

'Troubling' vocational education and training in disadvantaged schools

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Introduction

This paper is a part of two ongoing and interconnected Australian Research Council (ARC) projects, one investigating student engagement/retention (Smyth & Down, 2005) and the other school-community renewal (Smyth & Angus, 2006), in two Australian regional communities experiencing significant levels of socio-economic disadvantage. In a collection of articles previously published by John Smyth, Lawrence Angus, Peter McInerney and myself in a special edition of *Learning Communities* (2006) we attempted to map out not only some of the broader economic, political and social forces at work in constructing persistent patterns of socio-economic disadvantage but the ways in which students, teachers and communities were able to successfully reinvent their identities and practices in an increasingly hostile and authoritarian economic and political reality (Giroux, 2004).

In this paper, I want to pursue some of my earlier arguments concerning the nature, purpose and processes of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools. Borrowing Kumashiro's (2004) notion of "against commonsense" I want to provide a more 'troubling', 'disruptive', and 'discomforting' reading of the historical role of vocational education and training in the streaming of students who are economically, socially and educationally disadvantaged. In this task, I have structured the paper around three themes. First, I want to challenge the commonsense assumption that more training will produce more jobs. This article of faith has been seriously eroded by the profound changes unleashed by the techno-scientific revolution of modern day capitalism. Today, young people for the first time face the prospect of the 80/20 society — where 80% of the population will achieve the freedom, whether voluntary or not, of not having to work (Hinkson, 2006, p.26). The evidence shows that jobs for young people are disappearing. Contrary to popular belief, most job openings in the future will not require high-tech skills or advanced levels of education. Official projections indicate that the largest expected job growth will be in the service sector where people will require less than an associate degree (Dwyer & Wyn 2001, p.61). Despite these "shattering shifts in economic and cultural life" (Giroux, 1994, p.286) numerous politicians, educators, parents and industry representatives continue to argue that young people today simply need more training to get a job.

Second, I want to argue that despite the numerous strengths and successes of VET in Schools programmes, especially for disengaged and working-class students, these programmes have historically failed to disrupt the strong correlation between social advantage, school achievement and the competitive academic curriculum (Teese & Polesal, 2003). Thus, whilst the competitive academic curriculum continues to function as the gateway to more socially valued forms of knowledge for university bound students from middle class backgrounds, VET in Schools programmes will be confined to producing skilled and semi-skilled workers and a cadre of casualised and low-paid workers at the bottom end of a volatile youth labour market (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p.44;

Kenway & Bullen, 2001). In this section, I want to explore the artificial divide between academic knowledge and work related knowledge; the tendency to filter working-class students into vocational programs; the way students are treated as if they are deficient, and the consequences in a labour market characterised by casualised, low-skilled and low-wage work (Kincheloe, 1995, 1999). Freire (1998) alerts us to the political significance of this kind of analysis when he says “To the degree that the historical past is not problematized so as to be critically understood, tomorrow becomes simply the perpetuation of today” (p.102).

Finally, I want to turn attention to the political question of what can be done? How might educators think otherwise about the role of VET in Schools in producing a new generation of critically informed citizens and workers? This kind of project involves interrupting existing human capital approaches to education and reclaiming the symbolic spaces for an alternative vision and practice based on the principles and values of economic and political democracy, meaningful work, critical inquiry, civic engagement and “educated hope” (Giroux, 2001, p.125). It involves teachers and students working collaboratively “to gain new ways of knowing and producing knowledge that challenge the commonsense views of sociopolitical reality with which most individuals have grown so comfortable” (Kincheloe, 2001, p.372).

Confronting the big lie that training creates jobs

Jim is a teacher in a large senior high school and a strong advocate of workplace learning. For him, and many teachers, students and parents the primary purpose of schooling is about ‘getting a job’. Jim argues that students are far more motivated, engaged and employable because of the industry knowledge, skills and values they acquire through vocational education and training programmes. For him, it’s about giving his students whatever advantage he can in a volatile youth labour market. On the surface, the benefits are attractive to all concerned – students getting out of ‘boring’ classrooms; teachers planning relevant and meaningful activities; employers having a say in curriculum design; and parents anticipating that their kids will ‘get a job’. What remains problematic, however, is the extent to which students actually do get a full-time job once they leave school and whether it provides them with meaningful work, fair wages and conditions and possibilities for alternative life choices. Furthermore, there are questions about the kind of education students’ experience. To what extent is the curriculum driven by business needs? How relevant is a narrow technical education in a rapidly changing economy? What knowledge and skills are marginalised in the curriculum? What knowledge is denied? What images of ‘good’ workers are created? Who creates these images? In whose interests? Where do students learn critical literacy skills?

Interrupting official discourses about the nexus between schooling, the economy and jobs is no easy matter. History illustrates the power of commonsense in constructing particular

“truths” and ways of “talking and reasoning in schools” (Popkewitz’s, 1997, pp.138-140). For example, following the 1930s depression and rising youth unemployment in Western Australia, a Royal Commission was established to investigate the links between schooling, training and unemployment. The Wolff Report (1938) cited evidence of the unsatisfactory relationship between the needs of industry and the nature of children’s learning. The Western Australian Chamber of Commerce complained loudly about the low average standard of commercial efficiency among children entering the world of business. They argued that children received inadequate specialised training because of the emphasis on general education. Furthermore, schools were blamed for children’s inability “to spell correctly, write a simple and intelligent composition, and perform the simpler operations in arithmetic” (p.xvi). Fast forward seventy years, and the assertions by neoliberal and neoconservative protagonists about ‘failing’ schools (Donnelly, 2004) have not changed much. The solution then, as now, was to reassert the primacy of ‘back-to-basics’ approaches to education and a tighter correspondence between schooling and the world of work (Down, 1993, p.108; Bessant, 1989-90).

The arguments for state involvement in secondary education have consistently referred to the themes of international survival, national efficiency and the need for a trained workforce (Down, 2000). There can be no doubt secondary schooling remains largely an instrument of economic and political ends. After the Second World War, human capital theories underpinned a range of educational reports to realign the education system with the emerging requirements of the new international division of labour (Gallagher, 1979, p.7). According to Crittenden, the evidence indicates that the initial faith placed in human capital theory was wrong. He argued that there was no evidence that productivity and wealth in the economy increased by extending general education beyond basic schooling. On the contrary, Crittenden (1988) claimed that increased expenditure on education was “an effect rather than a cause of economic prosperity” (p.301). Nonetheless, human capital theorists contend that more schooling and better training would provide better paid jobs and social mobility for all. However, the evidence indicates otherwise. What mattered most in determining who got what jobs, if any, were a person’s class, gender and race and not length of schooling or training (Fitzgerald, 1979; Greig, Lewins & White, 2003; Peel, 2003).

Similar arguments for a closer correspondence between schooling and the needs of the global economy were again mounted in the mid 1970s. With the economic crisis of the 1970s deepening and youth unemployment on the rise, the neoliberal assault on the social democratic settlement of the 1950s and 1960s created a conservative backlash during the 1980s and 1990s. Education (Weiner, 2005; Apple, 2001) like all aspects of peoples’ lives was now subject to the inevitability (Saul, 2005) and self-evident (Bourdieu, 1998) forces of neoliberalism. At the national level, *Australia Reconstructed* (1987) was influential in shaping the inherent logic of the school and economy relationship:

Evidence suggests that Australia is not producing the right skills as well as not producing enough skilled people ... Australia has a relatively low proportion of the population with degrees or qualifications in science, engineering or technology-related disciplines ... Australia's performance has improved in recent years but its competitors are not standing still. It must strive to improve the base skills and knowledge on which our future competitive position in world trade depends (cited in Smyth, 1991, p.33).

Like the earlier *Wolfe Report* (1938) and *Australia Reconstructed* (1987), a plethora of Federal and State government educational reports (see Down, 2000) have reinforced the dominant view that the solution to Australia's economic problems whether unemployment, lack of international competitiveness or skill shortages requires an education system that is more attuned to the needs of the new economic realities. According to Smyth and Dow (1997):

... the focus is on how to best control education by making it do its economic work through greater emphasis on vocationalism, as well as by changing the ideology and the discourse of schooling (where students = customers; teachers = producers; and learning = outcomes) and through a restoration of the primacy of notions of human capital theory. Coupled with this is a worldwide move towards re-centralising control over education through national curricula, testing, appraisal, policy formulation, profiling, auditing, and the like, while giving the impression of decentralisation and handing control down locally (p.2).

In all of these debates there seems to be one key question that is not being asked. What is happening to the paid labor market to which the neoliberals want to attach the education system? Without going into detail, it is suffice to say that over the past three decades the forces of global capitalism (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005) have radically transformed the nature of work. By way of summary, the following broad features and characteristics are evident:

- A reduction in the size of core full-time jobs and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, low-paying, and repetitive jobs in the retail, trade and service sectors (Hinkson, 2006, p.26; Apple, 1998, p.345; Anyon, 2005, p.20; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p.30; Wynhausen, 2007, p.22).
- It is projected that 95% of all new positions will be created in the service sector including food preparation and service, fast-food restaurants, waiters and waitresses, cashiers, retail salespersons, labourers, truck drivers, clerical services, and health aides (Apple, 1998, p.345; Anyon, 2005, p.21; Berliner & Biddle, 1995, pp.100-102).
- The proportion of professional workers has risen from 11% to 28% since the 1960s. Over the same period, the proportion of semiskilled and manual workers and

labourers combined has declined from almost a third of the workforce to 19% (Greig, Lewins & White, 2005, p.101).

- The fragmentation of jobs to the degree that even technologically sophisticated processes now normally require a training period of only a few weeks—even for unskilled workers (Braverman, 1974; Grubb & Lazerson, 1975; Kincheloe, 1995, p.10).
- The replacement of the traditional craft labor system with a multi-level stratification system, which not only introduces craft-less “utility workers”, but management dominated evaluation schemes measuring both skills and attitude (Blum, 2000, p.120).
- From the late 1960s to the present, the proportion of male workers aged 15 to 19 in full-time work has fallen from 59% to 18 % (Greig, Lewins & White, 2005, p.101).
- Australia’s workforce is increasingly divided; between the overworked and the out-of-work; between the well paid and the poorly paid; between career and fringe jobs (Long, 2000, cited in Greig, Lewins & White, 2005, p.100).
- Despite the lowest official levels of unemployment in thirty years, Australia has the highest rate of underemployment in the OCED. Underemployment has increased from approximately 2% of the labour force in 1978 to almost 7% in 2006 (Campbell, cited in Wynhausen, 2007, p.22).
- The destabilisation of labour market structures associated with labour hire firms (Underhill, 2006, p.301).
- A common pattern of unstable, short-term employment or “churning” interspersed with unemployment resulting from involuntary loss of jobs (Underhill, 2006, p.303).
- The de-institutionalisation of wages and conditions through the use of individualising workplace contracts (WorkChoices Bill, 2005) between employers and employees (Peetz, 2006).
- The emergence of the ‘Walmart factor’ whereby large transnational companies shop around for the cheapest global wage rates, thus further deindustrialising national economies in search of profits (Hinkson, 2006, p.26).
- A growing sense of insecurity and uncertainty about work (Greig, Lewins & White, 2005, p.3; Peel, 2005, p.4).
- A growing mismatch between the types of jobs available, the rhetoric of the highly skilled workforce and the future aspirations of young people (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p.17).

With regard to the youth labour market, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum report *How Young People Are Fairing* (2004) identified a number of worrying trends:

- In 2004 15.5% of teenagers were not in full-time education or full-time employment; 27% of school leavers were not in study and were either working part-time,

unemployed, or not in the labour force; and 47% of early leavers were not in study or full-time work (p.4).

- Prospects of work and further education for early school leavers have changed very little in recent years despite the improving economic conditions—43% of early school leavers and 19% of school completers still experienced a troubled transition in 2003.
- In 2003, 50% of students in Years 11 and 12 were enrolled in a VET in Schools program (p.4).
- The proportion of teenage apprenticeship commencements in traditional apprenticeships declined from 40% in March 1997 to 33 % in March 2003; and in the year after completing their qualification, 25% of TAFE graduates were not in full-time work or study (p.4).
- More than two-thirds of young people start their working lives as casuals and growing numbers may never work any other way (Wynhausen, 2007, p.22).

The evidence tells us a lot about the neoliberal agenda for workers. Giroux (2004) argues that corporate ideology with “its dubious appeals to universal laws, neutrality, and selective scientific research” (p.xix) has effectively obliterated those discourses that are central “to the language of public commitment, democratically charged politics, and the common good” (xvi). Instead, market values, ruthless competitive individualism and corporate interests allow “a handful of private interests to control as much of social life as possible in order to maximize their personal profit” (p.xvi). Underpinning this position is the vision of students as human capital or future workers who must be given the requisite skills, knowledge and values to compete in an increasingly hostile labour market (Apple, 1998, p.342). Apple (1998) rightly argues, that discussions of vocational education and training will “have to deal not only with the place of vocational education itself, but also with its connections to an entire and interlocking ideological assemblage” (p.348).

The irony is that Australian employers have been amongst the worst in the world in supporting skills training. The findings of a report prepared for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum were “unambiguous”: (i) according to OECD data Australian employers have been amongst the worst in the world in creating high skilled white collar jobs; (ii) while there are some differences between industries, employers’ contribution to training and education funding has been falling; and (iii) the training provided to non-standard workers is limited at best and at worst non-existent (Hall, Buchanan & Considine, 2002, p.1). Furthermore, the often repeated argument that the individualisation of wages and conditions is necessary to improve productivity and create more jobs is not substantiated by the evidence. Peetz (2006) dismisses most of the research evidence provided by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) as selective, unreliable and misleading. He concludes, that the WorkChoices Act “delivered lower productivity growth than a period when centralised arbitration set wages, union membership was double what it is now, tariffs and quotas

protected local industry from competition, some key enterprises were government-owned and the computer revolution was the stuff of science fiction" (pp.63-64).

Evidence of this kind supports Blaug's (1985) argument that the primary function of state schooling has more to do with socialising students to "co-operate in carrying out the tasks of the employing enterprise" than producing a high-skilled work force (p.55). According to Blaug (1985), this involves socialising, screening and segmenting the labour force in the interests of capitalist social relations (p.48; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In his view, screening through educational qualifications is "economically efficient not because 'good' students are always 'good' workers but because educational credentialism avoids the inherent conflict of interests between workers and employers" (p.25). As a consequence, schools face the inherent contradiction of reproducing the social relations of capitalism and at the same time, satisfying the democratic demands for equality of opportunity (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Shapiro, 1982; Offe, 1981). On the one hand, schools are responsible for developing workers with appropriate cognitive skills for existing jobs; inculcating appropriate behaviours, habits and values; socialising and certifying children according to class, gender and race; and promoting an ideology that portrays capitalism as the embodiment of individual liberty and democracy. On the other hand, schools are responsible for producing citizens who know and care about democratic rights and equality of opportunity (p.146).

There is no question that education has a role to play in equipping students with the capabilities to survive in a complex technological society and finding meaningful work. However, the often repeated argument that secondary schools are to blame for the present crisis because they do not teach the appropriate skills to enable students to 'get a job' is misleading. The simple fact is that the process of re-structuring and de-skilling of the labour force results in more not less unskilled, repetitive, boring and poorly paid jobs. In this case, efforts by employers and governments to promote students' work skills, preparedness and attitudes may simply raise expectations and/or credentials, especially for the 15-20% who are most disadvantaged. Fulong and Cartmel (2001) commenting on the British experience, believe the government's heavy reliance on the knowledge economy and skill training programmes simply serves to "perpetuate a false assumption about a one-on-one relationship between being qualified and being employed" (p.69).

Kincheloe (1999) is helpful in summarising the problems confronting a narrowly conceived human capital approach to VET in Schools:

... no one has produced convincing evidence of where skilled jobs in the twenty-first century are going to be found. Contrary to the corporate implication that a better educated workforce will keep employers from exporting jobs, factories will continue to be lost. When these factors are combined with increasing job loss from automation, the

skilled-job future grows even more dismal. Government officials and vocational educators do not want to deal with this problem. How do we tell the workers of the future that they are being misled? (p.362).

Deconstructing job hierarchies

Jack, a highly effective and engaging teacher, shared with his colleagues a view that his students were not academically inclined and therefore, required a more practical and job orientated education. Typically, this involved students in work related experiences and the early selection of career pathways and specialisations in their areas of interest. As one Deputy Principal explained, “we only have a small cohort of TEE [academic] students—20 out of 86 year 12s”. She indicated that many “bright students chose other pathways, partly because of the workload stress of TEE, but also because failure in TEE could leave students with few career choices”. For many of these students, according to one Deputy Principal, “TAFE [Technical and Further Education] is seen as a viable option but university is too far away”. Another Deputy Principal spoke about the culture of the district and home background of kids not being conducive to tertiary aspirations. In the main, “kids want a job and parents look to school to prepare them for work—hence the emphasis on VET courses”. It was not surprising to hear one industry representative argue that schools must “adjust their programs to the demands of industry”. In her view, TEE students “are at a disadvantage when it comes to apprenticeships because they have not had the workplace experience”. This seemed to be a strong motivating factor for many students and their parents as they searched for an advantage in a competitive job market. From the point of view of students, the possibility of spending one day in industry, one at TAFE and 3 days at school was far better than full-time school. For them, school was clearly at the bottom of the pecking order in regards to their learning. In the words of one student, “The maths course could be improved—it’s too easy and needs to be more relevant to the workplace. They throw you a book but they don’t go through it with you”. This student really wanted to engage in a rigorous and relevant curriculum but only in the context of his work. Unfortunately, only a few students were deemed capable of doing academic work while the rest seemed destined to focus on the manual skills relevant to the job at hand.

Despite the overwhelming press for VET in Schools many students, teachers and principals expressed concern about maintaining a balance between the academic and vocational curriculum. One principal noted that while he had a “very strong VET in Schools programme, in some ways that works as a disadvantage—the parents see this as not providing for university entrance”. Many teachers commented on the impact of the drift of academic students away from public schools to private schools or as one teacher put it “private schools cream off the ‘smart kids’”. At a staff meeting, another teacher suggested “that perhaps the long term goal of the school is to put a spanner in the hands rather than to offer TEE ... we have to do something for the better kids”. Another teacher indicated that “We have had to limit the number of TEE subjects ... more of our resources now go

into non-TEE courses. This is far more equitable". In these schools, academic TEE pathways were no longer perceived to be the core business of the school and as a result, struggled for survival. One explanation offered was that students tend to overestimate their ability and as a consequence do not cope with the TEE as illustrated in the following comment "we've all seen students who think they are going to university — don't get in — and then don't have a backup plan — and then they can't get into TAFE either".

These stories provide some important insights into the dilemmas and contradictions facing schools, teachers, parents and students with regard to the hierarchy of school knowledge and its relationship to the job market. Clearly there is something going on here in terms of "advantaging and disadvantaging" different classes of students and their families (Angus, 2006, p.61; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ball, 2006a; Anyon, 2005). Nearly thirty years ago, Apple (1979) attempted to explain these larger cultural processes:

I want to argue that the problem of educational knowledge, of what is taught in schools, has to be considered as a form of the larger distribution of goods and services in a society. It is not merely an analytic problem (what shall be construed as knowledge?) nor simply a technical one (how do we organize and store knowledge so that children may have access to it and 'master' it?), nor, finally, is it a purely psychological problem (how do we get students to learn?). Rather, the study of educational knowledge is a study in ideology, the investigation of what is considered legitimate knowledge ... by specific social groups and classes, in specific institutions, at specific historical moments (p.45).

Historically, schooling has served different classes of students in different ways. Prior to the Second World War, secondary schooling was the right of the wealthy and a few selected and deserving children from the working class. The private church schools established a market in educating the sons and daughters of the colonies elite. Then, with the rapid expansion of secondary schooling in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church opened schools for the poorer and humbler classes. However, it wasn't long before they too, established select and superior fee-paying schools for the wealthier and upwardly mobile Catholics (Ely, 1978, pp.43-45). It was only after the Second World War that comprehensive state high schools were introduced to cater for all students. With the rapid expansion of universal state secondary schooling in the 1950s and 1960s, McCallum (1990) argues that "selection by differentiation replaced selection by exclusion" (p.98). As more students entered secondary schooling, it was necessary to find other mechanisms of social selection and differentiation, this time under the guise of intelligence, mental testing and meritocracy (Down, 2001).

With the psychological capture of education, individual merit and ability soon became the basis for allocating children into different school classes and courses of study (McCallum,

1990, p.74). Intelligence testing became a way of life for all children transferring from primary into secondary school. The emergence of the vocational guidance movement assumed that a hierarchy of natural ability determined who got what jobs. The assumption was that only a limited number of students were capable of doing a limited number of well-paid jobs (Miller, 1986, p.5). Elsewhere (Down, 2001), I have argued that school guidance officers with their barrage of intelligence tests, personality inventories and aptitude tests were able to convince children and their parents that it was nature and not the economic system that determined their future work and class location. The result of all this scientific effort was to reinforce fairly well established views of educational inequality. In other words, children of the rich were probably brighter than working class children and definitely smarter than Aboriginal and migrant children (p.17). The power of the guidance movement was not so much its capacity to impose a particular world view on the individual but to establish consent from within (Gramsci, 1971).

Against this backdrop, Furlong and Cartmel (2001) argue that as individuals are made more accountable for their "labour market fates" (p.28) young people from advantaged backgrounds have been "relatively successful in protecting privileged access to the most desirable routes" (p.34). This means that "middle-class children ... are increasingly placed in schools with a 'name', while working-class children are left in schools with inferior resources which rapidly become ghettoized" (p.19). Lipman (2004) argues that "School accountability policies that discipline, sort, and teach students they are responsible for their own failure serve as a powerful form of ideological preparation for integration into a stratified and compliant workforce" (p.136). In her view, "We should not underestimate the centrality of education policy to labor discipline in a global economy that demands an uninterrupted flow of low-wage labor" (p.137).

What we are now seeing in schools is a "collapse of the social and economic fields of education into a single, over-riding emphasis on policy-making for economic competitiveness (Ball, 2006c, p.131). According to Brown and Lauder (1997) the market approach to schooling fosters the mentality of the "survival of the fittest", based on parental choice and competition (p.176). Bourdieu (1998) sees this as a new kind of neo-Darwinism where it is "the 'brightest and best' who come out on top" and this can be explained by a "philosophy of competence according to which it is the most competent who govern and have jobs, which implies that those who do not have jobs are not competent. There are 'winners' and 'losers'" (p.42). Underpinning this world view is the assumption that choice, competition and accountability will raise standards and consumers (students and parents) will pick schools, subjects and courses where there is demand for labour, thus addressing the problem of skill shortages (p.177).

Of particular concern, is the way in which public high schools in disadvantaged communities are being constructed as "as a residual place of last resort for those unable to

exercise choice or flight to private schooling” (Smyth, 2005, p.225). As one teacher explained, “other schools have taken all our kids—with Howard’s [The Prime Minister of Australia] push it has done enormous damage—we’ll end up a residual school—you’ll only go to a government school when you can’t afford anything else”. In short, schooling has become “inextricably mired in the capitalist relations of the market economy and capitalist labor market” (Willis, 2004, p.193). This leads to a narrowing of the curriculum in terms of knowledge and skills (competencies) relevant to the work place, greater curriculum differentiation, course specialisation, and ultimately, a highly stratified education system that is geared to the short term interests of a hierarchical labour market (Teese, 2003; Lipman, 2004). Evidence is now mounting that these kinds of narrowly conceived and instrumentalist policy responses are producing significant “collateral damage” (Nicholas & Berliner, 2007) not only to the way young people are (mis)treated (Grossberg, 2005) but (mis)educated (Meier, 2002).

For instance, by pathologising and individualising issues of academic performance and student behaviour the focus shifts from the broader sociological aspects of schooling and lets off the hook the “predatory culture” that contributes to the problems that arise for young people (McLaren, 1995). As Giroux (2001) observes, young people today are increasingly “being framed as a generation of suspects” (p.31). As a consequence, students and their families are constrained in the “parameters of political possibility and acceptability” (Ball, 2006b, p.39). The challenge, according to Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) is to understand how “schooling creates and perpetuates images of children in ways that are destructive, in ways that predispose some children to be successful, confident, and engaged, and others to become lower achievers, timid, or aggressive, reluctant, and disengaged” (p.1). Hudak (2001) believes that the labeling of students in these ways becomes “toxic” when it demonstrates “a moment of exploitation where one’s ontological vocation—being fully human—is hindered” (p.14).

For this reason, Brantlinger (2003) argues that the practice of segregating children from poor and working-class backgrounds from the mainstream and referring to them in “disparaging epithets” (p.11) inflicts “symbolic violence (humiliation, alienation, and rejection) on those labeled and educated in the lower echelons of stratified schools” (p.12). Kincheloe (1995) adds that “young people no longer look to the school or to work as venues in which the creative spirit can be developed” (p.124). In his view, there is a crisis of motivation as evidenced by a malaise—low quality work, absenteeism, sullen hostility, waste, alcohol and drug abuse (124) and cognitive illness created by a loss of meaning and purpose in education (p.125). According to Shor (1992), “playing dumb” and “getting by” are two acts of student resistance to a school culture “that ignores their language, interest, conditions, and participation” and “makes their subjectivity invisible” (p.138).

Bernstein (1996) argues that because there is “an unequal distribution of images, knowledges, possibilities and resources” in schools, there will be a corresponding affect on “the rights of participation, inclusion and individual enhancement of groups of students” (p.xxii). Bernstein (1996) provides some insights into these cultural processes:

A school metaphorically holds up a mirror in which an image is reflected. There may be several images, positive and negative. A school’s ideology may be seen as a construction in a mirror through which images are reflected. The question is: who recognizes themselves as of value? What other images are excluded by the dominant image of value so that some students are unable to recognize themselves? In the same way, we can ask about the acoustic of the school? Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is hailed by this voice? For whom is it familiar? (p.xxi).

In schools, vocational guidance has played a key role in this kind of identity work (Wexler, 1992) by helping students to choose the right subjects to match their abilities, interests and backgrounds. The emphasis is on getting to know students in order to better manage their expectations. As one teacher explained, this kind of career guidance involves “a lot more tracking of kids’ performances ... the school is looking for hard data”. On this basis, schools are seen as places that reward individual abilities, interests and effort rather than a person’s social position, despite evidence to the contrary (Brantlinger, 2003; Devine, 2004). Harris (1982) elaborates on how the notion of meritocracy works in schools:

In more fleshed-out form, it claims that children differ in general mental ability or intellectual merit, that the relevant differences can be measured by standardized tests or cognitive or mental ability, and that the demands of school work increase in direct proportion to this particular merit such that the more able one is the longer one can stay on at school mastering increasingly difficult and more demanding content. It is then taken to follow that this intellectual merit is a reliable indicator of a person’s productive value, and that schooling thus fairly and properly selects the more able people for the more intellectually demanding jobs: jobs which in turn bring with them high social status, economic and other privileges, and increased life chance along many dimensions. The end result of this merit, as measured by school performance, tends to become indicative of personal merit in a far wider sense, such that a large range of opportunities open up for those who have demonstrated particular capabilities at school (p.106).

What is not acknowledged is that social hierarchies are already structured into meritocracies. Therefore, schools have to be seen as fair, impartial and independent of external power relations between competing social groups (Brantlinger, 2003, p.2). The only way that schools can legitimately justify school failure is through “inborn facilities

both cognitive and affective or to cultural deficits relayed by the family” (Bernstein, 1996, p.xxiv). This is where Bourdieu’s (1979) understanding of cultural capital helps to explain:

... the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. This starting point implies a break with the presuppositions inherent both in the commonsense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes, and in human capital theories” (p.47).

In the case of vocational education and training, Welch (1996) argues that the options are limited to: (i) blame the student which leads to a focus on improving attitudes towards work, and a narrow vocationalism; (ii) educate for unemployment whereby young people must accept, or learn to cope with it; (iii) adjust content so that work related skills are enhanced, and pupils find out more about career prospects; and (iv) terminal programmes for the lower streamed pupils, labeled as of poor academic ability (p.65). Once identified, Kincheloe (1999) argues that students “are initiated into the sixth circle of educational hell—the realm of the low achiever” (p.258). Anyon’s (1981) research on social class and its relation to curriculum and instruction demonstrates that working-class students are domesticated into the world of blue-collar labor, where passivity, conformity and following instructions are a part of the hidden curriculum. On the other hand, students from more affluent schools learn sophisticated analytical skills and develop personality traits of self-reliance, problem-solving, flexibility and leadership (see also Finn, 1999).

On these counts, Kincheloe (1999) provides a useful summary of the criticisms of vocational education and training:

1. It has segregated poor and minority youth into a curriculum that reduces their access to high-skill, high-status, high-pay careers. Such segregation creates the impression that vocational educational is a dumping ground for ‘children other than mine’;
2. It teaches skills that are obsolete in a rapidly changing economy. By the time vocational education students get to the job market, the specific work skills they have learned are out of date;
3. Its instruction is narrow—so narrow that students who graduate are often unequipped for existing jobs. Vocational students do not have access to a curriculum that teaches them how to think;
4. It has failed to offer students an alternative to dropping out of school. At the same time, it has not enhanced the employability of a large segment of the youth population, especially the poor and nonwhite;

5. Its image revolves around a picture of students working with their hands but *not* their minds. The popular prejudice against manual jobs and the persistent reduction of such jobs to repetitive, deskilled labor has rubbed off on vocational education, making it a place where incompetent students can seek shelter;
6. It leads too often to nonprestigious jobs—bad work (pp.138-139).

These shortcomings run counter to the seductive rhetoric of the neoliberal promise of a high-tech and high-skilled future. In a climate where Australia's booming resource sector is driving unprecedented profits for transnational corporations, exorbitant salaries for chief executive officers and the lowest official unemployment figures in thirty years, the growing divide between 'winners' and 'losers' appear beside the point (Greig, Lewins & White, 2003; Vinson, 2007). Nationally, evidence consistently shows that working-class students have different educational experiences to their more affluent counterparts: only 59.2% of boys from unskilled or working class families complete Year 12, compared with 88.6% from professional backgrounds (Ainley, 1998, p.55); for girls the figures are 69% and 95% respectively (p.55); the proportion of young people from rural areas who complete Year 12 is 51% (p.56); and 60.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders leave school before the age of 16 and fail to complete a secondary education (Smyth & Down, 2004, p.57). A key argument in this section is that VET in Schools can be only properly understood within the dynamics of the broader shifts in the global economy and the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging based on pre-existing social hierarchies of class, gender and race.

Reclaiming symbolic spaces for meaningful work

Potential early school leavers, Mick and Johnny, were involved in designing and constructing a courtyard project under the direction of their teacher who has a special interest in horticulture and science. Both students talked about the transformation in their attitude to schooling when they were engaged in a community-based project that encouraged them to take greater responsibility for their own learning and enabled them to work as part of a team. Not only did they appreciate the hands-on approach to learning but they discovered that the contextualised nature of their learning gave them a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts than their peers in the so-called smarter classes. The kind of learning promoted by their teacher gave them a reason for staying on at school and brightened their aspirations for the future. Johnny indicated that he felt more comfortable in the horticulture programme. In his words, "It's just not student and teacher it's like you have friends. You get a chance to work in groups and it's not as hard. You learn to communicate with other people whether you like them or not. We listen a lot of the time and input a lot of information into our heads". Mick wanted to work "In a trade—or some other type of job ... but I'm not sure at the moment ... I'm still thinking ... maybe an electrician or mechanic or something". Asked about the perceptions of other students towards the project, Johnny commented "At the start they thought we were the stupid

class until they saw what we can produce now they don't think that we are so stupid". Mick explained that he valued the opportunity to do something worthwhile "The difference is in other classes you just get heaps and heaps of assignments but we get to do big projects. Maybe the teacher gets something out of me doing an assignment but I don't get anything out of it. When you have finished a project you are proud of it".

Mick and Johnny are typical of many vocational education and training students who wanted to be involved in meaningful work and a relevant and rigorous curriculum. Like Dewey (1916/1944) these students understood the importance of (re)searching for meaning based on their own experience, knowledge, passions and interests. Dewey himself warned, that "failure to bear in mind the difference in subject matter from the respective standpoint of teacher and student is responsible for most of the mistakes made in the use of texts and other expressions of pre-existent knowledge" (pp.182-183). To do otherwise, Dewey (1916/1944) argued, "is simply to abdicate the education function" (p.73).

This story helps us to understand that education is not something "done to students" (Shor, 1992, p.20). Education should provide learning experiences that will: (i) challenge and extend student interests; (ii) emphasise group work rather than individualised learning; (iii) respect student knowledge and experience; (iv) engage students in learning that is socially worthwhile; (v) provide opportunities to publicly demonstrate competence; and (vi) prepare students for a life of meaningful work. According to Shor (1992), this is the only way "to shake students out of their learned withdrawal from intellectual and civic life" (p.20). In this task, Freire (1970/2000) offers some timely advice when he reminds us that the purpose of education is to affirm men and women "as beings in the process of *becoming*— as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p.78). For him, education is an ongoing process of personal and social transformation whereby people transcend themselves, move forward and look ahead, and "for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future" (p.79). In short, education is about "making kids powerful" (Smyth & McNerney, 2007, p.205).

This kind of empowering education (Shor, 1992, Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2001) confronts head on the current obsession with impoverished market driven approaches to education such as paper and pencil testing, standardisation, rote memorisation, vocationalisation, streaming and 'back to basics' reforms. As Pinar (1995) argues "We are what we know." We are, however, also what we do not know" (p.23). McMurtry (1998) alerts us to the dangers of closed value systems such as the global market because they "are blind in principle to the harm they cause" (p.23). Worse, he argues, the market value system "cannot see past its own demands for ever more market activities of society, what is good

for the market's expansion and control of civil life is assumed to be good for society" (p.22). McMurtry (1998) elaborates:

When we approach a value structure as global and as universally practised as "the market value system," with an immense edifice of technical experts, government ministries, national and international banks, transnational corporations, and international trade regimes all promulgating and implementing its prescriptions, we are faced by an especially difficult value program to investigate and question. Still it is important to make the effort to do this investigation, this questioning. If a value system is simply presupposed and obeyed as the given structure of the world that all are made to accept and serve, it can become systematically destructive without our knowing there is a moral choice involved (p.10).

In reclaiming the symbolic spaces for a more egalitarian and democratic society, Giroux (2004) urges educators to move beyond the "limited story" of "market fundamentalism" (p.xxii) in order to "imagine otherwise" (p.143). For him (2004), this involves creating "a common symbolic space and multiple public spheres where norms are created, debated, and engaged as part of an attempt to develop a new political language, culture, and set of relations". Central to this new discourse are the principles and values of "global justice, community, and solidarity" (p.xxvi). In a similar vein, McMurtry (1998) adopts the notion of "civil commons" or "what people ensure together as a society to protect and further life, as distinct from money aggregates" (p.24). He goes on to explain how the civil commons guarantees access of all, irrespective of market values or social class, to the goods required to safeguard and advance life-capacities including public health care and education (p.24).

Drawing on these broader democratic aspirations, I want to now pursue the implications for reimagining a more critical democratic form of vocational education and training in schools. In the space available, I will briefly allude to three sets of issues that might assist teachers in framing a more democratic and socially critical approach: (i) developing an understanding of good versus bad work; (ii) breaking down the artificial division between academic and manual education; and (iii) fostering a commitment to the values of critical citizenship, democracy and social justice.

(i) Developing an understanding of good versus bad work

In schools today, you will hear very little discussion about the changing nature of work. The assumption in most vocational education and training programmes is that students must simply be prepared for jobs, no matter what kind, if any, or how rewarding. My argument is that if we are going to create a truly democratic society where students are able to construct their individual and collective identities as future workers and future citizens then there is an urgent need to critically examine the changing nature of work, in particular what it means to be engaged in meaningful work. In the light of the current

neoliberal assault on workers' rights, wages and conditions as outlined earlier, this task becomes even more urgent (Peetz, 2006).

Kincheloe (1995, 1999) provides a clear and compelling case for creating an alternative vision and practice of vocational education and training at the beginning of the 21st century. At the heart of his writing, is a desire to connect democracy, work and education in ways that will produce socially just futures for all citizens. For Kinchleoe (1999), this involves building an "ethical basis on which social, educational, and, contrary to the prevailing sentiments, economic institutions are constructed" (p.64). In contrast to narrowly conceived skills training approaches, he urges teachers and students to become critically aware of the complexities of the modern workplace. At the core of this critical democratic approach is an understanding of good versus bad work (pp.64-74). This approach engages students in the task of separating "the concept of work from the notion of a job in that a job is simply a way of making a living while work involves a sense of completion and fulfillment" (p.66). Here, students and teachers together set out to investigate the following kinds of questions: What constitutes good work? Socially beneficial work? Just work? Fulfilling work? Democratic work? (p.64). These questions provide an alternative foundation in building an ethical and socially just orientation to vocational education and training. In mapping out this vision, Kincheloe (1999) summarises some key principles of good work such as: self-direction; the job as place of learning; workplace cooperation; individual work as a contribution to social welfare; work as expression of self; workers as more than a sum of their behaviors; work as a democratic expression; freedom from the tyranny of authoritarian power; workers as participants in the operation of an enterprise; play as a virtue that must be incorporated into work; and better pay for workers in relation to the growing disparity between managers and workers (pp.64-75).

In pursuing the vision of good work, Kincheloe (1999) advocates the benefits of critical constructivism (Kincheloe, 1995, 1999, 2001). Underpinning this approach is the constructivist learning theories of educational writers such as John Dewey, Jermone Bruner, and Lev Vygotsky (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1963). For them, knowledge is socially constructed and developed by individuals in context. Put simply, constructivist learning theories assert that learners must actively construct or generate knowledge and meaning from experience. Rather than treating students as repositories for storing content which is often divorced from reality (Freire, 1970/2000), teachers and students begin to explore their own worlds, produce knowledge, generate meaning and engage in social action. Such views challenge traditional conceptions of the curriculum about what students need to know, what they might want to know, how they might learn from their own experience, and what benefits their learning might bring. Significantly though, what makes this kind of pedagogy critical is the emphasis on helping students to develop a critical consciousness, that is:

... an ability to step back from the world as we are accustomed to perceiving it and to see the ways our perception is constructed through linguistic codes, cultural signs, and embedded power. Such an ability constitutes a giant step in learning to think, in gaining deeper levels of understanding. Critical constructivism is a theoretically grounded form of world making. We ask penetrating questions. How did that which has come to be, come to be? Whose interests do particular institutional arrangements serve? How did the status hierarchy in the world of work develop? (Kincheloe, 1995, pp.183-184).

(ii) *Integrating the vocational and academic curriculum*

As argued earlier, current approaches to vocational education and training are premised on the assumption that schools should develop a practical and job orientated curriculum for 'non academic' students because some kids are born smarter than others. However, as Blackmore (1992) argues, the emphasis on vocational education and training in schools is really about who is taught what curriculum, how and by whom (Blackmore, 1992). Likewise, Bessant (1989) observes that historically, the vocationally orientated curriculum has been used to restrict the numbers of students climbing the educational ladder previously preserved for the wealthier classes, on the grounds that "the masses would 'lower standards', threaten 'excellence' and impede the progress of the academic elite" (p.70).

In dismantling social hierarchies of class, knowledge and power, the integration of academic and vocational education provides an important first step (Lawton, 1997; Apple, 1998, p.35). Kincheloe (1995) argues the current divide between academic and non-academic students serves no useful purpose other than perpetuating social divisions based on class, race and gender. Furthermore, he argues that it damages the majority of students who no longer look to the school or work as venues in which the creative spirit can be developed (p.124). In tackling these complex problems, Kincheloe (1995) argues that integration can create situations where students can learn to use material and conceptual tools in authentic activities. In this way, students and teachers come to "appreciate the use of academic skill in real life context; at the same time, they understand the vocational activity at a level that activates their creativity" (p.254).

Kincheloe (1995) believes that vocational education approached in this manner is not only more respectful of the intellectual and creative potential of all learners but recognizes that crafts and trades involve higher orders of intellect. Importantly, he states that such an approach refuses "to validate the common assumption within the culture of formal education that the theoretical ways of knowing of the academic disciplines are innately superior to the practical ways of knowing of the vocations" (p.270). Thinking about the integration of vocational education and training and academic learning opens up possibilities for building a new democratic vision and practice. This new approach

becomes interested in the following kinds of questions: What knowledge is of most worth? How is it organised and for what reason? What are the assumptions about student's abilities and capacities? How did it get this way? Who benefits? Who loses? What are the obstacles to integration? How might integration work? What kind of conditions need to be created? How should workplace experience and expertise be incorporated?

(iii) *Fostering critical citizenship, democracy and social justice*

A critical democratic vocational education and training would seek to combine the role of schools in "developing forms of critical citizenship, while at the same time, helping students gain the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the social relations of the economy" (Simon, Dippro & Schenke, 1991, p.6). Currently, little space is allowed for questioning workplace issues such as personal experiences of work, the changing nature of work, structural unemployment, trade unions, power relations, health and safety, child labour, industrial legislation, and wages and conditions (Simon, Dippro & Schenke, 1991). Aronowitz (cited in Brosio, 1994, p.240) explains why this might be so, when he describes the effectiveness of mass culture in colonising the public and social spaces available to ordinary citizens for purposes of reading, talking, analysis and exchange as one of the major accomplishments of capital (p.240). Under a sustained period of neoliberalism there has been a "manufacture of consent" (Chomsky, 1999, p.10) leading to a depoliticised citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism or what Macedo (1995) describes as "literacy for stupidification" (p.81). To engage with these broader substantive economic, social and political issues would put at risk the goodwill of many school-industry partnerships.

In addressing these problems, Simon, Dippro and Schenke (1991) argue that work education programmes should "encourage students to: question taken-for-granted assumptions about work; comprehend workplaces as sites where identities are produced; see this production as a struggle over competing claims to truth and to correctness; and envisage ways in which the quality of their working lives can be improved" (p.15). For Shor (1992), this means inviting students "to make their education, to examine critically their experience and social conditions, and to consider acting in society from the knowledge they gain" (p.188). Classroom practitioners such as Bigelow et al., (2006,) argue that this more empowering education is: grounded in the lives of our students; critical; multicultural; anti-racist, pro-justice; participatory, experiential; hopeful, visionary; activist; academically rigorous; and culturally and linguistically sensitive (p.2). These critical democratic approaches to education begin to engage with a range of alternative questions to guide curriculum planning: How might schools use community assets and resources? What kinds of community partnerships and networks are desirable? How is the curriculum negotiated with students? How are students' lives and experiences acknowledged? What resources are required? How might students demonstrate their learning?

Ultimately, the purpose of a critical vocational education and training is to enable students and teachers to not only better understand the world of work but to actively participate in creating alternative conceptions of their individual and collective futures. It means restoring “schools as democratic public spheres” (Giroux 1997, .p.218) with its “emphasis on social justice, respect for others, critical inquiry, equality, freedom, civic courage, and concern for the collective good” (Giroux, 2004, p.102).

Conclusion

With the demise of the social democratic settlement in the 1970s and the dominance of the neoliberal and neoconservative agenda schools are being refashioned around the narrow imperatives of global capitalism. In this paper, I have attempted to provide some critique of these developments and the consequences for vocational education and training. The official rhetoric focuses on producing students with the knowledge and skills (competencies) relevant to the workplace, curriculum differentiation, specialisation, standardisation, high stakes paper and pencil testing, school choice, league tables, and accountability. This paper argues that the renewed emphasis on Vocational Education and Training in Schools cannot be divorced from the wider shifts in the global economy and the changing nature of the youth labour market, in particular the escalation of part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector of the economy. In response, neoliberal and neoconservative public policy makers have attempted to blame individual students, schools and their communities for this state of affairs while rendering their own ideologies invisible. As McMurtry (1998) explains so well, the global market is a “monstrous system of value” because “it subjugates and sacrifices ever more life to its demands—if not by destruction and consumption, then by instrumentalization or starvation of what does not serve it” (p.390).

In this brave new era, increasing numbers of young people in public schools are being streamed into vocational education and training programs based on deficit logics that serve to perpetuate their relative disadvantage compared to their middle class counterparts. A critical vocational education and training adopts a ‘troubling’ perspective on these events and practices with a view to not only interrupting the dominant human capital discourses but advocating an alternative vision and practice founded on the values of economic and political democracy, critical inquiry, civic engagement and “educated hope” (Giroux, 2001, p.125). In the words of Kincheloe (1995), “Critical work educators want to turn out workers who appreciate the dynamics of the relationship between technological development and ecological concern, between economic growth and the basic material and spiritual needs of all citizens, between technological progress and the demand for knowledgeable citizens in a democratic society” (pp.309-310). In short, a critical vocational education and training would have broad social meaning, take students experiences seriously, help them to give meaning to their lives, and enable them to envisage alternative conceptions of their individual and collective futures.

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