Creativity, production and identity

– from production school to vocational qualification

Tanja Kirkegaard and Klaus Nielsen
University of Aarhus, Department of Psychology

Summary

This study seeks to uncover the characteristics of the group of young people attending Denmark's production schools, how these pupils learn and the role that the production schools play for their pupils once they have graduated. The study maps out the pedagogical and learning-related qualities of the production schools, which other educational systems may find beneficial. In an educational sense, the production schools are unique, because they seek to integrate workshop training with more traditional educational practices.

In order to get to know better the pupils at the production schools – i.e. uncover their social and educational backgrounds as well as their goals and ambitions in relation to attending a **production school** – we cooperated with three production schools in Aarhus and selected 110 pupils with whom we conducted structured interviews. The results show that a large group of the pupils had had various experiences of defeat in the Folkeskole (the primary and lower secondary school), that is to say, they often had problems with the teachers, were frequently bullied and had changed schools a lot. Conversely, the majority of pupils experience very little bullying at the production schools and have very few conflicts with their teachers; moreover, many pupils indicate that they prefer the practically orientated teaching methods at the production schools.

With a view to gaining a deeper understanding of the pupils at the production schools, we decided to divide them by type based on a number of statistical analyses. We found that the majority of pupils taking part in the study could be divided into the following five types: the subject-focused, entrepreneurial, experimenting, creative and education-oriented pupils. Naturally, we have to take such typification with some reservations, but it did give us an insight into the disparity characteristic of the pupils at the production schools. One group of the pupils, e.g. the experimenting type, use their stay at a **production school** to work out what they want from their education/working life, while other pupils already have very clear goals with their education (the subject-focused type) and yet other types of pupils focus most of their energy outside the framework of the **production school**.

For the qualitative part of the study where we observed a small group of selected pupils and conducted several interviews, we initially focused on the **production school** itself in its broadest sense as seen by the pupils. One of the aspects emphasised by the pupils as a particular strength of the production schools was the practice of having supportive and clarifying teacher-pupil interviews and the general environment of tolerance at the production schools. The pupils also described a division between the various workshops mirroring a kind of "class-like" division at the production school. In addition, several pupils indicated that there was a split between ethnic Danes and non-ethnic Danes, the so-called New Danes.

Moreover, during the qualitative part of the study, we focused on the teacher-pupil relationship. The set-up characteristic of production schools with small workshops combined with the teachers' trade-related and broad general experience enabled some teachers to develop a deep understanding of the pupils they teach. This level of understanding meant, among other things, that the teachers are better at dealing with the pupils and avoid confrontations. The teacher-pupil relationship tends to be mutually close, so pupils also get to know their teachers very well. In this connection, it was emphasised that respect played a significant role in the pupils' learning process.

In connection with the qualitative study of a smaller group of pupils, we found that the pupils had very different personal objectives in attending a **production school**. In the publication, we describe different types of personal learning paths. In one learning path, one pupil wants to test his or her skills in relation to a forthcoming job; other pupils' personal learning paths are directed at establishing existential stability in their lives while others want recognition and the courage to sit an exam. It is interesting that pupils often do not state the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and skills as the direct objective, but often want to combine personal objectives with a qualification from a **production school**.

In chapter 5, we discuss the different central learning methods at the production schools. Analytically, we distinguish between horizontal and vertical learning methods. The horizontal learning methods describe, partly, how pupils learn from each other via informal pupil-pupil training and other collaborative learning processes, and partly, how pupils learn via using the skills they have acquired from near-practical situations. In the vertical learning section, pupils emphasise the importance of learning from experienced skilled craftsmen and that their feedback and recognition is of great importance to the pupils' learning. In addition, the pupils indicate that it has an inspirational effect on

their learning when they work with teachers who are experts within their field. In connection with the vertical learning dimension, it was emphasised how important it is for the pupils to be able to include their own trade-specific experiences and that in some situations, to have the opportunity to widen the forum for broad inter-trade reflection.

During the last part of the study, we re-interviewed by telephone 35 of the original 110 pupils one year after they were interviewed for the first time. The 35 pupils interviewed were those pupils we were able to get in touch with. Generally, the majority of the re-interviewed pupils said that having attended a **production school** had had a positive effect on their lives – also socially it was deemed to have been a success.

In the following, we point out the aspects of the study that may be of relevance to other sections of the education system:

- That pupils who have subject-specific and social problems work together with other pupils in small groups with high levels of clarity, security and cohesion.
- That pupils who have subject-specific and social problems work with near-practice situations and issues where it is possible to achieve fast, broad social and subject-specific recognition for what they are doing.
- That these pupils work together with teachers who have broad trade-related, social and personal competences.
- That the teachers have regular conversations with the pupils where it is made clear what progress they have made and where there is still room for improvement.