

Mending the Rift Between Academic and Vocational Education

ANN M. DOUGLAS

Both "academic" and "vocational" teachers play an important part in the education of today's youth. Unfortunately, they often see their roles not only as different but competitive as well. This attitude is frequently manifested in a rift between academic and vocational education, which serves only to harm the students.

Some academic educators contend that vocational education should assume its extraneous role as the stepchild of the curriculum, offering blue-collar occupational skills training for students who cannot or will not be successful in the "academic" program. Others see it as a medium for students who want to "work with their hands," a phrase overused and misused by even the most well-meaning advocate. Many teachers and counselors also steer "academically talented" students away from vocational courses, further contributing to negative attitudes about such courses.

In addition, the few publicized unfortunate instances of the misuse of funds, toleration of mediocrity from students, and poorly structured, supervised, and taught vocational courses have not endeared vocational education to academic teachers. However, academic courses have not always found favor with vocational teachers either. Many, in fact, view the theoretical aspects of many academic courses as pompous and irrelevant. The prestige and attention bestowed upon them

by school administrators and the public have widened the gap.

The rift between academic and vocational education has been especially magnified by the physical isolation of vocational facilities. Such isolation promotes psychological segregation of the two, further damaging the image of vocational education.



Students benefit when academic and vocational teachers become partners in their education.

Just what is it that separates educators into separate camps and stirs such academic bigotry against vocational education? It may well be that vocational educators and administrators are not blameless. Perhaps they have been too busy clamoring for a separate and special place in the curriculum. In their zest to accumulate numbers and provide a service for students, vocational educators may have too often allowed their programs to be used as dumping grounds for academically weak, disruptive, and habitually absent students. Maybe they have also been too humble about seeking respect for their students and their professions.

Whatever the reason, it's time for vocational educators to abandon their apologetic soapboxes and tackle the

task of helping parents, students, and other educators realize that today almost all education *is* vocational — yes, even and especially, high-level mathematics and science. Further, to help mend the rift, vocational and academic teachers need opportunities to reflect on and discuss the objectives of their programs in relation to one another. How beneficial it would be if vocational and academic teachers could work together to help all students. Achieving a relationship of cooperation would require not only attention to attitudes toward vocational and academic education by both groups but efforts toward collegiality of education in general.

A good first step might be the deliberate dissolution of the separation of education into "academic" and "vocational" camps. Participating in one should not preclude involvement in the other; placing importance on one should not relegate the other to an inferior status. Rather, traditional academic and vocational education offerings should be complementary, thereby allowing the educational system to offer students the best well-rounded education possible.

A logical, though not an easy, approach would be to restructure the curriculum to integrate vocational courses into the core required course offerings. A true reformation of curriculum would call for a required number of units of vocational study, allowing students to select from an offering that meets their career objectives. The new required units would

come from a wide range of offerings matched to grade level and course level of mathematics, science, and English courses.

Another action would be to retain, as practicable, vocational students at their school campuses in as nonrestrictive an educational environment as possible. Team teaching by academic and vocational teachers is also a possibility. Through such a partnership, teachers would not only complement each other's efforts but also have an opportunity to develop a rapport and an appreciation of one another's efforts in relation to the overall educational process.

Teachers must assume a shared responsibility for educating *all* students, for selling the virtues of academic and vocational elements alike, and for helping students, parents, and the community understand the importance and interrelationship of the two. Only then can all students be offered a true education that will prepare them for the world beyond high school, whether it involves full-time employment immediately after high school or more specialized education.

Educators must not lose sight of the fact that students would be the recipients of the benefits of such an integration of academic and vocational education. If students are to receive the quality education to which they are entitled, educators must stop seeing themselves as either competitive academic or vocational teachers but, rather, as coequal, collegial champions of all students! □

Ann M. Douglas is a Vocational Business Education Teacher-Coordinator at Virgil I. Grissom High School, 7901 Bailey Cove Rd., S.E., Huntsville, AL 35802.

academic and vocational education. Coherent programs of courses, improved counseling, the smaller scale and continuous contact between teachers and students, teachers who collaborate in developing curriculum and taking responsibility for students, and closer connections to institutions like firms are all improvements that schools could undertake even if they have no interest whatsoever in the vocational purposes of education. The emphasis that gives a distinctive flavor to academies, focus schools, and occupational clusters could be achieved in other ways: an academy or focus school could concentrate on environmental issues, the special problems of cities, math and science, or the humanities — rather than a cluster of occupations.

But even if an occupational focus is only one of several ways to reform the high school, it provides some obvious advantages over other approaches. In attempting to integrate different subjects, teachers are required to collaborate and to remedy the deficiencies of the traditional academic teaching style. In developing focused programs, educators must decide the content of a coherent curriculum, consider how students can learn to make intelligent choices about their futures, and determine the connection between the school and the rest of society (including economic institutions). The efforts to integrate academic and vocational education force teachers to balance the varied capacities — general and specific, "academic" and "vocational," manipulative and behavioral as well as cognitive — that successful individuals must possess.

Above all, an occupational focus as a mechanism for reform takes seriously the vocational nature of the high school, rather than hiding it. For all of

these reasons, the effort to integrate academic and vocational education may be the best stimulus to reconstruct the American high school. □

References

- Adelman, N. E. (February 1989). *The Case for Integrating Academic and Vocational Education*. Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, Inc. for the National Assessment of Vocational Education, U.S. Department of Education.
- Grubb, W. N., G. Davis, J. Lum, J. Plihal, and C. Morgaine. (August 1991). *The Cunning Hand, The Cultured Mind: Models for Integrating Academic and Vocational Education*. Berkeley, CA: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The University of California, Berkeley.
- Hill, P., G. Foster, and T. Gendler. (August 1990). *High Schools with Character*. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, Report R-3944-RC.
- Mitchell, V., E. S. Russell, and C. Benson. (November 1989). *Exemplary Urban Career-Oriented Secondary School Programs*. Berkeley, CA: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The University of California, Berkeley.
- Powell, A. G., E. Farrar, and D. K. Cohen. (1985). *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stasz, C., D. McArthur, M. Lewis, and K. Ramsey. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Generic Skills for the Workplace*. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation and the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Report R-4004-NCRVE/UCB.
- Stern, D., C. Dayton, I. Paik, and A. Weisberg. (Winter 1989). "Benefits and Costs of Dropout Prevention in a High School Program Combining Academic and Vocational Education." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 11: 405-416.

W. Norton Grubb is a Professor at the Graduate School of Education, The University of California, Berkeley, Educational Administration, 3653 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720.

Copyright © 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.