

Strengthening Vocational Education: Applying Lessons from the Netherlands to the United States

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Abstract

My research question is ***Which elements of the Dutch vocational education system are transferrable to the American schooling context?*** Looking at the low rates of college retention in the United States and the problem of un- and under-employment across the country, I believe there is a need for expanded vocational education. Vocational education in the US is fragmented and underfunded, but the system in the Netherlands is robust, serving roughly half of all students. Using my placement school in the Netherlands as a case study, I have explored students' perspectives on their educational experiences at the MBO (senior secondary vocational education) level. I conclude with policy recommendations for the American education system.

Framing the Problem

The Education-Employment Gap

In the US, the 6-year graduation rate for students pursuing a bachelor's degree is 59%.¹ The problem with low college retention in the US is that when a student completes his or her high school education, this degree has only provided academic skills, at best. There is rarely formal job training or hands-on experience, leaving students with few prospects for employment.

At the same time, there is a huge need for qualified workers in the vocational sector in the US. For example, 70% of construction companies nationwide have trouble finding qualified workers.² This is a global trend. 75 million youth around the world are unemployed, but 40% employers are struggling to find qualified young hires.³

Half of youth around the world are not sure that their postsecondary education has improved their chances of finding a job. Almost 40% of employers say a lack of skills is the main reason for entry-level vacancies.⁴

Purposes of Schooling

There are several purposes of education, and creating workers is only one of them. Dutch researcher Gert Biesta claims there are three questions in education. Education is that students learn something (content), they learn it for a reason (purpose), and they learn it from someone (relationships). He proposes three purposes of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification.⁵ American education historian David Labaree agrees, identifying the three goals of school as social mobility, democratic equality, and social efficiency.⁶

When I asked what the purpose of school is, 57% of students interviewed or surveyed cite reasons for personal development, while 28% focus on job preparation or money. Only 10% state that the way their school helps them achieve their long-term goals is through the qualification of a formal diploma.

Research Methods and Context

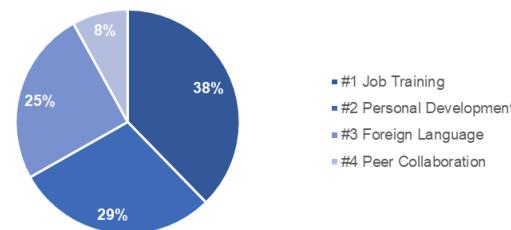
This project is a case study in which I explore questions on purpose, content, and relationships in school at ROC van Amsterdam MBO College Airport. In addition to a review of literature, student voice is central to my investigation, which consists primarily of interviews and surveys with students across three years of a Travel and Hospitality program. Driving past Schiphol airport, one of the team managers said that any job that happens at the airport is something students can learn at this school. Noting the significance of tourism to the Dutch economy, and Schiphol's centrality in that industry, she remarked ***"as good as we get these people to be, as good as the society will be."***

Key Findings

Content for Careers

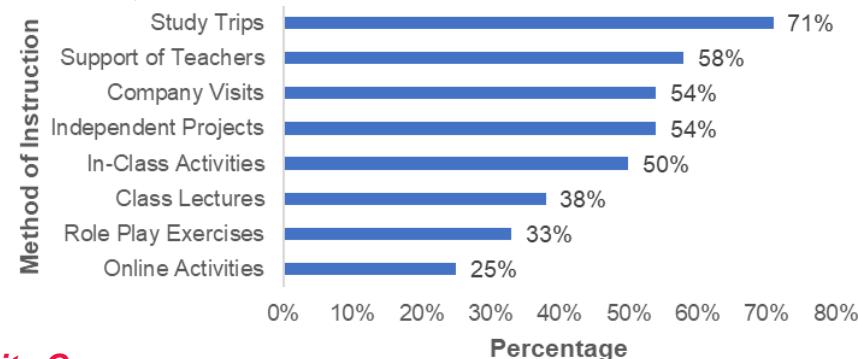
38% of students interviewed or surveyed believe the most important thing they should be learning in school is job training. The two features of successful vocational education programs are close connections between schools and employers for both planning learning and hiring young people.⁷ The Travel and Hospitality program has these features with all students completing two internships during their education here.

What are the most important things students should learn in school?



Learning Experiences

100% of students interviewed who have completed an internship cite this as their most meaningful learning experience. In the chart below, observe the percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that a given instructional method supports their learning. Students tend to believe they learn most from practical, hands-on experiences or from teacher support.



Equity Concerns

Students are tracked into different levels of education at age 12. According to the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, students with different backgrounds but similar test scores at the end of primary school are referred to different tracks for secondary education.⁸ Research shows that teachers in the Netherlands often have lower expectations of children from underprivileged backgrounds. This Pygmalion Effect⁹ leads to referral to lower-level secondary education programs and an underuse of talent.¹⁰ 100% of student respondents agree that a stereotype or stigma exists about students in certain levels of education, and 75% think that academic degrees are more valued by society. Fortunately, the Dutch system is highly mobile. 90% of students surveyed indicate an interest in pursuing higher education.

Policy Recommendations

"However much we might wish it to be the case, copying an approach that is successful in one country is no guarantee of the same result in another country. Every teacher, every school, every country must go their own way... Different contexts produce different answers to what are generally the same social challenges."¹¹ In light of this fact, I propose an increase of vocational programs inside the existing secondary education structure in the US, so as not to overhaul the system entirely, and so as not to limit students' options at a young age. My recommendations are:

- Certifications in secondary school:*** I suggest that schools offer vocational certifications within their traditional comprehensive academic program, for example, training to be an Emergency Medical Technician, a home health aide, a beautician, a welder, or an administrative assistant can all be classes that students take while they are in high school.
- Mandatory internships:*** Given McKinsey, Inc.'s findings regarding the importance of the connection between schools and future employers¹², internship completion should be a mandatory component of high school education, whether it is completed in the summer or school year. Students still have an opportunity to complete a college preparatory curriculum, but will have other options and experience that lead them to a career to pursue if they end their education after high school.
- Make vocations socially valuable:*** Reducing or eliminating the stigma against vocations, by highlighting the value and salary of these professions, could lead more parents, teachers, and counselors to advise students to pursue a vocational certification rather than a bachelor's degree after high school. Federal and state funding is one means to this end.
- Avoid tracking, especially by race:*** Students of all abilities learn better in heterogeneously grouped classes.¹³ "In racially mixed schools, curriculum tracks are generally color-coded" with students disproportionately tracked up or down by race.¹⁴ A strong feature of the Dutch system is that all tracks of vocational education give access to higher levels of education.

Together these suggestions support student mobility and school/employer connection, two things so crucial to a successful vocational system. In conclusion, I want to remind myself, and also readers, of the other purposes of education: creating citizens who participate in a democratic society, and supporting the development of students as people. Students are more than just future workers,

Acknowledgements

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