

## *Book Review / Recension*

Wolfgang Lehman. (2007). *Choosing to Labour? School-Work Transitions and Social Class*. Montréal: McGill-Queens. 221 pages.  
ISBN: 9780773532809 (cloth), 9780773533066 (paper)

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This excellent book by a sociologist of education looks at the influence of youth's social environment (parents, teachers, peers) and institutional environment (education system, labour market) on the active formation of their dispositions toward certain transition paths. Data include surveys and interviews with 105 youth in academic track and apprenticeship program streams in Edmonton and Bremen, Germany. The international comparison allows the author to look at the impact of institutional arrangements on youth transitions. For example, he suggests that the German system of education is more transparent, while the Canadian system is arguably more flexible in responding to changing labour market needs. Germany's highly streamed education system and credential-driven labour market tend to lead to more stratified school-work transitions. But apprenticeship is a more common and highly valued pathway there, and young apprentices appear able to make more informed decisions. In the Canadian system, high school apprenticeship programs represent an attempt to make pathways more transparent and to raise the status of trades work. Lehmann's data highlight some differences across Edmonton and Bremen students which suggest that institutional arrangements have an impact.

However, socio-cultural factors, notably social class and gender, appear to have a greater influence on youths' education and occupational decisions. Lehmann's survey data indicate that socio-economic background and cultural capital strongly determine participation in youth

apprenticeship or academic track programs. For example, 36 per cent of those whose fathers had only a high-school education were in the academic group, in contrast to more than half of those with a more educated father (p. 28). Youth with low cultural capital were over-represented in the apprenticeship group. They were more likely to have grown up in homes that considered manual skills important. They also tended to reject the theoretical aspects of education and embraced practical, applied knowledge. Gender was also an important influence on career decisions. For example, young women expected to be responsible for the care of children, while young men tended not to consider future family obligations in their career choices.

But despite evidence from surveys of social reproduction, interviews provided a more nuanced picture of agency and reflexivity. For example, apprentices often described their decisions in terms of rational choice calculations and vocational preferences. Some youth who were following “socially reproductive” pathways appeared to have thought a great deal about their decisions, while others whose choices appear to lead to social mobility seemed to be less conscious of where they were going and why. This finding challenges the assumption that dispositions and choices that lead to social reproduction are less agentic, while those involving social mobility are more agentic. Lehmann argues that participants in the study understood and incorporated into their narratives where and how their dispositions were formed; in other words, they displayed a reflexive engagement with their habitus.

Lehmann's book provides a comprehensive analysis that makes three main contributions:

- First, he questions common sense understandings of high-school apprenticeship as “win-win” to ask about the backgrounds and experiences of youth and whether programs fulfilled their educative potential. He finds that programs like the registered apprenticeship program are both socially reproductive *and* offer meaningful alternatives to more practically-oriented youth (p. 114). However, despite the discourse of new vocationalism, educators tend to defer to employers and see programs as education for work, as opposed to education that may provide a critical analysis of social relations in the work-

place (cf. Watts, 1991).

- Second, Lehmann does an excellent job of placing narratives of youth in “the larger structural context that is outside their frame of reference” (p. 166). This achievement is facilitated by his use of qualitative and quantitative data, his understanding of education and labour market structures in Germany and Canada, and his excellent knowledge of the literature related to school-work transition.
- Finally, his challenge to the dominant academic approaches to school-work transition – human capital/rational choice and social structural approaches – is an important contribution. He successfully makes the case for a third alternative that explores ideas of bounded agency or structured individualization, based on his interview data.

The only area where I feel Lehman's analysis could go further is in Chapter 5: The Role of Policy, where he focuses primarily on the registered apprenticeship program in Alberta and discusses how the program could create more meaningful alternatives for youth. Although the author talks about the implications of the academic-vocational divide for apprentices in schools and in terms of labour market rewards, and argues for the need to integrate academic and vocational learning, he does not pursue what this might look like. In this regard, Michael Young's (1998) book, *A Curriculum for the Future*, might be a useful complement. Young suggests that the British system of education, and I would add the Canadian system, remains dominated by an academic curriculum with a rigid stratification of knowledge. High status and rewards are associated with written literacy and abstract curriculum that are unrelated to everyday experience. Young argues that divisions between academic and vocational learning reflect the contradictory social function of the division between mental and manual labour and its role in the reproduction of wider social divisions (p. 62). He envisions a curriculum for the future that builds on connections between general and applied studies, opportunities for progression and credit transfer, and a clear sense of purpose.

To borrow from Lehmann: “integrating such suggestions into educational practices [truly] requires a far more radical rethinking of the role of vocational education and work experience in Canada than might at

first be thought" (p. 138). Clearly, there is a need for a rethinking of academic as well as vocational education – of how knowledge in schools should be organized and valued – so that all youth are better served by the education system.

## REFERENCES

- Young, M. (1998). *The curriculum of the future: From the 'new sociology of education' to a critical theory of learning*. London, UK: Falmer.
- Watts, A. G. (1991). The concept of work experience. In A. Miller, A. Watts, & I. Jamieson (Eds.). *Rethinking work experience* (pp. 16-38). London, UK: Falmer.