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Vocational Education in Developing Countries: What is the Worth?

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Abstract

This article is a review of studies on whether vocational schools are an effective educational device for training the youth of developing countries to enter the world of work. Although the studies differed in their findings, some common themes reappear in their recommendations to make vocational education in these countries effective. These common themes are: the design of a relevant curriculum, the provision of a greater spectrum of vocational courses, and the provision of opportunities for work experience.

A more comprehensive approach and comparative analytical studies of vocational and non-vocational graduates are suggested, with a view to making such studies reliable and useful in future.

Most developing countries are plagued by high rates of youth unemployment. Some have even registered such high rates as 70 per cent in Sri Lanka in 1971, and 58 per cent in Jamaica in 1977. These seem to worsen every year and in the majority of developing countries today there is an urgency among politicians, planners, and educators to find a quick solution to the problem. Vocational skills training in secondary schools has been accepted as one of the chief means of providing young people with the necessary skills, the underlying assumption being that the major deterrent to employment is a lack of skills.

To ascertain whether secondary vocational schools are an effective educational device for training the youth of developing countries to enter the world of work, several studies have been done during the past two decades. A review of these brings to light their findings, the central themes of their recommendations, and their shortcomings.

Foster (1965) surveyed a group of 210 academic, middle-school Ghanaian students who were in their final month of studies before seeking employment or continuing their education. In his discussion, Foster argued that no amount of formal, technical, vocational instruction, alone, was going to reduce the volume of unemployment or necessarily have any effect on the rate of economic development. He proposed developing vocational training outside the schools through the use of auxiliary institutions, with special vocational institutes created in particular cases where their endeavours could be closely meshed with on-the-job training to match actual manpower requirements with skills training.

Hanson (1965) reported that vocational education had not fared well in Africa because existing vocational schools were unable to place their graduates. In order to make vocational education in secondary schools more successful, Hanson recommended making courses of study relevant to African conditions, and providing the reinforcement which comes from continuing help, follow-up, or cooperative training.

Meaders (1968) conducted a study in Taiwan and found that one out of three vocational agriculture graduates and one out of every sixteen academic graduates was employed in agricultural jobs. He called for general training in various areas of vocational agriculture education as a preparation for various occupations. Additionally, he urged an emphasis on work experience during vocational training.

Bukhari's (1968) two studies in Tunisia and Jordan found that the more specific the skills provided by the educational system, the less the likelihood of these skills being relevant to the actual job-related needs of the employment system. He pointed out a need for developing a comprehensive school system, with existing vocational schools incorporated into it.

Thuemmel (1970) was a member of Meaders' team in the Taiwan study. In his aspect of the study, he concluded that a greater percentage of vocational agriculture graduates perceived their kind and level of middle school education as being most appropriate for prospective farmers. He urged providing students with a much greater spectrum of vocational course offerings than are presently included in most vocational school curriculums.

Staley's (1971) studies in Latin America raised doubts about the effectiveness of secondary vocational training and found that training centres operated by national manpower training organizations were more productive than vocational schools. These centres were more flexible, less costly, and prepared interested individuals who were trained in the work to be done. He called for the preparation of reasonably versatile persons who could acquire new skills quickly and with some training be able to transfer from one specific job to another over a fairly broad range of jobs.

Newbry and Martin (1972) reported that one hundred and sixty-one (or 95 per cent) of the 169 Nepalese graduates who had received vocational training in a multipurpose high school, had continued their study at higher levels and that only five students were employed in jobs directly related to their training. This was so, even though the vocational program was intended to provide terminal training. They urged combining institutional and industrial vocational training and called for making vocational education programs appropriate to the societies and economies of developing countries.

Blaug (1972), like Foster, viewed formal vocational instruction as incapable of reducing the volume of unemployment in developing countries. He argued that vocational education in formal education institutions made little sense on either educational or economic grounds and that it was impossible to foresee accurately the requirements for specific skills in an economy two or three years hence. For that reason vocational training on a full-time basis must necessarily impart general skills at which point it ceases to be vocational in the sense that term is usually used.

Rado (1974) reported that before 1960, academic education had paid off in Africa as a whole and that in East Africa vocational education cost four to five times as much (per student) as academic education, but showed few signs of delivering equal benefits. He pointed out a need for designing relevant curricula at the post primary level in developing countries. In addition, he warned against the dangers of assuming that vocational education was the answer to unemployment or that it necessarily led to better employment or earning opportunities.

Bennett (1977) compared vocational and non-vocational secondary school graduates in Jamaica. He found that the state of Jamaica's economy was probably the most critical factor in the unemployment of vocational and non-vocational secondary school graduates. He proposed an upward or downward adjustment of enrolments of students in the various occupational areas according to employment opportunities and students' interests. Additionally, he

emphasized the importance of work experience programs in the preparation of youths for the world of work.

From the above studies emerge two distinct schools of thought (protagonists and antagonists) of secondary vocational education in developing countries. The protagonists of secondary vocational education are represented by such scholars as Meaders and Thuemel. Based on their findings, they argued that the most pragmatic way to provide necessary job skills was technical and vocational training at the secondary school level. They felt that high youth unemployment was due in large part to a lack of skills and that in developing countries there were limited numbers of large private industries or informal training resources to provide out-of-school skills training.

The antagonists are represented by Philip Foster, John Hanson, Newbry and Martin, and Mark Blaug, who have expressed doubts about the utility of preparing skilled manpower through the formal secondary system. They felt that the expensive emphasis on vocational training in formal institutions was wasteful because the training was often not used.

While the individuals cited differed in their opinions of the effectiveness of secondary vocational training, some common themes reappear in their recommendations to make vocational education in developing countries effective. These common themes can be grouped into three broad areas. These areas are:

1. *The design of relevant curricula:* the design of relevant vocational education curricula for developing countries implies that such programs will mesh with the employment needs of these countries. Additional relevance will be gained when curricula are modified to include courses that will assist graduates to establish and manage their own businesses.

2. *The provision of a greater spectrum of vocational courses:* This implies widening vocational curricula to reflect a cluster concept of exploration and instruction in groups of related occupations, rather than stressing isolated skills (e.g. concepts and skills in Automotive and Power Services, rather than auto mechanics, auto body welding or painting). Although cluster programs do not provide the depth of specialized instruction possible in teaching single skills, developing countries need to furnish students with entry-level skills in a range of related occupations to make them more employable.

3. *The provision of opportunities for work experience:* For graduates of vocational programs to succeed in the labour market, they need to be exposed more frequently to the discipline and reality of the work place. Opportunities for work experience may take the form of school-supervised cooperative experiences in local businesses, industries and agriculture. When successful, cooperative education pro-

grams often provide a substantial number of students with full-time positions (after graduation) with their co-op employers.

Two shortcomings were prevalent in a number of the studies cited. The outcomes of vocational education were assessed largely on the basis of the school variables and this approach is too narrow. As explained by Bennett, an adequate evaluation of vocational education outcomes should consider the combined effects of school, student, and occupational opportunities variables. Dewey (1902) supported such

a wide approach when he observed that there were three fundamental factors in the educative process: the learner, society and organized subject matter. There is always an unfortunate tendency to treat them separately.

In addition to the narrow methodological approach, a number of the studies cited examined only vocational graduates. Comparative analytical studies of vocational and non-vocational graduates, as done by Meaders in Taiwan and Bennett in Jamaica, would have been more useful.

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