

Book Review

Educational Outcomes for the Canadian Workplace: New Frameworks for Policy and Research. Jane Gaskell & Kjell Rubenson (Eds.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 240 pages.

Reviewed by: *Alison Taylor*
University of Alberta

This book was produced by researchers involved in a five-year strategic research network funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The *Western Research Network on Education and Training (WRNET)*, centered at the University of British Columbia in western Canada, was developed to explore "what educational outcomes matter and to whom, how these outcomes can best be measured, and what social processes account for the outcomes that are observed in different contexts." It was unique in bringing together university-based researchers from economics, commerce, adult education, educational administration, and sociology of education. Participants at annual WRNET conferences included government policymakers, practitioners from education and community agencies, and academics. I had the opportunity to attend some of these conferences and appreciated the challenges involved in trying to link academics from quite diverse disciplines (e.g., education and economics), as well as academics with community partners and policy makers. This book reflects the diverse research studies undertaken within WRNET, including chapters by academics from economics, adult education, and curriculum studies departments. I believe that a key strength of the book is the presentation of findings from a variety of original, empirically grounded studies.

The introductory chapter by Gaskell and Rubenson provides a helpful overview of the context in which current policy and academic debates are occurring. I was particularly interested in the authors' discussion of a shift from the "first wave" of human capital theory beginning in the 1960s, which focused on the state's role in expanding educational access, to the "second wave" of human capital theory beginning at the end of the 1980s, which has focused more on the quality and vocational relevance of education and training. This discussion provides a frame for understanding current policy debates and various understandings of the links between education and the economy. The theme that government policy in Canada and other OECD countries has encouraged educational institutions to become more responsive to economic demands runs through several chapters. At the same time, I felt that the policy context could have been taken up by more authors in the chapters that follow as a way of providing greater textual coherence and engaging more effectively with discussions beyond Canada and British Columbia.

Alison Taylor has published in the areas of educational reform, school choice, and school-to-work transition.

The first section, "What skills matter in the economy?" presents two articles by economists who draw on national datasets to address questions about educational investments and outcomes. Riddell's chapter provides a snapshot of Canadian education in relation to education in other OECD countries. His discussion of student performance on national and international tests (such as PISA) highlights the increased importance of such outcome measures for policymakers, although I would have appreciated more discussion about the adequacy of these measures. Allen's chapter challenges the popular claim of "techniks" that we need to educate more postsecondary students in science, technology, and engineering fields by presenting data about the employment outcomes for graduates from a wide range of programs. Given the author's argument that the market does not appear to value technology grads more than social sciences and arts grads, it would have been interesting to speculate about why "techism discourse" has been so pervasive and persuasive in recent years. Both chapters in this section, therefore, are useful in presenting empirical data that shed light on the relationship between education and the labor market with less attention to more normative issues.

The second section of the book, "Achieving equity," includes three chapters that focus on outcomes of training and education policies for various groups. The first, by Hum and Simpson, draws on national data to ask the question: do all Canadians have comparable opportunities to participate in post-school (formal) training? Authors do a good job of discussing some of the independent variables that need to be examined when looking at training outcomes such as gender, family status, occupation, nature of employer, presence of union, industrial characteristics, and local employment conditions. They find that a lower probability of training is evident for a variety of groups that include women with permanent jobs, persons with disabilities, adult male immigrants, unionized workers, and Francophones. To an extent, findings raise more questions than they answer—for example, why are there gender differences among immigrants with respect to training opportunities, and what are the causes of unequal outcomes across groups? For me this chapter reflects both the value and limitations of large-scale quantitative research and suggests several directions for complementary qualitative work.

The two chapters that follow analyze interviews with participants from two "disadvantaged" groups, Aboriginal peoples and low-income single mothers, in order to examine the outcomes of education and training policies. The chapter by Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin presents a hopeful view of how postsecondary programs can be designed to reduce the effects of disadvantage. They adopt a life history approach to interviewing adults who applied to university access programs for Aboriginal students in order to gain a sense of participants' trajectories. In discussing the outcomes of programs, the authors conclude: "while the impacts of early and continued disadvantage cannot be overcome entirely by any one element of the social structure, additional education and supports can undoubtedly significantly improve employment outcomes."

Butterwick, on the other hand, presents a story of "access denied." Focusing on policies for mothers on welfare, she highlights the devaluation of the work of mothering, the lack of recognition of their informal learning, the tension

between the discourses of *employability* and the *good mother*, limited training opportunities, and partial citizenship. By referring to the unpaid work of mothering and the informal learning undertaken by women on welfare, her chapter draws attention to the narrow conception of work and learning adopted by policymakers. Chapters by Sloane-Seale et al. and Butterwick emphasize the differential effect of policies on the lives of various groups. They also direct the reader's attention to the kind of policies and practice that are required if we are to take social equity seriously.

The final section, "Policy and practice," includes three chapters that are based on studies of efforts to increase linkages between formal education and work sites. Lackey's article provides an examination of a provincial educational policy developed in the early 1990s in British Columbia called "Skills Now!" Her analysis focuses on contradictions in this policy, including the progressive vocational rhetoric used to foster acceptance of an agenda that essentially retools education to fit more closely with the demands of employers, a supply-side focus that downplays the reality of the labor market, and an individualistic focus that ignores how people's lives are influenced by political choices. This chapter effectively examines the manifestation of second-wave human capital theory in education policy.

The two chapters that follow shift our attention to the outcomes of initiatives designed to integrate academic and vocational learning. The first chapter, by Gaskell, Nicol, and Tsai examines the implementation of a provincial high school program called Applied Academics which introduced a new stream of courses that were intended to link abstract classroom knowledge with more concrete workplace applications. The article usefully points to aspects of policy implementation that made it difficult to challenge the existing hierarchy associated with academic and vocational education in schools. At the same time, I was disappointed that the authors do not revisit the question they raise early in the chapter about whether educational initiatives designed to integrate academic and vocational education can be seen as part of a widespread conservative restoration or have progressive possibilities. In particular, I think that some dialogue between this article and the chapter by Lackey in relation to contradictions in policy would have been helpful.

The final article in this section by Grosjean focuses on the outcomes of university cooperative education programs. His research suggests that co-op students benefit in several ways from such programs, including higher salaries, professional enculturation, social capital, and self-reports of a deeper understanding of classroom knowledge. At the same time, these programs appear to be becoming elitist with higher program fees and restricted access based on GPA. Grosjean's article adds yet another literature to the mix with his focus on the learning that occurs across the various sites and in possibilities for the integration of work and school-based learning.

The concluding chapter by Gaskell and McLeod provides a useful reflection on the research network's functioning with reference to relationships, structure, and challenges. In addition to providing a behind-the-scenes look at such a network, it helps the reader to understand the tensions in the text. I see these tensions resulting from several factors, including the attempt to bring together researchers across disciplines, my sense that researchers shared only a

general set of research questions, the diversity of theoretical literatures informing the work of authors even in the same discipline, and my impression that although researchers reportedly "shared a political view that was critical and on the left side of the political spectrum," opinions about the role and goals of research differed. Gaskell and McLeod are clear about both the possibilities and constraints of this type of network, and I appreciated their candor. Therefore, although I was left with the question of how more linkages could have been made between the areas of work, the smorgasbord presentation provided much food for thought.