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Educational philosopher Phil Smith critically examines the assumptions and arguments put forth by the advocates of Career Education. He questions the thinking behind the idea that the primary objective of the educational endeavor should be concerned with "the development of skills in an accepting job market."

career education as an educational ideal

By Philip L. Smith



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During the past decade our schools have faced one crisis after another. The fact that those in charge have not always been up to the tasks before them hardly needs documentation. Many of the problems dealt with by schoolmen have simply been those recurring difficulties that confront every new generation attempting to educate its young. Decisions regarding curriculum content, teaching techniques and general school organization are, at least in part, contingent on existing social circumstances and for this reason must be reappraised constantly. But the issues with which these decisions deal are, nonetheless, manifestations of perennial educational problems. There are presently, however, a good number of difficulties within the field of education that cannot be easily explained as historically recurrent phenomena. Attempts to do so give the impression of misconceiving the nature of these difficulties, for they dictate responses that are ineffective as remedial replies. The magnitude of these difficulties justifies their being viewed not only as problems of crisis proportion, but as difficulties in great degree unique, requiring, perhaps, a new revolutionary mode of response if they are to be dealt with satisfactorily.

This, I think, is a position presently supported by a good number of educational policy makers and is not, therefore, to be taken as a one man declaration of war on my part. Indeed, I believe this viewpoint is oftentimes overstated, with the effect that any new proposal is considered desirable because it is new, and any historical correlation thought to be misleading because of the uniqueness of the present scene. To the degree present problems are different from those of the past it is a consequence of the fact that effective reform must be broad in scope and deep in constructive change.

One could responsibly argue that the present problems of the schools are not all that different from those of the past, but he would be much harder pressed to maintain that they have been as pervasive as they are now. The fact that many educators view the field with concern can be illustrated by the proliferation of sweeping suggestions for making the schools more effective in teaching and more suitable as socializing institutions. One of the most ambitious, and still influential, schemes so far proposed has been labeled "career education." This movement has accumulated a good deal of political power and continues to gather support from professionals and laymen alike. Simply in terms of financial backing career education deserves closer attention than it has so far received. In the last few years supporters claim to have gathered over \$100 million dollars to operationalize their programs.¹ One source insists that the amount received

from the federal government is closer to \$150 million, granted mostly from discretionary funds allocated by the U.S. Office of Education.²

Primarily because of its present prominence, I believe it important to examine the assumptions and arguments used to support "career education." I would like especially to evaluate "career education" in terms of its acceptability as an educational ideal, for it is usually inferred by supporters that it can meet ideal standards better than any other alternative. Both tasks require an examination of what might be called the "conceptual core" of the literature. I will proceed to lay out, as best I can, the basic concepts of career education which, together with their interrelationships, make the scheme intelligible as a theory. Now, this is not an easy task, for there are at least four factors which make explication difficult. (1) The concepts that constitute the scheme are admittedly vague and remain undeveloped in many important respects. Writers will admit frequently that terms lack precision and that the movement as a whole is not yet guided by universally accepted definitions.³ (2) It is also a fact that advocates of career education differ on many important points. Frequently, those who differ will say this is a good thing and, in a sense, they might be right. But the result of this divergence commonly produces a form of ambiguity that appears as contradiction. (3) Supporters often make claims that appear so sweeping as to be all inclusive. But by appearing to claim everything, these proposals lose their meaning and appear to say nothing at all.⁴ (4) The literature on career education is wide and various and, for this reason, hard to pull together. One has the feeling that no matter what he says he is doing someone an injustice. Recognizing all of these limitations and the pitfalls they create, I will proceed toward my stated objectives. I hope not so much to produce a definitive analysis as to start a constructive dialogue.

Vocational Ancestry

Despite the many attempts of writers on career education to disassociate themselves from the more narrow conceptions of vocational training, it is the older vocational education movement out of which career education has grown. But whereas leaders in vocational education argued that vocational training is necessary, in many cases, if one is to have the best possible education for him, they never tried to argue that it is necessary in every case or that it is sufficient in any case. Proponents of career education are more ambitious than their forebears. They seem to argue that their scheme is both necessary and sufficient for all who are being educated. Thus, they insist that reflective effort in education ought always to be centered around the problems of gaining employment.⁵ We have here a system that cannot be conceived simply as a portion of a student's education, nor as a separate subject field like that of vocational training. Career education provides the specific objective of successful career performance and employs it as the primary aim of all education.⁶

Career education, then, is proposed as a whole new paradigm for education.⁷ Career concerns would be made a part of every student's course of study from the moment he

enters school. Every subject he takes would be related, ostensibly, to the various ways adults live and earn a living. The assumption here is that virtually everything the school teaches, or should teach, can be helpful in at least one type of career.⁸ Indeed, career implications are said to be inherent in every learning experience from preschool to graduate school and beyond.⁹ Such are the rationale for requiring every teacher in every course to emphasize the contribution his subject makes to successful career performance.¹⁰ This stress is phased into every subject for every student, not just in separate classes designed for those who are "going to work."¹¹

I think the extreme formulation of these claims can be questioned. It seems naive to deny that the result of trying to operationalize such a belief would be an artificiality of the most glaring sort. Most of what must be learned in life is not for the sake of getting a job, but for the sake of leading a good life. And schools have been set up to concern themselves at least as much with the problems of leading a good life as with the problems of getting a job. It should be obvious that not all of what is involved in leading a good life can be understood and achieved simply through successful job performance. Thus, a good deal of the school's curriculum has to do only indirectly, if at all, with the eventual selection of individual occupations, for such considerations are not always tied to a person's leading a good life. A good life is based in part on social participation in cultural and intellectual activities that are more inclusive than those found in one's occupation. Individuals ought to be able to engage in conduct that results in an ever increasing understanding of the world in which they live.

Limiting studies to career concerns makes it less likely, rather than more likely, that this objective will be achieved. If we are to demand that school subject matter be related directly to career performance when such a connection does not always exist, then we must admit to a certain amount of artificiality or else deny the appropriateness of much of what schools have been established to achieve.

Proponents Persistent

Proponents of career education are, nonetheless, persistent in arguing that anything worth teaching can be related to occupation. They describe the curriculum, for example, as a series of experiences designed to enhance the job skills of students.¹² Such an orientation is thought to give each individual a self-concept in keeping with a work oriented society and assure his making a fair contribution to the group. It is through this somewhat devious approach to teaching that career education is said to make schools more relevant. Children are made aware of "the world of work" and their interests channeled into specific programs. Informal guidance and counseling, as well as instruction, are given throughout the school years. All students are encouraged to make a tentative career choice by the end of kindergarten and asked to modify or reaffirm that choice periodically throughout the period of their education.¹³

In the years up through grade school students are exposed to large and inclusive categories called "clusters" which serve

to reveal hundreds of separate occupations. For example, one will find a "transportation" cluster subsuming all of those jobs within the transportation industry. In all there are fifteen such categories from "personal services" to "marketing and distribution," each cluster representing hundreds of jobs and their interrelationships.

In the middle grades, 7 through 9, students begin to zero in on particular job clusters catching their eye. By the end of the 10th grade students are at work developing specific job entry skills that would make them employable if they decided not to finish high school. Those who graduate are in a position to accept a job or continue their education. In every case students have an opportunity to "enjoy actual work" during their high school years. Arrangements are made with business and industry to help give guidance and counseling. In this way, students are aided further in developing interests in potential careers.¹⁴

Influenced By Montessori?

Without any conscious intention to do so, proponents of career education have apparently adopted many of the pedagogical principles of Maria Montessori. Like Montessori, they maintain that children are best taught by providing a certain amount of freedom within a precisely structured environment. Sidney P. Marland Jr. has said that career education, "implies a structured orientation and preparation program for every student as an integral part of his academic course work throughout the school and college years."¹⁵ This claim appears to be founded on the belief that children require order and direction if what they learn is to be judged desirable, for such a belief underlies any justification of a rigid formulation of curriculum. Thus, when Marland and others describe teachers as facilitators and counselors, they are ignoring the fact that the curriculum, and those who formulate it, are predetermining the answers to the most important questions a student might ask. As Montessori was criticized by progressively minded educators in her own day, proponents of career education might likewise be denounced for ignoring both the ethics of imposition and established principles of learning.

The career education movement can be explained not only as a reaction against the way schools are presently being run, but against more radical proposals for change. Individuals in this movement view the alternative of "free schools" as irresponsible, and are especially offended by Ivan Illich's suggestion to "deschool society." Because of this view the career education movement can be best understood as a traditional reaction to revolutionary forces. One is reminded of the response of James Conant to the urban schools in the late 1950's. He said with alarm they contained "social dynamite." Most of his proposals were motivated by his desire to defuse the rebellion he foresaw and only indirectly to provide students with an adequate education.

Proponents of career education do not consider the possibility that schools could have problems for reasons other than a lack of career programs. But if our schools have problems it is not necessarily because they fail to focus on the learner's perception of himself as a worker. There are other possible explanations for the schools' failure to come

up to our standards. Indeed, it is likely that their failure is not solely the result of their internal organization. If the problems of schools emanate, even in part, from other than internal sources and if these problems are to be dealt with in an adequate fashion, then it is not enough for the schools simply to reform themselves. They must play a part in more fundamental social change. But the record of schools as institutions of social reform is less than impressive. There have been many to argue that schools will act invariably to preserve, not change the status quo.¹⁶ Christopher Jencks has recently defended the view that our nation has asked too much of its schools, expecting them to solve problems that society as a whole is unwilling to attack directly.¹⁷ The evidence he has gathered supports the conclusion that children are influenced more by what happens at home than by what happens in school. Once in school, the formal curriculum affects them far less than the intimate minute-by-minute contacts with classmates and teachers. And these, unfortunately, are so far beyond our control. Where there is some evidence of schools exerting an influence on students, the effect usually fails to carry over into adulthood. To assume that the problems of the schools can be remedied by imposing a rigid system of career preparation is not only naive, but makes the causes of school failure even more difficult to understand.

Purpose: Work Ethic

Career education has been described as a philosophical commitment by the enterprise of public education to the values of a work-oriented society.¹⁸ Its purpose is to establish a strong work ethic through the instructive functions of the school. "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch," is the cry.

Individual incomes and national strength still rest upon productivity. Some can live without work only by lowering the standard of living of all. . . . no society can survive without work. Moreover, he who does not contribute in some way to society's welfare is a parasite, a situation more harmful to himself than to the society. If the school prepares people for life, it must prepare them for work and for some type of worth ethic.¹⁹

In order to support the claim that career education would make schools more relevant, four assumptions are made and insisted upon: (1) That productivity per unit of population is directly related to a national commitment to the work ethic. (2) That the classical version of the Protestant work ethic is being eroded in American society. (3) That, historically, great civilizations have ceased to prosper after abandoning a commitment to the work ethic. (4) That career education will restore us to work ethic, adopted to reflect new social and economic realities.²⁰ Being aware of these assumptions, one can recognize the rationale of writers who assert that, "the work ethic should be taught to and accepted by all students."²¹ As imposing as this demand appears, the same people who make it will then turn around and claim to be giving students more freedom, rather than less freedom, in making decisions about how and what to learn. The claim is

based on their belief that the best measure of a man is found in what he achieves and how he serves.²² And one can neither achieve nor serve, so it is said, unless he is both willing and able to develop his work values in conjunction with the work values of his fellow men.²³

A Lack Of Sincerity?

It could be maintained that there is a lack of sincerity in these statements as well as a lack of knowledge. As to lack of sincerity, it seems clear that, despite their misleading remarks intended to demonstrate their concern with morality, proponents of career education do not deal adequately with questions of value. The explanation of this fact might be found in their exhibition of a missionary zeal for propagating their ideas. They speak frequently of the need to "convert" the schools to the programs of career education.²⁴ Working with such an assumption, it is easy to understand how they might fail to appreciate the need to deal with questions that could undermine their beliefs. Operating on faith, they conceive of their function in terms of spreading a creed. And a creed cannot be questioned. Its truth is guaranteed and its worth is beyond reproach.

Hence, it is hardly surprising to find sponsors of career education putting forth a version of the Protestant ethic as the only rational alternative in a society of moral men. Reading the literature, one is reminded of the moral messages in each and every story of McGuffey's reader. The primary purpose of the reader was to teach children to read. But this purpose made possible another: the moral indoctrination of youth. It is not in itself condemnable that a movement would moralize in behalf of a certain way of life. What one could criticize in the writings on career education is the superficiality with which they make their moral pronouncements. An obvious objection to the programs of career education is that they appear to manipulate the lives of students in ways that could result easily in exploitation. If a certain amount of manipulation accompanies the implementation of career education curricula, it ought to be justified or else tempered with an adequate degree of student participation in decisions of program and purpose.

Older forms of vocational education were frequently criticized for ignoring, and sometimes supporting, an already corrupt and unjust social order. Despite disclaiming remarks, career education supporters fail to provide any assurance that they would not continue in this tradition. Students are asked to step into an already existing job market without thinking of their place in the overall scheme of things. They are asked simply to be realistic and prepare for life in the society into which they will be graduated.²⁵

Unfortunately the emphasis on working within the system of existing social and economic relationships is not counterbalanced with a corresponding emphasis on developing an ability to think about the system in anything resembling a critical manner. In virtue of its failure to provide this critical capacity, it is hard to see how career education could be considered "ideal." The teaching of the ability to think, and to think free from institutional constraints, is a priority high on the list of any ideal educational scheme. The scheme must demand, among other things, that a person have the will as

well as the skill to evaluate and change the status quo when it no longer deserves to be perpetuated. John Dewey has been only one of many to point out that an education conceived exclusively in terms of securing a technical competency in specialized future pursuits becomes an instrument for perpetuating unchanged the existing social order instead of operating as a means of desirable transformation.²⁶

The National Urban League has expressed great concern about the effects of career education on desired social reform. They have gone so far as to call it a potential threat to American blacks and the urban poor. They believe that minority students will tend to be channeled into low-paying service jobs without any control over their fate. Students must be guaranteed not only certain job skills, but the right to decide how and when to use them.²⁷ Public schools have not traditionally worked in the interests of minorities. Indeed, they have served the needs of dominant social classes.²⁸ In its present amorphous condition, career education could easily operate to continue this pattern. "Career education" could turn out to be just another label with effects similar to infamous labels in the past. "Career education" seems destined to the sort of interpretation given eventually to words like "vocation," "special," "slow" and "tracked." These terms were first employed with the best of intentions, but employment ended to the disadvantage of those to whom they were used to refer.

Applicability Questioned

Career education has grown out of the research tradition of career development and is fused with concepts of manpower training. But there is a serious question as to whether concepts evolved for the purpose of dealing with the limited concerns of career development can have application to the general interests of educational foundations. Even used metaphorically, the language of career education appears inadequate to deal with the problems of formulating an educational theory. For example, the literature is permeated with discussion based on cost-benefit and business analysis. The need to alter school organization is conceived as the need to "retool" education. Truly, we often speak of retooling a factory, even an entire industry. But when we talk of changing the organization of schools we usually recognize psychological and moral dimensions in our task that simply are not present when we speak of "retooling" an industry. Educational change is more than physical; it is dispositional as well. Conceiving of such change as if it were a process of retooling can distort important dimensions of educational enterprise. We could object similarly to conceiving the curriculum as a "delivery system," for such a conception brings to light only the tangible and measurable effects of teaching and learning. It is not unwarranted to expect the schools to deal with more than practical concerns.²⁹

In the literature on career education one can occasionally find attempts to operationalize abstract ideas. But these attempts are usually totally ill conceived. "Intelligence" for example, is described in terms of "units." The overriding temptation of a discerning reader is to ask for the rationale of such a conceptualization. One cannot say that it is generally

recognized that such a reduction is possible. The suspicion is that the interpretation is for the sake of consistency and the argument that career education can be supported by every important educational consideration. Another example illustrating this point can be found in the not infrequent reference to human beings as human resources. Viewing people as resources allows their programs to be seen as a form of investment in human capital—an investment offering the promise of high economic returns.³⁰ I would contend that viewing education solely in terms of an investment in human capital, providing potentially high returns makes it more, rather than less, difficult to see what is at stake in the educational enterprise. Education is not simply a means to making individuals contributing economic producers and responsible members of society.³¹ And a system of education with a demonstrated capacity to contribute to economic growth and national well-being is not necessarily a desirable system.³²

Relevance To Accountability

Perhaps one reason for using the language of cost-benefit analysis to describe an educational ideal can be found in the fact that it makes accountability an achievable reality. Indeed, supporters of career education see accountability as an extremely important feature of an ideal educational scheme. Their system "offers accountability because its objectives are clearly defined and its success or failure can be measured in the employment, earnings, and job satisfaction of its recipients."³³ As cost-benefit terminology is used to describe the advantages of career education, the language of medicine is used to depict the ills of contemporary schooling and to suggest further ways to remedy them. Their curriculum programs, or "instructional components," are referred to as "treatments." These treatments are applied after a proper "diagnosis" is made of each situation. "Prescriptive treatments" are then formulated and carefully evaluated against desired outcomes and, if necessary, "recycled" or improved upon. "The iterative cycle of diagnosis, prescription, treatment, assessment, accepting, rejecting, and recycling is the central project strategy."³⁴ And the strategy itself is conceived as nothing less than a "systematic research and engineering effort."³⁵

Writers proclaim that education can at last have intelligible criteria of success; that is, criteria having the advantage of being practical, achievable, and measurable. But can the ideal be defined simply in terms of what can be made measurable? There are phenomena in education that cannot be ignored solely on the grounds they cannot be measured with existing instruments and techniques. If this is the case, the conclusion stands out that the criteria of success developed in the literature on career education are less than adequate. And if they are not adequate, we have sufficient grounds for rejecting career education as an educational ideal, for its acceptance is contingent not only on its being successful, but on the criteria themselves being judged satisfactory.

Almost a half a century ago John Dewey described a vocation as signifying any form of continuous activity that

renders service to others and engages personal power in behalf of some result.³⁶ He went on to warn us not to conceive of a vocation simply as an activity producing tangible commodities, or such that they are distributed in an exclusive way; one and only one to each person. He insisted that, "nothing could be more absurd than to try to educate individuals with an eye to only one line of activity."³⁷ To the degree an activity is isolated it loses its meaning and becomes merely a way to keep busy. We must all be conceived as having a variety of callings. No one has simply a single-role life. To the extent that a person approximates such a condition he is a kind of monstrosity. We naturally identify an individual by naming that particular vocation which distinguishes his personality. But in education we must not let this fact blind us to other essential activities and interests simply because they are commonly shared with others.³⁸

In all of his educational writings Dewey described the dominant vocation of all human beings as an intellectual and moral expansion of practical capabilities. But he saw education as rigid and stifling when career guidance is thought of as leading up to a definite and all encompassing choice. One's calling must not fossilize him.³⁹ It is a conventional and arbitrary view which assumes that the choice of one's career is made once and for all at some particular point in time. Educators must periodically remind themselves of this seemingly obvious fact, for the history of education reveals a pattern of their ignoring it. Dewey himself recognized a general lack of technical proficiency in his own day and admitted that such a proficiency is desirable in its own right, as well as for the production of more and better goods. No one cares for what he cannot half do.⁴⁰ But it is important to distinguish a proficiency in a particular area of work and a competency extended to view it in a larger light. Giving one the skills to carry out someone else's designs is not as high on the list of educational priorities as giving one the ability to formulate his own. Despite an occasional acknowledgement of this latter concern in the literature of career education, the primary objective of the movement too often appears to be centered on the development of skills in an accepting job market. As important as this consideration can be, we can conclude unequivocally that a system of education is unacceptable if it ignores or consciously works against the paramount goal of freeing the mind from the forces that create it. The career education movement can make a valuable contribution to revitalization of our schools. But first someone must rethink its objectives and their place in the palace revolution.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sidney P. Marland, "The School's Role in Career Development," *Educational Leadership*, vol. XXX (December 1972), p. 204.
2. Sally Spitzer, "Career Education: A New Name for an Old Game," *Education, Policy and Information Center Bulletin of the National Urban League*, vol. I (Summer 1972).
3. Keith Goldhammer and Robert E. Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972), p. 5.
4. Kenneth B. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it.* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Olympus Publishing Company, 1972) p. 2.

5. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. 2.
6. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it*, p. 6.
7. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. V.
8. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it*, p. 74.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
12. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. 6.
13. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it*, p. 74.
14. "Career Education," U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW Publication # (OE) 72-39, 1971), pp. 7-8.
15. Marland, "The School's Role in Career Development," p. 203.
16. G. Max Wingo, *The Philosophy of American Education* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1964), pp. 57-121.
17. "Can Equality be Taught?" *Newsweek*, vol. LXXX (September 11, 1972), p. 50.
18. "Career Education," U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, p. 4.
19. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it*, p. 14.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
23. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. 10.
24. "Career Education," U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, p. 8, and Keith Goldhammer, "Alternative Educational Futures: The Choices Before Us" (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University, 1972), p. v.
25. "Career Education," U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, p. 8.
26. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 319.
27. Ermon O. Hogan, "Career Education in the Urban League Movement: Beyond Vocational Education," *Education, Policy and Information Center Bulletin of the National Urban League*, vol. 1 (Summer 1972).
28. Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), and Henry J. Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education, 1865-1965* (New York: Random House, 1968).
29. Gordon I. Swanson, "Career Education" (Columbus, Ohio: The Center for Vocational and Technical Education, The Ohio State University, 1971), p. 5.
30. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. 111.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. Hoyt, et al, *Career Education: What it is and how to do it*, p. 6.
34. Goldhammer and Taylor, *Career Education: Perspective and Promise*, p. 8.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 319.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

"Education has never had an easy time of it. It is constantly the subject of a contest because it does not have well defined boundaries. The classicist argues persuasively that real education is cultivation of the mind. But the vocational voice, highly regarded in our culture, stresses the importance of job-oriented instruction. And the pragmatist seeks to reconcile these divergent views, often with little success. Small wonder that educational critics, a group to which all citizens belong by the very nature of their concern, disagree about educational goals. And because our society has not yet made up its mind about what schools should be about, it is not surprising that teachers sometimes question what it is they are trying to do."

—Donald J. McCarty and Associates
New Perspectives on Teacher Education, pp. vii-viii
(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973)