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SKILL FORMATION IN SCHOOLS:

AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

by

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Discussion Paper

on

Teshome Wagaw's

EDUCATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF MODERNIZATION:
PROBLEMS OF SKILL FORMATION

The issues addressed by this paper refer to one of the most frustrating among the problems faced by education in the developing societies. While educationists, politicians, economists and other concerned people have been advocating in the past twenty five years the need to diversify secondary curriculum to include vocational training and have been furthering a variety of schemes of skill formation -these appear to have failed in many respects. Already in the sixties Philip Foster (1) citing the case of Ghana indicated the fallacy of believing that vocational education could lead to economic development.

These failures specifically affect broader experiments to alter the schooling structure by introducing diversified secondary or core curriculum programmes with a skill training component, attempts in fact which seek to alter the normally accepted meaning given to education. It would be unfair in this respect, however, to neglect the value of successful non-formal experiences of special attempts to change the system which have solid political backing such as the "escuelas hacia el campo" in Cuba (2).

Prof. Teshome Wagaw's paper deals with Africa and I think very specially with prevalent attitudes towards vocational education and manual professions, and to this end he provides a very useful historical background about the types of schools that have succeeded each other or coalesce in Africa. His comments, however, are relevant also for many other Third World settings as they are for regions in the industrialized countries

such as Wales in Briatin where a coal miner still does not want his son's education to equip him to return to the pit.

Thus, I have a couple of comments addressed to the wider implications in this paper.

The first point I would like to make refers to the understanding of modernization and of the role that people assign to education in this respect. It seems to me that there is a fundamental contradiction between the concept given to modernization by the consumers of educational services and that which is expounded by the expert or specialist (be he the educational economist or the politician). Although this contradiction is considered by Prof. Wagaw it seems to me that he does somewhat slight the issue. Modernization, as the specialist sees it, refers to the use of appropriate technology with the purpose of increasing the wealth of a country and hence the well-being of its citizens. The road to modernization goes through the understanding of modern technology to its application by means of the skills considered appropriate (generally also, by the expert); these two processes, however, are entrusted to different types of people (as teachers and as students) and are rewarded differently. A majority of the non-experts, that is, the people who would normally be subjected to vocational education, view modernization in terms of a life-style which is itself linked to longer and more academic forms of education. They do not want skill formation which appears to lead only to low paid, and low-prestige manual occupations.

From the point of view of the experts modernization also includes (as Prof. Wagaw notes) certain social practices which largely would appear to accompany economically successful societies: monogamy, birth control, partnership in the family rather than hierarchical relationships. Paradoxically, however, while these styles are considered desirable at the family level, the rest of society remains hierarchically organized on the basis of a more or less deeply engrained division of activities. And this division may also involve very unequal distribution of wealth for a very long time while a country is considered to be in a process of modernization. So that in fact the structural conditions that often accompany less 'modern' life-styles are almost condemned to remain.

The specialist has considered for some time now that for a society to progress education must be regarded as a value in itself with its theoretical and practical components, and that these must be presented in diversified streams. He has also considered that both practice in the manual skills as well as higher-level understanding of technology whether within or without the educational system will be necessary for development to take place. On the other side of the fence, the common citizen's views about education are not so much that it is a good in itself, but rather that it is a means to attain a desirable and therefore 'modern' status. And practical experience suggests to them that such status is not given by the existing system of vocational

and the rewards that it elicits. Thus we have, as Prof. Wagaw explains, views and attitudes which oppose vocational education as denying individual ascent and the possibility of enjoying material goods and status that other forms of education seem to afford. Thus, regardless of what they are urged to believe, deep down these people mistrust all efforts to force them along a path which is not seen as leading to better living conditions and to social status. The justification for such a belief is not lessened by the fact that vocational training in many depressed economies is very far from being a road to any type of employment and even by the fact that employers prefer their own type of on-the-job training to other institutionalized forms.

Another one of the points raised by Prof. Wagnaw but scarcely discussed refers to the nature itself of vocational-technical education. Quite apart from how it is perceived by its potential consumers is the question about whether it can really fulfil the objectives that are given for it and which Wagnaw outlines in his paper:

- to impart necessary skills for development in business, industry, and agriculture;
- to influence the development of positive attitudes in young people in favor of development needs;
- to stem the flow of urban immigration;
- to alleviate unemployment or underemployment of school leavers;
- to induce positive attitudes for manual work.

The achievements along these lines have dubious to say the least (3). The view of the more traditional functionalists (4) who have considered the problem of the interface of society and schooling is such that if changes in social and economic structures are not effected, there will be no justification for asserting that education can contribute to the building of skills for rural and industrial development. However, there are many aspects that have to do with the quality of education provided in technical-vocational streams that have been little studied. Perhaps by questioning the assumption that technical-vocational education within the system, in any of its forms, can provide skills valued by employers or deter the flow to the cities, there might be an incentive to examine the advantages that the introduction of manual labour and the knowledge of technological principles might bring to education. In other words, less emphasis could be placed on the preparation for employment or work, and more on the value of work as a component of the formal system. But also beyond that more could be done to improve the quality of the vocational components that could justifiably be included in the curriculum (5).

Having said the above, systematic education should provide tools for active participation in the world both in its work and leisure activities. It should also provide the information needed to deal with modernization in its negative and positive connotations. But it may be worth relinquishing false expectations that there can be within schools specific training for specific

jobs, or that attitudes to society can easily be changed through educational experiences. What seems to me to be crucial is to consider that there are different aims and rationale involved in the worlds of employment -productive work and of education. Kenneth King (6) in considering the question of education for production refers to three separate areas of interest: the world of education with all its institutions, the world of training (institutions that train nurses, car mechanics, or computer programmers), and finally the world of productive work represented by firms, farms or factories. He contends that when elements from one sphere are introduced into another (e.g. specific skill training into secondary schools) they are affected by the social relations and institutional characteristics of the sphere in which they enter. Thus King exemplifies:

... when the school gears up to do training (whether for employment or self-employment), this training emphasis cannot help being affected by the character of schooling. Instead of being the dominant activity which it would be in training institutions, training-in-schools gets turned into a subject, like English or Maths, gets slotted into the school hierarchy of more or less high status knowledge, and thus gets incorporated on terms other than its own. Training-in-schools tends to have much more in common with schools than training in regular institutions or again training in industry.

Basic skills like reading, writing or numeracy as Lillis and Hogan point out (7) may be more important for a variety of tasks when they have been well acquired. Equally, the case can be made for analytic capacity, questioning attitudes, awareness of the ambiguities in different realities, rather than for teaching

youngsters with great care the know-how involved in specific skills. Further education and specialized skill centres, on-the-job training schemes may provide better opportunities to fulfil some of the claims set for vocational training.

Finally, despite widespread failure there are experiences around the world which do attempt to fulfil some of the objectives signalled out earlier and which have been reported as fairly successful (8). They should be studied with more care in order to pick up the elements within them that might contribute to enrich a secondary level of education which would include a 'general education' geared both to academic study and to work.

References

1. Philip J. Foster, "The Vocational School Fallacy in Development Planning" in C.A. Anderson and Mary Jane Bowman (Eds.) Education and Economic Development (Chicago: Aldine, 1965).
2. Cf. M. Figueroa, A. Prieto and R. Gutierrez, The Basic Secondary School in the Country. An Educational Innovation in Cuba (Paris: UNESCO, 1974).
3. See review by Kevin Lillis and Desmond Hogan, "Dilemmas of Diversification: Problems Associated with Vocational Education in Developing Countries", Comparative Education, vol. 19 (No. 1, 1983), 89-107.
4. Philip J. Foster, ibid. and Mark Blaug, Education and the Employment Problem in Developing Countries (Geneva: ILO, 1973).
5. For the distinction between "education for work" and "education about work" see Lillis and Hogan, ibid.
6. Kenneth King, "Education with Production: Approaches to a State of the Art", in Research Programme on Education and Production in Theory and Action (EPTA). Report of a workshop on Education with Production held in The Hague, The Netherlands, 21-24 February 1985 (The Hague: Centre for Study of Education in Developing Countries, 1985).
7. Ibid.
8. Cf. for example the reports on "relevance experiences" in M. E. Sinclair with Kevin Lillis, School and Community in the Third World (London: Croom Helm, 1980).