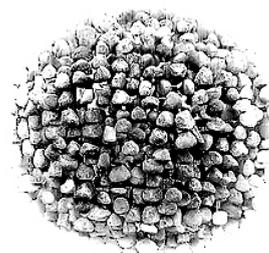


YOUTH EDUCATION FOR ALL - THAT WORKS!

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Schools that fail to teach their students anything

It is possible to be taught without learning a thing - and conversely, one can easily learn a thing without being taught.

The target group of production schools often have specific problems, of various nature and degree, with the forms of education they were exposed to in the institutional education system, whether in primary, secondary, or vocational school.

When perusing the notes to the Danish Production Schools Act we find that the legislators first contrived production schools as a provision primarily for groups of "disadvantaged young people" - also branded the "residual group in education".

In real life, however that rather technical generic term covers a group with vastly different social and cultural backgrounds. An evaluation study of production schools completed in the spring of 2000¹⁸ made it clear that the term includes large groups of young people with a social and cultural baggage of a nature that makes it difficult for them to begin or complete a VET education.

Mainstream education has (probably always) been stuck in that dilemma. Education involves lots of formal scholastic knowledge, infused or prescribed to students without any particular cohesion with the practicalities of real life. As a result large groups of students have little or no profit of that education - and may even drop out altogether.

We are not dealing with unfamiliar problems here. In recent years several Danish social studies have fully documented that our education system has proved blatantly incapable of making up for social inequality. The case is most thoroughly documented in a study by Erik Jørgen Hansen, mapping the education patterns of a generation over 25 years¹⁹: "The study breaks with a view of the Danish education system as one developed to benefit all Danish citizens. It documents that education has not worked as a social equalisation factor, not by a far cry, and that resources for education are not allocated by principles considered to be of essence to a democracy. A very sizeable skew in resources spent on education is documented. Numerous initiatives have failed to make up for a permanent residual group problem comprising 33 per cent of a youth cohort. Thus our VET and upper secondary education system does not secure a basic qualification of our future labour force."²⁰

So these issues have already been disclosed, and are even often on the agenda of the Danish education policy debate. Enormous sums are invested on education. Yet, a serious effort to change the learning conditions that prevent large groups from benefiting from it still appears to be an exotic notion to our education system.

Everybody can learn, given the right conditions

An overriding experience of production schools, who have worked with these groups of young people for a good 20 years, is that their participants - practically all - have considerable learning resources, once they are given the right learning environment.

This and similar experience should not be alien to the education policy debate. In that context let us emphasise the groundbreaking (in more than one respect) Lisbon Declaration²¹ on lifelong learning, which also stated that 'judged by the provisions of most contemporary education systems one would think that our ways of living and taking education had not changed over the past 50 years'!

The declaration also underscores the fact that we need to create systems that adapt to individuals and not the other way round, that quality and results are the most important to the users, and that people's "learning capacity" (which in many has been ruined by education from which they learned nothing) is a basic qualification, as an incentive to active participation in learning processes throughout our lives.

We need all our young people

The small youth cohorts and a predictable shortage of skilful practitioners do not make it less urgent for us to find different forms of learning that can bring out the resources of these young people.

However, the problem of making systems suit individuals - as apparent in the 2000 Danish VET reform - is that such changes are very likely to produce a super-individualistic, elitist new system. The thing is that the reform is also based on an alleged so-called cultural emancipation in society, meaning that each individual is free to make her/his choices - including a 'deselection' of one's own background.

However the residual groups in education are by and large characterised by a non-middleclass background, so they cannot make use of middle-class-type education. Young people belonging in the residual groups of education have a few features in common: They come from more non-verbal backgrounds, from population segments and families with different cultural and social approach and language use than those most valued in a school environment. In other words, their values and behaviours differ greatly from the culture appreciated by mainstream education.²²

If they drop out the social security system is always close at hand, including its patronising dependency. That is a trap that will easily snap on these groups of rather disadvantaged young

people who fail to consolidate themselves on the labour market. The result is familiar: clientship and imminent ostracism.

The main part of young middleclass individuals - the primary target group of the education establishment - fare a lot better. They are practically predestined to complete a reasonable education, and provided their upbringing and formative process have otherwise followed the beaten track they are fully socialised into believing that anything going on at an education institution is good - and if not exactly good, then at least a necessary evil. They are embraced as the system's most legitimate participants. Their education careers run according to a principle of ascending trajectories - with ambitions on behalf of the most gifted ones.

That leaves no room for good practitioners. The system mostly sorts them out, almost automatically since looking to their needs goes beyond its practice. The system monopolises education, ousting other forms of learning - and if not, it will make room for them in a discontinuous and off-hand manner.

Here it is a concern of ours to underscore that the norms governing our education are not necessarily all wrong; they just cannot stand alone. That there is a need for true alternatives in the form of other - both qualified and parallel - forms of learning.

The school that is not a school

Jean Lave's contribution also provides a coherent and more general characteristic of different forms of learning found at production schools (the school that is not a school) - a characterisation that must be of great interest, both to actors at the production schools proper and to actors in other fields of the Danish education arena.

One fact has been all-important for the achievements of production schools: the strong communities of practice evolved at the individual schools and their workshops, jointly created by their participants through their shared life.

Let us emphasize the sure integration of newcomers into the learning environment of a workshop - an aspect already dealt with in the 1984 White Paper on Production Schools²³. In her contribution Lave terms this vital element of our toolbox legitimate peripheral participation. That should be understood as a generic term denoting 'open access to participating in a community of practice', which we already practise, yet may have failed to make sufficiently known in education policy terms, since preoccupied with making our own practice work.

The fact that Lave applies the concept for production schools also indicates that 'the education establishment' now will now have to acknowledge our extraordinary opportunities for participation - and thus for learning.

And let us emphasize yet another vital tool, by Lave characterised as changing participation in changing communities of practice (which equals her general definition of learning): the indispensable range of different workshops, and at each of them the necessary availability of many and different production tasks. What really matters is that you are always part of several contexts and can alternate between different tasks in different contexts.

These learning spaces, created at the production schools, embody a whole lot of learning opportunities that are hard to come by elsewhere in our education system. Once our participants become part of productive learning contexts they do not need a motivation to learn; but most of the time they are very keen to help solve the working assignments at hand. When solved in a community of practice, those tasks provide a stable motive for participation. The thing is that it is both acceptable (legitimate) and meaningful to join in. And most of the time our young people end up taking 'ownership' of the working process, which in turn ensures a natural learning at nearly 100 per cent - provided, of course that the workshop runs busily like it should, and can do.

Production schools lead the way

In her contribution Lave says that production schools make it abundantly clear what learning is all about - as a place where learning will transform a person's understanding of her or his learning opportunities in life - and a place where learning opportunities will unfold across the multiple contexts through which they contribute to the life of the school.

She sees an inspirational school because it actually helps promote the participants' chances of moulding their own lives, and she has seen that it works in practice.

Others have seen that, too. In that context it lies near to pull out the OECD report²⁴ on the transition from education to working life back out into the light, after (or so it seems) it was rather prematurely shelved by our Ministry of Education, not least considering the highly interesting sections on safety nets for the disadvantaged and on production schools.

From the report is also seen that during their visits to Danish education institutions, the OECD examiners heard a refrain repeated by education 'pros': that 'attempts are made in order to move from a system, in which teachers have the prime responsibility for educating their students, and towards a system in which students will assume the prime responsibility for their own learning'.

The OECD folks commented the refrain as follows (Section 169): "There are good reasons for educators, trainers and policy makers from OECD countries to be interested in these ideas. Properly implemented, they have, as we have just seen in the case of the Production Schools, the potential to get many people who never thought they wanted to have anything to do with education highly motivated to get as much as they can of it. They can help many people who simply could not learn with more conventional methods learn a great deal more quickly. (...) And they lead naturally to a taste and facility for life-long learning, an explicit goal of many nations these days."

From the OECD examiners' visit to a production school²⁵ we would like to cite the following: "Students are treated as if they are responsible, and are expected to be. The conversations we had with these young people made it clear that most of them, for a variety of reasons, had given up on themselves before they arrived. Some had been referred by the Municipality or their parents. Others had referred themselves. Most did not expect to find anything there. They did, though. All but one that we talked to had found hope. Most had discovered that they could do something that was not easy, something that would earn the respect of others and their own self-respect, something that people would pay good money for, or, for the musicians, something that people would travel to come and hear. They found a place where they were genuinely valued for themselves. And it worked."

Praise and good intentions - but then what?

Considering the positive descriptions of production schools one would assume they deserved being used in a rather more proactive way on the education policy arena; however that raises a few issues.

Production schools are - and now even by statute²⁶ - obliged to make a special effort to motivate and prepare their participants for a continuing VET education. By tradition such educations are considered the most application-oriented and relevant for our target group. That also used to be the general idea - that a VET education was an obvious path for young people with more practice-minded predispositions and skills. And many actually did make it to their trade journeyman's certificate, even with less than excellent scholastic gifts.

But we need to point out a few of the most urgent problems that, due to the 2000 Danish VET reform, we envisage for our participants' future prospects in vocational education.

A recent article in *Weekendavisen*²⁷ had the following statement, "The new reform both wants to lure resourceful students away from advanced secondary education while also roping in the most disadvantaged ones to the education system. But apparently it has merely widened

the gaps, leaving the very weakest with a bill to pay."

Anyhow, after the reform was launched, production schools have noted an increase in dropouts from VET provisions, all of whom we have to rescue.

Admittedly the 2000 VET reform very much relies on students to work independently with projects (without needing a lot of additional teaching!), but with different individual targets and levels, and within the framework of an extremely modularised education set-up that makes it possible to pick out the elite. That makes the reform come across as progressive in relation to the new learning theories.

There is much to indicate that what is really going on is an elite-orientation²⁸ of VET educations. A strategic planning document from the Danish Education Agency (Ministry of Education) underscored the following as a central point of the 2000 VET reform: It allows for a more widespread and legitimate practice (than today) of letting identical education provisions produce different levels of quality. Thus the 2000 VET reform encourages an inequality-oriented pedagogical set-up, since - "as a legitimate target" - it will let VET provisions produce an "internal marginalisation" of the less adept in terms of scholastic proficiency in an "updated segregation school".

The planning document's chapter on "Rethinking the holistic approach to education" clearly and

unequivocally states that the 2000 VET reform represents a break with the 1991 reform's notion of differentiated education, the purpose of which was to let all participants achieve identical or comparable skills in different ways, and in a social setting.

Now their learning processes are reduced to individual accumulation of knowledge. From being a 'collective' measure holism becomes a strictly individual matter.

Against that backdrop it is really not to wonder if and when young people with a non-scholastic approach to learning may find themselves compelled to look out for other pastures. Apparently the VET system has no room for the practically minded - either in its streams towards academic or business competencies.

But then - was the plan to also have "the most disadvantaged" roped in by the education system just a passing thought or a whim? And presumably the expression "the most disadvantaged" reflects just precisely the one-track minded verbal and scholastic set-up of the entire education system. We do know, after all, that given access to other forms of learning these young people have plenty of the learning resources and potentials that our society so needs.

How can they ever cope?

We have excellent practitioners and capable citizens - yet, how can they ever cope with mainstream education? Here it lies near to look for learning transfer, a core concept in learning psychology and pedagogical studies. The concept refers to the fact that a behaviour acquired in one situation can be transferred to and repeated in a different situation.

Gradually, as we begin to think of all learning as being situated - meaning that it takes place in a specific context and thus cannot directly be transferred and used in another context (unless you have adaptive powers) - the issue of learning transfer is coming into focus.

The problem is mostly referred to when discussing to what extent scholastic knowledge and skills can be transferred to non-scholastic contexts²⁹ ("practice shock"). Yet production schools are faced with quite another problem. We see our participants acquire a lot of skills during their stay. Among other things they develop adaptive skills and plenty of new knowledge. But we find it hard to ensure that credit is given for such skills and is transferred to a scholastic environment, e.g. when they proceed to a VET school.

That indeed is a major barrier. In order for these young people to successfully enter another school culture they urgently need acceptance and recogni-

Such recognition and acceptance can make possible "handles" to give them a better welcome at a new school.

Production schools have tried to develop documentation tools that would enable participants to get credit for skills acquired by solving practical tasks at our workshops. However those attempts invariably ran into trouble, since such documentation would always have to reflect the tasks our participants have carried out independently - and here we speak a language that does not fit into the curricular thinking of VET schools.

We also need to call attention to the fact that way back in 1984 the Danish 'Folketing' (our parliament) was unanimous in adopting the so-called 10 stage programme, Item 10 of which reads: "Adults should have a right to document and be credited for their actual competencies, regardless of origin." Given the fact that there is now to be 'lifelong learning' for all it would be more than timely for something to be done about it.

Introduction of a parallel practice stream at VET schools

In order to get moving we would propose that VET schools introduce a parallel practice stream. We need to stress that does not make us proponents of second-rate educations, but much rather of an ambitious novel education prospect for the practically-minded, including young people with a social and cultural background other than standard Danish middleclass.

We see it as a replacement for the right to discharge students with "part competencies", which the Danish VAT reform has also opened up to. We do not know how that option will be practised; but we do fear that young people from our target group (and other skilful practitioners) will start on a VET education, try to hang on and make it through some kind of formal education - and achieve nothing but a 'part competency certificate' that, when presented to an employer, could even make them the laughing-stock.

As we said, we have no way of predicting how things will turn out; but instead of spending so many public resources on that kind of 'buying customers' we would find it a lot more appropriate to offer them a parallel practice stream, with the many learning opportunities inherent in quasi-apprenticeship communities of practice.

The new stream should be organised to make room for decentralised, autonomous learning and an exceedingly 'flat' education structure, with a skilled worker's certificate as its fixed target (as opposed to the élitist segregation race of the 2000 VET reform).

Natural and sure learning should be secured by allowing students to form strong communities of practice (within the school setting), thus many of the learning features found in production school practice.

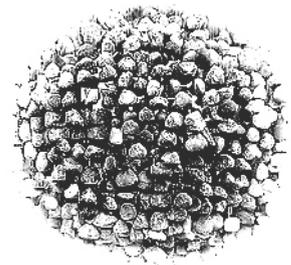
Our Ministry of Education and the trades committees are most welcome to make high demands, should they fear for the level and quality of such new stream in education. Only their demands should be based on 'best practice' skills instead of verbal/scholastic skills.

And in case those parties also fear that such a stream would produce skilled illiterates, then we can reassure them: In our experience practically-minded young people will make sure to fill any major gaps in scholastic prowess, once they get a chance to become accomplished practitioners.

But that is definitely not where to start!

We have often seen that such practitioners even develop and acquire innovative skills, provided they do not require scholastic studies. So let us conclude with a quote from a book by Mette Mønsted, Copenhagen Business School, who (among other things) is investigating why public-fund advisory services for small enterprises have such poor impact³⁰:

"Most of the time people in small enterprises are not impressionable to abstract, general knowledge. For themselves, they will work and learn in a completely different manner, namely based on their present needs. They are used to solving problems as they occur, and they are attuned to search for new knowledge to do so. Yet, knowledge as apart from problems - they just won't buy it. They lack a motive."



Notes

- 1) ACIU is an acronym in Danish, denoting the Danish "Labour Market Centre for International Education Initiatives". On 1 July 2000 ACIU became part of Cirius, the Danish "Centre for Information and Advisory Services on International Education and Co-operation Initiatives", an independent national institution under the Danish Ministry of Education.
- 2) Anders Mathiesen is a senior lecturer in Education Sociology with the Social Studies Faculty, Roskilde University. Since the late 60s A.M. has been working with the issues of residual groups in education, and in a manner that also placed into focus the social inequity and injustice reflected by the allocation of education opportunities in Denmark.
- 3) At the time Jean Lave was a visiting professor at the Institute of Psychology, University of Copenhagen.
- 4) Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger, "Situated Learning - Legitimate peripheral participation", Cambridge University Press 1991. The book presents a groundbreaking rethinking and reformulation of the concept of learning, making it a meta-concept - as independent of education - a status that caused theoretical practice in further thought on education to disintegrate.
- 5) "Produktionsskoler og Iværksætterkultur - Hvabehar?". In Danish. ("Production Schools and Entrepreneurship Culture - really?"). Ed. FFP, Confederation of Danish Production Schools. 1997. The publication was the Danish production schools' contribution to the Danish Ministry of Education's action programme to support entrepreneurial culture in Denmark.
- 6) Editorial note re "legitimate peripheral participation: The concept was first introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) and has in recent years become a key concept in learning research. The concept is used to analyse relations between newcomers and experienced participants and comprises activities, identities, artefacts and communities of knowledge and practice. 'Legitimate peripheral participation' describes the process by which newcomers become part of the community of practice." Here cited from the glossary of Klaus Nielsen & Steinar Kvale, "Mesterlære - Læring som social praksis", Copenhagen 1999.
- 7) Carl Nissen is senior advisor in general adult education and youth initiatives.
- 8) Lone Kaplan is consultant of Cirius, "Centre for Information and Advisory Services on International Education
- 9) The U-77 project is detailed in a report, "Kombinerede undervisnings og produktionsprogrammer". In Danish. ("Combined Education and Production Programmes"). Ed. Danish Ministry of Education. April 1978.
- 10) Report worked out by Tegnestuen Vindrosen, "Lerjord som byggemateriale - vejledning". In Danish. (Clay soil used as construction material - instructions). Ed. The Danish Construction Development Council. January 1993. The report details the constructional experience gained during the construction of the youth housing project.
- 11) Report published by KPS, "Ungdomsboligprojektet MEDBYG - En rapport om et forsøgs- og demonstrationsprojekt af ungdomsboliger ved KPS - opført i stampet lerjord og med unge deltagere som medbyggere". In Danish. (The youth housing project MEDBYG - erected in tamped clay and with production school participants as co-builders).
- 12) Nils Ørum-Nielsen and Nis Peter Kjær Lange, "Sydpå for en stund - med Martin og Så Simon". In Danish. ("Goin' South for a While - with Martin and Then Simon"). Printed and published by KPS in November 1999 (ISBN 87-982224-4-9). The book sold pretty well and received quite laudatory critique from the reviewers of the national public library service.
- 13) The KPS Youthstart project was described in detail and evaluated in a report, "Projektervalueringsrapport Youthlink 97/YS/301C/ DK", KPS. November 2000. In Danish.

- 14) 'DO' is a Danish acronym for 'Danish ingeniousness'.
- 15) Steen Larsen "Det musiske og logiske". In Danish. ("The Artistic and the Logical"). Hellerup 1996, 122 pp.
- 16) Jean Lave, "Learning in practice: Kalundborg Production School, page 9.
- 17) Marianne Søgaard Sørensen, "Den usynlige læderpose - et arbejdsblad om personlige vejledningskompetencer". In Danish. ("The invisible leather bag - a working paper on personal counselling skills"). Ed. Udviklingscentret for folkeoplysning og voksenundervisning. (Danish Development Centre for General and Adult Education). Copenhagen. April 2001.
- 18) "Produktionsskolerne i Danmark - deltagere og skoleprofiler". In Danish. ("Danish Production Schools - Participant and School Profiles"). A study conducted for the Danish Ministry of Education by the Danish Development Centre for General and Adult Education. The Danish Ministry of Education. Feature Series of the Danish Education Agency, vol. 13. 2000.
- 19) Erik Jørgen Hansen, "En generation bliver voksen". In Danish. ("A Generation Grows Up"). Danish Social Research Institute. 1995.
- 20) The abstract of Erik Jørgen Hansen's study as cited by Anne Retz Wessberg, "Livslang læring - om at tilpasse læringsformer til forskellige målgrupper". In Danish. ("Lifelong learning - on adapting forms of learning to different target groups.") Ed. ACIU. 2000
- 21) The Lisbon Declaration adopted by an EU Summit in March 2000. Followed up by the EU Commission's "Lifelong Learning Memorandum".
- 22) Cited from article by Anders Mathiesen, "UTA og restgruppeproblemerne i 90'erne". In Danish. (UTA - and the issue of residual groups in education in the 90s). Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift 4/1998.
- 23) "Hvidbog om produktionsskoler". In Danish. ("White Paper on Production Schools"). The Danish Ministry of Education. December 1984.
- 24) The OECD report "Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life" is from January 1999 and was published at a press conference in the Danish Ministry of Education in mid-February 1999. The quote is from section 5.6, item 169.
- 25) Quote from the OECD report, the part specifically dealing with Korsør Production School, based on the examiners' visit (Section 5.5, Box 1).
- 26) Under the Danish Production Schools Act, § 1, item 3 the production school provision should be "organised with particular respect to imparting skills that will enable the participant to carry through a VET education."
- 27) Article in Weekendavisen (a Danish weekly), "Mon bukserne holder" (Literally "Will the trousers hold" - indicating that VET schools may overreach themselves), 10 March 2001.
- 28) The following three quotes are from Anders Mathiesen: "Uddannelsernes sociologi". In Danish. ("The Sociology of Educations"). København 2000. (From the chapter on VET reforms and holistic approaches to education).
- 29) Klaus Nielsen and Steinar Kvale "Mesterlære - læring som social praksis". In Danish. ("Apprenticeship - learning as social practice"). København 1999.
- 30) Here cited from "Sløve, Dumme Danskere?". In Danish. ("Indolent, stupid Danes?"). Copenhagen Business School.