

Taylor, A. (2016). *Vocational Education in Canada – The Past, Present, and Future of Policy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Pages: 140. ISBN: 9780199009985 (hardcover/paperback/e-book)

Reviewed by: Claudius Soodeen, University of Winnipeg

In *Vocational Education in Canada*, Alison Taylor (2016) provides a compelling, well-organized, and thoughtful research-based discussion of the fundamental and very current debate about the purposes of education (vocational and academic) and its impact on policy, perspectives, and participants. From a sociological perspective, she guides the reader through the historical and economic underpinnings that have driven perspectives and policies about public vocational education and its participants. The current system, she asserts, focuses too much on the supply side (schooling) and not enough on the demand side (e.g., workplace training) (p. 3). Vocational education, Taylor points out, is often juxtaposed with and subtended to academic education and unproductively separated from it.

Governments have touted vocational education as a tool for economic health and by school systems as a mode of education for those less capable or less inclined to pursue traditional academic studies, while the current system perpetuates social and labour-related inequities. Regardless of its historical or current positioning, Taylor argues that such separation stigmatizes its participants (learners and schools) as “lesser than” academic learners/schools and calls for “connected learning” in which theory and practice/work skills are more closely integrated. Her intent is to contribute to the discussion on:

preparing youth for work by taking a critical look at what changes in the demand for labour and skills ... mean for the expectations placed on schools, how schools have responded to these expectations over time, and how they should respond in the future. (p. 1)

However, in proposing a possible response, she leaves several aspects open for further research.

First, some commentary about the organization of the book: In each of its seven chapters, Taylor addresses a unique aspect of her argument, each building on the previous and leading into the next chapter. She weaves her case for reform through discussion of global economic phenomena, highlighting the purposes of education that drifts into analysis of the New Vocationalism and ultimately connective learning. She keeps readers on track by reminding them how current discussions link to previous arguments and scenarios and by linking to forthcoming material. For example, Chapter 1 serves as an organizer for the rest of the book that in addition to providing a useful overview and synopsis of subsequent chapters, establishes her five core assumptions: there are problems with neo-liberal policy and human capital theory; history matters; there are divergent interests (amongst stakeholders); students’ education and future well-being is at risk; and, that there are viable alternatives to how we educate that need to be implemented (pp. 2-6). In this chapter, she briefly but effectively summarizes the issues and solutions her research has uncovered.

For those unfamiliar with neoliberalism or human capital theory, she provides a clear explanation and connection to her topic, unfettered by complicated theoretical or philosophical background. Her argument, that vocational education is seen as a lesser form of education than academic education, is broached, as is her solution for reform. While readers deeply familiar

with the underlying theories, policies, and practices of vocational education will have little problem entering into critical analysis of the text, novices too will gain a high-level understanding of the issues from her clear, relatively jargon-free writing. Where specific concepts or language are used, clear and succinct definitions or explanations are provided. As a learning tool informed by original research and discussion of extant literature, the book excels by closely guiding the reader through her building argument. It thus functions as a primer that reads like a series of seamlessly-woven and highly-explanatory class lectures or articles. Although providing high-level overviews of the issues, each chapter is the foundation for further, deeper research and each could be expanded into standalone books. For academics or students looking to undertake relevant research topics, this book is for you. For those seeking in-depth discussion about vocational education or deeper revelation on curriculum, the efficacy of particular delivery strategies or highly analytical research on specific aspects of apprenticeship education, this book will provide the starting point for such discovery.

Taylor argues that economic trends such as globalization, trade liberalization, and neo-liberalism set the stage for the current state of vocational education. These powerful, far-reaching phenomena, coupled with the shift from an industrial/manufacturing- to knowledge/service-based economy have impacted how youth have been educated and in turn how well they have transitioned into the workplace. Some problems identified include the reduced likelihood of traditional stable jobs and increased participation in higher-education co-located with increased time doing non-standard, less stable (and typically non-unionized) jobs. These, coupled with uncertain return-on-investment juxtaposed against increasing tuitions contribute to increased income inequality in Canada. Furthermore, off-shoring of high-skill, low-wage jobs poses a threat to students with “intermediate” skills (e.g., skilled trades apprentices) by removing viable work options from their grasp.

The marketing of vocational education (VocEd) as a debt-free or backup plan for university education is also identified as a problem. But VocEd also tends to be stigmatized because of its history as education for ‘less able’ students. Furthermore, she contends that youth are given conflicting advice: aim high but expect lower returns. Taylor agrees with Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) that policymakers should focus on how occupational opportunities are being transformed in the global division of labour – not just on the supply of marketable skills (Taylor, 2016, p. 26). In fact, she notes that over time, policy discourse has grown attuned to more closely matching skills development to labour market demand. While she may convince us that times have changed due to the problematic influence of globalization and related phenomena, she does not as clearly address whether or not these forces are too powerful to overcome. Can reforms in education, discussed later in the book, counter labour market forces or industry labour strategies or even the deeply embedded social perspectives on VocEd? How does her reform proposal fit with the imperatives of globalization? Rather than a weakness, the existence of these questions can lead the inquisitive reader to further thought, discussion and research.

For Taylor, a historical perspective is critical for understanding why VocEd policy and perspectives are what they are today and what the significance of changes will be. Technical education and streaming – the sorting and selection of students into various educational opportunities and pathways to higher education or work – have a long history stemming from the late 1800s and reinforced in the 1900s, as do the tensions and struggles between differing interests of labour and business. For readers wanting to understand why we have had different types of schools and programs, Chapter 3: *Education for Industrial Purposes*, lays out the philosophical, political and social foundations that have influenced policy and practice up to today. Along with policies that permitted streaming came the increased stratification of education, the eventual rise of education as a tool of industrial development (1960s-1990s) and

today's market approach to education by governments. The latter is evidenced in their heavy reliance on private-sector partnerships to deliver programs out of school, rather than investing in school-based educational programming, which in turn perpetuates the separation of work-based and academic education. Social stratification also resulted from such policies whereby socially-privileged students tended to be favoured via educational selection. Taylor points out that whether intentionally or not, most technical/vocational schools in Ontario (Toronto specifically) were located in working-class and immigrant neighborhoods. Furthermore, no dialogue about education and stratification would be complete without some acknowledgement of inequities along racial, social status, citizenship status, regional, and gender lines. Taylor moves into a discussion about "youth-at-risk" discourse and "rethinking" VocEd, noting that this discourse has exacerbated racial hierarchies by "constructing working-class, racialized and Aboriginal youth as deviant, dangerous, threatening and risky" (p. 89).

Rather than simply propose an idealized set of reforms based on successful programs in other countries, Taylor critically analyzes such arguments, clarifying the different educational traditions and policy/political environment in Canada that would hinder simple adoption. Our system, she maintains, provides flexibility to change educational directions (streaming notwithstanding) but less transparency of pathways to do so; whereas, the German system is the opposite. However, one positive impact of global economic changes is that of policy convergence. For example, in an effort to increase transparency, Ontario has required school-to-work transition (SWT) programs in an attempt to decrease academic bias of schools and the purported shortage of intermediate skills. Additionally, the "New Vocationalism" with its overall intent to remove the dichotomies of theory/practice, mind/body, and head/hand that characterized the approach of old vocationalism, while admirable in intent, may not be realizable in Canada due to over emphasis on competition and choice amongst schools, and reliance on voluntary VocEd training partnerships.

Taylor's own research on high school apprenticeship programs forms a significant component of her discussion on "connective learning" – integrating academic and vocational education that is perhaps the most critical concept that she explores. Participant comments illustrate the concern that regardless of any VocEd reforms to date, students still do not always see how theory, namely, the world of school, relates to practice, or, the work world, although other comments indicate that there are some who do. Thus, they are not served well by the very system that purports to advance their economic and social well-being. Essentially, Taylor is calling for a model of education that is already taking root in post-secondary institutions and that looks at individuals as members of society, not just as single economic units who must critically engage with and transform work structures, not merely adapt to them.

Community-engaged learning opportunities are already starting to be graduation requirements in some jurisdictions and allow students to compare their experience with classroom theory while learning about improving life or conditions for various parts of the community. Connective learning counters the assumption that "hands-on" learners cannot handle abstract concepts and learning and are therefore of lower status. It acknowledges that students learn differently and may need different starting points. The stigma attached to vocational schools was evident in her research in Alberta. Connective learning as a pedagogical approach also prepares vocational students to take on broader roles in the workplace by allowing the development of systems-thinking about how theoretical knowledge is constructed and how critical thinking applies to work-based situations. As policy, it redresses the implication that practical knowledge is devalued by creating pathways amongst colleges and universities. This addresses the frustration that some of her participants expressed about not being able to easily articulate apprentice education with university entrance. However, according to Taylor de-streaming and

unifying academic and vocational curricula best accomplishes inequalities associated with the current educational system rather than simply reforming vocational education.

Unfortunately, her proposed reform, while a refreshing and likely useful change, does not take up what happens to those students who would not thrive in such an environment. There is also the assumption that the current academic programming in high schools is adequately transformational. From this reviewer's experience in both the college and university systems, this may not be the case. However, as pointed out earlier, gaps in this book are ideal gateways for further research. Taylor discusses anticipated reforms in Alberta and British Columbia that seek to increase learner freedom to explore their passions while still instilling necessary basics (e.g., critical thinking). Success will require good resolutions of current tensions: rigour vs flexible assessment; "deep knowledge" vs "competency-based learning"; teachers as "learning architects" vs "knowledge authorities" (Taylor, 2016, pp. 108-109) and so on.

One of the ironies in this book is that although Taylor believes that more focus should be on workplace (demand-side) education, she did not delve deeply into that topic. It would have been useful to have at least part of, if not an entire chapter dedicated to what education does occur in the workplace. To be fair, there were brief comments interleaved throughout the text and her research, as far as I can tell, did not purport to undertake that aspect. Overall, this is a solid, clearly-written primer for a high-level understanding of the sociological issues of VocEd in Canada and as a launch point for further discussion and research. For graduate students who are looking for a novel research topic, much can be found here in terms of Taylor's own research and in relation to the historical and current literature referenced. While it is not a road-map for development or implementation of solutions, it should still have broad appeal across disciplines and across the domains of practice and policy. As an educator in both the college and university worlds, her findings from the public school system resonate with me. I would recommend this book to anyone looking for a readable, birds-eye view of the past, present, and possible future of vocational education in Canada.

References

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