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## **School's liberating values and Initial VET that incorporates: Work Based Learning: a contradiction?**

**Abstract:** A clear incitation is provided from European organizations, for the development of vocational education and training (VET) programs which adopt the idea of parallel work based learning (WBL) in enterprises. In the present work the role of vocational school within the framework of such programs is analyzed. The question is to what degree the school partner can maintain its pedagogical role and can support the development of liberating values within this partnership. For this purpose relative bibliography is searched and discussed.

Regarding the pedagogical role of school, this study shows that this cannot be fully developed within the framework of the so called 'dual system' as the logic of the labor market prevails, thus hindering the critical approach of social institutions and production structures. However school liberating intent and student preparation for critical re-entry into an examination of everyday life including vocational life can potentially be realized in joint programs when the school adheres to the role of the important partner, that of the coordinator. Some suggestions to facilitate school-company cooperation within the framework of joint programs, conclude this paper.

**Keywords:** School liberating values, Vocational education, work based learning, labor market

### **Introduction**

In the new global economy and knowledge-based societies, vocational education and training (VET) is expected to become a key educational sector that provides students with the required skills and competence to meet demanding labour market needs (UNESCO, 2001). The Bruges Communiqué (2010, p. 4) suggests that "initial and continuing VET share the dual objective of contributing to employability and economic growth and of responding to broader social challenges, in particular that of promoting social cohesion".

A clear incentive is provided by European organizations, for the development of VET programs which adopt the idea of parallel work based learning (WBL) in enterprises. The idea is, that vocational programs are preferable when coupled with

a type of training in the workplace, where this vocational specialization or some of its tasks are practiced. This idea is in general supported by literature; Lave and Wenger (1991) for instance, claim that vocational knowledge appears fundamentally situated in communities of practice, much of it developing through participation. The demand for linkage between school and the labour market for the realization of vocational programs is already part of suggestions and directives of European organizations regarding vocational education and the labour market (Bruges communiqué, 2010).

Among the various types of joint vocational education programs practiced in different countries, apprenticeship is the most common. The term denotes practice in the workplace generally paid for by the employer, for the purpose of obtaining a vocational certificate or qualification after a prearranged period and, after qualification exams. It goes without saying that in this process the employer is not alone. They act within an organized framework elaborated by school systems and work partners (vocational chambers, labour unions). The apprenticeship goes hand in hand with the workplace trainer. The term refers to a workplace employee who is charged with the training of apprentices. In fact in most cases, as Bahl (2013) explains, it is not only one employee: the apprentice while practicing learns from different employees. One can speak about a community of practice in a workplace. In any case the role of the workplace trainer is complicated as he/she exercises this role in conjunction with their work tasks. In such situations equilibrium between the different functions can be difficult. Workplace trainers are in a certain sense “the hidden protagonists” of training (Ostendorf, 2012).

In this paper the pedagogical school role and the pedagogical aspects of WBL in the various forms of joint vocational programs are focused on. It is searched if within these structures and activities the idea of emancipation can be supported and developed. This idea is understood by critical pedagogy as part of social transformation. According to Freire (1968), education is never neutral. It either works as a means of adapting people to a given existing order or it becomes a practice of transformation of the present conditions. This author suggests educational practices in view of freedom for the oppressed population, particularly, for the impoverished population.

Specifically, the research questions are:

- Can school liberating intent and student preparation for critical re-entry into an examination of everyday life including vocational life, be developed in joint programs?
- How can workplace training be coupled with school expertise regarding learning and educating?

Research through literature review is intended to be carried out. Vocational school, labour market, apprenticeship, critical pedagogy were used as key words to initiate the research.

## School's liberating values and Initial VET

The term vocational education is not easy to define as demonstrated by Moodie (2002). This author prefers the definition "Development and application of knowledge and skills for middle level occupations needed by society from time to time" (p. 260) after a thorough analysis and discussion of a series of definitions classified into four types: epistemological, teleological, hierarchical and pragmatic. Vocational education has generally been associated (Hyland, 2011, p. 131) with "less prestigious, workaday activities". It has also been mainly associated with 'preparation for employment'. Thus VET practices have principally been identified with employability discourses that may move students away from critical engagement (Grubb and Lazerson, 2005 as cited in Tur Porres et. al, 2014, p. 275). Current 'skills talk' enhances in a way such visions as they put in danger "rich and deep conceptions of teaching, knowledge and the person"(Johnson, 1998, p. 211). Skills talk tends to suggest, according to Halliday (2010, p. 172) that "vocational practices are somehow cognitively deficient".

Various authors disagree with such visions of VET. According to Whitehead, 1962, cited by Hyland, (2011, p. 130) "there can be no adequate technical education which is not liberal, and no liberal education which is not technical". Pring, 1995, also quoted by Hyland (2011, p. 131) comments"

'Liberal' is contrasted with 'vocational' as if the vocational, properly taught, cannot itself be liberating-a way into those forms of knowledge through which a person is freed from ignorance, and opened to new imaginings, new possibilities; the craftsman who finds aesthetic delight in the object of his craft, the technician who sees the science behind the artifact...

Wrangle (1991, p. 38) claims: "Work does not have to be sublime or spectacular...to be worthwhile. Many relatively mundane jobs can be challenging and varied, and involve standards of logic, efficiency, integrity, judgment and so on". Green 1968, cited by Hyland (2011, p. 132) argues that the "meaningfulness of a task lies not in the work but in the worker" and that "some people may find even cosmic significance in a task that, to others, would seem mean and inconsequential".

Shavit and Muller (2000) cite two different visions of VET. Some view vocational education "as a safety net, which enhances students' chances of finding gainful employment as skilled workers" (idem, p. 29). Others view it as "a mechanism of social reproduction, which diverts working-class students from higher education and the professions" (idem p. 29). The writers having conducted a study in 13 countries around the world conclude that 'diversion' and 'safety net' effects are not mutually exclusive but they are the flip side of the same coin. Safety net and diversion were found to correlate positively. In countries where vocational education is specific and is linked to the labour market organizations, both safety net and diversion tend to be strong. This result supports, among other things, the idea of

the positive effect of dual type systems in youth unemployment. This is a kind of 'emancipating effect' but not enough. According to Tur Porres et al. (2014, p. 280) we have to go beyond the idea that "VET is emancipatory since it promotes social integration through economic empowerment". It is interesting to observe how the idea of emancipation, understood by critical pedagogy as part of social transformation, nowadays "amalgamates with the notion of empowerment" (idem, p. 277).

For Hyland (2006), VET goes along with the idea of development of transferable competencies. "Emphasizing self-esteem and affective objectives is far less dangerous than suggesting that all that matters in education and training is the achievement of narrow, mechanistic performance outcomes" (idem, p. 302). In the case of disaffected youngsters with little experience of success and achievement at school, such 'therapeutic' strategies become absolutely vital, according to this author. Personal resources, as analysed by Di Fabio (2014), are considered protective factors also in the Positive Youth Development perspective (PYD; Kozn et al., 2014), which "focuses on the development of young people's strengths and potential to proactively face the complexity of the postmodern era" (Di Fabio, 2014, p. 195). This potential has to be built chiefly in initial VET for a life-long perspective. As Duarte (2014, p. 217) puts it: "To be life-long means not only to help the individual acquire particular skills for dealing with a particular change at a particular moment", but also, and chiefly "to determine what kind of skills and knowledge ought to be altogether acquired for the life-long development" (idem, p. 218).

It is clear from the above analysis that Vocational Education's scope is far broader than merely teaching and acquiring technical skills. This enables full engagement within the framework of Vocational education to emancipator practices and considerations. The WBL dimension presents nevertheless, its proper characteristics that are considered in the following in relation to the idea of emancipation.

### **Work Based Learning and Critical Pedagogy**

As we have seen in Shavit & Muller (2000), VET when specific and especially when including apprenticeship, can lead to a higher degree of youth employment. Arighi (2013) gives data showing that some years after qualification or graduation, young people having been trained through apprenticeship enjoy a higher degree of employment. But results are not clear-cut. Factors influencing unemployment are multiple and complicated. The dependant variable youth unemployment cannot easily be correlated to VET systems alone. The serious problems of young adults regarding employment cannot be solved by pedagogues alone. They have to, as Eckert and Schmidt (2015, p. 130) express it "be brought back into the political discussion". These authors describe phenomena of social selection in the German dual system claiming that especially those students with low academic profiles are prepared through this system for the "growing sector of working poor" (p. 146). Beicht and

Walden (2014) proceed to a thorough analysis of social origin as a factor of successful placement in apprenticeship in the German dual system. In this system in which the allocation of training places is exclusively in the hands of training firms, social class becomes a determinant firstly because it influences the initial academic level (Higher education entrance qualification, intermediate secondary school leaving certificate or lower secondary school leaving certificate) of the students searching a place in the dual system. This in turn leads to a different placement or to no placement for many of the holders of the lower secondary school leaving certificate. Secondly, young people affiliated to lower classes have, according to the writers (p. 4) “fewer chances of successful placement in initial vocational training, even if controlled for the level of school-leaving certificate”. Besides, according to Arrighi (2013), one cannot speak about youth unemployment in general without relating it to the sector and to the level of education.

Even if the contribution of VET systems by apprenticeship to higher youth employment is accepted this is restricted to one aspect of emancipation which is ‘empowerment’. This contribution albeit not minor is far from justifying an emancipatory potential of apprenticeship. Tanguy (2013), analyzing modern apprenticeship shows that this has shrunk in an efficacy adjustment research to the move of economy and employment: “Today’s prevailing configuration excludes the common conviction of great reformists such as Langevin and Wallon regarding school liberating virtues and school capacity to educate both the worker and the citizen” (idem. p. 9). Besides, as Kergoat and Capdevielle-Mougnibas (2013) highlight, the place given nowadays to the a ‘work culture’ or rather to a worker and employee culture permits control, exercised by work directions that “assures the best conditions of practicing work and citizenship”(idem, p. 7).

VET systems based on apprenticeship lead to an earlier employee selection at around the late-teens or even the mid-teens. This brings to the surface orientation phenomena with regard to social class or to sex. Apprentices are employed nowadays, according to Moreau (2003), from a social environment slightly more advantaged in comparison to the students of a vocational lyceum. Young people from immigrant families and girls in general are almost excluded from this system. They pass through a stricter selection at the beginning of the apprenticeship and when they accomplish it they encounter more difficulties in getting a job. According to Arrighi (2013), apprenticeship has become dynamic in France only to those parts of the youth population who do not have difficulties in general to enter the labour market. He adds that apprenticeship systematically excludes young people who live in slum areas or young people who prepare for a lower prestige vocational degree. This is “at least annoying” claims the author “when speaking about a political action supposed to fight against youth unemployment” (idem, p. 54).

Sex discrimination in the labour market is the result of personal choices and of the employer mentality. Direct offer of work places or offers of places through re-entry programs result in sex discrimination. Adams and Adams (2006) describe

through qualitative research a particular gendered ideology that offers little emancipation potential for those women enrolled in an educational program within the framework of the welfare-to-work program in the Midwest USA. Offer of work places for apprenticeship which in turn reproduces phenomena characterising offer of work places in general, limits the choices of young people. International research has already shown that companies which train young people through apprenticeship direct them in different directions according to sex. Imdorf (2013), for instance, through 27 semi-directive interviews with staff supervisors of small and medium sized companies, in the car repair sector in French-speaking Switzerland, shows that when companies recruit, apprentice sex is one of the criteria leading to an almost total elimination of girls from the sector. The reason as is revealed from the interviews is firstly, to prevent eventual dysfunctions that could, according to their estimation, occur in the company and secondly, to prevent the danger of withdrawal or from failure in the training.

As mentioned above, dual-type systems lead to an earlier employee selection. There are both positive and negative aspects of this 'premature' selection. The first comprise the fact that the labour market sends early signs to young people regarding job needs. Moreover when there is difficulty or rejection during the process of apprentice recruitment, the fact that young people are still around the school systems can potentially provide support in terms of reorientation or better competence development, so that young people find their way around and become eligible in their future apprenticeship research. The non-selection on the other hand illustrates the negative aspect of this early selection process: the non selection is likely to be more traumatic at the age of 15-16 than the same eventuality occurring when seeking employment after the completion of a school-based VET program at the age of 19 plus.

Apprentice socialization is marked by confrontation in the work environment and the forms of knowledge transmission (which are oriented to an inductive method that attributes great value to the practice of technical knowhow) indicate that "in the framework of apprenticeship the workshop prevails over the classroom" (Kergoat, Capdevielle-Mougnibas, 2013, p. 8). These findings show that the margin of school initiatives and impact during apprenticeship programs is rather narrow. It seems that many things are determined by the impact of workplace and labour market reality and that active school participation with the desired liberating and egalitarian ideals, is not present. The findings presented earlier regarding the orientation process during apprentice recruitment, highlight this reality. Besides, with regard to learning, a finding of Cheneval-Armand (2007) supports this idea also. In her research which studied VET students' learning of health risks and accident prevention at work, students tend to overestimate workplace trainer practices and to devalue school teaching.

School margin for initiative seems to be broader in the type of joint programmes with 'alternation' (during their studies in vocational school, students spend several

weeks of training each year in a firm of their sector: they are not employed, they are placed for training after an agreement between the school and the company). However, the characteristics of this system (applied in France, Spain, Italy and other countries) cannot be studied systematically. They are largely based on voluntarism (Agulhon, 2000). Voluntarism on the part of the employers and also voluntarism on the part of VET teachers responsible for such cooperation contracts.

## Discussion

The aforementioned theoretical and empirical contributions indicate that there are serious reasons to doubt the liberating effect of WBL. There are nevertheless aspects of WBL that support the possibility of an emancipator potential. There is no better source for this than John Dewey, the “philosopher par excellence of vocational education” (Hyland, 2011, p. 130) who spoke about the false oppositions of “labour and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind” (Dewey, 1966, p. 301). He also reminds vocational teachers that the only adequate occupational training is that through occupation. Education through the occupations means an education that engages the intellect in reflection upon actual practical activity, the shared practices of a community. Returning to Freire (1968) the proposition to reconsider the traditional models of education framed by a dominant teacher-student relationship is evident. He proposes ‘liberatory education’ as an educational practice that aims at overcoming oppressive conditions. It can be assumed that the entire field of VET, when open to society and to work realities, offers potentially the conditions for such educational practices.

Moreover it cannot be assumed that school alone can accomplish the pedagogical objectives discussed in the previous paragraphs. For instance, questioning social classes and realizing limitations due to social class provenance could become more serious and essential if the workplace realities are within the sphere of everyday adolescent life. Besides, the development of some transferable competencies could be easier when workplace reality provides opportunities that are properly exploited. Vickerstaff’s (2007) research on young people who had qualified through apprenticeship systems indicated the valuable socialising and developmental nature of this form of vocational training. Thus, therapeutic education previously analysed becomes significant in the new work-based learning (WBL) initiatives which have been central to much recent VET reform: “newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity” (Lave and Wenger, 2002, cited by Hyland, 2006, p. 304) and thus it could be claimed that WBL-in addition to fostering the occupational knowledge and skills that make up ‘economic’ capital-can, through workplace practice, also facilitate the development of the valuable ‘social’ capital. The problem is in what way this fruitful workplace experience could lead

to self development and to the development of abilities having a value beyond the workplace where it was obtained.

The solution to the problem depends first on the quality of WBL. The latter has complied in recent years with the Competence Based Learning directives but field trainers have in fact various interpretations of the skills and competences described in the programs and the margin of initiatives is great. As shown by field research (James and Mulcahy, 2006) competence based standards can serve as guidelines but not as prescriptions. A new model emerges, according to these writers, put into practice in a specific case in their research, which emphasises “the importance of context and process (work context, cultural context, social context, learning processes, research processes, for example) over outcomes, skills and tasks” (James and Mulcahy, 2006, p. 528). However, the problem cannot be solved if the experiences described in the above paragraph do not become systematically the object of retrospection and comparison. School could be the ideal place for it as it is situated outside the workplace and students who are apprentices in different workplaces can intermix. This thesis is also supported by vocational didactics (Pastré et al., 2006). It is claimed by these authors that VET cannot be complete by only providing expertise in one special situation but that should cover a set of possible situations for the same problem, even if the practitioner has little chance of ever coming across them. In this way there could be a transformation of the ‘working field’ to a ‘conceptual field’ and a creation of degrees of liberty as opposed to the “submission to the reality that characterises learning on the spot” (idem, p. 189). Simulations, according to the writers, can largely help in this direction by organizing learning in a systematic way. Special training of VET teachers on these issues is also considered necessary.

This means that it is considered neither proper nor necessary, that schools restrict themselves to a secondary partner in the joint programmes but should maintain their proper role within the framework of school-enterprise programmes. On the other hand pedagogical thought should not consider that liberating content is reserved merely to school attendance. The very act of learning at work may in itself, present liberating characteristics. The theme is inevitably followed by the question concerning cooperation: how do these agents (especially VET teachers and VET trainers) cooperate regarding the very essence of their project which is educating and providing qualifications to young students? If the need for cooperation is felt by all sides it can be put into practice by different means and tools. ICT collaborative platforms for instance could largely help since VET teachers and trainers work in different and sometimes remote places (schools, companies etc). Such ICT platforms could also serve as educational tools within the framework of VET teacher preparation and in VET trainers’ training. Trainee VET teachers and VET trainers will become acquainted, by simulations and learning scenarios in the platform, with WBL characteristics and with possible teacher-trainer interaction for the purpose of effective joint programs realization which both educate and prepare for work.

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