



Book review

Emancipation and vocational education: Skills, *Bildung* and the subject

Bill Esmond, Johannes K. Schmees & Volker Wedekind

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Review by

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In policy documents issued by governments and international organisations, vocational education is assigned an impressively broad range of responsibilities, from addressing skills shortages and unemployment to supporting technological transformation. *Emancipation and vocational education* critically examines the economic rationale underlying this policy framing and explores how vocational education might contribute to the formation of the whole person, social justice, and meaningful participation in work and society. Bill Esmond, Johannes K. Schmees, and Volker Wedekind approach this question from research environments spanning Britain, Germany, and South Africa. The result is an ambitious and demanding book that challenges the economic treatment of vocational education and training (VET) while reconstructing a largely forgotten theoretical tradition of vocational *Bildung*.



The seven chapters form a coherent historical and theoretical movement. The introduction establishes the book's central concern by showing how neoliberal skills discourse positions VET as an investment in employability and vocational students as deficient subjects. Chapter 2 traces the changing relationships among skill, education, and subjectivity. It considers the transmission of expertise in early productive communities, the division between civic and technical knowledge in classical Athens, and the transformation of apprenticeship during the emergence of modern state and market relations. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the theoretical centre of the book, moving from Humboldt's account of *Bildung* through Kerschensteiner's vocational *Bildung* to Blankertz's critical-emancipatory reconstruction. Chapters 5 and 6 follow these ideas into neoliberal Western societies, colonial histories and the Global Majority world. The conclusion draws these strands together in a proposal for an expansive and emancipatory approach to VET.

The focus on the Anglophone and German-speaking worlds is well justified. Anglophone countries have supplied much of the market-oriented vocabulary through which skills, employability, and individual responsibility became international policy common sense. Germany's dual system, meanwhile, has become the institutional model that policymakers repeatedly present as the corresponding solution. The authors make a persuasive case that Germany is invoked internationally rather more often than it is understood. The exported dual model commonly arrives stripped of the social institutions, educational traditions, and theoretical foundations that gave it meaning. By recovering those foundations, the book reveals a striking discrepancy between the global admiration of German dual training and the limited attention paid to German thinking about its educational purposes.

The historical range is impressive. The authors draw on archaeology, social history, political economy, educational philosophy, and contemporary VET research to show that skill formation has always been embedded in particular relations of power, recognition, and belonging. Their discussion challenges romantic accounts of craft and apprenticeship by attending to hierarchy, submission, and exclusion alongside expertise and occupational identity. Plato's devaluation of artisans, the disciplining of parish apprentices, and the commodification of skill appear as different moments in a much longer history of the academic-vocational divide. Several familiar pieces of contemporary VET debate fall into place through this account.

The reconstruction of German educational theory is the book's most distinctive contribution. Humboldt separates general *Bildung*, understood as the development of the human being, from preparation for a specific occupation. Kerschensteiner attempts to bridge this divide by describing vocational *Bildung* as 'the gate to general Bildung', although his emphasis on citizenship, nation, and

service to the state carries an evident conservative legacy. Blankertz provides the decisive reinterpretation. Since all education develops through engagement with particular content, so-called general education also rests on a form of specialisation. Vocational knowledge can therefore become a medium for *Bildung* when it develops critical judgement, theoretical understanding and the capacity to examine the purposes and consequences of practice. The discussion of the *Kollegstufe* reforms in North Rhine-Westphalia gives this theoretical claim an institutional form, bringing vocational and general pathways, and at times their students, into a shared educational structure.

The later chapters broaden the argument considerably. The authors connect the retreat from critical educational theory to neoliberal restructuring, employer influence, and increasingly narrow understandings of 'social partnership'. Their account of colonial and 'settler VET' shows how vocational systems have supported racialised labour markets, displaced local forms of skill transmission, and contributed to the material organisation of colonial rule. The international export of dual training continues this history in modified form when a complex educational arrangement is packaged as a technical solution. The discussion also introduces post-independence alternatives, including Nyerere's Education for Self-Reliance, Education with Production, Freirean pedagogy, and capability approaches. These examples demonstrate that emancipatory thinking about vocational education has many geographical and intellectual origins.

The cumulative picture is sobering. VET appears repeatedly as a mechanism for sorting populations, restricting access to valued knowledge, and preparing marginalised groups for subordinate positions. Yet hope enters the final chapter, albeit rather late and carrying a substantial workload. The authors propose an expansive VET in which practical activity provides access to theoretical knowledge, ethical judgement, and civic questions. Such education would be shaped through collective action among students, educators, workers' organisations, and other democratic actors, while drawing on local educational traditions instead of universal policy recipes.

Reading the book from a Norwegian and Nordic perspective, I found both the history and the severity of this diagnosis illuminating. The book helped me understand the historical experiences that continue to shape British and German debates, including why vocational pathways can be associated with enduring social and economic deprivation. The Nordic point of departure creates a somewhat different encounter with the argument. In Nordic societies, vocational education has long been recognised as a central social institution and is combined, in varying ways, with a common foundation of compulsory education, general subjects, public regulation, and tripartite governance. These arrangements still contain social stratification, gender segregation, migration-related inequalities, and hierarchies of status. They nevertheless offer institutional

experiences that could enrich the book's search for an internationally shared theoretical understanding of VET.

This perspective also draws attention to the point at which vocational education begins within a person's educational trajectory, an issue that receives limited consideration in the book. The relationship between general and vocational education depends partly on the common education that precedes occupational specialisation, the general subjects included within vocational programmes, and the ways these elements complement occupational learning. The opportunities following a vocational qualification are equally important. A pathway leading to stable skilled work, higher vocational education, or university study has a different social and emancipatory significance from one leading to a narrow credential and restricted mobility. A more explicit comparison of when vocational specialisation begins, which opportunities for further progression it provides, and how easily learners can move between vocational and general or higher education would have strengthened the analysis of educational divisions across societies. The Nordic experience itself remains at the edge of the analysis. The authors engage with several Nordic studies, but the region receives little sustained consideration as an institutional configuration that might test their claims. This feels especially significant because the book ultimately calls for exchange among educational traditions and for locally embedded alternatives to standardised international models. A closer engagement with Nordic successes and continuing tensions could have helped specify the conditions under which vocational education gains social recognition, educational breadth, and genuine routes for progression.

The book also asks much of its readers. Its primary audience will be well-read scholars familiar with educational philosophy, *Bildung* theory, and international VET research. Long passages from historical sources, particularly in the chapters on German theory, sometimes allow the source material to occupy the lectern while the authors' own synthesis waits politely nearby. A more sustained explanation in their own words would have made the argument more accessible. The central tradition reconstructed in the book remains overwhelmingly male, reflecting a familiar feature of historical canons. Anna Siemsen receives meaningful attention as an early critic of vocational *Bildung*, while Hannah Arendt, Olga Essig, and Gisela Stütz appear only briefly. These voices broaden the intellectual landscape, although the book's main theoretical trajectory continues to run through Humboldt, Kerschensteiner, and Blankertz.

Overall, *Emancipation and vocational education* is an impressive work of intellectual retrieval and theoretical reconstruction. It performs much of the heavy lifting for scholars seeking to understand the historical foundations of contemporary debates about skills, education, and work. Its argument will probably resonate differently across Anglophone, German-speaking, and Nordic

contexts; that variation may become one of its most productive effects. For experienced VET researchers and doctoral students, the book offers a rich body of literature, a compelling critique of economistic vocationalism, and a serious invitation to recover the educational and democratic purposes of vocational education.

Note on contributor

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