" (Globe and Mail 31/1/1970). One article, entitled "Why should the poor be denied education?" pinpointed the cause of the problems succinctly."Number

statistics show the two and four year courses are swollen with children of the poor and the immigrants; the five-year course is overloaded with children of the well-to-do" (Toronto Telegram 4/3/1970).

Only seven years after it had been introduced into, and totally transformed, the provincial education system, the Robarts Plan was ignominiously abandoned by the very officials who had promoted it in the first place. In its stead, an entirely new program was introduced. On the surface, this new provincial syllabus appeared very much the opposite of the Robarts Plan: many compulsory courses were dropped, and students were allowed to construct their own individual timetables from a plethora of optional courses. Underneath, however, there was actually little change in the overall nature of the academic and vocational programs of the province, or in the streaming of students on the basis of social difference. For starters, clearly in place were the several hundred new school buildings in the province, all of which were expensively built and equipped for vocational programs, all needing to be occupied with an ongoing student population. Given these structures, and the continuing strength of beliefs in the mental-manual divide, streaming very much continued as the norm for Ontario's schools. In addition, this streaming also continued very much along gender, race, class and ethnic lines – a problem in itself for these social groups (given the poorer outcomes of these programs), as well as constituting a continuing problem for those who wished to see, or to transform, vocational programs into a context of equal status and social worth as their academic program counterparts.

Table A – Number of Students Enrolled in Vocational Subjects in Grades 10-12, 1981-2 and 1984-5, Four Provinces. (Canadian Teachers' Federation 1987, 10).

| Province | Year | Business/Commerce | | Industrial/Vocational | | Total Enrolment |
|----------------------|---------|-------------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----------------|
| | | N / % | | N / % | | |
| Saskatchewan | 1981-82 | 25,295 | 57 | 17,818 | 40 | 44,024 |
| | 1984-85 | 21,594 | 53 | 14,525 | 35 | 40,963 |
| New Brunswick | 1981-82 | 23,053 | 64 | 13,567 | 37 | 36,256 |
| | 1984-85 | 18,125 | 54 | 11,993 | 36 | 33,721 |
| Prince Edward Island | 1981-82 | 861 | 13 | 550 | 8 | 6,532 |
| | 1984-85 | 623 | 10 | 541 | 9 | 6,002 |
| Newfoundland | 1981-82 | 3,121 | 15 | 1,585 | 8 | 21,074 |
| | 1984-85 | 4,290 | 15 | 3,412 | 12 | 29,436 |

Vocational Education in Ontario Since the 1960s

There is no question that vocational programs in public secondary schools have fallen off considerably in the past three decades – in Ontario and in Canada generally. Table A (across) shows these shifts during the first half of the 1980s, for four representative provinces (Canadian Teachers' Federation 1987, 10). More recently, for Ontario at least, these shifts have been even more profound. As Table B indicates, the number of individual technology courses taken by all secondary school students in Ontario schools has dropped from 481,000 in 1973 to 257,000 in 1996, while the overall student population has increased from 586,000 to 696,000 students. This dramatic drop in vocational program participation is certainly mirrored in the Province of Quebec, as indicated in Table C.

Table B – Province of Ontario Secondary School Course Enrolment by Major Subject Area (Ontario Ministry of Education, www.edu.gov.on.ca).

| | 1973 | 1982 | 1986 | 1996 |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| <i>Arts</i> | | | | 277,057 |
| <i>Business</i> | 467,546 | 421,016 | 411,996 | 311,550 |
| <i>Data Processing</i> | --- | 74,038 | 107,839 | 152,500 |
| <i>English</i> | N/A | 575,806 | 686,049 | 672,286 |
| <i>French</i> | | | | 128,973 |
| <i>Geography</i> | | | | 158,084 |
| <i>History</i> | | | | 320,512 |
| <i>International Languages</i> | | | | 29,681 |
| <i>Mathematics</i> | 569,256 | 573,265 | 628,008 | 548,941 |
| <i>Contemporary Studies</i> | | | | 256,061 |
| <i>Phys Ed/Health</i> | | | | 235,039 |
| <i>Science</i> | 541,764 | 475,318 | 547,348 | 487,622 |
| <i>Technology</i> | 481,411 | 430,943 | 312,083 | 257,196 |
| <i>Classical Studies</i> | | | | 6,132 |
| TOTAL COURSES | | | | 3,842,234 |
| TOTAL STUDENTS | 585,725 | 562,013 | 527,238 | 695,784 |

Table C – Province of Quebec Secondary School Graduations, 1975-76 to 1991-92 (Ministère d'Éducation, Québec 1983).

| School Type | 1975-76 | 1985-86 | 1989-90 | 1991-92 |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| A. Public Board – Total | 63,047 | 66,097 | 50,028 | 56,395 |
| General Diploma | 47,341 | 49,905 | 42,807 | 51,293 |
| Vocational Diploma | 15,706 | 16,192 | 7,221 | 5,102 |
| B. Private Schools – Total | 10,604 | 12,581 | 11,503 | 12,235 |
| General Diploma | 8,828 | 10,943 | 11,135 | 12,235 |
| Vocational Diploma | 1,776 | 1,638 | 368 | 284 |
| C. Total – Total Diplomas | 73,651 | 78,678 | 61,531 | 68,630 |
| General Diploma | 56,169 | 60,848 | 53,942 | 63,244 |
| Vocational Diploma | 17,482 | 17,830 | 7,589 | 5,386 |

In fact, while the most recent data is somewhat contradictory, and complicated by studies which emphasize as much the prescriptive as descriptive aspects of ‘the new vocationalism’ (see, for example, OECD 1998b; Skilbeck *et al* 1994), Benavot has suggested that this downward trend has been very much the case with most of the world, in both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations, and one which began soon after the Second World War in many cases. As the world-wide data in Table D indicates, between 1955 and 1975, the percentage of male secondary students who were enrolled in vocational (as compared to academic) programs dropped from 24% to 18%, and for females, 21% to 14%.⁵

Table D – Proportion of Full-Time Secondary Students in Vocational Programs, by Gender and Regions of the World (Benavot 1983)

| | | 1955 | 1965 | 1975 |
|---|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Africa | <i>Male</i> | 18.4 (22) | 13.3 (29) | 7.3 (29) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 15.7 (22) | 13.4 (29) | 6.7 (29) |
| Asia | <i>Male</i> | 13.3 (12) | 12.5 (13) | 13.6 (14) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 5.9 (12) | 9.4 (13) | 7.8 (14) |
| Middle East / North Africa | <i>Male</i> | 11.3 (11) | 13.6 (14) | 12.4 (14) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 11.0 (11) | 9.5 (14) | 8.1 (14) |
| Latin America / Caribbean | <i>Male</i> | 29.0 (19) | 21.5 (19) | 21.8 (16) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 32.4 (19) | 21.7 (19) | 18.1 (16) |
| Eastern Europe | <i>Male</i> | 68.4 (4) | 59.7 (6) | 76.3 (5) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 37.9 (4) | 43.0 (6) | 58.1 (5) |
| Western Europe | <i>Male</i> | 34.2 (12) | 31.9 (14) | 23.1 (18) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 28.2 (12) | 22.3 (14) | 18.0 (18) |
| Totals, All Regions | <i>Male</i> | 24.0 (80) | 20.5 (95) | 17.9 (96) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 20.6 (80) | 17.1 (95) | 13.8 (96) |
| Totals, excluding Eastern Europe | <i>Male</i> | 21.7 (76) | 17.9 (89) | 14.7 (91) |
| | <i>Female</i> | 19.6 (76) | 15.4 (89) | 11.3 (91) |

(Cell entries are mean values; number of cases in parentheses)

Why this downward trend? Given this virtually uniform decrease across countries and regions reflecting a wide spectrum of national economies, national modes of production, and levels of enrolment in state schooling systems, it would seem that the explanation for these downward trends in vocational programs lies outside of industrial or general economic explanations. Benavot suggests an alternative interpretation of this data.

The fact that the vocational share of secondary education has declined since 1950 so consistently and in such diverse countries appears to reflect a growing global ideology, egalitarian in character, that shuns formal differentiation of children while they occupy the status of high school pupil. ... Until recently, undifferentiated forms of education where schools and classes are relatively uniform and homogeneous were only true of primary education. Now ... they are becoming true for secondary education as well (Benavot 1983, 74).

From our interviews, and from the commentary of a number of organizations reporting on these trends in Ontario and Canada generally, it would appear that these concerns about increased social stratification continue to play a large role in influencing the downward spiral in vocational education. Recent public opinion polls, for example, indicate decreasing interest in streaming students into non-academic programs. According to longitudinal studies in Ontario, for example, the percentage of the overall adult population believing that such vocational streaming should happen at grade nine or earlier has dropped from 39% in 1980 to 20% in 1998. By comparison, those believing that streaming should happen only in the last year of secondary school, or should not occur at all in high school, has risen from 17% to 47% of the overall adult population (Livingstone and Hart 1998).

As the Canadian Teachers' Federation explained the matter in their 1987 report to the federal cabinet, the

dramatic expansion of compulsory public schooling to all children ... [has] effectively placed under suspicion any school system which appeared to have winning (academic) and losing (vocational) tracks. In consequence, a new ideology developed emphasizing postponed selection and maximizing future access to postsecondary education for all children (Canadian Teachers' Federation 1987, 12).

In addition to the egalitarian pressures working against vocational education, the recent decline of many industrial and commercial occupations and jobs certainly has a strong effect. Further, while the message is often confusing and complex, public statements from employers and their associations often express an interest in, if not preference for, graduates with competence in non-technical knowledges and skills, such as general academic proficiency, and emphasis on general values, attitudes and social relations applicable to the workplace.

Recent attempts to restructure, renew, or simply invigorate interest in vocational education seem to have little effect. The Ontario government's 213 page Radwanski Commission report of 1987, seeking "ways of ensuring that Ontario's system of education is, and is perceived to be, fully relevant to the needs of young people, and to the realities of the labour market they are preparing to enter," now occupies bookshelf space. The similar 1990 opus, *The Mind as Well as The Hand: A Report on the Current State and Potential of Technical and Technological Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools of the Toronto Board of Education*, seems equally as neglected in the latest flurry of schooling reform and restructuring activity.⁶

The Future of Publicly Funded, School-Based Vocational Education

Is there a future for vocational education in the public school system?

On the one hand, there are certainly many reasons why one could legitimately predict an end to these programs. First, the present realities surely speak volumes – the significant and continuing decline in their numbers and popularity. Secondly, they are relatively more costly to operate than academic or general programs. In a time of already significant cutbacks to public expenditure on schooling (and other social services), and in the absence of apparent public interest in vocational education, it is difficult to imagine governments wanting actively to buck this trend. In Quebec, for example, this delay in vocational training to the post-secondary level has been increasingly promoted by educational regulation (e.g., Ministère d'Éducation du Québec 1983). In spite of a flurry of recent Ontario government announcements in favour of public vocational education programs ("Better Education and Training for Better Jobs in Ontario"- 5/5/1998 News Release; "Choices into Action: Guidance and Career Education Program Policy for Elementary and Secondary Schools" – March 1991 Announcement), critics have been quick to note that there is very little of new substance behind these announcements, and very little new funding, certainly in relation to the overall costs/spending for vocational schooling in the province (e.g., Ontario Schools, Hospitals Face Major Cuts: Municipalities Urged to Start "Downsizing, Restructuring" – Globe and Mail 9/8/1995; School Shopss: Image Woes, Poor Funding Leave Students Losers in High-Tech World – Toronto Star 6/16/1990).

Thirdly, in the case of Ontario, at least, those students and parents interested in pursuing specific vocational training are turning more and more to the private sector for this service. Ironically, the Ministry of Education's main web-site presently includes a section listing over 500 private enterprise vocational schools, complete with address, phone numbers and web-links. (Given this government's neo-liberal penchant for promoting private enterprise, and the concomitant tax savings for every vocational student leaving the school system, this is no surprise).

Fourthly, it would appear that there is continuing opposition to publicly funded vocational programs, not only from parents and students, but also from sectors within the schooling system itself – officials and teachers alike who are concerned about the effects of such streaming on their attempts to provide a more equitable future for all children, regardless of background. Many also continue to express the concerns enunciated much earlier by John Dewey, that public schooling not concern itself with "adapting workers to the existing industrial regime." Many continue to believe that education at the elementary and secondary levels should focus on the development of the 'whole child' – to develop their basic academic skills and encourage their active participation in a wide range of intellectual and creative areas. Steering and training children for a specific, or even general, occupation pursuit should be left to until after completion of basic elementary and secondary education. While some academic teachers may adopt this position primarily in self-interest of protecting their own jobs, others may have more humanistic

concerns for their students. One teacher, interviewed about these matters recently in England for a similar research project, held to an even more conspiratorial analysis, reflecting closely Benavot's 'class-based' explanations for the rise of vocational education.

Teacher: The government regards an educated workforce as a threat. They cannot say it ... We're deeply suspicious of the government ... undermining the ability of the population to question and challenge the leadership, the elite. That's the background to our reservations about [the new vocational program] I don't think that the government and industry want people who can think, they want people who are easily motivated and who do as they are told, frankly. Education on the old model was turning out too many free-thinking, rebellious types.

Interviewer: I have been waiting to meet a sort of liberal educator.

Teacher: There's plenty in this school.

Interviewer: Are they on the defensive now?

Teacher: Yes, we're on the defensive but we are not defeated and we won't be defeated because the basic idea of educating the whole person is one which is fundamentally and absolutely sound, and it won't go away (Jordan 1994, 22).

Similarly, David Coffey, in his recent study on vocational education in England, states that, "though vocationalism has become more respectable and widely accepted, there remains a reluctance among many teachers to accord it unreserved approbation." Further, he suggests that there "has been a strong preference by all classes of society for a general education rather than one that narrows occupational opportunities" (Coffey 1992, 187; see also Shilling 1989, 184). While these convictions may not be shared by all, or even most, teachers and educators, they do represent a long-standing opposition, within the public school system, to any program which steers students away from a 'well-rounded' education.

Ironically however, while individual teachers may be divided about these matters, most provincial and national teachers' organizations invariably argue for inclusion or expansion of school-based vocational programs, even though admitting to the tensions which pervade the issue. In a 1987 position paper, entitled "The Revitalization of Vocational and Technical Education in Canadian Secondary Schools," the Canadian Teachers' Federation recognized that

industry and government were major contributors to the development of vocational education. [However] it is also very plain that vocational education was, and is, championed on theoretical grounds by a perhaps small, but enthusiastic, group of educators who perceive many young people to be better served by an education of a more practical nature (Canadian Teachers' Federation 1987, 13).

An earlier statement, presented to the Ontario cabinet by the Ontario Teachers' Federation in 1983, both recognized these tensions, and at the same time, attempted to proselytize against them. The Federation expressed its regret that

skills shortages [are attributed by many] to negative attitudes of Canadians toward blue-collar work, thought to be inferior in status and life-style. Blue-collar work now pays well, provides good working conditions, and is increasingly unionized. Many skilled blue-collar workers advance to managerial and entrepreneurial positions (Ontario Teachers' Federation 1983, 17).

It is hard not to read through these kinds of statements, to speculate on the tensions which must underlie them. For starters, at the very personal level, one is left wondering how many of these officials would counsel their own children to select vocational programs at the high school level, especially if they were deemed capable of success in the university-bound streams."Schooling other people's children" is all too often an exercise in individual denial.⁷

Finally, as suggested by the comment from the apprentice at the beginning of this chapter, many students themselves – particularly those now in vocational streams – find school less than rewarding. It is not surprising that many would much prefer to be out in the 'real' world of work – even in pursuing their own further development. In the words of one apprentice mechanic, "Being in the world of work gives you a better and more natural education."⁸

On the other hand, one is certainly left with the impression that, in many nations of the world, vocational education is on the rise – at least within the realms of the public and private discourse, if not in reality. As Malcolm Skilbeck, *et al* suggest in their recent study, "the years since the early 1970s have witnessed a major resurgence of interest in the vocational role of education and training." This surge (of interest, if nothing else) has been labelled 'the new vocationalism' by some, and there is no question that it is tied closely to the interest in "matching of human capabilities to labour market needs and opportunities ... to sustain growth in the modern economy ... to reorient and restructure, to achieve greater efficiency, to find new economic opportunities, and, more recently, to alleviate or forestall youth (and adult) unemployment." (Skilbeck, *et al* 1994, 1-2) Canada, and Ontario in particular, has certainly been well-immersed in this discourse, judging by the prolific rise, particularly during the past decade, of high-level commissions, investigations, studies and reports. As Alison Taylor notes in her comprehensive analysis of the Ontario scene, much of this activity has been promoted by the corporate sector, in collaboration with government officials at the provincial and federal levels, for the economic and national purposes suggested by Skilbeck, *et al* (Taylor 1997). Needless to say, the recommendations of these commissions and reports are clear: more, better vocational education is needed, and it must be much more closely tied to the needs of employers (see, for example, Economic Council of Canada 1992; Premier's Council Report 1990).

Given the turbulent economic times, the fluctuating employment rates, and the ways in which the school system is often scapegoated for not 'training' students properly, it is not surprising that many parents, students and local schooling officials also express concern about the purported failings of vocational education. For example, in recent Ontario public opinion surveys, respondents were asked whether they thought that high school students should take business or vocational studies, even if they were planning on attending university after high school graduation. While only 36% of respondents believed they should, when asked in a 1984 survey, by the 1996 survey this number had jumped to 75% of the sampled population (Livingstone, *et al* 1996, 23). Similarly, the responses from "educational organizations as well as groups representing various ministries, business and industry and others interested in technical education" to a consultation paper on technological education sent out by the Ontario government in 1991, found overwhelming support for an increase in vocational education. Further, this was not to be limited to just the secondary school level. For example, over 70% of these respondents supported a proposal to "introduce Technical Education programs in the early [kindergarten] years and the Formative Years (Grades 1-6) that lead to Technological Education programs in [grades 7 to 12]" (Ministry of Education 1991, 1,6).

In Ontario, these beliefs are being rewarded mainly by a flurry of media activity from the provincial government. "Better Education and Training for Better Jobs in Ontario" headlined one May 1998 pre-budget press release – allocating virtually all new funds for computer/internet expenditures, general textbooks and materials, and "\$150 million over the next three years to enable twice as many students to enroll in computer science and high-demand engineering programs." While a new "Guidance and Career Education Program Policy for Elementary and Secondary Schools" was circulated in March of the following year, the newly released 1999 "Program and Diploma Requirements" for Ontario secondary schools states that only one credit (of 30 in total) in science or technological education is required for high school graduation.

In any event, given the historic tensions over vocational education in the public school system, the continued underfunding of the present-day programs, and the continued decline in student participation (not unrelated matters), it would appear that there is no early change in sight – in spite of the recent rhetoric to the contrary.

How Could Vocational Education Be Different – and Successful?

Is it possible for vocational education to be successful? Who would be involved in helping to define success? What would these new definitions look like? Having decided that, could they be achieved at all in the public education system, as compared to some other venue? If so, how could they be achieved?

I would argue that any successful vocational education program should be based upon at least the following three principles. First, that the traditional mental-manual divide, in both its ideological and concrete forms, must and can be successfully bridged; secondly, that these programs can and must be redesigned to draw attention to, and hopefully eliminate, the biases of class, gender and race; finally, that they can be planned and taught in ways that would appeal to the needs and interests of students.

In addition, what must clearly be resisted in vocational education are pressures to train students only for single, narrow occupational niches. As John Dewey himself warned us, almost 85 years ago, "nothing could be more absurd than to try to educate individuals with an eye to only one line of activity" (Dewey 1916/1966, 306). David Coffey emphasizes the importance of moving "away from attempts, merely to train workers for specific work tasks. ... The primary concern of schools should not be with the living young people will earn but with the life that they will lead. That is the prospect for vocational education" (Coffey 1992, 189-90).

This narrow approach often manifests itself as the 'competency model' of training, where the emphasis (if not the totality) of the program lies in identifying and mastering specific 'behaviours' and 'performance objectives' for very specific job roles, at the expense of grounding students in knowledge and understanding. As Nancy Jackson points out, "The net effect of this practice is to impose a narrow and short-sighted perspective on the definition of learning 'needs,' weighing in favour of those 'objectives' which can be expressed in simplistic, often mechanical terms." This has negative consequences for students, both in the short and long term. It severely limits the possibilities for educating the whole person – even in regards to building an wide base of skills and understandings related to work. Further, given the ever-changing nature of the workplace in our times, it carries the definite risk of "planned obsolescence for workers ... The much-promised 'flexibility' and 'relevance' of such a system is realized by creating a workforce which is disposable or recyclable, rather than one which is innovative, and therefore durable, on the job" (Jackson 1989, 80; see also Gleeson 1989).

Much has already been observed and written about the ways in which the historic mental-manual divide can be bridged by adept teachers through active curriculum and pedagogy. Jane Gaskell for example, in an article comparing the very different philosophical and pedagogical approaches of two vocational teachers in Vancouver, argues that we "need to understand more about what does go on in the name of vocationalism, and how we might encourage a more critical and contextual exploration of working knowledge." Vocational education, "where knowledge, representations of the workplace and definitions of skill are contested[,] is more likely to inform vocational instruction than [when it is seen] as sites for the imposition of class and gender privilege." While there is certainly pressure on training institutions "encouraging instructors to take the point of view of employers" in developing and implementing their courses,

On the other hand, there are structural factors that encourage instructors to take the point of view of their students, and of workers. Instructors are hired to educate, to help students learn and ultimately lead more satisfying lives. Vocational instructors in clerical programs have often worked as secretaries themselves. They are in close contact with students, and easily empathize with their problems and frustrations. They also have an interest in upgrading the status of the occupation, a status which they come to share as instructors. There are organizational forms and a culture here which could support a more transformative vocationalism (Gaskell 1993,56-7,66).

As an example of how things could be different, a very insightful volume by Roger Simon, Don Dippo and Arlene Schenke combines the results of an extensive ethnographic study of vocational programs in a number of Ontario schools with a prescriptive schema for developing a counterhegemonic course of studies for secondary school vocational students. The authors suggest that an effective approach should involve three major areas of exploration and discussion – technical relations of work, social relations of work, and exchange relations of work. In each case, the classroom pedagogy would be based on students' own reflective inquiry, as they 'worked on' and 'worked with' their own experiences in the workplace. 'Working on experience' would allow students to examine their own situations, and "open up the possibility for understanding the workplace as a socially defined space within which neither custom nor values need be taken for granted or go unquestioned." Following on this,

working with experience is an attempt to explore how one's work experience is linked to the experiences of others in other places and in other times. ... [This would allow] a consideration of how the possibilities open to and the constraints imposed on people's working lives are neither random nor a matter for individual effort. Rather, working with experience can develop the realization that specific economic arrangements, beliefs, and social interests have to be questioned and at times transformed to enable students to increase their effective participation in determining practices that define their working lives (Simon, *et al* 1991, 11).

As befits the notion of bridging the theory-praxis divide, much of their text is spent in detailed discussion of actual content and strategies which vocational teachers could adopt in order to effect these critical discussions and activities in their classrooms.

These are but examples of what might be possible, and how it might be introduced. There is no question that much more investigation and practice is necessary, to identify successful, transferable models of alternation between the school-place and the workplace, wherein students can continue to explore and interrogate the world of work, as they develop their values, knowledges and skills. I look forward to these possibilities, even if I believe that they may yet be a long time in coming.

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Notes

¹ To be sure, even this definition is somewhat ambiguous, given the more recent proliferation of training programs, particularly at the community college level, for occupational categories which historically required only secondary schooling, and/or non-institutional preparation (eg. trades apprenticeships). Indeed, this increased specialization and credentialism is one factor in recent shifts in the number and nature of secondary school vocational programs.

² The lessons were, in fact, well learned. When federal funds became available for a massive increase in vocational programs in the early 1960s, eight new vocational high schools were built in Toronto. Every one of them was situated south of Bloor Street, which has historically been considered the dividing line between the working class/immigrant inner-city and the more affluent north sections of the city.

³ Cf. for example, Prentice 1975; Curtis 1988; Smaller 1994.

⁴ Anstead and Goodson 1993, 34. It is interesting to note, however, that the colonial government was involved in providing funding for other kinds of "vocational education" during these times. On the one hand, by mid-century official professional schools were being founded – Trinity Medical School in 1850 and the Toronto School of Medicine the following year. These were followed, soon after confederation, by the College of Dentistry in 1868, the College of Pharmacy in 1871 and the Ontario Agricultural College in 1873. At the other end of this spectrum, 1849 saw the first government involvement in grants to private organizations for industrial programs for "marginal" communities – Mount Elgin Institution for aboriginal children. By 1871, the first "Industrial school" had been opened, for "the vagrant class and the children of parents too poor to provide them with clothes." According to the official description of the institution, "the inmates are taught different branches of trade, so that on leaving for active life they find themselves able to command employment at remunerative wages, being educated and skilled workmen"(Hodgins 1904, 373).

⁵ The one regional anomaly is that of Eastern Europe, where vocational program participation actually rose dramatically during this post-war time period.(As a result, if data from this region are excluded from the world data stated above, both the level and decline of participation rates in the latter would be even more dramatic – 22% to 15% for males, 20% to 11% for females.) Dunavot suggestion for this rise in participation in Eastern Europe certainly fits within our overall analysis for its lack of support in Canada – in Eastern Europe, vocational education was considered, and rewarded, as being equal, if not superior, to academic pursuits.

⁶ To be sure, the Conservative government elected in Ontario in 1995 has moved very strongly back to streaming of students into academic and non-academic programs at the secondary level. However, these latter programs are not in any way related to the teaching of specific vocational skills, as the teachers and schooling officials interviewed in this project were the first to point out.

⁷ Even among those in the system who are in favour of vocational education, there remains considerable difference in opinion why this is the case, and for whom it should apply. Some express

the belief that to engage in vocational education is, or should be, as equally rewarding, and valuable, and/or dignified, as purely academic pursuits. These programs should be available, and encouraged, for all students, regardless of their academic capacities. By comparison, other educators are in favour of vocational programs, but only for those who are unable to succeed (for whatever reasons) in the traditional academic programs. Even among this latter group, the motives are still complex. Some emphasize the interests of the non-achievers themselves, and their need to feel success and/or gain useful skills. Others, by comparison, stress the importance of having them removed from the academic setting, so that they will no longer be a burden on their academic teachers, interfere with teaching the "more advanced" students, and/or serve as a bad example for this latter group.

⁸ These opinions on schooling are certainly not confined to Ontario, Canada or North America. In an interesting study of 1,617 vocational/apprentice students in Norway, educational sociologist Liv Mjelde found that 89 percent preferred to learn in the workplace than in school, in spite of the clear understanding they had about the possibilities of their being exploited in these jobs (Mjelde 1995).

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