



RESEARCH BRIEFING

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL: a case study of North Lanarkshire schools

ABSTRACT

Within the international literature there are extensive studies of 'work-based' learning approaches, with a particular focus upon the apprenticeship model. However, it can be argued that 'work-related' learning in secondary schools has become more significant in recent years, often providing a vocational entry route to employment or tertiary education. Although the relationship between work and education can be problematic, there is evidence to suggest that vocational courses can engage and motivate young people within school settings. The study set out to better understand the experience of pupils undertaking certificated vocational education courses within a selection of comprehensive schools in one Local Authority in Scotland. It

is based upon a case study methodology and uses observation and questioning techniques to gather primary data sources. The research was undertaken during the period 2009-11. The results indicate that when taught appropriately vocational classes can motivate and engage pupils in work-related learning activities within the lower-secondary school. Moreover, that this type of 'useful learning' is often perceived by young people as meaningful, when set within an educational context and taught by teachers with relevant occupational experience of the subject area. However, it is argued that this mixed-mode model of teaching vocational education classes needs to be further developed through the more widespread use of cross-curricula learning projects within the schools.

BACKGROUND

There is much debate in the literature on the purpose and status of the vocational curriculum within the compulsory school years. The recent Wolfe (2011) report into vocational education in England acknowledged the importance of vocational subjects within schools, but also argued for restricting their coverage within a core curriculum for 14-16 year olds. This ambivalence towards vocational learning is echoed elsewhere in the international literature, with some arguing that vocational subjects only tend to further segregate young people along socio-economic lines, have a 'stigma' attached to them and are often seen as a poor alternative to work-based training (OECD 2010). However, an alternative literature is emerging that emphasises the role of vocational education in engaging young people in forms of active learning and supporting their progression into tertiary education and employment.

Following the National Debate on Education in Scotland in 2002, the then Labour Government launched a 'Curriculum for Excellence' (Scottish Government 2004, 2006). This enabling legislation was particularly innovative as it supported a *values* driven agenda for change across the education sector. Although there has been a change of Government, the current administration has continued to support these core values by reducing the burden of assessment and opening the door to a further expansion of vocational education in secondary schools. The vocational education awards can be best described as 'work-related' rather than 'work-based' as they are intended to have an educational component that contributes to cross-curricula learning within the school. It is useful to think of them as preparatory studies for broader work-based occupations. They are also intended to promote certain generic clusters of skills and qualities, including the 'four capacities' from the Curriculum of Excellence: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (HMIE 2009).

The North Lanarkshire school-based model of delivering S3 and S4 vocational courses is unique in Scotland, both for the scale on which it is offered and the range of provision across the different levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The influential report on Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland by the OECD (2007) highlighted the advantages of offering vocational education in schools based upon the North Lanarkshire model. Although concerns were raised about how the vocational curriculum could be better integrated with academic subjects (Raffe, 2008), there was overwhelming support for expanding the delivery of vocational education within the compulsory school years.

RESEARCH AIMS

The overall aim of the study was to better understand the role work-related learning fulfils within the lower secondary school. In particular to:

1. Enhance our understanding of how young people engage with a vocational curriculum within a school environment;
2. Determine the level of achievement of pupils in a range of vocational subjects in lower secondary years of compulsory education;
3. Identify the progression routes of S3 and S4 pupils undertaking vocational classes;
4. Establish the nature and extent of the inter-connectedness between the academic and vocational curriculum within the schools.

METHODS

We collected data based upon a case study methodology, utilising both quantitative and qualitative techniques of enquiry. A number of vocational courses were selected for the study, each representing a range of pupils participating in vocational education classes and a gender balance within particular subject areas. The courses have a nationally set curriculum and are delivered by college staff within the secondary schools at Intermediate levels (ISCED: level 2). Pupils are allowed to undertake one vocational qualification from a range of eight subjects. The vocational subjects can be selected alongside academic awards and are organised within the school timetable to form a mixed-mode curriculum in S3 and S4.

The first stage of the study involved the collection and analysis of secondary data sources from across the Local Authority. This included all of the vocational courses delivered within the schools over the period 2005-2011. We used the identifiers of individual student, level of award, type of award, gender, age, and length of study, completion rates and destinations. The data was analysed using descriptive rather than inferential statistics.

The second stage involved collecting observation data from the classrooms. A total of three schools were selected from the Local Authority. A range of the most popular vocational education courses were chosen: Professional Cookery, Early Years Education, Hairdressing and Beauty. We then conducted systematic observations of a number of teaching sessions using a pre-defined observation framework. One class was selected from each of the three schools based upon an occupational subject area and then each class was observed on six occasions during a double teaching period. Our methodology built upon early work on 'active learning' by colleagues at the School of Education (Stephen et al. 2010).

Finally, 15 teachers were interviewed for the research project from 8 schools from across North Lanarkshire. All of the teachers interviewed were very experienced and had taught on average, for over 15 years. Some were employed by a local Further Education College and came into the schools to teach vocational programmes, as they were subject specialists. The majority of them had several years of work experience outside the education sector, with some additionally having experience of running their own businesses.

It is recognised that this is a partial study and selected for illustrative purposes. We make no claim to the generalisability of the findings. However, it does give us a much more in-depth account of events and one covering all of the stakeholders within the schools. Our interest is primarily in exploring our understanding of the nature of work-related learning in the lower-secondary school and how this relates to policy-making within Scottish Education.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

- > Approximately one third of all pupils are now undertaking vocational education courses in the lower secondary school within North Lanarkshire Local Authority. The majority of participants registered for a vocational award are now females and the mean age of pupils studying a vocational subject is 14 years of age.
- > There is difficulty, however, in attracting female pupils into male dominated traditional vocational subjects and, in turn, in attracting males into service and care sector vocational courses. However, more positively, there is a better gender balance emerging within the newer vocational courses.
- > Although the vocational subject offerings within the curricula are becoming more varied the completion rates (average 90.7%) remain comparable with general academic awards.
- > One of the most interesting findings from the secondary data analysis is the role played by the vocational education curriculum in retaining pupils within the school beyond the compulsory school years. Eventually, the pupils progress into tertiary level education or employment and training but only after completing their education at 17 or 18 years of age. This is an important outcome given that non-positive school destination outcomes can be explained by age related factors.
- > The 'near-work' environments within the schools were all of a very high standard and the level of investment in technology and learning materials was considerable in all three subject areas selected for the study.
- > We observed on numerous occasions that the school timetabling of the classes was flexible and allowed for double periods of teaching and the movement of pupils between different learning environments. Timetabling appeared to be an issue that had been successfully addressed at a strategic level within the local authority.
- > The observations of the vocational classes tended to confirm that the pupils were fully engaged in the subject area. Much of the learning taking place was active and co-operative, involving the use of multi-level teaching methods. The activities were mainly based around material practices that engaged the young people in paired, small group and individual tasks. There was a high pace and tempo of activities with pupils being constantly encouraged to ask questions and share ideas and concerns. Interestingly, the observers regularly recorded instances of pupils acquiring and using the language of the occupational area.
- > An important aim of the observations was to determine how the pupils engaged *educationally* with the vocational curriculum. We observed that the teaching was often based upon building theory out of practice. This meant continually referring back to the practices within the occupations and relating these to a set of broader concepts and principles within the subject area. This was supplemented with open book formative assessments to highlight an aspect of language or the development of a particular conceptual idea. There existed here a type of 'theoretical quietism' that explored conceptual thinking through practice-based learning activities. The observers also noted that the pupils and the teachers were continually relating the broader principles of the vocational subject to other aspects of the wider curriculum within the school.
- > The researchers, through observations and questioning, identified a number of generic qualities or capacities that were being developed through the vocational subjects. The qualities ranged from the more general ones such as teamwork, communication and self-confidence to the more specific capacities of literacy and numeracy. There was also evidence that the pupils were fully aware of such qualities and how these could be of value in other more academic subject areas. The study tended to confirm the value of developing the 'four capacities' used within the Curriculum for Excellence.
- > The teachers strongly believed in and supported the development of generic life skills that could help build pupil confidence, motivation and engagement with a range of subjects. They emphasised the importance of giving pupils the opportunity to gain 'a different' experience within 'a different' teaching setting from the rest of their school subjects. It was also strongly felt that the pupils positively benefitted from the fact that qualified practitioners of these vocational subjects were teaching them. Several teachers identified a shift in pupils' attitudes as they broadened their experiences through participation in the courses

and took more responsibility for their own learning. The vocational programmes are restricted due to funding and availability of staff and some saw this as a weakness, as they felt they should be available to all pupils.

- > In a number of separate interviews with teachers from the respective schools, there was an acknowledgement that much more had to be done to support the teachers of other more academic subjects, through continuing professional development activities, to better understand how their subject areas could link more effectively with the vocational education curriculum.
- > The observers found that although the tasks set for the pupils were engaging and enjoyable- they at times, for a minority of pupils, were not sufficiently challenging. This often reflected the mixed-ability groupings within the classes. There may, therefore, be an argument here for some form of bio-level teaching taking place within the subject areas. This would not be unusual within a school setting, given the existing mixed-ability teaching practices already adopted within the schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The study set out to explore the educational policy issues related to the expansion of vocational education courses in the lower secondary years of compulsory schooling. It did so by using a case study methodology, bringing together both secondary data sources and observation and interview data. The argument put forward in the study is that 'work-related learning' within schools should not be seen simply as a substitute for 'work-based learning' and that the educational purposes of such provision should be considered paramount. The evidence suggests that vocational subjects, when offered within a mixed-mode curriculum, can engage young people through active and co-operative learning processes. That this, in turn, can develop the pupils' sense of well being and build a range of 'capacities' to help them better prepare for work while extending their educational opportunities through staying-on in school. One of the major unexpected outcomes of the study is the degree to which this provision can lead to under-achieving pupils being retained within the upper secondary school. Given the potential for 16 year old leavers from school to become part of a NEET group, then retention within school is an entirely positive outcome. However, further research is required in understanding how vocational and academic subjects can be better linked to raise the overall standards of achievement for pupils within schools

FURTHER DETAILS

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