

Book Reviews

~~aware that the social and cultural contexts of pupils' lives are particularly important when teaching themes. The collection is recommended as a reference to the many organisations and Local Education Authorities working in the field of race and gender and to the available resource material. The appendix on the implications of Race Relations legislation and the extensive list of useful addresses will be welcomed by many teachers.~~

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Liv Mjelde (1993) *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Practice and Back Again*
University of Joensuu Publication in Social Sciences, Finland. 272 pages. ISBN 951 708 171 5

This is an important contribution to an under-researched but topical field of inquiry, whose value is accentuated by the fact that it reports on work carried out in Norway, with reference to theoretical perspectives prevailing in Scandinavian countries. Such theoretical and empirical data are not often accessible to researchers in English-speaking countries, and hence the book will be of great interest to those looking for fresh insights as well as for comparative material. Mjelde, who has been investigating vocational education over the past twenty five years, has come up with a sustained sociological account relating to different aspects of vocational training and apprenticeship — or 'workshop learning', as she calls it. She draws on a number of research projects with an extensive quantitative and qualitative data base, generating important insights through interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, and analysis of educational policy texts.

These multiple research strategies are brought to bear on a number of concerns related to the field of vocational education, whether this is organised within the school or in industry through apprenticeship programmes. Taking a political economic approach to the field, the author asks questions regarding the way the restructuring of the economy has influenced the different pedagogical traditions that have developed in post-war Norway. Mjelde combines a structural account with an ethnographic investigation of the learning experiences of vocational students. In focusing on these experiences, Mjelde not only explores the social background of these largely working class students, but also delves into the processes which lead these students to opt out of general schooling and for more directly work-related learning. Mjelde is here interested in arguing for the legitimacy of a pedagogical tradition which goes back to the medieval guilds, and which was lost when the comprehensive experiment attempted to weld together academic learning traditions — which privileged theoretical knowledge and intellectual labour — with popular learning traditions — which celebrated practical knowledge.

The author in fact argues that the comprehensive education model muted popular learning traditions, to the extent that students from a manual working class background could not relate to the cultural values of the school as it developed in post-war Norway. She explains this group's failure at school, as well as high rates of disenchantment with learning and of absenteeism, by suggesting that rather than cognitive deficits, we have here pedagogical deficits. Like many of her colleagues in Scandinavia, Mjelde draws on the theories of Vygotsky to suggest that the tasks of learning need to be related not to internal biological or genetic ability, as Piaget proposed, but rather to the pedagogical environment in which learning, as a social activity, takes place. In other words, Mjelde claims that working class students who fail at school

do so because the pedagogical model we propose to them — one which starts off from the abstract realm and moves to the applied — is not congruent with their frameworks of cognitive relevance. That model, harking back to the grammar school type of pedagogy, and fitting in the cultural values and material orientation of the middle class, is experienced as an alien imposition by many working class students. The latter perform better when learning is presented in an applied context, where a practical work situation creates ground for more profound insights, with the possibility of discovering theory related to practice. For the working classes, learning needs to be related to the prospect of — and in preparation for a subsequent activity. However, the distance between school and work has increased so much that meaning and motivation suffer as a result. In Mjelde's view, these classroom interactionist perspectives on pedagogical relations are directly linked to the macro structural dimension of class reproduction through education. Ironically, therefore, comprehensive education, introduced as a tool to create social equality in an otherwise unequal society, is considered by Mjelde to contribute directly to the reproduction of inequality from one generation to the next.

The author points out a number of distinct advantages with the 'workshop learning' model. Some of the more obvious ones relate to the fact that teachers in industry tend to be more in touch with technological developments in their own field than their counterparts in vocational schools, that equipment will similarly tend to be more up-to-date since industrial set-ups depend on this to give them their competitive edge in production. In addition to this, the mastercraftsman-apprentice relationship can be a privileged one, where the student gains professional skills while interacting with materials, with teachers and with fellow worker-learners. In this context of informal, interdependent and co-operative relationships, learning is not something which happens in a student's head when s/he listens to a teacher or studies a book, but is rather a fundamentally interactive process mediated through hands-on experiences.

Mjelde does not, however, celebrate 'workshop learning' in a naive or unproblematic manner. Rather, she notes the continuing dichotomy between the hand and the mind in the two key pedagogical traditions, and wonders about the extent to which technological innovation underlining economic restructuring in the western industrialised world will in fact lead to a transcendence over the traditional separation between praxis and theory, between vocational and general education. The author also notes a number of problems that were highlighted by several of the apprentices and vocational students involved in her projects problems that find resonance with other similar studies carried out in other parts of Europe. While apprenticeships provided money, security of job, relationships, a sense of independence, and effective learning through the use of up-to-date equipment and technology, these young adults did complain about the fact that their trainers and employers considered them as a source of cheap labour. In addition to this, quite a substantial number were given routine work for long periods of time, were fired just before the probation period ended, or before they graduated to a full wage, and were short-changed in terms of learning trades since some employers were not fully aware of — or did not take seriously — their responsibilities as trainers. In contexts where work projects were on a contract basis, employers felt under so much pressure to meet deadline targets that apprentices were given repetitive work to ensure speed, and training concerns were either completely set aside or given cursory attention. Another crucial aspect relates to the fact that many apprentices find work in fields which are not training-related, though most do end up employed as skilled labourers. Mjelde could have

developed this further, given the fact that employers are more likely to invest in apprenticeship-type programmes if there are returns for the training they provide.

The author's evaluation of learning through the apprenticeship-type, workshop-based activities and experiences comes at an important time when, in many countries, there is heated debate about the relationship between education, training and the job market. Indeed, models such as those prevailing in Germany, where the 'dual system' of the *realschule*, and the apprenticeship training involving employers, have often been jealously regarded both in developing and developed countries. There are those who would argue, however, that the restructuring of the contemporary economy entails a shift away from the types of manual jobs that apprenticeship programmes are usually associated with, and that given the types of occupations developing in a post-industrial era, general, academic education is in fact the best form of vocational education. Others, adopting Mjelde's own ideological and political commitment towards the working classes, would point to the oppressive tradition associated with vocational training and see this rather more as a tool of reproducing Labour than as a legitimate pedagogical alternative leading to emancipation. This reading is particularly strong in Anglo-Saxon countries, where the whole debate about vocationalism — from the late 19th century onwards — has revolved around the pejorative qualities of utilitarian 'training' that fits people into jobs and co-opts them into an unjust and exploitative social structure, as distinct from a true 'education' which develops understanding and empowerment. Given Mjelde's educational politics, I would have expected a more detailed analysis and critique of the way vocational education and apprenticeships could indeed become an instrument of the employing classes, as well as pointers towards alternative practice where students learn rather more *about* work than *for* work. She herself points out in Chapter 6 that apprentices have precious little knowledge of unions, and I for one cannot imagine employers sharing that kind of knowledge with a group of young workers who often feel that they are not being paid sufficiently for the amount of work they do. But this is exactly where Mjelde's contribution to the field becomes even more clear for, granted that such hegemonic dangers do exist, she nevertheless makes a strong case for learning through an active, hands-on, group-based pedagogy which links hands and mind and which holds the promise of motivating students who are disillusioned with traditional academic schooling. For it is only then that such students will become engaged with the process of learning which is at the same time useful, relevant, and empowering. I can just imagine my mentors, Marx and Dewey, nodding appreciatively at Mjelde in the aisle!

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