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Young Lives and Vocational Education

Researching young lives and the culture of the Danish Vocational Education and Training System

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Publication date:
2010

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Hjort-Madsen, P. (2010). *Young Lives and Vocational Education: Researching young lives and the culture of the Danish Vocational Education and Training System.* Paper presented at Comparative Educational Pathways, York, United Kingdom.

Young Lives and Vocational Education – Researching young lives and the culture of the Danish Vocational Education and Training System

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Introduction

The focus of this paper draws attention to the complex, complicated and ambiguous transition of youth pathways to adulthood. Based on an ongoing research project transition is being used to explore the concrete situation of students having to navigate between an arbitrary cultural order within the educational system (Bourdieu 1977) – something not all students merit – and an expected rationality of having a clear objective for attending a particular vocational education (Jørgensen 2009 (a)) in order to enter the job market and become full-fledged members of society. The tangible use of transition in this paper relates to the specific context of the empirical study (ethnographic interviews and classroom observations within different vocational education contexts) and therefore not only transition from school to work as often seen in research on Vocational Education and Training (see Jørgensen 2009 (a); Raffe 2003; Hodkinson, and Sparkes 1997 – see also Heath et al. 2009 on youth research not necessarily in the field of VET). Transition is in other words used to underline the complex situatedness of being young and in the middle of an educational context that supposedly is the pathway to adulthood, but which might be perceived as being *in the middle of something* where a defined ending point might not be in sight.

Furthermore I would like to follow up on McDermott and Varenne's call for a shift – when focusing on the problems of contemporary (their focus; American) education – from approaching children (in this case youth) with a "diagnostic and remedial preoccupation" arguing that "... it might be best to forget individual children and focus instead on how we have created contexts that make some children – about half of them – so problematic" (McDermott and Varenne 2006, p. 4). By pursuing the dilemmas experienced by three different students with very different background(s) it is my intention to unfold how the arbitrary cultural system produces students as problematic despite their "will" to participate, complete their education and from there go into the labour market and into adulthood. Consequently this paper is a call for a research based understanding of the student's background and their participation placed *within* the specific institutional context of vocational education. In continuation hereof it is concluded that if we want to understand why it is hard for some young people to navigate within the educational system, it is of pivotal importance not to detach the dilemmas experienced by students from the structures of the culturally arbitrary educational system. We need to stop pointing to young people's "laziness" or lack of engagement because in doing so we ignore both the fact that very often young people would wish for nothing more than to complete their education, as well as the fact that the educational system itself reproduces certain cultural structures and cultural norms of participation and not least norms of failure and success.

The context of the Danish Vocational Education and Training System

In order to understand the national and institutional context of a Danish VET setting, a historical outline is needed. By historical outline is not meant a linear reading of the

past events and lead politics of the VET system. On the contrary the historical perspective is an essential part of constructing the research object. By constructing the research object historically it exceeds the narrow context of the empirical fieldwork and relates the object to its broader context (Bourdieu 1996).

Significant to the Danish VET system is what would be considered as a dual system (in some context called the "sandwich model") based on a combination of school-based education in a Vocational Collage and workplace training in a company. This model has proven to be highly effective with regards to a successful transition from school to work because it slowly incorporates young people into the labour market (Jørgensen 2009 (a)). Historically the dual system is closely tied to the organization of the crafts and in this context the different trade unions (Cort and Wiborg 2009; Juul and Koudahl 2009), which partly explains the model of "taking common responsibility" (cf. state, schools, business, trade unions and vocational students) – a responsibility that has more resemblance of a struggle between different interests and the legitimate power of shaping the system in accordance to these interests (Bourdieu 1996), than that of mutual understanding and consensus.

Critique of the system has respectively focused on "low retention rates, drop-outs and a threat of falling esteem of the vocational track in relation to general education" (Jørgensen 2009 (a)) as well as the latest big reform of the VET system (Reform 2000) and its extensive individualisation of educational pathways (Koudahl 2006). In the current situation (referring to the global economic crisis – a crisis that is still forming and transforming the debate on VET), the Danish government has put forward a political goal for 95% of a year group to complete an upper secondary education in 2015 (currently 80% complete an upper secondary education – Jørgensen 2009 (b)). In the slipstream of this context a discussion on who's responsibility it is to give young people an opportunity to complete a vocational education has occurred; is it companies who have profited in good times on the highly qualified students or is it the educational systems (state) responsibility not to permit actual youth unemployment like most European countries experienced in the 1980ies? In dealing with this question researchers and politicians have been looking in different directions; towards a more school based regime like Sweden or more marked based regime like in the UK? The school based regimes have some qualities with regards to further education/higher education but might be most beneficial for the "stronger" students, who have already experiences with or have considered general education like high school/gymnasium (Jørgensen 2009 (a)). The marked based regime on the other hand holds the risk of educating/training young people fairly close to the "here and now" demands of companies and thereby leaving young people less flexible on the labour market – the advantage would be that companies can take in students/ apprentices/trainees without having to fulfil strict demands defined by the VET system.

One aspect that is surfacing in a Danish context (as well as internationally – see Smeyers and Depaepe 2008) is the concept of "educationalization" – an educational response to social problems. In the context of this paper, two threads of the concept of educationalization can be pursued; one generated from my empirical data and one related to structural changes within the field of youth and education guidance (the two threads are tightly interwoven). First of all I noticed, while speaking to the young students attending the different vocational programs, that many of them had attended

more than one upper secondary education and that many of them did not have a clear idea of what they wanted to do upon completion of the program they were attending (see below the elaboration and discussion of the three students). As mentioned in the introduction of this paper it has been common sense that students attending VET programs chose a specific job – not choosing an education. This is to some extent still an accurate picture if we look at some of the more classic programs (carpenter, motor mechanic, hair dresser, etc.). But why then this lack of vision amongst the students I talked to? Following the other thread, the structural change within the field of youth and education guidance, and more specifically the establishment of local guidance centres (Juul and Koudahl 2009), it seems that guidance has been pushed towards a rationale of "education is the solution" – even if education is the problem for some of these young people. The point is; whether young people desire education or not, whether they want to work and earn money or not, whether they are sick and tired of going to school, the only opportunity they are given is education, education and even more education (see also Standish 2008). By pointing to the consequences of the naturalized (dominant) rationale of education, the idea is not to reject positive aspects of education or the potential social mobilisation of education. On the contrary, pointing towards the naturalization of education is done in order to discuss the consequences for the students who – as implied – are caught in the educational grinder.

Turning back to the point of constructing the research object trough a historical outline, the concrete problems of the Danish VET system – who is responsible for ensuring apprenticeships, growing individualization as a consequence of Reform 2000, the fact that education increasingly is perceived as the solution to globalization as well as social problems – are altogether framing the complex, complicated and ambiguous context that young people attending a VET programme are facing.

Young lives and the school
As mentioned in the introduction the dilemmas that three young people are encountering within an arbitrary (see below) cultural system will be unfolded in this section. The way it is being done is by an elaboration and discussion of the ethnographic interviews conducted with the three students and more precisely an elaboration of their life and school situation (circumstances). The three interviews elaborated upon are part of a larger body of interviews – 26 ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979; Bourdieu et al. 1999) – all conducted as part of six weeks of classroom observations (Spradley 1980; Prieur 2002 (b)) in the fall of 2009 – the first step of the production of empirical data. Even though the whole body of data has not been analyzed in debt yet, the three interviews all shed light on the students' complex situation and multi-faceted lives. The three students chosen for this paper have very different backgrounds and they are encountering different problems as well as engaging within the educational activities in very different ways. On top of these differences the three students are attending different educational entrances; Tom is attending "HG" (a school based two year basic mercantile/business education – after the school-based period there is two years of apprenticeship in a shop or an office or similar); Jane is attending "Service assistant" (a 40 week basic service and cleaning course and hereafter the students are supposed to find an apprenticeship); Nabil is attending "Food for People" (a 40 week introduction course to basic kitchen techniques, hygiene, etc. followed by approximately two years of apprenticeship). The tree students will be elaborated and discussed separately below.

Before proceeding with the three students, a short unfolding of what has been pointed out to be the *arbitrary cultural system* is needed. As emphasized by Esmark in the introduction to the Danish edition of Bourdieu and Passeron's *La reproduction* from 1970, students are exposed to: "… pedagogical work which goal it is to inflict upon the students a certain culture – culture understood as an interconnected system of meaning, categories of perception, preferences of taste, habits, language usage and ways of acting in broader term. This culture is what Bourdieu and Passeron identify as arbitrary. It [the arbitrary culture] is neither given by God, nature or a universal human reason, but reflects and expresses the balance of power [ruling powers] within society, in other words the culture of the dominant classes and consequently has status as *legitimate* culture" (Bourdieu 2006, p. 8 – my own translation). The arbitrary culture of VET is to be understood as *the expected* social behavior, participation, language (socio lingo especially in relation to ethnic minorities) and so on. Not expected in the sense that teachers individually indentify and insist on a certain culture within the classroom, but expected in the sense of *naturalized* behavior, participation, language and so on. An illustration of a recognizable situation might be useful: A teacher poses a question to the class. A young male student is eager to answer, so he replies snappy. The teacher is clearly annoyed by the young guy and admonishes him for not raising his hand and waiting to be picked by the teacher. This illustration might seem banal and insignificant, but the point is that the teacher expects him to be familiar with the culture of the classroom and how to act within this context. The thing is that the guy most likely knows how to act but got too eager because he knew the answer to the question posed. Hence the point is that the expected behavior of the classroom is (supposedly) known to everybody and therefore the legitimate culture – it is the naturalized culture of the classroom – and acting otherwise becomes problematic. As we shall see in the following three cases, the students backgrounds and their participation sometimes clashes with the arbitrary culture of the VET system.

Nabil
Nabil is a young guy in the beginning of his twenties who as at a young age came to Denmark as a refugee from a Middle Eastern country. He now lives alone in the dormitory right next to the vocational collage, after having had some serious conflicts with his father. According to one of his teachers the father riped apart the clothes Nabil had bought from his first pay check, because the father did not approve of him spending money on things like cloth. The "Food for People" programme is his second upper secondary education. He first attended a basic mercantile/business education but was not able to find an apprenticeship. The process of finding an apprenticeship triggered experiences of discrimination, something that has not left Nabil's mind/body.

My first impression of Nabil was that he was a tough guy, someone who did not take "no crap from nobody". He wore baggy clothes, constantly had an earphone in one of his ears listening to gangster rap, came in late for classes and talked back when the teacher gave him orders. This impression was nevertheless quickly blurred as Nabil was one of the first students to ask me what I was observing (and writing in my notebook). He told me that he was very interested in science but that he would never be a scientist, because "... if you want to be a scientist, you need to know all kinds of things and I don't" as he expressed it. The reason why Nabil is so interesting is

because he covers a range of different expressions and reflections upon his own situation (the complexity of it) and because he at the same time expresses a certain anti-school attitude, which brings him into trouble every now and then. Nabil is very aware of the future prospects of his own situation and at the same time he speaks lively about the different things he has "researched" in his spare time.

As mentioned, Nabil talks about his experiences of discrimination when he tried to find an apprenticeship. The particular situation revolves around a company (housing association) who had promised him an apprenticeship, whereupon they retracted the offer, stating that they did not have the economic resources to hire him. Nabil found out later on that they had hired an ethnic Danish girl shortly after he had been rejected – in the interview Nabil expresses great contempt towards the company. This experience (alongside numerous others) has had a profound impact on his habitus (Bourdieu 1996) and made him distrustful towards the Danish society and it has shattered his ideas of the future. Stopping the description of Nabil here would nevertheless be a mistake because he is so much more; he is also a young man with dreams about opening up his own business or maybe going into real estate. Nabil is – which contrasts the picture of the gangster rap listening young male with a tough outside – very reflexive about his own situation as well as the school context that he is placed in. As an example Nabil states that the teacher's complimentary approach to the students when giving them feedback on their cooking "is just another way of giving us a little self confidence". Nabil knows how he is supposed to behave if he wants the teachers to applaud his participation just as well as he knows what is important within the school system and what is not (cf. "a little self confidence"). But then why doesn't he act according to his insight; is it some form of resistance? Before trying to answer this rather rigid question, I will unfold and discuss Jane's situation and then return to the question later on in the intersecting discussion at the end of this paper.

Jane
Jane is 18 years of age and lives together with her mother, stepfather and baby sister. It is the second time Jane is attending this particular programme (service assistant). Two years ago she started but got into some conflicts with one of the teachers, something that she explains by referring to the fact that she was not feeling well at the time, mainly because her mother (age 36) had lost an unborn child around that time. Jane then got transferred to a social program combining social support and work (it is called a production school employing teachers, craftsman (women) and social workers). Jane speaks in positive terms about her experiences at the production school, where she gained self-confidence and as she puts it: "it gave me back the desire to pick up school again".

At first I did not notice Jane amongst the other girls in the class (there were no boys in the class). She seemed insecure, quiet and kept to herself most of the time. I decided to interview her because I had interviewed three other girls that turned out to be slightly similar. Once inside the room – that I had been appointed when interviewing the students – Jane opened up an started to talk intensely about her family (more specifically her mother and her recently born baby sister), about her past school experiences which included numerous shifts between schools because she was bullied and, as mentioned, her positive experiences from the production school.

Jane's relationship to the mother seems more that of a friendship than a mother daughter relationship, and the relatively small age difference between Jane and her mother seems to have had a significant impact on her life. Actually Jane's mother is supposed to start at the same school as Jane is attending a few months after the interview was conducted. Jane admits that is going to be "a little strange" having her mother around, but also useful because, as she cheerfully puts it: "then I can borrow money from her". Other than the age difference and the fact that Jane and her mother's lives are so closely intertwined, it seems that moving around a lot through her childhood and consequently experiencing many shifts from one school context to another, has had a large impact on Jane. As mentioned one of the reasons why they moved around was that Jana was bullied. At one point in the interview she states that she in a way grew accustomed to the bullying. I ask her how one can grow accustomed to being bullied, to which she replied: "at some point you think that what they say is true..." This way of giving up or surrendering to the circumstances seems to be a pattern in the way she deals with problems. This can be illustrated by something that she said while talking about the job she had as a receptionist (arranged by the production school) where she experienced that by doing her job well she was able to make others happy: "It saved my day many times being able to bring a smile on somebody's face, and that's why I thought, this is what I want to be... but I just wasn't sure that I could be none of it, because I don't have such good grades from elementary school, because I got very tired of school at the end of elementary school". Later when talking about what she wants to do after the course is completed she despairingly says: "maybe [I will] start at the production school again". So even when she finds pleasure in something or when she expresses joy in relation to the job as a receptionist, it does not seem unfamiliar or alien to her withdrawing into the "known position" of not dealing with or facing the challenge. One might pose the question: Instead of capitulating why doesn't she "clean up her act" and start going for what she wants? Like the question posed in relation to Nabil, this question will be picked up in the later discussion.

Tom
At age 17 Tom is one of the youngest in his class. The previous three years he went to a special school for dyslexic students; three years of school experience of which he speaks highly. He still lives at home with his parents which is a little more than an hour away from school by public transportation. Every morning he takes a bus, the train and then again a bus, rushing from on means of transportation to the next. Despite the fact that his day has a hectic start he arrives at school 45 minutes before classes start. Tom could have chosen another school closer to home, but chose this particular school because they offer dyslexic students an "it-backpack" which includes a laptop with software that supports him in his schoolwork – as an example he can scan a text and the computer reads the text out loud.

I noticed wile observing the class that it is hard to get eye contact with Tom. He looks down and often his eyes flickers or wanders as if he is insecure where to look. His body language is a mixture of an introvert boy-like insecurity and that of a tough pumped young man who wants to scare other people of. "Tough and pumped" in the sense that his shoulders are pulled back a little resolving in a forward-pushed chest and "boy-like" in the sense that he does not take it all the way, compared to some of the other more extrovert boys who are using their body as their main tool of communication. To me it seems like Tom is trying to identify or at least not

distinguish himself from the tough boys of the class. Not that he is spending time (hanging out) with the tough boys but it seems like he does not want to stick out as special or the odd one.

Unlike the two other school contexts the mercantile/business programme is – physically and culturally – very similar to what elementary school looks like. Almost all of the classes (subjects) are textbook oriented with a more or less strict curriculum; the teachers start at one end of the textbook and runs through the different chapters and assignments according to the didactics of the book (of course this is a far too simplistic presentation, but nevertheless significant compared to the more practical oriented "Food for People" and "Service assistant" programs). When talking with Tom about the different subjects, Tom states that they have "too many" assignments. He usually tries to solve all assignments at school, because: "I can't get any help at home, because there is nobody in my family who knows anything about this... I only solve the assignments at home if I know that I can solve them... that's also why I don't use much time on the visual aspect of my assignments... I see that my classmates spend time making it look good, but I don't have time to do that". Clearly Tom has some problems caused by his dyslexia, but it seems that he has his own ways of dealing with these problems. In this respect he seems like a very strong willed young man who on the basis of past experiences is determined to achieve a good end result at completion of the programme. But Tom's past experiences has also marked him in another way and while talking about what he wants to do after having completed the mercantile/business programme, his tentative answer is that he wants to start an apprenticeship in "some" shop but quickly rejoins: "it hasn't been decided yet – I might choose something else". He tells me that he just had had a session/conversation with the study (youth) counselor and that she had informed him of the different (academic) levels he needs to achieve in order to continue into an apprenticeship in a shop. If it is the specific context of having to come up with an answer when the study counselor demands a thought through plan for the future, the fact that he finds it unfeasible to achieve the different academic levels or it is his insecurity (cf. looking down, experiences of defeat within school contexts) is hard to determine. In many ways Tom's situation is interesting because he does not fit into the categories of failure or success, just as well as the pathways beneficial for Tom are not easily identifiable.

Discussion
Despite their different backgrounds and the different school context they are situated within, all three students shed light on the fact that school is not just a question of succeeding or failing – school is, to these three students and to many of the other students that I have observed and interviewed, filled with complex relations that are not always easy to deal with. As shown through Nabil's account of his relation(ship) to the school system, he demonstrates an insight into his own situation which many of his peers do not posses – an insight which both causes an opportunity to keep on dreaming about his future as well as it causes despair (will he ever be able to work with something he likes – cf. the story about discrimination). Jane really wants to work as a receptionist and has concrete experiences of success as such; it has even proven to put a smile on hers and others faces. But when it comes to achieving a certificate that will enable her to work as a receptionist, her poor academic skills are put forward as barriers for her – by the school system and consequently by herself. Toms ostensibly success story of coming from a school for dyslexics to now being

(almost) peer with "normal" students, shows how strong the culture of "knowing what one wants out of life" or at least "knowing what kind of job you want" is. Faced with the question about what he wants to do after the two years of school, he quickly replies that it hasn't been decided yet.

When looking at these three students it would – in accordance with the naturalized understanding of success within the educational system – be easy to identifying them as problematic or even as failures. But by taking a closer look and unfolding their situation one by one it is my argument that they point to severe "blind spots" within the VET system (and maybe the educational system in general). Nabil does not act according to his relatively insightful understanding of what is going on inside the classroom (kitchen) because he does not want to, he acts the way he does because he has been struggling most of his life, and because his potentials have not been recognised as valuable within the educational system. Jane has difficulties accomplishing her dream of working as a receptionist, not because she is not fit for it (except form her poor academic skills), but because she knows that she can always "move" to something/somewhere else, that it is ok not facing the challenge. Tom does not fit into the commonly used categories of success and failure because he is strong willed when it comes to fighting his dyslexia, while at the same time he is "giving in" to the norms of having to have a clear idea of what he wants out of his life. In other words; these three students are pointing to the fact that there are certain aspects of the VET system that is not sensitive to the sometimes difficult situation students encounter while trying to make sense of it all.

Having highlighted some dilemmas experienced by students within the VET system the intention has been to shed light on the consequences that might follow. The culture of the VET system is not given by nature; it is the product of power relations within the VET system, where certain norms of language, ways of acting and participation, etc. are valued higher that others and hence reproduced. Reproduced because, as seen in the case of the three students their actions are moulded by their experiences of not meriting the cultural norms and hence trying to adjust to the norms.

As mentioned by Jo-Anne Dillabough (Dillabough 2004) reproduction is not to be perceived as an "unconscious mechanism", behind it underlies a legitimate culture mirroring the interests of the dominant classes and therefore, in the case of the emphasized problems of the Danish VET system, reproduction is not to be seen as natural or for that matter acceptable. Researching and investigating these reproductive mechanisms and illustrating how they qualitatively influences students of the VET system is necessary if we want all students to unfold their potentials.

Conclusion
As shown through this paper youth pathways to adulthood are not rational pathways with clear objectives. With examples from an ongoing research project, this paper has shown how social and cultural background, past school experiences, the institutional context of VET and the given social structures, produces a complex transition situation. This situation might lead to despair, impotence and carelessness among students of different VET programs. These feelings however, are not traceable back to the student's lack of competencies or their "laziness". We need to start focusing on the fact that very often young people would wish for nothing more than to complete their education and as a consequence hereof, start focusing on the fact that the

educational system itself reproduces certain cultural structures and cultural norms of participation and not least norms of failure and success.

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