

Title: Learning for the Project-World: Opportunities and Risks of a Network-oriented Organisation of Vocational Education from a Perspective of Social Inequalities.

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Abstract (total: max. 900 words)

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

Nowadays education systems are being challenged to teach students *key competencies* and prepare them for a professional life that requires flexibility, autonomy and self-responsibility, as well as the willingness to be mobile and engage in life-long learning (European-Communities 2007). However there is not much knowledge as to how *apprentices* experience these competency requirements, how they evaluate their own predispositions to fulfil them, and to what extent these requirements imply new gateways for social inequality.

The aim of our paper is to analyse these questions in the context of *training networks (TN)*, a new form of VET. In German-speaking countries TN have been promoted by the national departments of VET since the 1990s. A training network is a coalition of several companies that train apprentices together. A *lead organisation (LO)* is responsible for the recruitment, employment and support of the apprentices. Various features of TN require and nurture the flexibility and autonomy of apprentices: (a) *Rotations*: Apprentices exchange their training company several times (every ½-1 year). (b) *Shared support*: Apprentices receive support from two parties: The current training company and the LO. (c) *Additional training elements*: Many TN offer additional training elements that focus on self-responsibility and life-long learning.

What are the opportunities and risks for apprentices in TN regarding these key competencies? What is the impact of social factors such as social background, gender, and age?

Comparing TN to traditional apprenticeships, the specific features of TN (particularly the rotations and shared support) place greater demands on apprentices. Apprentices are required to exhibit high degrees of self-control, self-commercialisation and self-rationalisation, as described by Voß/Pongratz in the concept of the 'entmployee'. For apprentices from socially disadvantaged families this can be an opportunity: They have the chance to acquire qualities usually attributed to members of the more educated classes (autonomy, sovereignty, as well as the willingness to take on risks and to be mobile). On the other side however there's substantial risk that they are being overstrained by this type of education, since their milieu of origin is less likely to provide them with the predispositions necessary to cope with these requirements.

Our paper builds on the cultural sociology of Bourdieu (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992) as well as on the French sociology of conventions (Boltanski/Thévenot 1999, 2006). Bourdieu's approach allows an analysis of experiences and competences of apprentices from a perspective of unequal social positions. The sociology of conventions has developed as a critique of Bourdieu's epistemological standpoint and rejects the idea that social action depends on individual's dispositions. Instead its proponents envisage an actor who has the competence to orient himself in a social world shaped by uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity, and to decide and act adequately. Especially in the *project world* (Boltanski/Chiapello 2005), which – on a small scale – can be found in TN, the class habitus (so they say) has lost its relevance for social reproduction.

The consideration of these opposite epistemological positions opens up the field for analysing the opportunities and risks of network-oriented VET organisations for apprentices from low educational background.

Methods/methodology (up to 200 words)

The empirical data stems from a case study (Yin 2009) of four selected TNs which differ in size and financing (i.e. private or partly public). The results of this paper are based on one TN which places great demands on flexibility, mobility and autonomy (*project qualities*), and focuses on promoting entrepreneurial individuals. (1) In a first step we are going to outline the features of the *project world* and network structure of TN on the basis of expert interviews with representatives of the LO as well as documents concerning their training. (2) In a second step we are going to present multivariate analyses of an online survey with second year apprentices (n = 389, return = 65%). The following research questions are going to be answered: (a) How do apprentices experience and cope with the rotations? (b) What is their opinion regarding the shared support? (c) How do they assess the various additional training elements intended to enhance *project qualities*? (d) How do they evaluate their own project qualities? Which social inequalities become apparent in answering these four questions (a-d)?

Expected outcomes/results (up to 200 words)

- (1) The high demands with regard to *project qualities* in the here presented TN result from (a) the six-monthly exchange of training companies and an internal application procedure for the placing in the third year (b) the simultaneous exchange of both supporting persons (in the training company and in the LO) at the rotation and (c) training elements that explicitly teach project qualities.
- (2) Apprentices whose parents have undergone VET training cope better with *rotations* and feel less burdened by project-oriented *training elements* than apprentices from an academic milieu. Their familiarity with the VET-system seems to facilitate dealing with these requirements.
- (3) Apprentices from low educational background are less likely to experience the rotations and shared support as a burden than those with academically trained parents. We assume that they perceive these features as providing opportunities for professional learning and career development.
- (4) Female apprentices are more often burdened by the exchange of vocational trainers than male ones. They distance themselves from some ideals of the *project world*, but assess their skills in this field as higher.
- (5) Older apprentices are more at ease with the rotations and more confident about their project qualities.

References (300 words)

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