

Vocational Education and Training: Discourse, Systems, and Practices of VET in Rural Tasmania and Nova Scotia

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Abstract

In this article we offer a comparative analysis of vocational education and training (VET) in two rural regional locations by situating the pragmatic problem of advising rural students against the backdrop of differently structured market-oriented vocational education systems in Canada and Australia, respectively. Each of these jurisdictions offers a particular vision of the place of VET in the context of compulsory education. In rural/regional Canada and Australia, we argue, the socio-material situation within which students live can provide what Bourdieu called “coherent and convenient” educational

choices for students to challenge educators to create the conditions for an engaging and non-binary (academic-vocational) approach to compulsory schooling. We conclude, given the constantly changing nature of contemporary occupational opportunities and labour markets, that the goals of the new vocationalism will only be achieved in rural areas through challenging programming that focuses on capabilities, change, and multiple integrated literacies that span and expand the academic-vocational binary.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), academic-vocational binary, rural/regional, compulsory schooling

Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse comparative des systèmes d'enseignement et formation professionnels (EFP) dans deux régions rurales, en situant concrètement le problème lorsqu'il s'agit de conseiller les étudiants des milieux ruraux en contexte de systèmes de formation professionnelle orientés vers le marché, et structurés différemment au Canada et en Australie, respectivement. Chacun de ces systèmes éducatifs offre une vision particulière de la place de l'EFP en contexte d'éducation obligatoire. Au Canada et en Australie, nous soutenons que la situation socioéconomique dans laquelle vivent les étudiants en milieu rural peut les amener à faire un choix éducatif que Bourdieu appelle « logique et pratique », ce qui met au défi les éducateurs de créer les conditions d'une approche attrayante et non binaire (universitaire/professionnelle) de l'éducation obligatoire. Étant donné la nature en constante évolution des opportunités de travail et des marchés contemporains, nous concluons que les buts des nouvelles formations professionnelles ne seront atteints, en milieu rural, qu'à travers des programmes stimulants axés sur les capacités, le changement, et de multiples compétences intégrées qui traversent et élargissent la formation universitaire/professionnelle.

Mots-clés : enseignement et formation professionnels (EFP), dualisme des formations universitaire et professionnelle, rural/région, éducation obligatoire

Introduction: Methodology and James's Question

Binary educational models that juxtapose vocational training and academic courses as largely separate programs have been normal in many national, state, and provincial education systems. In her recent survey of vocational education in Canada, Allison Taylor (2015) compares models of vocational education that include the Swedish system, integrating vocational and academic education; the German system, which maintains two equally valued tracks; and the UK/Canadian model, which is marked by strong academic-vocational separation and lower status for vocational education. A recent analysis has found that despite Canada's highly decentralized education system, the stigmatization and devaluation of vocational education is consistent across the country (Arnold, Wheelahan, Moodie, Beaulieu, & Taylor-Cline, 2018).

We begin by pointing to the way that the academic-vocational binary is differently positioned in Australia and Canada by analyzing the particular cases of Nova Scotia and Tasmania, two jurisdictions that are considered economically and geographically "marginal" within their respective national contexts. Following critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001), we are interested here in analyzing how contemporary vocational education (VET) discourse operates to present a particular (neo-liberal) ideological picture of the world and those who operate within it.

In the UK/Canadian model, and in other market-driven systems such as Australia and the United States, there is a persistent discourse surrounding streaming vs. the relative flexibility of these educational tracks (Down, Smyth, & Robinson, 2017; Lehmann, 2013; Livingstone, 1999, 2016; Taylor, 2015). This in turn has led to various investigations of programs that seek to expand the participation of "non-traditional" students in higher education (Ames, Wintre, Pancer, Pratt, & Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2014; Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016; Gale & Parker, 2014; Lehmann, 2013; van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, and Meijer, 2018), as well as considerable research into the lived realities of students (Corbett, 2007; Lehmann, 2013, 2014; Taylor, 2008; Willis, 1977). We examine both academic texts relating to vocational education and key policy documents that examine the emergence of what is called the "new vocationalism" in Australia and in Canada.

Both of us grew up in rural/regional communities where the academic-vocational binary has inflected understandings of what constitutes an appropriate education for particularly positioned youth. We were both raised to expect working-class jobs. Following

vocational training, Zach worked as a plumber's apprentice for a year before returning to university as a mature student. We met in a teacher education class at an Eastern Canadian university and decided to examine the distinct, but not entirely different, discourse around VET to investigate how work-oriented students are constructed as educational subjects, made present in curriculum, and constructed as future workers in two rural/regional contexts.

To support our discourse analysis, we develop our argument by considering a particular student that Zach encountered in a rural high school in Nova Scotia who posed a familiar question. The student (we call him James) clomped into class, as he did every day, with his untied, mud-caked work boots and signature plaid coat. James's look would have blended seamlessly into any Canadian construction site. The lesson that day was about the last stand of the Spartans and their Greek allies at Thermopylae. Animated by his devotion to the Classics and ancient military history, Zach worked to impart his love of history. When he came across James's open disinterest, Zach asked how the lad was doing that day and why he was disengaged. James replied, "Why do I gotta' know what a bunch of old Greek fellers did thousands of years ago? I just wanna' go to work." Predictably, Zach rattled off a platitude about historical awareness and the links between Greek history and modern society.

Zach realized, after he left this public school classroom and returned for a last semester of his Bachelor of Education study, that James's question was not only valid, but that there was no coherent and convincing answer in current education systems. When he met Zach, Mike had just returned from a three-year sojourn in Australia, where vocational education was much more prominent in rural and regional areas, but where the same academic-vocational tensions and hierarchical binaries described by Alison Taylor seemed to animate the character of an integrated and inclusive, yet highly segregated form of secondary schooling in Tasmania. Furthermore, this binary academic-vocational gulf and the language used to describe and regulate it seemed to take on a particular character in rural locations in both national contexts. By comparing current global policy trends and relating them to the examples of Canadian and Australian vocational education, our objective is to interrogate the underlying assumptions animating current discourse and how structural apparatuses enhance or limit student attainment. We seek to challenge educational policy makers and educators to create a responsive and intellectually challenging school experience for future global citizens that expands capabilities and opens up opportunities

rather than shutting them down. In other words, we want to explore, through critical narrative inquiry, how we might respond to James.

We do this theoretically by offering an analysis of neo-liberalism and the dominance of human capital theory, which we argue tends to reinforce the academic-vocational binary rather than transcend it. Drawing on two rural/regional contexts in Australia and in Canada, we then go on to suggest that the idea of the new vocationalism, which seeks to overcome this binary, will benefit from the theoretical insights of Amartya Sen in his articulation of the capabilities approach. We do not, however, analyze or problematize the way that rurality is increasingly conflated with vocationalism (Corbett & Baeck, 2016; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015), or how in rural parts of both North America and Australia there have been interesting developments in vocational education relating to community and regional development (Douglas, Kilpatrick, Barnes, Alderson, & Flittner, 2018; Hadley, 2018; Schafft, 2016).

Vocational Education and Neo-Liberal Discourse

We begin with an analysis of ideas and trends that form what we see as the ideological animus of neo-liberalism as a form of global socio-politico-economic organization (Hill & Kumar, 2008; Foucault, 2010; Lakes & Carter, 2011; Slater, 2015). Down, Smyth, and Robinson (2017) posit that, “in essence, neoliberalism is wedded to the idea that the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social and economic decisions” (p. 3). By this logic, with the invisible hand of market forces at play every day in our lives, humans are driven by market competition to become competitive actors themselves. “Competitiveness in this new economy,” writes Alison Taylor (2015), “is seen as tied to human capital skills, innovation, and technology” (p. 22).

These ideas of competition and human capital (Becker, 2009) are taken mostly as fact in contemporary schooling discourse and can manifest in the rather innocuous comments teachers relay to their students regarding the worth of their education. For instance, when teachers suggest that their students’ main purpose is to get good grades in order to be competitive for job searches and/or post-secondary education applications, they reinforce overt competition embedded in human capital theory. In most educational policy discussions, curriculum reform, and in much public discourse, education is principally

construed as a means to an end, which is gainful employment and an individualized personal and economic independence/freedom. Additionally, educational subjects are reduced to their measured performance, becoming, in an important sense, data points contributing to competition and comparison as individual, communities, regions, and nations (Corbett, 2008; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2015; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Sellar & Lingard, 2014).

Neo-liberalism has successfully permeated economic as well as educational discourses shaping how policy makers and politicians approach education policy. “The neoliberal project,” through the use of ideas like human capital theory, “has succeeded in redefining education as job preparation” (Lipman, 2004, as cited in Down et al., 2017, p. 4). Subsequently, current vocational education trends address the ideologically driven allegation that today’s youth are ill-prepared for the rigors and demands of the “knowledge-based economy” (Livingstone, 2016; Taylor 2015, p. 22–23). The argument, typically constructed as an employment-skills gap, contends that without workplace skills and knowledge, students are poorly served by the current education model. The neo-liberal program is founded on notions of competition between individuals, groups, regions, and nations. In a competitive environment it is not structures of power or established resource distribution patterns that matter, it is the choices made by individuals. Individuals choose educational options and careers as though from a menu. The skills-employment gap argument concludes that some (if not most) education systems are insufficiently skills-oriented and overly focused on academics (or the wrong kinds of academics—i.e., the arts, social sciences, and humanities), which results in inappropriate study choices (Coates, 2015; Schleicher, 2012).

Responsibilization, Choice, and Skills

Human capital theory necessarily places responsibility for socio-economic success in life on individual agents, reinforcing a choice-oriented “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality as a recent admonition of Atlantic Canada’s economic fortunes argues (Savoie, 2017), echoing contemporary economic, social, and economic policy documents from the region (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014, 2015, 2018). Tom Karmel sums up the general view of neo-liberal human capital theory well, stating that “education and training are seen as an investment in an individual’s productive capacity, and are motivated by an

expectation of a return on that investment. That is, an individual invests the cost of tuition and his or her time on the basis that he or she will end up with a better job” (as cited in Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 22). To discern the mobilization of human capital discourse in vocation education requires an understanding of the idea of “skills.”

The term “skills” is widely situated as the key to developing job-ready workers, yet the very term itself is often poorly defined, and moreover, makes assumptions as to what the ideal future worker should be. Skills are essential to the neo-liberal discourse, which assumes a considerable measure of workforce stability as well as an implicit commitment to providing labour for established capital. Neo-liberalism also thrives on creating a crisis narrative, reaping the benefits from what Naomi Klein (2008) calls a “shock doctrine” predicated on a teleology of inevitability which holds that the only way out of challenging economic circumstances is to upskill (Down et al., p. 4). In turn, the national trajectory toward success works by and through the development of skills in order to increase international economic competitiveness (Taylor 2016, p. 47). The neo-liberal subject is not free, however, to simply choose what skills they deem important as individuals, but instead, must be aptly matched to skills that are “realistic” in terms of their school-tested personal capacities, and which will result in future employment. Policy discourse, and in turn actualized educational policy, argues Taylor (2016), “now aims to produce a better match between youth skills and actual labour market requirements rather than simply more skilled graduates” (p. 49).

In this context, student “choices” for educational and employment futures are constrained so as to serve the national economic interests concurrently with individual economic futures. In other words, skills-matching discourse assumes an imagined menu of accessible opportunity. Louise Berlant (2011) cryptically calls this a “cruel optimism” that pays lip service to imagined opportunity, goading students to follow their dreams and passions while eliding the actual options available to situated individuals. Alternatively, for marginalized youth, the encouragement is all too realistic, and options are framed in terms of tightly organized vocational career paths, virtually from grade school. This approach is common in relatively low SES rural/regional settings (Corbett & Baeck, 2016; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Down et al., 2017; Theobald, 1996).

In response to the hegemonic and taken-for-granted ideas perpetuated by human capital theory, school curricula have become frameworks for thought and action regarding how best to equip students with skills, drifting toward a conflation of learning and

earning, which Singh and Harreveld (2014) term “l’earning.” An analysis of some of the key elements of vocationally oriented curricula illustrate the ideological biases present in school-based outcomes. What this also illustrates is how James’s question about the usefulness of academics for students like him is effectively reinforced not only by his rural, working class culture and the failure of schools to productively incorporate multiple forms of vernacular knowledge (Corbett, 2004; Roberts, 2019; Theobald, 1996), but also by the neo-liberal framing of education as job preparation.

Vocational Infusion of the School Curriculum in Rural/Regional Geographies

Curriculum outcomes associated with various VET courses in secondary schools essentially construct a future worker that seamlessly fits the mold of the ideal neo-liberal “skilled” worker (Taylor, 2005). Contemporary curriculum documents, both in Canada and Australia, now feature the omnipresence of “skills” in current vocational discourse. We focus here on two particular contexts, the Canadian province of Nova Scotia and the Australian state of Tasmania. We compare these two jurisdictions because both represent “problem geographies” for the neo-liberal nation state. Both jurisdictions have highly dispersed (rural) populations and both are considered to be educational laggards within their own national contexts, although the evidence to support this conclusion is both uneven and questionable (Corbett, 2014). In both jurisdictions the central education policy concern is not so much structured in terms of academic excellence, citizenship, inclusion, equity, or other possible framing language; economic functionality, efficiency, and employment are instead key. Chronic problems of regional underdevelopment are constituted as fundamentally individualized educational problems in key research reports (Eslake, 2016; Government of Nova Scotia, 2014, 2018; Savoie, 2010, 2017). For instance, in the Nova Scotia *Public School Programs* framing document, the language is clear:

The primary mandate of the public school system in Nova Scotia is to provide education programs and services for students to enable them to develop their potential and acquire the knowledge, *skills* and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and to a prosperous and sustainable economy [emphases added]. (Government of Nova Scotia, 2013, p. 3)

For Nova Scotian students and educators alike, the message seems to be “you are here to become employable.” This, we think, is overt human capital discourse in a particularly raw form, which situates James’s question in broader system ideology.

Nova Scotia, like all Canadian provinces and territories, has jurisdiction over its education, including teacher education, teacher certification, curriculum, and testing. Tasmanian education operates within a national curriculum and testing framework. Through its *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)*, the Australian Commonwealth (federal) government offers a broad national mission statement for grade levels 7–10, in which the main focus of curriculum is to “prepare students for civic, social and economic [emphasis added] participation” (ACARA, n.d.). In contrast with Canada, Australia has moved toward a more centralized national curriculum, although not all states have embraced it with equal enthusiasm, or indeed in a standard way. Yet, much discourse around secondary and tertiary education in Australia is focused on education/career “pathways” or other forms of linear career trajectories that support students moving smoothly between education and work. Tasmania has developed a comprehensive suite of online career development offerings that are now rolled out to students from K–12 (Government of Tasmania, 2018). The new Year 10 course outlined in the Australian national curriculum entitled “Work Studies 10” seems to both reinforce and call critical attention to the neo-liberal human capital discourse.

Australian industries and enterprises face unprecedented global competition and pressure for increased productivity. This, in turn, contributes to an unpredictable work future for young people, where routine job opportunities are limited, and outsourcing, contract work and flexible work arrangements are the norm. School leavers can no longer anticipate a single job or single-track career for a lifetime and will be encountering jobs which currently do not exist. (ACARA n.d.)

The outline that ACARA offers for Work Studies 10 identifies significant challenges for individuals in a globalized neo-liberal economy, foregrounding a race to the bottom regarding jobs and wages (Taylor 2015, pp. 23–24). The logic that justifies work preparation as a means to the end of economic stability leaves little room for other reasons to work and takes on a particularly desperate tone in national subregions like Nova Scotia and Tasmania that are considered to be underperforming both educationally and economically. In such contexts, alternative reasons to work other than economic gain can

seem ludicrous or even irresponsible. The result is a regional imaginary that simultaneously positions academic education as inappropriate for students like James, while maintaining the academic-vocational binary hierarchy.

This neo-liberal curricular approach seems to imply that economic gain is the only reason to work, something James knows only too well. Work Studies 10 outcomes aim to make students aware of the “emerging approaches to work and the implications these have for workers to be flexible, proactive and responsive” (ACARA, n.d.). The onus is on the VET student to remain flexible, docile, mobile, and open to changes in the workplace. The logic of the Work Studies outcome supports the creation of deployable young workers ready to please their employers. Nowhere in the Work Studies outcomes is there a focus on the value of creativity, labour rights, or unionization for instance. Nor is there any emphasis on the purpose of work that focuses on craft, the joy and wisdom associated with making (Ingold, 2013) or the older idea of craft (Langlands, 2018; Sennett, 2008).

In their analysis of VET internationally, Gerhard Bosch and Jean Charest argue that VET differs significantly from country to country based on various factors that influence perceptions of vocational education. The most distinct dichotomy relates to prevailing national attitudes about whether a holder of a VET qualification is either a highly skilled, flexible, and educated work-ready individual, or a low-achieving, over-specialized worker (Bosch & Charest, 2009, p. 1). Key to these different perceptions is how the labour market interacts with, and rewards, vocationally trained participants. The results across different national labour markets vary and the lifetime economic payoff for individuals who undertake vocational and academic forms of education diverges from country to country (Hanushek, Schwerdt, Woessmann, & Zhang, 2017). At the same time, the globalized promotional efforts of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) refocus national education systems on positive promotion of VET education, which is reframed through the language of “skills” for “21st-century learning” (Schleicher, 2012). “VET certainly enjoys higher esteem in countries in which it opens up access to well-paid jobs with complex tasks and good career opportunities,” contend Bosch and Charest (2009), as opposed to countries that remunerate vocationally trained workers poorly (p. 1).

The nature of VET training itself, however, is changing. With a global push for more general education that either transcends or at least problematizes the academic-vocational binary, post-secondary VET curriculum has tended toward becoming more

demanding. At the same time, general secondary education certificates have become the lowest level of achievement labour markets will accept from participants (Bosch & Charest, 2009, p. 8). Instead of the traditional bifurcation of academic and vocational routes, there is a movement toward what is called a hybrid, non-binary “new vocationalism” (Bosch & Charest, 2009, p. 9; Hodgkinson, 1991). The general trend moved VET into the realm of tertiary education, yet, vocational education takes different forms depending on myriad factors at play in particular national milieus. For the purposes of comparison, we undertake an analysis of the Australian and Canadian models of VET.

Pathways, Steering, and Regulation: Australian VET Education

The Australian VET system claims to address industry needs by taking advantage of government deregulation. Brian Knight and Peter Mlotkowski (2009), reporting through the (Australian) National Centre for Vocational Education, write that vocational education is meant to “provide [students] with the knowledge and skills they require to...enter the workforce for the first time, reenter the workforce after absences, train or retrain for a new job, [and/or to] upgrade their skills” (p. 10). Australian VET institutions may be either public or private and may operate either as a senior secondary certificate-oriented school or a place of higher education (p. 10).

Australian VET institutions are decentralized, and states and territories have considerable autonomy over the governance of educational institutions; however, they must follow national guidelines in order to receive federal funding. The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) sets out the regulations and standards for compliance with national goals for VET (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 11). Technical and further education (TAFE) providers receive the lion’s share of government funding for VET in Australia, ranging from apprenticeship support centres to full-fledged training providers known as registered training organizations, or RTOs (p. 11). Other providers, such as private VET schools, private career colleges, and informal (unaccredited) training programs supplement and enrich a significantly diverse VET environment in Australia (p. 11). Australia has used broad national oversight and planning, combined with market forces and

relatively decentralized roll-out mechanisms, to create a system of significant choice and freedom for vocational education students.

While choice is one of the main features of the nationally organized VET system, Australia has followed England in a movement toward centralization and nationalization of educational governance, national curriculum, national program accreditation, and quality-control frameworks for certification and curriculum standardization. Prior to the formation of a national regulatory body, VET credentials in Australia were awarded and recognized by the state or territory that trained the vocational students only, leading to mobility problems for interstate workers (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 27). On the surface, VET in Australia appears as a diverse, cohesive system that maximizes individual freedom of choice, yet the “national” program imagined by Australian policy makers is still very much unrealized (as arguably is the national school curriculum).

Increased deregulation and industry fragmentation have not created the imagined efficiencies or quality, which has led states and territories to work independently to create meaningful educational experiences for students, especially in government schools. In 1996 Australia undertook a number of reforms to the national VET system, which led to increased deregulation (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 28). The existing guidelines most affected by deregulation were those of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The AQF’s aim is to create sequential levels of qualifications, skills, and competencies to allow for a cohesive and nationally transferable system for students and workers to enjoy a linear, predictable path toward employment and eventual pay raises (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 28). Firms, emboldened by increased deregulation of qualifications, began to tailor competencies to suit their own individual needs, hijacking the VET system to serve private, for-profit interests. The result has been a multimillion-dollar private VET funding scandal that has subsequently eroded enrolment in both private and public courses (Tomazin, 2018).

In order to ameliorate the shortcomings of the national model of qualifications, more local “pathway” initiatives have been introduced to help students transition from VET to work. VET in public secondary schools in Australia is relatively new, implemented as the Vocational Education and Training in schools (VETis) initiative to assist in linking secondary schooling to relevant post-secondary paths. Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) provides “an interface between school and work” in order to keep learning at the forefront of workplace vocational experiences, instead of letting a student simply be

co-opted by industry partners as free labour (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p. 34). In addition, for industries with significant skill shortages in Australia, there have been demands to decrease the amount of formal off-the-job training in favour of on-the-job work experience (p. 34).

In Australia, students seem to be understood as consumers of skill-based vocational education designed to serve industry interests through a standardized qualification framework. The ultimate goal is to offer choice and a menu of pathways to gainful, mobile (socially and geographically), long-term employment. We turn now to compare Australian VET to the current trends and existing system in Canada.

Decentralization and the Canadian Context

Canadian education is one of the most decentralized systems in the world. Unlike Australia, Canada has no current overarching federal policy on vocational education, which has been influenced by generations-old VET legislation that reflected a distinctly functional instrumentalist view. The Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act (TVTAA), passed in 1960, represents the most significant attempt by the federal government of Canada to influence VET (Taylor, 2015, p. 36). Technically, the federal government overstepped their mandate in directly intervening in educational policy, which falls under provincial jurisdiction in Canada. The TVTAA sought to ameliorate the apparent skills shortage across Canada, containing distinct elements of early human capital discourse throughout the act (p. 37). Ontario and Alberta rolled out the TVTAA most robustly, and streaming became status quo in secondary schooling (p. 38). In our view, the TVTAA contributed to a long-lasting trend of senior high school streaming in Canadian secondary schools, varying only slightly in relation to how particular provinces understood and implemented the federal legislation (Arnold et al., 2018).

Despite governance, regulatory, and curriculum differences, Canadian secondary schools look somewhat similar to Australian schools, where streaming toward vocational or academic routes becomes distinct after Grade 10. In Australia there is greater flexibility, and the mix of public and private vocational and academic options is generally more diverse. Ultimately, to be employable in most parts of Australia or Canada, a post-level 10/Grade 12 diploma is a virtual necessity. Scrutinizing VET practices from

the implementation of the TVTAA to the present, not a lot has seemed to change. School is still viewed as a job preparation service in many Canadian provinces, but instead of the TVTAA's overall mission of matching students to future jobs, current VET practices often fail to comprehensively assist students in transitioning from school to work, similar to what often happens in Australia (Taylor, 2015, p. 43). The lack of a coherent national regulatory framework also allows for multiple private and public VET options. Indeed, even in the case of publicly funded VET providers in Canada, steadily increasing tuition fees are paid directly by students and their families, raising the questions about the extent to which all VET is effectively undergoing privatization.

In many Canadian provinces there has been a return to vocationally focused programs that take the form of traditional apprenticeship and work-oriented, hybrid, non-academic secondary school offerings such as Nova Scotia's O2 (Options and Opportunities) program, as well as an expanding suite of trades training programs, which are similar to those found in Australian secondary schools. These programs are more or less well articulated, with post-secondary offerings in a complex of 13 community colleges. However, unlike Australia, Canada's decentralized education system has no national qualification framework or assessment system providing formal articulation of K–12 schooling and higher education. Nevertheless, high school programming is clearly bifurcated between academic university preparation offerings and vocational options.

The status quo, however, has been jostled by current discourse concerning “new vocationalism” in Canada, which reflects tensions in the system relating to both efficiency and the limits of human capital thinking (Livingstone, 1997; Marginson, 2017), but also the complexity of the emerging world of work where coherent and understandable “pathways” are challenged by precarity in advanced neo-liberal economies (Standing, 2012). James now faces an economy that will require flexibility and literacy/numeracy demands he cannot easily comprehend, particularly without a holistic education.

The New Vocationalism and the Capabilities Approach

New vocationalism attempts to appeal to both economic instrumentalists who believe school is a job preparation experience, and social justice commentators who wish to mitigate the reinforcement of social class through traditional vocational education. New

vocationalism is heralded by proponents as a “broader...better integrated...and critical” form of VET that represents a “progressive” mission (Taylor, 2015, p. 52). Specifically, New VET seeks to address the issue of practical skills becoming obsolete or non-transferable in a changing globalized economy. New VET theory advocates for breaking down the long-established barrier between “knowledge (knowing) and skill (doing)” (p. 53). New VET discourse is holistic, acknowledging not only the practical need for students to be prepared for the economy, but also to understand and problematize issues related to economics and work.

The goals of New VET challenge established conceptions of vocationalism. The focus on choice, and on the indelible links between secondary schooling and other stakeholders (PSE, VET institutions, industry partners, etc.) first established by the TVTAA, creates an environment that mirrors Australia’s VET system, ultimately working to limit the realization of the ambitious goals of New VET. As long as industry partners are left to determine the core elements of what is deemed important to VET programs, and the Canadian federal government avoids providing substantial funding and planning/oversight, it is difficult to imagine a holistic approach to VET that successfully integrates vocational skill and academic development.

What is required, in our view, is a strategic New VET focus relating to the changing nature of work that transcends established binaries. Reinforcing prejudices that favour academics over vocational training will only serve to exacerbate tensions between thinkers and doers. Yet, at the same time, a return to streaming and job-ready training is also problematic. What has been described as the “new work order” (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015) is both precarious and founded on complex configurations of knowledge and ability, which require an education that transcends the economistic imaginaries of human capital theory. We think that the path forward must involve developing broad-based capabilities, as opposed to disparate skills, in order to create a truly flexible and thoughtful citizenry and labour force.

Amartya Sen’s capability approach (1999) offers a model of VET education that will produce capable, flexible, and holistically educated individuals, free to think about work and life as well as choose their path as future political-economic citizens. Sen’s capability approach “recognizes that not all individuals will participate or benefit from education in the same way, nor be able to convert the resources afforded by education to generate the same advantages in life” (Hart, 2012, p. 276). This approach acknowledges

the diversity of both individual desires as well as differences in material circumstances, and what educational sociologists call social and cultural capital. These concepts sensitize us to difference and indeed to the multiple life strategies or “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) drawn upon by located social actors to achieve valued objectives in an unevenly structured world. In other words, in the context of James’s lifeworld, how things are done and valued in his community should be integrated into his education. How Greek history can be made meaningful to him is a question that might be taken seriously in New VET. It might involve a study of weapons technology, which could lead to considerations of the ethics of the global arms trade and working in defense industries for instance.

Considering the diverse ways in which individuals leverage their own resources and circumstances, VET might be understood as a tool that may allow for future employment and labour market participation, but not as a simple pathway that will lead to adequate preparation of interchangeable units of labour. Such an undifferentiated approach to VET will only reinforce inequities (related to class, race, region, or gender) against which critics like Down et al. (2017), Taylor (2015, p. 62), and Zipin et al. (2013) have cautioned. Choice is always limited by personal circumstance, so the capability approach of Sen favours contextually grounded choice for individuals about how they imagine and achieve what they wish to do in life (Hart, 2012, p. 276). “The capability approach,” suggests Hart (2012), “allows us to think about the role, process and content of public education in innovative ways and to broaden strategic horizons beyond the constriction of... neoliberal discourse” (p. 277). We think this implies the retention of forms of curriculum and pedagogy generally considered to be “academic” for VET students. Additionally, we think it also means forms of pragmatic, skills-focused or “vocational” education for academically oriented students. Indeed, we see this kind of integration as one face of inclusion, which is an emerging discussion, particularly in the Nordic countries (Jørgensen, Olsen, & Thunqvist, 2018; Nylund et al., 2018; Taylor, 2019).

This focus on thinking outside of the neo-liberal-inflected binaries may offer diverse students a way out of the instrumentalist approach to VET policy and practice in secondary schools in both Canada and Australia. While national and regional education programs are organized around more or less agreed-upon and tightly framed principles, guidelines, and rules, the traditional rigidity of schooling and the durability of the academic-vocational binary has “limited [the] opportunity [of students] to choose the kind of

education they can pursue or the place and form in which it takes place” (Hart, 2012, p. 278). Through work like that of Hart and others, Sen’s capability approach is establishing a profile in educational policy circles, and some of these ideas are reflected in policy recommendations and curriculum reviews.

Conclusion

The future of VET in Canada, and worldwide, depends upon a renewed focus on individual student freedom of choice as well as a dedication to challenging both academic and vocational binaries and established academic and VET practices. Rhetoric around a “transformation” in education is commonplace. Increasingly, competencies are viewed as the end goal of education, allowing for flexibility in pedagogical and assessment practices that recognize multiple ways of knowing and representing. Much policy discourse however, still seems to exchange skills for job-specific competencies and contemporary VET can create a picture of idealized youth subjectivities that need to fit the mold demanded by employers (Corbett & Baeck, 2016). We argue here that VET should be seen as one of the many ways individuals can develop capabilities in life, allowing them to be free to choose from a range of options available to them.

Historic ideological and practical factors have led to VET being undervalued in Canada, and until the educational and social status of hands-on, “blue-collar” work is elevated and better compensated, as it has been in some European contexts (Hanushek et al., 2017), no substantial reform of VET is likely to take place. The very term “vocation” derives from the Latin *vocatio*, or “calling.” We feel that James can and should be empowered and inspired to reclaim the vocational terminology to represent a broader sense of the dignity of making (Ingold, 2013) and indeed to associate work with embodied knowledge and even deep wisdom (Crawford, 2009; Langlands, 2018; Rose, 2005; Sennett, 2008). The very language surrounding VET discourse suggests a functional instrumentalist reading of the field as job preparation, and an outdated mental-manual binary that artificially separates knowing, resulting in the parallel segregation of knowers from doers. We see this as counterproductive, inappropriate, socially divisive, and even dangerous in the current political climate.

Most Canadian youth aspire to hold at least one university degree (Taylor, 2015, p. 45), which we see as a strength rather than a weakness, as some have argued (Coates, 2015). This desire for university education can be interpreted in several ways, including the reasoning that either youth today are pushing back against human capital ideas to pursue education for its own sake, or alternatively, that the up-skilling of people and rampant credentialism has led to more demand for “higher” education. Regardless, when university education is favoured over VET, disparities between streams leading to future post-secondary options in secondary schools will remain distinct. The diverging pathways approach, practised in both Australian and Canadian secondary schools, continues to be viewed as a way to equip the non-academic pupil with the skills necessary to be a relatively productive member of the “middle-skill” labour force (Vafai, 2016, p. 150). Deficit-discourse thinking continues to shape the ways policy makers and educators conceive of the typical VET student. Taylor (2015) contends that the essence of the false dichotomy and valorization of academic over vocational education has its genesis in the distinction between “everyday and theoretical knowledge” (p. 65). Rationalist discourse, beginning with Plato and Platonism, was co-opted by early Christianity and culminated in its early modern form with Cartesian dualism, which has worked for centuries to create an ideological bias in favour of theoretical “thinking” knowledge over the practical “hands-on” knowing (Ryle, 1945; Taylor, 2015, pp. 66–67). It is safe to say that a simple and stark contrast has been drawn between technicians/tradespeople and professionals in North America, and this is the problematic message James has received throughout his schooling.

In our view, the value of manual work needs to be reimagined to help students interested in pursuing VET and subsequent blue-collar work so as to disrupt the dominant human capital narrative and provide a more profound meaning for hands-on work. We also think that this signals increased respect for the material that has been problematized by diverse emerging theoretical perspectives such as Indigenous scholarship, feminist new materialism, critical realism, posthumanism, actor network theory, and ecological and sustainability thinking in education.

The lens of Marxist critical theory can also assist in conceptualizing the modern separation of thinking from doing. In his inquiry into the value of work, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford cites the well-known practices inspired by Frederick Winslow Taylor in *Principles of Scientific Management*, which created a framework

for managers to gather systematic knowledge about work tasks and reduce each one to subsets of low-level skills (Crawford, 2009, pp. 38–29). In this early 20th-century view, workers are dislocated from traditional craft and trade knowledge and reduced to rosters of manageable behaviours. Hands-on work in factories became simple labour designed for simple people trained for efficient repetitive production, stamina, and obedience. Crawford sees this as a ripping-away of workers' knowledge base, both in a practical sense of alienation from the means of production, but also through a theoretical alienation from the trade knowledge that gave them power. What this signals is a transition from craft to labour. What is clear is that the resentment associated with this kind of transformation, and the educational discourse that accompanies it, seems to undergird some of Trump's recent nativism and xenophobia in the form of restrictive tariffs on steel and aluminum in order to somehow revive Rust Belt industries and curry favor with the dispossessed and devalued workers caught in the transition to globalized economies.

Crawford (2009) argues that in order to point students in a direction for the future that “engages the human capacities as fully as possible,” educationalists should advocate for students who enter the trades (p. 53). Tradespeople, such as electricians, carpenters, and plumbers, work independently and operate in a milieu that is constantly changing, demanding theoretical and practical knowledge (p. 53). They work in challenging careers not purely for an instrumental reason, nor for economic gain alone, but for the trials and creative necessities involved in a tradesperson's unique line of work. Mike Rose (2005) argues that this is also true of other forms of work, for instance in the service industry, which are demeaned and devalued even more than in the relatively lucrative male-dominated trades. Critically skilled, practically trained individuals can become the “masters of their own stuff” once more, instead of being at the mercy of increasingly bureaucratic corporate technicians (car dealerships/big garages, appliance repairers, big box store installation teams, etc.) and planned obsolescence (Crawford, 2009, p. 55).

Often students like James already possess a variety of more or less well-developed interchangeable work-life skills that are employed within families and in private life to make do. Practical skills can be a set of liberating tools that allow people to reclaim personal power, challenging the stereotype that positions workers as mindless drones. Workers are always contextualized and faced with both ideas and things; thinking and doing are necessarily intertwined for both office workers as well as for skilled tradespeople. The thinking-doing distinction is an artificial, reductionist, false dichotomy that

will not contribute to a helpful discourse that will serve students like James, who should envisage broader secondary and post-secondary educational horizons. So, in answer to his question, perhaps the target of educational reform needs to be more closely focused on the kinds of material engagements that he and many youth crave. And perhaps a further question concerns how this “vocational” form of material engagement can be enriched by conceptual and theoretical content both within and beyond the traditional academic subject areas/disciplines.

Many of the issues involved with VET in schools today begin and end with the discourse surrounding it. Many parents, teachers, policy makers, and politicians make assumptions about the supposed benefits of VET while echoing the sentiments and imaginaries of neo-liberal human capital theory. Offering VET education as a collection of courses and outcomes that promote job-ready skills only exacerbates the narrow ideations of VET as low/medium-level work preparation. Liberal market economies like those of Australia and Canada, through their own contextually unique processes, have allowed deregulation and the creep of industry interests that tend to instrumentalize students and leave them with constricted choices for the future. This problem, and the alleged solution of targeting rural regional youth as somehow “disposed” to hands-on, non-academic education, spatializes vocational education as a solution to chronic rural problems such as youth outmigration (Corbett, 2007) and regional economic development (Down et al., 2017).

By focusing on broad capabilities, while acknowledging and working to mitigate structural factors, academic and VET students can work to be more employable in an ever-changing knowledge economy. Only when the false dichotomy between academic and vocational education has been overcome will students have access to a meaningful vocational education. We feel that this should include, for example, ancient history, including the remarkable history of making (Ingold, 2013), and of craft (Langlands, 2018; Sennett, 2008). In quotidian life in schools, we conclude that teachers need to be thoughtful about the discourse surrounding VET because the way they engage with their students will influence how students think, feel, and view themselves and the meaning of VET to themselves and to others. Drilling rural and regional students about job preparation and the sorts of choices educators and others deem “realistic” or appropriate for them often recapitulates the worst racialized, classed, and gendered streaming practices historically enacted in schools. At the same time, inculcating only the values of theoretical knowledge

and its supposed superior status relative to VET will alienate many students who may see VET as their natural place in school. In holistic modern schools, all courses should have VET and academic principles to prepare *workers* and *people* practically and critically with streaming as we know it vanishing, resolving James's question through the content, pedagogy, and discourse surrounding his educational experiences.

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