

Chapter 8

Vocational Education Then and Now: So What's the Difference? A Dialogue About the Philosophy of VET in the United States

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8.1 Introduction

We worked on this chapter over two years and were engaged in an intense dialogue about the role of vocational education and training (VET) in the United States. A few of the questions that Antje Barabasch asked remained in this final version of the chapter. In this way it partially seems like a dialogue, which could have occurred between a journalist and a historian engaged in a conversation, raising a number of issues that illustrate our different cultural understanding of purposes and virtues (*Wirksamkeit*) of vocational education and training (VET). If our exchange ends with more questions than answers, it may be all for the better. To expect easy resolution of issues stemming from cultural differences is almost always a mistake, whether those conflicts exist within or between cultural groups.

The other chapters in this book explain and elaborate how VET in the United States is organized, structured, and governed. Labor-market outcomes and needs are discussed and a critique on the situation of VET is offered. Although the German system has been at different points in time a model for a variety of initiatives in the United States targeted toward the restructuring of VET, it never had been implemented comprehensively; and neither did it have a long-lasting effect on VET developments. Therefore, it seems to us that it might be difficult from a German perspective to understand current developments in the United States, especially why they occur the way they do. In this chapter we attempt to identify and explore the different ways VET is conceptualized and defended in Germany and the United States in order to improve our cultural, historical, and philosophical insight into the development of these differences.

Each way of looking at VET should be used to help imagine new options for reversing the apparent deterioration of living conditions for large numbers of people in both countries. Rather than construct our own theories as to how VET should be conducted, we want to discuss ideas and approaches that have emerged in our

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two cultures over the last century, and identify points of intersection. We need to appreciate each other's convictions and failures without assuming that one approach is superior to the other. A deeper and more reflective grasp of the philosophical rationale that prevails in the United States and Germany toward education in general and vocational education in particular should help us work together with greater profit.

To what extent did German and American scholars and policy makers of the nineteenth century agree on the foundations of education? If there was agreement, why did the educational systems of the two countries develop in such contrasting ways? Antje Barabasch takes the role of the German scholar, who makes observations and judgments about VET based on her own cultural understanding. Central to her concern is the issue of general-versus-vocational education. She believes it to be the driving question in current policy debates. The "college for all policy," which is popular in the United States, rejects the historically grown German understanding of VET as a necessary path for certain types of individuals. The German system of VET, which was and remains a valuable foundation of a thriving German economy, is currently being questioned within the country, even by German industry. Many believe it to be inadequate as preparation for the modern workplace, and for coping with the market-driven challenges to an individual's life course (Crouch, Finegold, & Sako, 1999; Culpepper, 1999; Flecker & Schulten, 1999; Steinmann, 2000). Philip L. Smith, an American philosopher of education, contextualizes the main ideas that have led the United States to adopt its own unique approach to VET, which it, also, now seems to be questioning. He addresses many of the standard questions about VET, but raises a number of his own questions that are characteristic of philosophy.

8.2 Smith on Education and Vocationalism in the United States

Americans have always been ambivalent about education. They tend to be suspicious about the value of formalized learning of the sort associated with schooling. For a good portion of the country's early history, educational institutions were seen as reflections of old world cultures (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). And old world cultures were precisely what the American ethos was designed to avoid. Besides, the struggle to survive in a land without the basic amenities required for civilized life put an emphasis on practical skills and action, not on tradition or deep reflection. So, this combination of wanting a new more liberating culture and the need to deal with the perils of nature in the raw produced an atmosphere of impatience when it came to traditional school subject matter and teaching methods associated with institutionalized learning. Americans of that day who were not of this attitude, who instead valued formal instruction, actually played to the prejudice against traditional schooling. They worked initially to emulate the educational practices of Europe. Latin, Greek and knowledge of the classics were thought of as the measure of a person who was properly prepared for a rich human life.

8.2.1 The Era of the Common School

Even after the American Revolution, when there was widespread recognition that the country needed to educate its citizens in a deliberate fashion in order for its democratic experiment to succeed, the model for doing this remained rather traditional in form and content until the end of the Colonial period. The 1820s, the beginning of the Jacksonian age, witnessed the beginning of a new form of America's democratic experiment. After the presidential election of 1828, which saw Andrew Jackson take office, a new attitude began to show itself. The period of high ideals that defined the early Republic had come to its useful end. In place of the romantic celebration of democratic sentiments, of the sort that characterized the French Revolution and the writings of John Locke, the American public wanted a more practical implementation of its democratic values. Talk about the glories of democracy and the type of literary education it required was replaced by an interest in "doing business" and fostering the kind of skills and attitudes that were useful to practical-minded people. Thus began the era of the Common School, the first public schools in America, which serve as the foundation for public education in the United States to this very day (Church & Sedlak, 1976).

Actually, there were two factions vying to control the hearts and minds of Americans after the Colonial period. Jacksonians pushed hard for rule by the "common man," for the authority of popular opinion, and for personal freedom, no matter how benighted or untutored they may have seemed. They believed that the best education came from actual life-experience, not from formal schooling (Church & Sedlak, 1976). The people who came up with the idea of the Common School, who called themselves "Whigs" – a term derived from the British middle-class politics – were appalled by these sentiments. They believed that what the country desperately needed, at that moment, and far into the future, was a massive effort to develop an infrastructure to support a bourgeois democracy and an industrious middle class. The Jacksonian celebration of an unfettered individual, free from the tyranny of government, and frivolous social conventions, had gone way too far, in their view. So, they organized politically under the banner of the Whig Political Party, which was a forerunner to today's Republican Party. Among other things, Whigs were the driving force behind the institutionalization of free public schools in the United States.

Jacksonian democracy made a deep and permanent imprint on American life. But Whig bourgeois republicanism did too. The conflicting influence of these two traditions can be seen to this day in the ambiguous attitude Americans have toward their educational institutions. They want them, but are predictably suspicious of their tendencies. Americans tend to be fearful that institutionalized learning will be used for cultural or political indoctrination, "old world" style. Or, almost as bad, they worry that whatever the schools strive to do will quickly become obsolete and irrelevant to the practical business of life. These worries are the source of a longstanding and nagging presence of anti-intellectualism in American life. They also lay bare the inclination of Americans to reduce the objective value of ideas to their useful effects and to regard the search for any deep understanding as purely personal,

i.e., as important, perhaps, for private purposes, but not for conducting important worldly transactions (Diggins, 1994).

Whigs were by no means free of this prejudice. But they were convinced that their understanding had more far-reaching social utility than Jacksonians could imagine. Controlling the Common School movement as they did, Whigs set up an educational system that standardized the curriculum and emphasized modern subjects, that were worldly, rather than classical subjects that most decidedly were not. Put another way, the Whig curriculum featured subjects that were designed primarily to give the learner dominion over nature, rather than a deep and, from the Whig perspective, “unproductive” urge to understand the human condition. Using ideas found in work of nineteenth-century German educational reformers, Johann Pestalozzi, Johann Herbart, and Friedrich Froebel, Whig educators introduced a new pedagogy that focused on the positive motivation of students, along with programs to train teachers in the proper utilizations of modern instructional methods (Church & Sedlak, 1976).

Whigs believed that the Common School would simultaneously serve two important functions. One was to cultivate citizenship for the type of society where one is expected to participate in government and the cultural affairs of everyday life. The other was to assure that the country would become materially strong through the economic contributions of its citizens, who fully and freely utilize their individual talents (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). The first function suggested the need for, if not exactly an intellectually serious liberal education, at least a hearty general orientation to the rights and responsibilities of civic life in a modern economic and political democracy. The second function recognized the importance of vocation, not in the grand sense of a “calling,” but in the practical sense of a “job” that would, at a minimum, allow an individual to be independent and self-determined. It also assumed that concern for the welfare of others would take care of itself if everyone learned to do their own work well.

This view of education assumes that most everyone has the capacity and motivation to be productive and self-sustaining. There is now as there was then plenty of evidence to the contrary. High dropout rates, lower educational standards, rising poverty and diminished social solidarity have not completely turned Americans against this picture of education. However, doubts about the intentions, motives, and competence of those who run the schools, as well as many of those who attend them, have led these people to believe that education should be geared even more to the cultivation of skills and attitudes believed to contribute materially to the functioning of a free society, rather than to the cultivation of a higher culture.

It should be said that faith in this Whig picture of education has ebbed and flowed over the years. Currently it is being tested as never before. Indeed, it may be fading permanently as a civic commitment of mainstream America. One factor is the sheer size of the American population (304 million in July 2008). This by itself makes it difficult for any single vision of education to meet with widespread public support. Another factor is the American attitude toward diversity. We encourage people nowadays to manufacture social differences, not merely to celebrate them. It also turns out that recognizing diversity among individuals and groups is good for

niche-market business practices. Mass production and marketing to a broad audience have little economic payoff these days. The Whig picture of a homogeneous public operating within a single sociocultural framework appears to have exhausted itself. The same forces that are encouraging specialization and commercialization in the larger society seem to be changing American education along these lines, too (Bloom, 1987).

Until now the most serious test of American faith in its Common School philosophy occurred after the end of the Civil War in 1865, when there was unimpeded industrial growth and rising immigration. Reforms back then favored schools designed for specific groups of students in recognition of the particular roles they were likely to play in American life (Church & Sedlak, 1976, p. 192). But the appeal of Whig thinking proved to be remarkably resilient. By the end of the century public schools had returned to a Common School philosophy with renewed vigor and determination. Whether this will happen again remains to be seen. What seems clear is that the dominating presence of economic and commercial values has not only accelerated dramatically in our time, but their range of influence is no longer restricted to local or regional interests. Technology has allowed these values to play themselves out on a global stage. The pressure on everyone, every organization, every government, to operate successfully in this mode stems not primarily from a commitment to a way of life, as was the case with the Whigs, but from a basic impulse to survive as a viable entity in the world, politically and otherwise.

If these developments are taking place on a global scale, why does it prevent Americans from training the workforce in a different way, e.g., in apprenticeships like in Germany?

The answer is that Americans, like Europeans, cannot sustain their identity playing exclusively on a global stage. As in Europe, this means, protecting their culture by designing their educational institutions in what they believe are appropriate ways. While public schools in America returned to a Common School philosophy by the end of the twentieth century, corporate forms of business and government had trumped the country's cultural values. Correspondingly, these corporate forms of social organization were made possible because of powerful, largely electronic, technology. In short, economic and political interests operating today dominate the formal values of American culture; and they exploit market labour at will. Far from preventing the training of a workforce, these interests control it without moral sensitivity.

The pressure on the American system to operate on these terms is immense. But even if they force Americans to give up their dream of free and responsible citizens, educated both to rule and to work, it is unlikely that the United States would move toward a European-style social democracy, and its associated educational policies that officially acknowledge the cultural status of socially functional subgroups. To begin with, silly or not, Americans are unsettled thinking of themselves as "old-world." They retain an aspect of the country's initial self-image, expressed largely in negative terms, as being anything but old-world.

Does "old world" imply conservative ways of schooling, separation and exclusion, and/or highly bureaucratic structures?

Yes, as far as most Americans are concerned. This may have nothing to do with Europe as it is today, or with how Europeans actually view themselves. The point is that most Americans see themselves as more modern than Europeans, because they believe Europe is still in the iron grip of centralized authority, cultural and otherwise, with little or no sense of pragmatic flexibility.

The average American has only this vague sense of what 'old-world' means. It should be seen more as an attitude than a theory, or set of facts. "Old-world" is understood to be more or less synonymous with "naïveté," or "impractical." This attitude comes from having little actual contact with Europeans, plus from constantly being told that America is the greatest country on earth. The truth is that Americans and Europeans are in the same boat, as far as being subject to worldwide economic pressures. Both are questioning their educational systems for exactly this reason. Do these systems serve their best interest? The current situation is daunting precisely because it is so ubiquitous.

Technology compresses space and time by enabling people to do things more easily and quickly. Ironically it can also create problems when used unintelligently. Education has the potential to alleviate these problems or make them worse, depending on how it understands and nurtures intelligence. If our educational institutions focus exclusively on technological and economic objectives, without concern for their impact on the larger culture, or way of life, the consequences will be disastrous. We could win by increasing our wealth, power, and status, yet lose by using these assets in foolish ways (Smith & Marx, 1994; Sturken, Thomas, & Ball-Rokeach, 2004).

8.2.2 American Approaches to Vocational Learning

Americans are looking at education increasingly in vocational terms. Their understanding of vocational learning is neither subtle nor deep. They speak the various languages of the high professions and applied sciences, as if the high professions and applied sciences were not themselves market-driven pursuits. But make no mistake about it; the American thirst for expertise is predictably driven by money, power, and status. Europeans may see nothing new here. But the difference now is that Americans are less aware than they once were of alternatives to material success. The use of technology for one's own purposes, having been dressed up in the specialized terminologies of professional service ideals, has no serious competition for the minds and hearts of those who operate and support American educational institutions. Vocations, high and low, have been forced to repackage themselves as means for self-serving material ends. Any other attitude is usually seen as an excuse for ineffectiveness, and as an obstacle to progress.

In the late 1800s American educational reform at the pre-college level put a strong emphasis on manual training, or "training of the hand," at least for a certain segment of the school-age population. It was largely an attempt to serve the emerging needs of a society that was growing to become an industrial behemoth. But it was also an attempt to foster genuine educational development of the child

through purposeful bodily activity. Along with a new emphasis on physical education, manual training was introduced into the curriculum of American schools to help restore a balanced social order that was threatened by industrialization and urbanization (Church & Sedlak, 1976). Beyond that, and more importantly from an educator's point of view, manual training was advertised as good for students, as nurturing their personal growth in a manner that was unlikely to come about in any other way.

Manual training was originally a European idea. The difference was that Europeans were more willing to admit that manual training was being utilized more as a palliative for some of the nastier side effects of the Industrial Revolution. In the United States, where it was important to maintain fidelity with the idea of an autonomous individual being, educational innovations needed to be expressed in terms of the democratic benefits for those being educated, rather than the interests of a powerful and imposing social system. There were numerous influential social critics at the time warning Americans about the dangers of monopolistic capitalism and special-interest politics. But it took the philosopher, John Dewey, to conceptualize educational reforms, like manual training, in a way that showed them to be intellectually serious, yet respectful of the individual in a manner Americans could accept.

Dewey was an empiricist, more radical than conventional, who saw human beings in naturalistic terms, as more like animals than gods. However, unlike other animals, people were born without much in the way of instincts. They need to learn in order to know. Because he was an empiricist, he believed that people learn essentially through experience. Of course, they learn through reflection, too. But activity of the mind is rooted within, and inextricably bound up with, experience gained through bodily activity (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's radical and philosophically original conception of human experience emphasized the active, or behavioral side of experience over the purely mental, or contemplative side. To paraphrase his view, verb forms of mental predicates are logically prior to noun forms. Human intelligence begins with conduct, not exclusively with what or how we think. Dewey was not, strictly speaking, a behaviorist. He acknowledged that what and how we think, as well as how we feel, are as real and important as what we do. What he meant to argue was that, as biological organisms, our actions have priority in our evolutionary history. Our actions are the touchstone for the veridical character of our experience. Thinking and believing emerge initially as tools of action. We recognize the inherent value of the mental side of experience after a long and arduous process of evolutionary development. We come slowly to recognize that our ability to tinker with our environment can make a big difference to our advantage. Our challenge is to actually make this happen. Meeting the challenge is what Dewey meant by "educational progress." If acting intelligently is not at the core of what we do in education, there is little value to anything else we might achieve.

Dewey also studied German developments in vocational education and training but disagreed with one of the leading scholars, Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932), at the time. Kerschensteiner attempted to instrumentalize vocational schooling for the development of industrial manpower and combine it with an unreflective

ideologization in favor of current national power relations. Kerschensteiner's essay with the title "Wie ist unsere männliche Jugend von der Entlassung aus der Volksschule bis zum Eintritt in den Heeresdienst am zweckmäßigsten für die staatsbürgerliche Gesellschaft zu erziehen?" [How can our young men in the period between graduation from the common school and admission to the military service appropriately and purposefully be educated for our civil society?] had led to intense discussions and great disagreement between the two scholars. Kerschensteiner thought in terms of the utilization of human capital, while Dewey favored the ideas of free citizenship and education for democracy based on the constitution of the United States and was convinced that an early occupational orientation or a vocationalization of schooling would be counterproductive. Therefore, it seems that a separation of schooling into an academic strand based in schools and training as a practical preparation for work based in companies still prevails in people's minds (Rauner, 2006). Kerschensteiner, nevertheless, needs to be given credit for raising interest in vocational education and training and the German approaches toward it in the United States (Gonon, 2008; Kerschensteiner, 1911). But, what was Dewey's approach toward education for occupations?

Dewey's plan for educational progress placed the learning of occupations above the study of traditional school subject matter. The idea of using occupations as the core of the school curriculum gained currency in the nineteenth century, largely through the work of Froebel, who along with Pestalozzi and Herbart argued that children learn best by engaging in activity with practical objectives (Church & Sedlak, 1976). The material to be studied needed to be geared to the actual abilities of the student, and connected to previous experience. Dewey expanded on this idea. Observing that human beings were social rather than solitary animals, living normally in groups, more like lions and bees, rather than alone, like moose or bears, he concluded that their experience is social before it is personal. That is to say, the former makes the latter possible, or at least give it a richer character. Dewey also connected experience with activity. He regarded the latter as a precondition for the former. Occupations were defined as activities necessary for living. They were tied logically to wholesome human practices, but not necessarily to wage-earning jobs, and were expected to cultivate the mental side of experience, as well as the behavioral side. Dewey had no objection to traditional school subject matter, nor did he think it should be ignored. Rather it was its formality and the way it was taught that bothered him. Any field of knowledge that fails to recognize the contingencies of reality and the endless possibilities found in human experience will eventually, according to Dewey, work to our detriment.

On these grounds Dewey saw the opposition between vocational and literary learning as a false choice. In his view, one requires the other. How is this possible? Dewey followed a general strategy whereby, if one good thing (e.g., freedom) had to be sacrificed in order to secure another good thing (e.g., equality), odds were there was something wrong with the way these things were understood. This type of thinking employs a dialectical logic. Dewey picked it up from the German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). The ancient Greeks used the term "dialectic" to refer to various methods of reasoning and discussion in order

to discover the truth. Another German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) applied the term to the criticism of the contradictions that arise from supposing that we can have knowledge of objects that we cannot literally experience. Hegel applied the term to the process of thought by which apparent contradictions, which were termed “thesis” and “antithesis,” are reconciled as part of a higher truth, or “synthesis.”

Using Hegel’s formulation of a dialectical process, Dewey recognized that cleverness in reformulating ideas does not always translate into intelligent or honest depiction of reality, and that there are many times when we simply need to make hard choices. But there are numerous occasions too, when the problem lies with our own assumptions. This is where Hegel’s dialectic comes in, or at least Dewey’s naturalized version of it. We need to see possibilities beyond the moment. We need to work with others to devise new options that can be brought about by our own hands. New assumptions help us find new and better ways to act. Correspondingly, acting more smartly will help us see new possibilities that move us beyond the assumptions on which our actions rest.

8.2.3 The Future of VET in the United States

Dewey spent the majority of his 92 years working to explain and defend his transactional approach to growth and development. His position on vocational and liberal learning is a case in point. Practical education helps give liberal learning existential validity. But correspondingly, liberal learning helps assure that practical education will have the right purpose and outcome. Assuming that Dewey made his case as regards growth and development, was there ever a time when educational practice reflected his ideas? How do things look today? Is there any reason for optimism? Given conditions in education today, what would we expect to see as the future of VET?

Could there be any role in VET for the idea of an apprenticeship derived from the German-speaking countries?

The European idea of apprenticeship never took root in the United States. As a matter of cultural difference, Americans viewed it as unduly restrictive for inventive, freedom-loving individuals (Church & Sedlak, 1976). As a practical matter, industrial work does not demand the skilled hands of an artisan. Progressive-minded educational reformers in the United States argued instead for “training of the hand” primarily on the grounds that it contributed to the personal growth and development of the students. Not that they failed to appreciate the economic benefits of vocational learning, only that they were seen as having secondary importance. At least to the satisfaction of those who supported the Manual Training movement, it had established its educational purity by emphasizing its fundamental nonvocational purpose.

For most of the twentieth century this area of the curriculum in American schools was known as the “Industrial Arts” (Cremin, 1964; Ravitch, 2000). The name was in many ways an unfortunate choice. In the first place, the “Industrial Arts” was

less about industry and more about the arts. It was mostly about building things and being industrious for the sake of what students might learn in the process. Only secondarily, if at all, was it done for the sake of making a living. The values that guided teaching in this area were usually out of line with the perceptions of the students themselves, who were frequently required to take Industrial Arts courses whether they liked it or not. They were out of line, too, with the expectations of the public, which was required to pay for the Industrial Arts. More recently the area renamed itself "Technology Education." But this designation has failed to capture the spirit of the original Industrial Arts movement, or the values that currently drive popular support for technology. The number of educators working in this area, who understand and promote its rationale, has continued to decline, along with support for the area itself.

If there was ever a time when serious vocational education in the United States was in the hands of Industrial Arts educators, that time has long passed. For most of the twentieth century vocational education, understood as formal programs offered by schools, and other institutions purporting educational goals, was controlled by those who saw it as a form of low-end job training. This attitude, too, is disappearing. The emphasis now is on preparation for higher-end professional activity. An obvious explanation for this change of attitude toward vocational education is the emergence of electronic technology, especially computers, as a critical factor in the growth of the American economy. Unsurprisingly, literary learning is still not seen as having much importance. More than ever educational programs must be shown to have a clear and immediate market payoff, if there is to be any realistic expectation that they will garner popular or political support (Ravitch, 2000).

David Brooks, a prominent American political commentator, who writes with intellectual sophistication on trends in American culture, believes that, "...the United States became the leading economic power of the 20th century because it possessed a ferocious belief that people have the power to transform their own lives"; and that it was this belief that, "...gave Americans an unparalleled commitment to education, hard work and economic freedom" (Brooks, 1976, p. A19).

Make no mistake about it. For a long time in America there was a deep and abiding commitment to education as a means for one to "get ahead."

Brooks thinks that while Americans have held on to their belief in self-determination, they have lost their deep and abiding commitment to education as the means for achieving it. The romantic faith that education would benefit the individual materially, intellectually, and morally, while at the same time fuel American development, has always existed partly as myth alongside of the uglier aspects of American life referred to earlier. Nevertheless, it has been critical to American success in the past. Brooks contends that the loss of this faith is proving to be disastrous for the country. He utilized research from two recently published books to make his case.

The Race Between Education and Technology, (Goldin & Katz, 2008) documents the rate of increase in the average level of education for Americans between 1870 and 1950. Educational attainment rose 0.08% a year per decade. By 1960 the average American could boast 14 years of schooling. The steady increase over

that time allowed the United States to build up a 35-year lead over the rest of the Industrialized world. In 1950, no European country enrolled as many as 30% of its older teens in full-time secondary schools, whereas the United States enrolled 70%. By 1970 enrollment growth of older teens in American schools had slowed to a trickle. By 1990 this enrolment growth had stopped altogether (Goldin & Katz, 2008). The big lead America enjoyed over the rest of the world in years of schooling quickly disappeared. There are now a number of European countries that have surged ahead of the United States on this measure. The thesis of *The Race Between Education and Technology* is that school enrollment by itself is a predictor of technological development. When the rate of school enrollment declines, especially among older teens, long-term economic prospects of the nation are threatened and the gap between rich and poor will predictably increase. Thus, we have, according to the authors, a race between education and technology. Unless school enrollment increases relative to technological change, economic development will lag and prospects for a rosy future will suffer.

There are two surprising aspects of this analysis. The first is that American schools between 1870 and 1950 contributed to the development of technology quite apart from whatever else they were doing. The second surprising feature is that these technological developments, whatever they were, contributed mightily to the economic health and overall strength of the nation. Both these claims deserve further examination. But what seems clear immediately is that formal education and technological development are somehow linked. When educational progress outpaces technological change, economic inequality narrows (Goldin & Katz, 2008). The market is flooded with skilled workers, causing wages to rise modestly but evenly over the market. In periods, like the one we are in currently, when educational attainment lags behind technological change, inequality widens as a proportionally small number of skilled workers garner higher wages, while a larger proportion of unskilled workers, defined by current market demands, have little bargaining power.

The second publication Brooks uses, by James Heckman, a University of Chicago economist, titled *Schools, Skills and Synapses*, attempts to explain why high school graduation rates peaked in the United States during the late 1960s, at about 80%, and have been in decline ever since (Heckman, 2008). According to Heckman, the problem is caused less by failing schools, lack of funding, and rising college tuition, and more by the deterioration of the American family over the past 40 years. Fewer children are being raised in an atmosphere that promotes, what Heckman calls, "human capital development." More simply stated, the problem is caused by an environment that fails to teach children how to take advantage of their economic potential. They are raised in circumstances that pay no attention to the skills and attitudes that allow them to benefit from, or contribute to, American ideals, especially that ferocious belief in the power to transform their lives through education, hard work, and economic freedom.

According to Heckman, it is possible to predict, with depressing accuracy, who will complete high school and college and who will not by the time children are 5 years old. Success in American life presumes marketable skills and the ability to think. It requires emotional stability, self-control, sociability, and motivation as

well. IQ matters, too, but not as much. Adopting policies that blunted the destructive effects of globalization, outsourcing, unregulated immigration, and predatory capitalism would certainly help moderate this problem. But without the essential character traits that allow individuals to take advantage of their opportunities, these reform measures would come to naught. American prosperity came about because it got more out of its citizens than other nations were able to achieve. The situation changed sometime during the 1970s. Heckman warns that unless the condition is reversed America could find itself on a slide from which it may never recover. David Brooks thinks that boosting educational attainment, especially at the bottom of the economic social order, is a more promising strategy for encouraging economic growth than trying to reorganize society on a larger stage.

Assuming that “an atmosphere that promotes human capital development” is not itself an objectionable idea, how can it be used to rebuild that “unparalleled commitment to education” that Brooks thinks Americans have lost? In another commentary Brooks offers this observation: “If you grew up in the 1950s, you were inclined to regard your identity as something you were born with. If you were born in the 1970s, you were more likely to regard your identity as something you created” (Brooks, 1976). What it meant to have “an identity you were born with” was experienced by Americans of that time as a practical and emotional imperative, rather than some sort of cosmic fate. They tended to see themselves with a moral duty to play the cards life had dealt them, and were comfortable with the challenge. This attitude disappeared quickly early in the 1960s, along with the social milieu that fostered it. Children born in the first few years after World War II were starting to come of age. Officially called “Baby-Boomers,” they were sometimes referred to as the “spoiled generation.” The Civil Rights movement was in full swing. The Vietnam War had divided the country. By the 1970s Americans were obsessed with exposing the wrongdoings of public officials. Traditional moral values were scorned. Educational institutions had lost the confidence of taxpayers and the lion’s share of their former authority. Performance levels slipped noticeably.

What role did vocational education play during this time?

Vocational education was not criticized in the same manner as other aspects of education. People still needed to make a living. The middle class viewed instruction of this kind as free of double-talk and moral preaching. Yet vocational educators who were not content functioning merely to help others find employment faced the daunting challenge of conceptualizing vocational programs in a way that would meet the increasingly high occupational and status expectations of students, while at the same time promoting the best intellectual and normative standards of socially important professions.

John Dewey’s philosophy of education is a good place to start trying to figure out how this might be done. If occupations are rooted in the ecology of living, if they require but are not reducible to knowledge and skills, and if they are expected to develop qualities that elevate the human mind and culture, then there is reason to believe that Deweyan-inspired VET is an education that might be offered proudly to anyone. Of course, making an education like this appealing to students, consistent with the ambitions and the expectations of their families and society, while

simultaneously making sure it comports with the higher values of learning, is easier said than done. But, then, how is this more difficult to achieve than what we strive for now? The difference is that Deweyan-inspired VET, done well, may be more sensible and coherent. Whatever the difficulties in meeting the challenges of education are today, this kind of VET would at least have the advantage of connecting up with the world in which people actually live. Tied to the full range of occupational interests, along with real economic concerns and available jobs, Deweyan -inspired VET could produce impressive outcomes.

8.3 Conclusion

Understood in this way, VET aligns with the German philosophical tradition where a strong partnership between the state, unions, employers, schools and the apprentices ensures that training not just meets not only the requirements of the market, but also provides the individual apprentice with life skills that are useful above and beyond any job that a student so prepared might acquire. In today's economy no one can predict with much accuracy the skills and competencies one will need to remain useful in the economic sector. But aspects of that education would retain their value regardless.

Perhaps the most critical question we could ask is how occupations are related to each other and how they fit within the general structure of society? Dewey believed that these occupations would and should be interactive and cooperative. He wanted them defined in "progressive terms," by which he meant that while the accumulated wisdom they embodied should not be forgotten, neither should there be silly restrictions on how they are practiced. He also felt strongly that a person's association with particular occupations should not be allowed to permanently assign that individual to that specific line of work. It would profit the occupations themselves, not just workers, if individuals were allowed to move between occupations. To encourage a learner to experiment with a wide range of life's possibilities was for Dewey a moral, as well as practical, imperative. Freedom disciplined by the ecology of life should not be seen as irrational or something to be feared. Nor should anyone fear education that reconstructs the way people understand and conduct their lives. If this is what VET strives for already, then Dewey's ideas are merely redundant.

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