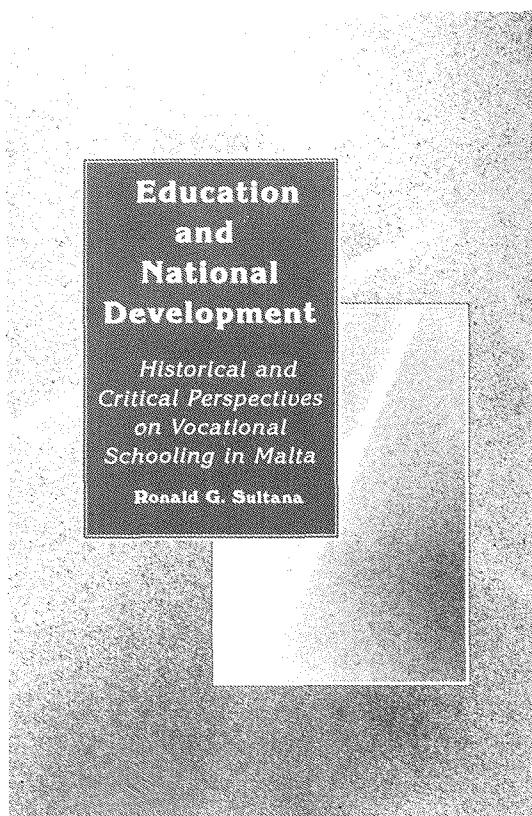


Book Review

Education And National Development: Historical And Critical Perspectives On Vocational Schooling In Malta, Ronald G. Sultana. 494 pages . Malta. Mireva, 1992. ISBN 1-870579-12-7.

This is a most impressive study of the historical, social, political, and economic issues related to vocational schooling. While its title may perhaps suggest a book of mainly local interest, it provides in fact a sustained analysis and critique of vocational schooling that should be studied with close attention much further afield.



The book is arranged into two major sections. A discussion of historical changes and continuities in vocational schooling in Malta since the early nineteenth century occupies more than half of the volume. Sultana then shifts his attention to the problems of the recent initiatives in the area since the 1970s, before going on to suggest possible scenarios and a preferred outcome for future policy. But despite the separate construction of "historical" and "critical" perspectives, one of the most important strengths of Sultana's book is in its portrayal of how an understanding of the history helps us not only to interpret

current issues, but also to address them more effectively. The setting up of vocational schools in 1972 thus becomes "the most recent turn of a ' story ' which had its roots in the nineteenth century" (p. 21). Historical analysis also serves to highlight the wider relationships of vocational schooling in Malta, such as "the economic battle to eke out an existence from what is ultimately a barren rock, and the often related vicissitudes suffered under foreign rule" (p. 26).

The interplay between the "national" and the "comparative" is another feature of the book that works very well. The Maltese experience is examined in depth partly for its own intrinsic value, but no less so for its relevance to a more general understanding of vocational schooling. Sometimes this relationship between the particular and the general is conceived in terms of providing an example of universal truths. Indeed, Sultana goes so far as to argue that "The Maltese case study will be a timely reminder that, irrespective of the good intentions behind any vocationalising scheme which sets out to provide relevant schooling, the results will very likely be the same as in Malta namely, the creation of lower-status tracks and/or schools for low status students who will be offered an inferior, diluted form of education which will lead to the reproduction of social inequalities from one generation to the next." (p. 10). This sounds somewhat over-determined, an iron law of vocational schooling as it were, but Sultana still finds room for effective contestation. At other times, the comparative aspect is seen in terms of Malta constituting a "test-case" for broad theoretical formulations, for example on the importance of vocational schooling for the economy, or for individual moral benefits, or for social transformation.

Particularly appropriate in a book about vocational schooling is an awareness of both theoretical and practical dynamics. Sultana shows a strong grasp of theory relating to vocational education, but is also able to apply this to everyday encounters in schools and classrooms involving teachers and pupils. This comes out especially well in the second section of the book. The methods used in the work shift markedly to suit this changed emphasis. Whereas in the first section intelligent use is made of a range of documentary sources (primary and secondary evidence and

thesis material), in the second section recourse is made to questionnaires, interviews, tracer studies, and action research. Indeed, it is this wide range of research methods and sources, just as much as its theoretical scope, that helps to make this book such a useful and important study.

The concluding discussion about policy implications also makes an interesting contribution to a wider debate. Although Sultana is sceptical of the value of separate technical schools for specific groups of students, he argues against excluding "vocationalism" from the curriculum (p. 13). He proposes therefore that vocational education should be developed as part of a compulsory core curriculum, and invokes the ideals of John Dewey as a guiding inspiration towards this end. At a time when national curricula are in vogue, this insistence on vocational education as an integral part of such a curriculum needs to be taken up and explored further in developing a comparative framework for this general policy trend.

There is much to argue about in this book. Sultana's perception of the English experience in technical education, as reflecting "belief in free enterprise, the spirit of initiative, and the march of technological progress" (p. 71), seems dubious when one recalls criticisms of the anti-industrial ethos of so much of English education. The tight fit suggested between periods of economic depression, and initiatives in vocational schooling, may also be open to dispute. But such debates are a continuing feature of the field. *Education and National Development* constitutes a notable contribution towards our understanding of vocational schooling in Malta and elsewhere.

Professor Gary McCulloch,
Department of Educational Research,
Lancaster University