Craftsmanship under Neoliberal pressure? The history of Danish vocational education and training

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Abstract

Since the reform of 1956 the Danish VET-system has been based on the principle of the so-called dual system. The dual model implies that education at the technical schools alternate with training at a workplace. The VET-system is therefore governed by two different interpretations of vocational professionalism and two different interpretations of how this professionalism is to be acquired. The aim of this article is to illustrate how this ambiguity has had implications on the historical development of the Danish VET-system from a craft based system controlled by the guilds to become an integrated element in an educational system dominated by neo-liberal ideology. The aim is to analyse the economical, political and cultural framework which the VET-system has been a part of. The historical introduction will functions as the basis for a discussion of the different roles of the technical schools and the training in the workplaces when it comes to the training of the skilled worker required by the labour market. This discussion will take its point of departure in the two traditions that have dominated the Danish research on the VET-system. Finally, the article will describe how the VET-students themselves look upon the professionalism promoted by the technical schools and the workplaces.

Keywords: Danish Vocational Education and Training, Pedagogy, Dual system, Neo-liberalism

1. The neoliberal concept of skill formation

Neoliberalism refers to a particular economic model, which has since the late 1980s influenced the discourse concerning knowledge and learning. What differentiates neoliberalism from the 18th century liberalism is the way the relationship between economy and politics is understood. Whereas the important question for Adam Smith was how to establish a free space for the market, the question that preoccupies the neoliberals of today is how to transfer and project the formal principles of a market economy to a general governmentality (Foucault 5. Lecture 7. February 1979 in Foucault 2008). In short, the term neoliberalism refers to a political process that extends the market into the social and political arenas, thus collapsing the distinction between the economic, social and political in a process resulting in the marketisation of the state. Government and the public sector are transformed in order to reflect market principles and mechanisms. The task of the government is to construct and universalise competition, to achieve efficiency and invent market systems, to promote and reward entrepreneurial behavior and oppose bureaucratic initiatives that stifle the market mechanisms (Olssen 2005). As Foucault puts it, individuals have become “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Foucault 6. Lecture 14. March 1979 lecture in Foucault 2008) and given full responsibility over their decisions.

The educational policy of the neo-liberal state is embodied in the term “Lifelong Learning,” which represents a global discourse for the flexible preparation of subjects. It promotes a flexible workforce with the ability of workers to move from one job to another. Such a model requires skills of self-management and record keeping so that...
demonstrations of established learning are rendered transparent through audit. Ultimately lifelong learning shifts responsibility from the system to the individual making individuals responsible for self-emancipation and self-creation. The lifelong learning discourse represents an internalized educational aspiration where the individual is not only responsible for the content of the knowledge, but also for the levels and structures and organisation. “Not only must the individual learn, but they must learn to recognise what to learn, and what and when to forget what to learn when circumstances demand it” (Olssen 2006).

Although neoliberalism is a global phenomenon the way in it is implemented will vary according to the national context. As the welfare state economy is deeply rooted in the Danish society, the neoliberal paradigm has not yet been able to penetrate society entirely. This is illustrated in the case of the Danish VET-system where the introduction of a neoliberal government structure, as one might expect, has not led to a dismantling of the influence of the social partners. The neoliberal influence has instead led to a reform in the government of the technical and commercial schools and to a transformation of the organization of curriculum and the learning processes.

2. A short history of the Danish VET

2.1. From control of the guilds to self-governance administered by the social partners

Originally, the training of the Danish skilled workforce was based solely on apprenticeship, and thus formed part of a tradition, which dates back to medieval guilds. The apprentices, or rather the guardians of the apprentices, would make a contract with a master and the guilds functioned as a controlling institution that would guarantee the quality of the training and thereby the survival of the trade. The guilds decided how many apprentices a master could employ and the proportion between apprentices and skilled/journeymen. The guilds would also determine the length of the apprenticeship, the wages and working conditions and what the apprentice was supposed to learn. This did not prevent the apprentices from being exploited and/or to be insufficiently trained, and the state, personified by the king, therefore had to intervene from time to time. The main control was nevertheless rooted in the guilds, whose mission it was to preserve the monopoly on the performance of specific tasks.

In 1857 when freedom of trade was introduced and the guilds were banned, the old rules concerning the training of apprentices eroded and the journeymen’s certificate became voluntary. As a consequence it became difficult to distinguish the skilled worker from the unskilled. The monopoly on the performance of certain kinds of work vanished as everybody could call themselves master and offer their products or services (Juul 2009).

The late nineteenth century was characterised by a growing specialization and a growing division of labour, and so further pressure was put on the established standards of apprenticeship. It was no longer unusual that the apprentice ended his apprenticeship before time, because he could earn more as an unskilled worker. This tendency was strengthened by the fact that the apprentices were often used as cheap labour, with the consequence that the training elements in the apprenticeship were weakened. In the years after the introduction of the act of free trade, complaints about the lack of control with the apprentices grew and it became evident that there was a need for a regulating institution, which could fill out the empty space left over by the guilds. In 1889, Denmark (as the first country in the world) passed a law regulating apprenticeship. This act was revised in 1921, and stated that the masters were obliged to send the apprentices to technical schools and pay for their lessons, which took place either on Sundays or in the evenings after working hours (Juul 2005).

The technical schools had been set up in the late nineteenth century by the local organisations of masters which had been formed when the guilds were forbidden. The teaching consisted primarily in Danish, arithmetic’s and drawing lessons. When the act was revised again in 1937, the journeyman’s certificate was again made compulsory and the social partners were given a say in decision-making concerning regulation of the apprenticeship and of the technical schools.

The central role played by the organisations of the labour market is characteristic for the Danish VET-system. The working conditions of the apprentice are regulated by collective agreements and the organisations of the labour market have, both on the central and the local level, an advisory role to play concerning the decisions about what the
apprentices should be trained in. Broadly speaking one could say that the organisations of the labour market took over the functions that were previously carried out by the guilds. It is also fair to say that these organisations took over the monopoly on certain types of work that the guilds had earlier on. The consequence was an exclusion of the unskilled workers from major parts of the labour market (Juul 2005).

2.2. The introduction of the dual system

The so-called dual system was introduced with the reform act in 1956. This meant that the general and theoretical lessons that took place on Sundays or in the evenings were complemented by training in workshops, which were established at the new central technical schools, which were set up in the major cities. Lessons were now to be given at daytime and separately for each trade. The introduction of workshop training at the technical schools meant that elements of the workplace training were implemented in the training at the technical schools, which meant that not only the workplaces, but also the schools became responsible for the craft related training (Juul 2005).

The introduction of the dual system in Denmark was seen as a means to relieve the workplaces from part of their training obligations, and make it more attractive and manageable to have apprentices. The period until the late 1960s was characterised by a broad consensus concerning the important role workplace training should play in the VET-system. The positive influence of the workplaces in the socializing of the apprentice for working life was particularly stressed. This role was later to be questioned as the workplaces were criticised for their authoritarian management and for exploiting the apprentices as cheap labour (Juul 2005).

As a consequence of this criticism, a new reform of the VET-system was introduced in 1972. The reform implied that the students now able to begin their training with a basic year at the technical schools. This basic year of training was made up of different modules, in order to make the VET-system more flexible and adjustable towards chances in the labour market and in the request for skills. The following reforms have taken further steps toward a flexible structure, to make it possible to meet the interests and professional needs of the students. This tendency culminated with the reform act of 2000, which puts the student and not the craft in the centre, and was inspired by a neo-liberal trend in the Danish educational politics which was introduced in the late 1980’s.

3. The roles assigned to the technical school and the workplaces respectively

As the historical development of the discussions concerning the VET-system has demonstrated, the role assigned to the technical schools has varied in the different historical periods. In the 1950s the argumentation was primarily of a pragmatic character. The aim was to compensate for the reduced training potentials that followed from the specialisation and rationalisation of the labour process. The extension of the school based-training was seen as a way to transfer some of the responsibility of training from the workplaces to the technical schools. The argument was not that the professionalism trained at the technical school was of another and more appropriate character than the one practiced at workplaces.

The argument concerning the role of the technical schools changed with the introduction of the basic vocational year in 1972. The reform expressed a new understanding of the role of the VET-system. It was no longer considered sufficient that the students were trained in the performance of traditional crafts such as welding, carving etc. and in the handling of different tools and machinery. These were all skills that could be learned by instruction and imitation and by solving practical problems and which could therefore easily be learned at the workplace. The representatives from the labour movement and the employer’s organisation as well as the educational planners argued that the needs of the future labour market required that students should be taught how to plan and survey a production process in order to match the future needs of the labour market. This required a certain amount of theoretical knowledge and implied a new understanding of the professionalism the VET-system was to produce. The former craft-oriented paradigm was replaced by an industrial paradigm. Whereas the 1970s was a decade where educational politics were inspired by social democratic thinking focusing on equal access to education, the late 1980s represented the influence of a neo-liberal trend in the VET-system. This meant the introduction of a pedagogical thinking that emphasized holism, experimental learning and reflexivity. In a broader perspective, the changes reflected a new
conception of management and a new view on the labour market. It represented an abandonment of the belief in the
technical rationality of detailed planning and its replacement by neo-liberal instruments of regulation. Management-
by-goals was introduced both in the planning of teaching and in the administration of the economy of the VET
system. Focus was transferred from the needs of the labour market to the development and motivation of the
individual. The connection to the labour market was maintained by claiming that there was no substantial difference
between the motivations and interests of the individual and the needs of the labour market. Seen from both the
perspective of the individual student and from the perspective of the labour market the important issue was the
development of the individual’s capacity of problem solving. The VET-students were to take responsibility for their
own learning processes, which indicated a major change in the role of the teacher. The individual students were
given the flexibility to choose between different training elements, and thus in principle, the opportunity to build
their own individual education as it was expressed in the title of one of the reports from the ministry of education
(Juul 2005).

4. What will be the possible long-term consequences for the VET-system?

The motivation and self-discipline of the student has now become a central factor in determining the results and
success of the learning process at the commercial and technical schools, but as the organization of the training at the
workplaces has remained more or less unchanged, the result has been a widening of the gap between school-based
learning and workplace training. Contrary to the school based learning, workplace learning forms part of a
workplace culture where fixed standards of both quality and productivity does not leave much room for experiments
and individual solutions. The mobilization of motivation and self-discipline of the trainee that is essential in the
school is not required in the workplace as the trainee is forced to follow the work rhythm and procedures of the
colleagues.

Adding to the difficulties in implementing the neoliberal-inspired learning concept in the VET-system has been
the fact that the majority of the trainees seem to prefer on-the-job training to the constructivist learning concepts
dominating the leaning processes at school. Their argument is that they find it difficult to manage the extended
degrees of individual responsibility for learning. In addition, they often find the competencies they obtain at the
workplace more relevant than the ones they train in at the commercial and technical schools. They also find them
more satisfactory as they form part of a normal work process and, the product thus is, of use to others.

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