

Vocational Education in Quebec

The status of vocational education in Quebec, especially the English-speaking sector, is the subject of the following three papers. The authors present some of the background issues, the developments of the recent past, the myths about vocational education, and some of the reforms initiated by the Quebec Ministry of Education.

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Obstacles and Opportunities for Vocational Education in Quebec

Abstract

The importance of vocational education on both the individual level (satisfaction, employment, and quality of life) and the societal level (productivity and economic growth) is reviewed, and the advocacy of vocational education programs by the ministère de l'Éducation du Québec is explained in the context of concern for the future of children and young people in Quebec. It is argued that school counsellors may no longer rely on outdated biases against vocational education, and should encourage students to make their own wise academic and career choices.

Résumé

L'auteur analyse l'importance de la formation professionnelle au niveau individuel (satisfaction, emploi et qualité de vie) et au niveau sociétal (productivité et croissance économique) tandis qu'elle explique la défense des programmes de la formation professionnelle par le ministère de l'Éducation du Québec par rapport aux préoccupations soulevées par l'avenir des enfants et des jeunes du Québec. L'auteur soutient que les conseillers scolaires doivent se débarrasser de leurs préjugés à l'égard de la formation professionnelle et inciter leurs étudiants à opérer leurs propres choix de carrière.

The first graduating class of the twenty-first century is in grade three today. Its members are already old enough to read, old enough to show exceptional talent, and old enough to be experiencing difficulty in school. Most educators subconsciously realize this, but probably do not give it much thought, since they expect tomorrow to be much like today and much like their own yesterdays. Many have a high level of education and fairly stable employment. Those at the front end or middle of the baby boom also have fairly secure prospects for old age, as well as comfortable pension plans. And even when they do think about the next century, it probably does not mean much more than a catchy idea some clever advertiser might translate into a script for a commercial. For many educators, the twenty-first century is still just an abstract idea.

A platitude lies behind this notion as well: the future remains unforeseeable. Who could have predicted the fall of Eastern bloc communism even ten years ago, the rise of Islam as a doctrine as powerful as any political ideology, or even our Western unease about determining the right line of behaviour towards Iraq or the conflict in Bosnia? Given these uncertainties, how can educators complacently assume their roles as guides and counsellors to children and young people who are headed for places and times that are likely to be quite different from their own? In many cases, educators typically continue to do as they have always done, namely, to believe what they have always believed and to speak more often of the students of the past than of the adults of the future.

Perhaps the future should be left to futurists, whether economists or science-fiction writers, and those involved in young people's education should continue to do as they have been doing. Not so – as those same young people would say. This is **not** good enough. It is **not** good enough for the young people whose education and guidance are entrusted to the educational community, and **not** good enough for educators as life-long learners and teachers.

No matter how difficult, educators must try to sift through what they know, what they see, what they read, and what they themselves have experienced, in an effort to make sense of the trends around them, and to decide which ones are trivial or passing fads and which signal momentous changes in how today's children and young people will live out their lives as adults. Having done that, they must re-examine their values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices, and determine which still hold and which need to be revised if they are to be wise, effective teachers and counsellors.

The educational community needs to reflect on its own daily practices and on the beliefs underlying the choice of certain kinds of actions over others. The intent of this article is to take a careful, critical look at one of the options young people have as they near the end of their

secondary school career: the opportunity of entering secondary school vocational education. It is hoped that as a result of this close look, educators will gain a slightly different view of secondary school vocational education. The approach taken here will not be a sales pitch or a marketing exercise, but will instead emphasize educators' common ability to reflect on their practices, and their willingness to see and acknowledge change around them.

Before explaining why a reform in vocational education was necessary and what the ministère de l'Éducation has been doing to implement this reform, first consider the following. Many of today's educators grew up in an extraordinarily affluent post-war economy. They did not experience the profound despair and hardship of the Depression years and the horrors of World War II lived by their parents. This generation has been exceptionally sheltered, raised, as it was, with a firm belief in the possibility of increasing its standard of living and with dreams of a limitless future. In such a context, although education was considered an important tool for personal, social, and economic success, just as it is today, it was also often viewed as a personal odyssey. Young people then made choices on the basis of their aptitudes and opportunities, just as young people do today, but they also relied a great deal on what "felt good," to borrow an expression from the sixties.

What is fairly clear today is that their freedom to "do their own thing" was in large part ensured by the general well-being and affluence of the society in which they lived – the very society that introduced medicare, free college-level education, and no-fault car insurance.

This must be understood before we can begin to look at what it means to say that the skills level of our work force must be raised in order to compete in the global economy. We cannot simply reject the evidence that economies such as ours, where labour and production costs are high – essentially because we maintain a relatively high standard of living – require highly skilled workers in order to preserve a competitive advantage over other economies whose labour and production costs are low – essentially because those who live in such economies do not live as well as we do. Market competitiveness will not go away merely because we do not like it. Preparing young people without giving consideration to the world in which they will have to live, and find and maintain jobs to support their families, is not responsible education.

Concerns about the skills level of the work force are neither theoretical nor inappropriate in the act of educating young people. Educators are no less child-centred because they take into account the future needs of the marketplace. On the contrary, such concerns demonstrate the commitment to guaranteeing that the entitlements now taken for granted will be there for future generations, that the standard of living

now enjoyed will be maintained, and that there will be the means to undo some of society's errors, such as cleaning up the rivers and replanting the forests.

In statistics obtained through the Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS), Employment and Immigration Canada states that of all the jobs created between 1989 and the end of the century, nearly two thirds or 62.9 percent will require at least 12 years of education and training, and nearly 40 percent will require more than 16 years of training. It also affirms that the work force of 1986 was made up of workers of whom nearly half (46.7%) did not finish high school. As of 1986, the average dropout between 25 and 44 years of age was earning 25% less than his or her classmates who had finished high school (Government of Canada, 1989).

Clearly then, the very first priority of the educational community must be to increase the number of students who graduate from high school. This is, of course, the aim of the current plan of action of the ministère de l'Éducation. But as educators do their part to encourage students to graduate, it is important that they bear in mind that a vocational education diploma is a secondary school diploma, one which students can earn either after obtaining a general education diploma or after Secondary IV.

It is important to understand that ensuring the availability of a highly skilled work force does not mean a reduction in levels of general education. In fact, universities must continue to play a part through the quality of their faculties, especially their professional ones, and through the value of the research they carry out. Industry as well must contribute and develop new models of partnership for the ongoing training and development of the men and women employed there and for the retraining of employees whose jobs become obsolete. *Collèges enseignement general et professionnel* (CEGEPs) also play an essential role through the quality of the technical and professional programs they offer. It is important that schools at the secondary level also play a part.

Years ago, secondary school vocational education was a path for students in difficulty – one more often chosen **for them** than one they chose **for themselves** from a range of options. The entire effort of the Ministère over the last six years has been aimed at changing that view and making vocational education a valued and logical choice – a choice that leads somewhere. More and more students are, for example, pursuing vocational programs in CEGEP after having completed one at the secondary level. Vocational education today can lead to further studies as well as immediate employment.

Furthermore, the bias that has persisted against proposing vocational education as an option to students who had other choices has somehow affected even those who may not have had many choices. How else can one explain the 36% dropout rate? Surely, of that number, only a very small fraction are truly incapable of achieving more after eleven or twelve years in school, and surely, of that number, a great many would be leading better lives if they had acquired marketable skills.

This is not to suggest that secondary school vocational education is a panacea for all problems in education. What is being asserted is that it is valid education, that it does offer employment opportunities, that it can lead to further studies and that it has not been presented to young people often enough as a sound and realistic choice for them – not others – to make.

In the past six years, the Ministère has raised admission requirements and rewritten vocational education programs, often in collaboration with industry. It has provided funding for new equipment and new workshops. It has developed cooperative education models. It has concentrated options in specialized centres and retrained teachers, all in an effort to create new choices for young people – choices which offer solid prospects for employment and well-being.

Yet, in the English sector, it often seems that more attention is focused on ways of dealing with special-needs students than on student success in new options. In part, this may be because the vocational programs that are offered in English tend to be the traditional ones, not the new exciting programs that have been developed. It is difficult, however, to supply new options when there is little or no demand for them, and educators and counsellors should consider the reasons for this.

It would appear that underlying this issue is a debate about the relative merits or status of knowledge versus skills. It sometimes seems as if high status is attributed to academic knowledge and low status to skills, particularly physical or manual ones. Such a dichotomy does not make much sense, of course, if one thinks of neurosurgeons or pianists – people expected to have both a high level of knowledge and a high level of skills.

Many of the skills that will probably be required for the highly skilled work force of the future also depend on a sound knowledge base, which is why the Ministère has raised entry standards for vocational education. It is fairly certain that whatever the ultimate level of education a person attains, whether secondary school, CEGEP, or university, there will always be the need to balance knowledge and skills. A skilled labour force in industry is not the army of drones engaged in mindless, repetitive tasks as evoked in the Charlie Chaplin movie, *Modern Times*. Ma-

chines do that now. What is required is a work force made up of people who can think, solve problems, communicate, work well, and learn and relearn techniques. That is the goal of both vocational and academic education.

Another bias may stem from perceptions of earning power. There is a general perception that studying social sciences in CEGEP will guarantee a higher income than studying to earn a vocational education diploma. The problem is that it is simply not true. There was a time when, for example, a liberal arts degree afforded entry into all kinds of fields, from banking to public relations. However, that is less and less the case at a time when employers are as concerned with the specific skills that their employees bring to tasks as they are with their level of general education. Earning power is now determined by both level of knowledge and degree of skills attainment. For example, the earning power of an industrial mechanic, a trade requiring a secondary-level diploma and an apprenticeship, ranges from \$20,000 to \$50,000 – exactly the same as that of the average architect.

The purpose here has not been to review every possible reason for the fact that more young people are not being attracted to vocational education programs. What has been intended is to encourage educators to rethink their beliefs in the light of recent historic and socioeconomic changes and in the light of a future that cannot be foretold but can perhaps be anticipated. It is hoped that the educational community will focus its knowledge and expertise on providing further insight into the issues raised here. This collective effort can only have a positive impact on our ability to guide and support young people wisely and effectively.

NOTE

This paper was adapted from opening remarks made at *Symposium II: Vocational Education Career Paths: Obstacles and Opportunities* at Le Nouvel Hôtel, Montreal, January 22, 1993

REFERENCE

Government of Canada, Employment and Immigration Canada. (March 1989). *Adjusting to Win: Report of the Advisory Council on Adjustment*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, p. 24.

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