The School-to-Work Movement and Educational Reform

While the perspectives voiced by economists, employers, labor representatives, policy makers, and educational and social reformers in the school reform dialogue have varied significantly, all have expressed concern about the education of our nation's youth. This section discusses some of the factors most often cited in the literature for developing youth apprenticeships and a comprehensive school-to-work transition system. While democratic issues will be discussed within the description of these factors, a more extensive critique in the Deweyan tradition will be provided in the following section.

Minimizing Floundering

One of the most often cited factors for developing youth apprenticeships is to help solve the problem of U.S. youth "floundering" in the labor market (Rosenbaum, Stern, Hamilton, Hamilton, Berryman, & Kazis, 1992). For example, high school youth between the ages of 18 and 27 who did not enroll in post-secondary education held approximately six different jobs and experienced four to five periods of unemployment (Veum & Weiss, 1993). For example, high school youth between the ages of 18 and 27 who did not enroll in post-secondary education held approximately six different jobs and experienced four to five periods of unemployment (Veum & Weiss, 1993). For example, high school youth between the ages of 18 and 27 who did not enroll in post-secondary education held approximately six different jobs and experienced four to five periods of unemployment (Veum & Weiss, 1993). For example, high school youth between the ages of 18 and 27 who did not enroll in post-secondary education held approximately six different jobs and experienced four to five periods of unemployment (Veum & Weiss, 1993).

Veum and Weiss (1993) cited many factors that contributed to this employment pattern. One factor is that employers have the perception that recent high school graduates lack the basic skills and work habits necessary to become valued employees. Such a perception may help to explain why employers tend to hire more mature applicants over recent high school graduates even when older applicants are less qualified (Hamilton, 1986; Rosenbaum, 1989). However, Veum and Weiss also contend that the employment pattern, or lack thereof, among high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 27 is also, to a limited extent, the result of decisions made by the youth themselves. Perhaps because the vast majority of jobs these youth hold are low skill, low wage, and do not possess a career ladder, youth seem to feel no major commitment to employers and may leave to search for more rewarding, meaningful labor.

Similar to reformers at the turn of the century, many contemporary U.S. education reformers have embraced an educational system similar to Germany's dual system to improve the employment patterns of youth. For example, many of these reformers have expressed the belief that Germany's apprenticeship programs have made significant contributions to that country's economic prosperity and have minimized many youth employment problems with which the U.S. is currently faced (Bailey & Merritt, 1992; Cheek & Campbell, 1994; Dowling & Albrecht, 1991; Hamilton, 1993; Rosenbaum, et al., 1992). They point out that Germany's youth unemployment rate has historically been consistently below 5%, which is substantially lower than most other countries (Hamilton, 1986). German high school youth, students from the
Ensuring Work Experiences are Educative

While the first three factors that have contributed to the youth apprenticeship movement have been the realization that many work experiences available to U.S. youth actually hinder their education. Historically, there has been the perception that work experience of almost any kind is good for youth because it promotes maturity by teaching the work ethic and the value of a dollar (Stern, McMillion, Hopkins, & Stone, 1990). However, there is evidence to suggest that some jobs may actually have a negative impact on youth. Because these low skill jobs are largely repetitive, unchallenging, and provide little contact with adults, they may contribute to cynicism about work and promote immaturity among youth (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986). In addition, there is also evidence that youth who work excessively or late hours at such jobs spend less time on homework, receive lower grades, experience more stress, use more drugs, and are less likely to graduate from high school (Stern et al., 1990).

Because European youth become employed in career-entry jobs, rather than the repetitive and unchallenging jobs in which the vast majority of U.S. youth are employed, Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) contend they are more likely to experience cognitive work environments. Cognitive work environments have frequently been identified as high performance work environments because they empower workers capable of effectively using mathematics, communication, problem solving, and teamwork to make decisions so that productivity and profit are increased (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990). To assist students in developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become high performance employees, Berryman (1992) identified several characteristics necessary for work sites in order to promote apprenticeship as a paradigm for learning. One of the most fundamental characteristics, and one which she contends is lacking in most jobs held by U.S. youth, is the tasks at work become increasingly complex so that more and more skills are required for expert performance. Another characteristic, similar to increasing complexity, is increasing diversity. Apprentices learn not only a wider variety of skills, but also a wider variety of contexts in which to use their skills. Consequently, transferable skills are heavily emphasized.

Critical theorists and cognitive scientists, who have expanded upon Dewey's vision of education through occupations, seem to have embraced cognitive work environments as meaningful places to learn. However, they are concerned that many cognitive work environments exist for young people to learn academic or technical skills, much less important think (Kinchlo, 1995; Levine, 1994; Roditi, 1992). In addition, some evidence suggests that school-to-work advocates may have idealized German work organizations as learning environments (Bailey, 1993).

Mentorships are another characteristic that is absent from most U.S. work sites where youth are employed but are prevalent in European work sites (Caldwell & Carter, 1993; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992). Mentors are an important element to youth apprenticeships because they provide guidance about social and personal aspects of work as well as instruction on how to perform job tasks. Mentorships also increase the extent to which youth are meaningful contacts with adults who are important that their areas and willing to invest time in them. When "mentors are carefully matched with students on the basis of interests and, where possible, geographical proximity," students are more involved and satisfied (Stear, Finkenstein, Stone, Latting, & Dornsife, 1990, pp. 110-111). While there seems to be a lack of consensus in the literature on whether mentors should be assigned to apprentices or whether they should emerge once workers and the apprentices have the opportunity to get to know one another, the value of mentors to apprentices remains unchallenged (Caldwell & Carter, 1993).

Increasing Earnings and Education

A third factor that has contributed to the youth apprenticeship movement has been that high school graduates are now experiencing a reduction in real earnings compared to high school graduates of the 1970s (Berryman, 1992). While this trend alone is undesirable, what is even more disturbing is that by age forty, a significant percentage of these workers still have not found stable employment in a career (Stearn, Finkenstein, Stone, Latting, & Dornsife, 1994). The result is that a number of young people, many of whom are parents and are having an increasingly difficult time "making it," often become burdens to society rather than contributors.

While the percentage of high school students employed in naturally occurring, paid, unsupervised jobs (i.e., no school or public agency involvement) is at all time high (Stern, et al., 1990), there has also been a significant increase in the percentage of youth who fall below the poverty level (Kozol, 1991). Many factors have contributed to this phenomenon. One such factor is that the vast majority of U.S. youth are working at low skill, low wage jobs. Another factor is that young low skilled workers frequently experience periodic periods of unemployment. However, even when these factors are considered, there is evidence that the average hourly earnings (adjusted for inflation) of nonsupervisory workers are now lower than in any year since 1965 (Wirth, 1992). This trend in earnings has contributed to an increase of 43% of full-time, year-round workers who fall below the poverty level.

While the evidence suggests that members of the "neglected majority" fall behind in the global economy when they enter the workforce full-time (Parnell, 1985), evidence also suggests that some U.S. citizens are doing quite well. For example, though the average income of the poorest fifth declined about seven percent between 1977 and 1990, the average income of the richest fifth increased about 15% during this time period (Wirth, 1992). This trend toward greater inequality is even further emphasized when one compares the income of college graduates with high school graduates (Raisch, 1991).

Some educational reformers feel this widening gap in income and in level of education is a threat to U.S. democracy. Consequently, they have advocated as one of their principles that youth apprenticeship results in or contributes to a two year associate degree that can then be articulated with a four year college degree. This initiative, often referred to as Tech Prep, is intended to articulate secondary and post-secondary educational programs and provide specific training for technical careers (Parnell, 1985). For example, Craftsmanship 2000 metalworking apprentices in Tulsa, Oklahoma, have the opportunity to earn a associate degree in applied technology.
The School-to-Work Movement and Democratic Concerns

Failure to Recognize Transformative Potential

While there have been instances in which youth apprenticeship has seemed to serve as a vehicle for educational reform, advocates of youth apprenticeship have failed to recognize that education can aim “at transforming society and the organization of work within it to reflect participative, democratic values” (Simon, et al., 1991, p. 5). In the early 1900s Dewey (1916, 1977) advocated an emancipatory education that would transform schools, work organizations, and the society at large into more participative, democratic cultures. He observed that oppression in society and exploitation in the workplace and recognized the radical potential of education taught through the study of young apprentices who operate from a critical theoretical framework (Bettis & Gregson, 1993; Gregson, 1993; 1994; Lakes, 1991, 1994; Rehm, 1985; Shore, 1984; Simon & Dippo, 1987) have expanded upon Dewey's vision and have advocated a critical pedagogy. These critical pedagogues have maintained that vocational education and cooperative work-site learning possess the potential for uncovering unjust contradictions, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, becoming 'knowledge workers,' and exploring possible alternatives for work-site reform. However, there is little discussion among youth apprenticeship advocates of its transformative capacity. Rather, the emphasis seems to be on the transmissive capacity of youth apprenticeship because industry wants students to function productively in the existing industrial environment regardless of how unjust it is.

Failure to Expose Students to Issues of Worker Empowerment

The transmissive pedagogy described above seems to represent dominant practice among vocational educators since there is an explicit commitment to adapt youth to meet the needs of employers (Gregson, 1991). This is in contrast to the pedagogy advocated by Dewey and contemporary critical pedagogues that is transformative in nature because its goal is to empower students so they can later transform the social relations of the workplace into more democratic cultures (Herschbach, 1994). Though Dewey did not use the term “empowerment,” his vision of schooling provided the conceptual base for critical theorists in their use of this term. For instance one critical theorist, Giroux (1988), defined empowerment as “the process whereby students acquire the means to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (p. 189). Giroux envisioned a schooling environment that not only promotes critical thinking but also action directed towards the creation of a more just and equitable society.

Historically, organized labor has advocated worker empowerment because of its concern for improving the quality of life for workers. As a result, organized labor and the vocational education community have often had a strained relationship, in part, because of the perception from labor that vocational educators “disempower” rather than empower students (Tanner, 1998; Violas, 1978). While labor leaders no longer publicly accuse vocational educators of training students to work for low wages, the perception does remain that vocational educators use predominantly an instrumental approach for the preparation of vocational students and that this contributes to an economic and social efficiency (Kinchloe, 1995; Simon, et al., 1991).

Because of these perceptions, some labor leaders have criticized the elements of the school-to-work movement (personal communication, J. Fish, October 31, 1994). One reason for this criticism seems to be that the term apprenticeship contributes to confusion between work-site learning agreements and traditional union apprenticeship agreements. Use of the term youth apprenticeship, some labor leaders have contended, symbolizes the extent to which they have been excluded from meaningful input on school-to-work initiatives. In addition, labor fears that some school-to-work efforts have been a calculated assault against unions and that elements of the movement are representative of the anti-unionism climate presently in the United States.

The labor perspective maintains that if advocates of the school-to-work movement are as committed to meeting the needs of students as they are to meeting the needs of industry, then vocational education must promote a discourse on the organizations and conditions of work. Herschbach (1994) contended that the nature of vocational education lends itself to help empower students so they could later improve the social conditions of work. However, the practice of such a transformative pedagogy requires the realization that schooling is political and involves a struggle among many (e.g., management, labor) with different interests. Critical pedagogues have argued that to promote critical reflection and democratic action, the political nature of schooling needs to be exposed by introducing conflict into learning experiences and advocated the use of problematics as one approach for doing so.

Failure to Introduce Conflict into the Curriculum

Numerous studies have reported successful instances in which science, math, and communication concepts have been effectively applied in a vocational or workplace context (Bottoms, et al., 1992; Grubb, Davis, Lum, Pihal, & Moraine, 1991). However, in part because the role of social studies seldom seems to be considered in occupational and vocational education, integrated studies, or vocational alignment, this approach offers an opportunity to introduce students to conflicts that exist in our society and places of work. Critical theorists find this omission problematic because it fails to inform students of the historical conflicts that have contributed to the struggle for freedom, social justice, and equality. Because many recently developed youth apprenticeships have been designed to teach students about particular trades, they provide the opportunity for students to examine collective struggles of unions, crafts people, and artisans. Not only should the struggles of these various groups be addressed, but their successes should also be discussed to encourage students to become actively involved in shaping their occupations. Apple (1992) suggested that the nature of conflict has usually been presented to students in a negative way, and he believed that this perspective was misleading, particularly in a pluralistic society. He, like Dewey and Freire, endorsed introducing conflict into learning experiences and advocated the use of problematics as one approach for doing so.

Apprenticeship, as a topic for study, lends itself to problem-based learning. While apprenticeship has historically been used effectively to produce highly skilled workers, it also has a long reputation of exploiting workers. Consequently, students could examine cases that show how apprenticeship has improved the quality of work life for some as well as explore instances in which it has been used as a “form of control over the most valuable, least powerful workers” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 64).
Failure to Critique "High-Performance" Workplaces

Gregson (1993), Marshall and Tucker (1993), and the influential report America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages? (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990) have criticized workplaces and schools for still reflecting the pyramidal, autocratic factory model of the early 1900s that Frederick Taylor helped to develop. The literature associated with these critiques suggests high performance workplaces have increased worker productivity, quality of work life, and profit through worker empowerment. See, for example, Xerox's Leadership Through Quality (Marshall & Tucker, 1993, pp. 95-98).

Some case studies support the position that Total Quality Management (TQM) and similar participatory management approaches have helped to transform traditional organizations into "high-performance" places of work and have improved the quality of working life for their employees in the process (Wirth, 1950). Other case studies have provided evidence that many high performance initiatives were sophisticated means to enhance management control (Levine, 1994; Wells, 1987). In these instances, workers experienced an intensified work pace, an increased number of duties, and poorer working conditions. In addition, their participation in decision making resulted in "a relocated tool tray, a larger oil drum, and a top for a garbage can" rather than "decisions involving planning, product design, and the organization of work" (Levine, 1994, p. 45). Educational reformers in general, and youth apprenticeship advocates in particular need to acknowledge the variance among companies that identify themselves as high performance organizations and address the conflict of transforming the theory of empowerment into practice through public discourse.

Similarly, Bailey (1993) and later Kinchloe (1995) suggested that because U.S. employers still rely predominantly on a "Tayloristic" approach to work, very few places of employment emphasize learning. What training employers do provide, they contend, goes to older workers with higher levels of education. As a result, their respective texts raise the issue that there could be a conflict between the apprentice as worker and the apprentice as learner.

Failure to Acknowledge Labor Market Realities

In the discussion of present and future work organizations, many educational reformers contend that high technology dictates that future workers need to have higher skills to be successful in the world of work. Absent in much of this discussion has been the extent to which technology has also deskill ed work (Feenberg, 1989; Thompson, 1985). Braddock and Slavin (1993) noted that the relationship between where youth apprentice in 1992 is not only captured by high-skilled jobs but also systematically analyzed the occupational outlook for low and high skilled work. Levine (1994) pointed out that the five most highly-skilled occupations, will only employ 6.1 percent of workers by the turn of the century. Meanwhile, such occupations as cooks, waiters, custodians, security guards, and other relatively low skill occupations will experience the greatest numerical growth between 1984 and 2000, at which time these jobs will employ 16.8 percent of the workforce. (p. 36).

School-to-work efforts, and youth apprenticeship in particular, have the potential to meet the needs of students in several respects. First, they can increase the current discourse on educational reform. Similar to Dewey's position on vocational education, it is this author's position that school-to-work initiatives, such as youth apprenticeship, have the potential for serving as vehicles for needed educational reform and democratic renewal. However, again like Dewey, there is also fear that leading advocates of this reform movement, who seem to hold the instrumental perspective, will develop school-to-work transition programs as training centers for existing corporate interests. While reform efforts should give consideration to the needs of industry, in fact they must if they are to become more prevalent; school-to-work initiatives should be as concerned with meeting the needs of students, parents, and communities as they are with meeting the needs of industry.

School-to-work efforts, and youth apprenticeship in particular, have the potential to meet the needs of students in several respects. First, they can increase the likelihood that high school students attain some type of higher education. This is especially true when youth apprentices have the opportunity to articulate their experiences to a post-secondary institution. If students can obtain an associate or even a baccalaureate degree. Youth apprenticeship can provide the impetus to reform educational practices so that schooling becomes more meaningful to students. When students find schooling more meaningful, they are likely to exert more effort and experience greater achievement. Youth apprenticeship might also increase the likelihood that a greater number of young people will experience careers where they find work to be meaningful and profitable. Currently, much work that youth are employed in is misused and fails to provide them with an opportunity for "making it."

Parental perception of youth apprenticeship has been repeatedly identified as a potential obstacle for the development of a comprehensive school-to-work system. Further, there seem to be legitimate parental concerns about such issues as equal educational opportunity, tracking, and training versus education. With continued improvements in becoming less of a miseducative and even a baccalaureate degree. Youth apprenticeship can provide the impetus to reform educational practices so that schooling becomes more meaningful to students. When students find schooling more meaningful, they are likely to exert more effort and experience greater achievement. Youth apprenticeship might also increase the likelihood that a greater number of young people will experience careers where they find work to be meaningful and profitable. Currently, much work that youth are employed in is misused and fails to provide them with an opportunity for "making it.

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Recognizing the possibility for school-to-work initiatives to provide broad social meaning and to assist in transforming society and work organizations to reflect participative, democratic values does not prohibit students from learning about work. However, it does threaten the status quo by refusing to make the interests of students subservient to the interests of employers. The critical perspective holds that work-site learning programs can provide students with an understanding of the realities of life in the job market and avoid becoming training centers for existing corporate interests. To contribute to democracy rather than hinder it, school-to-work initiatives such as youth apprenticeships need to employ a pedagogy that is both concrete and transformative. This can be accomplished through applying theoretical subject matter to problem-solving in a practical context as well as allowing for and encouraging alternative approaches for possible solutions. When students are active participants in such a learning process, they become change agents as well as makers of meaning. Similarly, through exploring broad career clusters, students learn about work in addition to learning how to do work. When youth apprenticeship is practiced as such a pedagogy, students have the opportunity to experience personal and social growth as well as to contribute to social and economic efficiency. If leaders in the school-to-work movement embrace such democratic principles, students will not only deepen their understanding of existing requirements of the world of work, but they will also understand how work
requirements might be altered and work possibilities expanded. The school-to-work movement would then resemble the reform movement that Dewey envisioned.

References


Prussian Education System refers to the system of education established in Prussia as a result of educational reforms in the late 18th and early 19th century, which has had widespread influence since. The Prussian education system was introduced as a basic concept in the late 18th century and was significantly enhanced after Prussia’s defeat in the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars. The Prussian educational reforms inspired other countries and remains important as a biopower in the Foucaultian sense for nation-building.

Charter schools and online education have introduced new school models and educational options to rural communities— but in a limited way. Students in rural America are still far less likely to benefit from school choice than students in urban areas. Philanthropy has a role to play here. Philanthropies have been critical links in the education reform movement, bringing the public and private sectors together and seeding innovations that take root and expand. Just as the Gates, Walton and Broad foundations have spurred faster-paced education reform in urban areas, a philanthropy committed to improvements in rural education could step up and challenge others to find creative solutions to the needs of rural communities. Reaction to the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 has been similar in some respects to the reaction to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. A second factor that has contributed to the youth apprenticeship movement has been the realization that many work experiences available to U.S. youth actually hinder their education. Historically, there has been the perception that work experience of almost any kind is good for youth because it promotes maturity by teaching the work ethic and the value of a dollar (Stern, McMillion, Hopkins, & Stone, 1990).