

Reviewed by Stephanie Cawthon
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As someone working on issues related to transition from secondary to postsecondary education and employment, I very much looked forward to reading Dr. Hoffman’s insights on the effectiveness of various integrated school-to-work transition programs Europe and Australia. Although the content is international in scope, the book *Schooling in the Workplace* is written directly to an American audience. Early on Hoffman addresses the skepticism, issues, and challenges of the United States context. She encourages the reader to be patient and to

read with an open mind as to how models from other countries, even with their different social and legal structures, can inform and improve the models we pursue at home. Personally, my biggest resistance was not the seemingly overwhelming gap between where we are in the United States and where other countries have been able to go. Instead, my hesitation in accepting these models as examples was in knowing that there is little coordination between the many stakeholders involved in supporting youth in their transition from school to work. Parents, teachers, policy makers, state agencies, federal initiatives, employers, and institutions of higher education, not to mention the students themselves, rarely seem to be on the same page about vocational goals and possible pathways to better outcomes. Throughout the volume, Hoffman takes time to speak directly to her audience, acknowledging places of resistance and frustration, but also offering strategies for potential local implementation of ideas presented in her case studies. It was like the “fourth wall” of the theatre had been broken, and we were invited into a behind-the-scenes experience with direct access to the author’s reflections and musings on the matter at hand. Throughout the book, I was reminded time and again that successful transition from school to work is not just a struggle for a minority of the US population, but rather is a process that faces fundamental obstacles of structure, funding, and opportunity for young people today. The stakes could neither be higher nor more pressing for our next generation of workers.

*Schooling in the Workplace* summarizes experiences and findings from six countries: Australia, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland. Hoffman situates these Vocational Education (VET) models in the context of her own experience at the Education and Training Policy unit at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. While this single vantage point could, in other situations, lead to a limited scope in an expository text, Hoffman does an excellent job of providing in-depth, personal insights that provide an up close and tangible experience for the reader. Each section features a single model or issue, with some comparative analyses across models when applicable. Hoffman provides a solid foundation on the structure and context of the model, what makes it unique, data behind its success, and a thoughtful discussion of how those structures might
be translated into the American experience. Often she directly confronts our assumptions about structures in different countries, knowing what stereotypes a novice reader may bring to reading this book. I especially appreciated the visual models and flow charts of an individual’s journey through the programs. Whenever I was tempted to feel like the model constrained an individual’s options and lead us down the path of segregated vocational vs. professional tracks for students, it was helpful to see decision points where a school-and-work partnership could open up opportunities instead of closing them off, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities.

Dr. Hoffman’s attention to the structure of local, federal, and private organizations is critical in learning how and what possibilities there are for successful VET options in the United States. The content of the training is important, but secondary to the mechanisms by which this training is leveraged and implemented. Her language and examples successfully tie these issues to the current economic times, though often at a general and not a specific level. I particularly resonated by Hoffman’s statement that students in the United States currently have competing goals, working and learning, instead of complementary goals of working and learning. This call for a non-compete approach requires a shift not only in program structure, but also some overlap in whom is teaching and how they are trained. What are the implications of shared goals and shared work/school contexts for the professional development of those who serve our youth? Are workplace experiences beyond the purview of the educators in our schools, or can there be academic experiences that are specifically designed to support a range of potential concurrent workplace apprenticeships? Do mentors and work supervisors have training in pedagogy and best practices in working with young adults? This knowledge base is critical to the success of the programs because students are negotiating not just their career skill sets but also their identities within their family, peer groups, and communities. And in all, who is providing the needed oversight to evaluate the progress of individual students in a dual (or even holistic) manner and providing targeted support to troubleshoot and address needs as they arise? It would appear that the role of a career counselor, currently one that is under-resourced in many schools, leading to
often minimal guidance for many students due to sheer lack of time, could become an essential liaison between workplaces and schools under VET programs.

_Schooling in the Workplace_ is a call for discussion, for open exchange of ideas, and a commitment to move beyond current frameworks and paradigms. The goal is to provide students with the experiences they need to be productive members of workplace environments in a seamless, supported structure. Hoffman notes that the current emphasis on college-bound students serves as a potential barrier to a coherent VET program, at least insofar as it removes the emphasis of work from a work and learn training context. While it would be tempting to become easily disheartened at the scope of the challenge, it is my view, supported by the examples in _Schooling in the Workplace_, that a VET initiative could be a long-term national goal. Due to the complexities of governance in the U.S., any approach requires (at least) two strategies: a coherent national vision and local implementation of partnerships between schools and businesses. Thus far, achieving such a goal has suffered from a lack of federal leadership and political will. Perhaps readers of this volume can motivate people and organizations to transform these ideas into an active, national discussion on the future of vocational training in the United States.

About the Reviewer

Stephanie Cawthon is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin. Her background is in educational equity for students with disabilities, including participation in standards-based assessment, accountability reforms, and educational policy. Cawthon has published widely in interdisciplinary journals and recently published a book, _Accountability-Based Reforms: Impact on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students_. Cawthon's current research focuses on the transition of individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing from secondary grades into postsecondary opportunities, including employment, internships, postsecondary training, and higher education.