

Title:

**Preventing drop-outs from apprenticeships under market-conditions.
The example of training networks in Switzerland**

Author:

Nicolette Seiterle¹ (nicolette.seiterle@fhnw.ch), University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, School for Teacher Education, Basel, and Institute of Sociology, University of Basel, Switzerland

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Abstract (total: max. 900 words)

General description on research question, objectives and theoretical framework (max. 500 words)

Vocational education and training (VET) is crucial for the future social and economic stability and competitiveness of Europe. In Switzerland, VET is very integrative on the one hand: two thirds of all school leavers pursue a vocational training. On the other hand the number of drop-outs in traditional single training companies is considerable i.a. due to poor school performance, wrong occupational choice or problems between apprentices and companies (cf. Schmid & Stalder, 2012; Lamamra & Masdonati, 2009). Faced with lower rates of school leavers due to demographic change, but also with risks concerning the integration of young people into VET and the labour market, VET is challenged to develop new organisational forms to guarantee successful apprenticeships. Training networks (TNs) are such a new, innovative form of vocational training. In the past decade, TNs have become increasingly widespread in Switzerland, as well as in Germany and Austria. The proposed paper presents on-going research on the benefits and challenges of training networks.

Since the late 1990s, the Swiss vocational education policy has boosted the establishment of TNs in order to increase the number of apprenticeship positions, to improve the quality of professional education and to further the integration of adolescents into the labour market (cf. BBT, 2008). A training network is a coalition of several companies that train apprentices together. The apprentices rotate from one training company (TC) to another, usually on a yearly basis. The responsibility for recruitment, selection, employment, and formal qualification lies with a professionalised lead organization (LO). Like traditional single training companies, TNs are also confronted with problematic situations concerning apprentices who are at risk for becoming drop-outs. The paper analyses the TN-specific possibilities to prevent and handle such situations on the basis of a comparison of two commercial TNs in Switzerland. As both TNs are market-driven their primary focus lies on creating a professional workforce for a specific line, but they differ with respect to their size. The two TNs will be compared along the following question:

Which structures and offers of TNs enable apprentices to successfully manage and accomplish their apprenticeship and prevent drop-outs?

The theoretical framework for this comparison is the **Capability Approach** (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) and the French **sociology of convention** (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2007). The Capability Approach allows to understand the kind of possibilities (conversion factors) TNs offer to enable apprentices to convert their individual potential into training success. Examples of such conversion factors are individual coachings offered by the LO, shared mentoring of the apprentices by LO and TC, and the possibility to relocate the apprentices in another TC if problems occur.

The sociology of convention proposes different (market, civic, industrial, reputation-driven etc.) principles of labour market coordination and social cohesion, and enables to theorise complex educational

organisations such as TNs (cf. Imdorf & Leemann, 2011). The paper focuses on the conventions that underlie conversion factors and promote the capabilities of the apprentices.

Methods/methodology (up to 200 words)

The empirical data stems from a case study (cf. Yin, 2009) of two selected TNs. The results of the paper are based on a qualitative approach which embodies a total of 25 semi-structured expert interviews:

- 8 interviews with representatives of the LO of the two TNs
- 17 interviews with representatives of the training companies of the two TNs

The interviews focus on (amongst others) 1) structures offered to apprentices by the LO to support them in handling the apprenticeship, 2) problematic situations concerning trainees who are at risk for becoming drop-outs. The interviews are aligned to the epistemological framework of the sociology of convention, i.e. the interviewees are asked for justification of their critiques and decisions (Why-questions) respectively the material searched for justifications. The qualitative approach allows reconstructing the conversion factors as well as the underlying conventions that guide the actions and decisions of LO and TC in daily working life.

Expected outcomes/results (up to 200 words)

My results highlight that TNs have many organisational resources that increase their potential to promote capabilities of apprentices and therefore enable successful apprenticeship trainings respectively the prevention of drop-outs.

Not only the ambition of integrating disadvantaged adolescents into VET and the labour market (civic convention) is underlying conversion factors concerning apprentices, but also market-driven and industrial motivations such as securing the future workforce. Hence, integrating young people respectively preventing drop-outs is also a goal of commercial TNs, and it is influenced by their size and reputation. I expect the big TN - due to its economic potential - to offer more organisational support to apprentices than the smaller one. The smaller TN on the other hand might provide a more familiar setting for the apprentices and therefore offer more personal support. Furthermore the latter might be more dependent on preventing drop-outs because their pool of candidates is restricted.

This analysis thus provides a tool for evaluating whether (and what kind of) TNs have a role to play in tackling some of the most pressing problems that VET is confronted with. It proposes policy measures to prevent and reduce inequalities in vocational education.

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