

BOOK REVIEW

A quality partnership: The transition between education and employment, by Harvey McQueen, 1992, Wellington: Institute of policy studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

A Quality Partnership resulted from a research project on the various issues and alternatives connected with the transition between education and employment, sponsored by the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University and led by Harvey McQueen. It follows on from the lecture series delivered by Sir Christopher Ball in 1991, recorded in Gary Hawke's *Sharks and Splashes: The Future of Education and Employment*, where Ball argued the need for a new partnership between education and industry.

McQueen sets out to examine how that partnership could develop effectively in the New Zealand context. He is clear that he wants to promote constructive dialogue rather than provide an account of systematic social research into the relationship between school and work: 'The intention of *A Quality Partnership* is to communicate what a selection of opinion leaders and practitioners in both sectors see as the major issues, particular interests, pressure points and current trends' (p.i).

This book was difficult to review. It is hard not to get excited about the production of *any* sustained and contemporary work in this area in New Zealand, especially when it is targeted at a wide professional audience. Nor can one argue with the notion that learning is a lifelong process, that more young people should be retained in the education system for longer periods, and that it is desirable that our education system be challenged to respond positively to emerging national and community needs. McQueen uses basic terms in his discussion of curriculum development, for example, that would be part of the cognitive baggage of any committed educator:

The greatest contribution which education institutions can make is to give people the skills and competencies which will enable them to go on learning throughout their lives. This means helping students at all levels to take ownership of their own learning, to be able to choose wisely between formal and informal learning situations, to recognise the value of greater knowledge and skills and to have the confidence to apply the benefits of learning (170-171).

He targets the importance of developing flexible, coherent links between secondary and tertiary education through the reform of the national qualifications system. As he points out, these formal certificated links will reduce age barriers to further learning opportunities and increase the opportunities for those already employed (ie 89% of the labour force) to participate in further education. He also provides us with a comprehensive overview of the current, overt, status of the relationship between education and employment in New Zealand: the development of transition education programmes over the past fifteen years, the current reformulation of national assessment and credentialling processes, and the development of an industrial skills training strategy. The text gives us examples of some of the successful projects that have already been implemented between education and industry, and examples of curriculum development in schools that can provide the basis for the quality partnership that McQueen seeks.

This is an important book in that it attempts to provide, as a matter of urgency, a way in which the relationship between education and employment in New Zealand may be reconsidered and reconstructed in a coherent and positive fashion. It is also a fascinating book in its unselfconscious and explicit articulation of a correspondence between the goals of education and the needs of industry that would delight the most determinist adherent of Bowles and Gintis' theories. For example:

Traditionally, education has fulfilled three prime functions: to help fit people into society, to provide skills, and to sort students (15-16).

This may be news to those educators who believe that they are enabling and empowering students to learn, to think for themselves, to develop and use knowledge in a creative and critical fashion, to choose with discrimination, and to be able to access a body of knowledge developed from a multiplicity of human resources over thousands of years.

He does carry on to say that there is 'arguably a fourth leg to be added to the traditional three' - the notion that education enables the learner to create new knowledge; to move from the known into the unknown; and to be an active participant in the teaching/learning process. This fourth role, however, is considered to be debatable:

Assuming that all three, indeed possibly, four functions exist, emphasis upon one at the expense of the others creates imbalance. To get this balance right is important for the operating of a modern nation which relies upon human, information and organisational capital in ways inconceivable a few decades ago. Education and training underpin all three forms of capital.

I am sure that educators feel that they are doing more than training up future workers!

The problem is that transition education, in whatever form, is a *political* answer to a *political* problem - how to maintain young people's readiness to enter the labour market during an extended period of youth unemployment and, at the same time, how to keep them usefully occupied within a set of structures that reduce the opportunity for antisocial or criminal behaviour. Transition education or skills training is neither an economic nor an educational solution to that problem. And, therefore, it becomes convoluted and contradictory to talk about the transition from school to work, or the relationship between education and employment, without reference to this political imperative as if we were dealing with merely a technical hiccup in our progress towards some ideal partnership between educators and employers. Gleeson, for example, suggests that the emergence of youth training is completely concerned with 'regulating youth labour markets and with establishing training as a substitute for employment' (1984: 98). It is a political process.

Nash (1987) commenting on the provision of transition education programmes in schools and tertiary institutions, points out that if young people are to be trained in work skills, work acquisition skills, or getting-by-in-life skills then, if our concern is with *education*, it is difficult to find any interest in such programmes. Transition education, in his view, exists only because of the collapse of the youth labour market and, if the economy does recover, and if employers do begin once again to take on all available school-leavers, it will disappear as quickly as it came: 'transition education is a misnomer that should be recognised as such' (ibid: 34-35).

McQueen, however, claims that it must be accepted that transition courses are not a temporary ornament to the curriculum but an essential curriculum component that will enable the education system to produce the highly skilled workers necessary for New Zealand's economic recovery.

I do not have a problem with the provision of transition education per se nor with the development of closer links between industry and education. Young people should be provided with as many opportunities as possible at present to be able to take up employment and to gain real skills. However, we do need to recognise and be honest about the fact that skills provision and closer links between work and school will not, in themselves, produce jobs; they will not alter the numbers in the queue for jobs, but simply change the place in line for individual young people. The argument that there is an 'urgent need for upskilling the workforce' in order that the nation can make a more productive use of new technological advances is suspect, given the current shedding of labour by both the private and state sectors. The increasing use of new technology, where introduced to create efficiency, is as likely to lead to redundancy and deskilling for the majority of workers as it is to lead to upskilling and 'unlocking people's potential'.

There is a problem of slippage from 'education and employment' to 'schooling and industry' in the book and, therefore, little discussion about the nature of education, its goals, how it should be

resourced and whom it resources. If we are talking about education contributing substantially to making New Zealand more internationally competitive, then we need to look at the provision of a broad common curriculum that retains young people in school until the age of eighteen. In other words we need to create a better *educated* population rather than a more *trained* population and this raises all sorts of questions about the provisions and attractiveness of the curriculum for young people.

While McQueen pays ritual obeisance to this view, the thesis of the book undermines that concept. There is no educational vision here (although perhaps this is an old-fashioned notion) except as this vision might be directly integrated with economic goals. There is no sense of educators having any aims other than those of preparing their students to enter the labour market. While McQueen suggests that the quality partnership is between two equals, in fact the book implies that education is the servant of industry; that the role of the education system is to meet industry's needs.

McQueen is optimistic about the future of this partnership and its ability to enhance both education and employment for the individual. Having just participated in a teleconference with two speakers from the United States called 'Successful Schools: Successful Business', which addressed precisely the issues raised in this book, I cannot have the same confidence. These two industry representatives were clear about the relationship between education and employment, and were explicit about the control over the direction of the curriculum that they expected in return for 'filling the financial gap' (that is, for resourcing such a partnership). They saw the school's mission as graduating students that business can use and expected that the curriculum would be taught in certain ways with particular outcomes that met industry's needs:

We want schools, from kindergarten to college, to teach children what capitalism is about and to prepare them for the world-of work; we want to teach teachers about business so that they are better prepared to go back into the classroom and teach for us.

I do not support academic analysis of the relationship between education and work that focuses on this nexus as unalterably reflective of the social relations of a capitalist mode of production and therefore open only to critique, deconstruction and more critique in an unhelpful fashion. However, there is a place for theory and academic analysis in examining a central social, economic and political relation in our society - the transition between education and employment - a relation which is highlighted by the measurable misery of the unemployed. McQueen ignores the large body of work which could illumine the opinions and exhortations offered here, a body of work developed initially in Britain in response to the same problem of high rates of youth unemployment and to the political provision of the same solution, a firmer linkage between industry and schooling/post-compulsory education.

McQueen is a provocative writer. At times, his work frustrates the reader with its unquestioned, embedded, and sometimes contradictory assumptions and with its tendency to cover complex and important issues at breathtaking speed. For example, he touches on issues of the national reform of qualifications, recognition of prior learning, the changing nature of women's role in the labour market, the provision of affordable, accessible and diverse childcare, *and* accelerate programmes in the space of two paragraphs. However, he has also written a much-needed contemporary account of current provisions for the transition between education and employment which is valuable because it raises these issues for public debate in a comprehensive and accessible form.

The real problem is that, in the end, *A Quality Partnership* does not tell us anything new. It is simply a series of exhortations to the educational and industrial sectors to work together more productively.

References

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