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Training networks in Switzerland – a new organisational form to prevent dropouts from vocational education and training

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Abstract

Vocational education and training is crucial for the stability of Switzerland's workplace and it is very integrative: Two thirds of all lower secondary school leavers pursue a vocational training. However, there's a considerable number of VET dropouts, or respectively, early apprenticeship contract terminations in individual training companies. On the one hand, dropouts can have negative long-term consequences for the adolescents concerned: Many of them have difficulties to find a new apprenticeship and some never succeed in accomplishing an upper secondary certificate. On the other hand, early apprenticeship contract terminations result in high financial and organisational costs for the training companies, which is another reason why they as well as the government want to prevent them – particularly in times of economic crisis when the commitment of companies to VET is brittle. For those reasons VET is challenged to develop new organisational forms to guarantee successful apprenticeships. Training networks (TNs) are such a new, innovative form. In the past decade, TNs have emerged, amongst others, in Switzerland ("Lehrbetriebsverbände"), Germany ("Ausbildungsverbände"), Austria and Norway.

A TN is a coalition of several companies that train apprentices together in dual-track programmes. The apprentices may rotate every 6-12 months from one training company (TC) to another. A professionalised lead organization (LO) recruits and employs the apprentices. Similar to individual training companies, TNs are periodically confronted with apprentices who are at risk to drop out from training. The paper analyses the TN-specific possibilities to handle such situations by comparing four Swiss TNs along the following question: *Which structures and offers of TN enable apprentices to successfully accomplish their apprenticeship and prevent drop-outs?*

Theories

The paper uses **(a) the Capability Approach** (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) to conceptualise the possibilities (conversion factors) TNs offer to enable apprentices to convert their individual potential into well-being (training success), e.g. private lessons, coaching, shared mentoring by LO and TC, and relocation of apprentices in another TC if problems occur. **(b) The Sociology of Convention** (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) enables to distinguish different conversion factors by the underlying principles of training and labour market coordination and social cohesion (market, civic, industrial...).

Methods

Based on semi-structured interviews with LO and TC representatives (N=50) as well as apprentices and dropouts (N=20) of four different TNs, the paper identifies the conversion factors and reconstructs the principles (conventions) that underlie those conversion factors.

Results

Due to the following structures and offers TN have the potential to prevent dropouts: *shared guidance and supervision of the apprentices by LO and TC, shorter duration of stay in a company due to the rotation principle, the possibility to relocate apprentices in another company in case of problems and support offers such as private lessons.* Depending on the size and initiative of establishment (public vs. commercial TN) and thus the financial resources and philosophy of a TN those structures and offers are more or less developed - hence, some TN are more likely to prevent dropouts than others. Due to their economic potential big and commercial TN offer more organisational support to apprentices than the smaller ones. Small and public TN on the other hand provide a more familiar setting for the apprentices and therefore offer more personal support. Furthermore, small TN are more dependent on preventing drop-outs in order to secure their future workforce because their pool of candidates is restricted.