

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie
= Swiss journal of sociology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 36 (2010)

Heft: 1

Vorwort: Editorial : vocational education and training in Switzerland, France,
Germany : perspectives for sociological research

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Editorial

Vocational Education and Training in Switzerland, France, Germany – Perspectives for Sociological Research

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George Waardenburg****

Scientific debates and research on vocational education and training (VET) in Switzerland as a definite task are institutionalized only since a short time, since the new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act came into effect in 2004. Today, five disciplinarily differentiated “Leading houses” carry out the statutorily requested Swiss VET research. Two of the leading houses are devoted to the economics of education, two focus on pedagogical issues, and one leading house investigates learning strategies from the perspective of educational psychology. A sixth scheduled leading house focusing on “systems and processes”, which explicitly required a sociological approach, was not implemented.

The current disciplinary division of VET research is not surprising given that a sociological perspective on VET has hardly any tradition in Switzerland: sociological studies in the field were rare and only sporadic. A review of articles published in the Swiss Journal of Sociology reveals only half a dozen contributions explicitly addressing questions of VET since the journal was founded in 1975. Most of them were published in the first half of the eighties, when the National Research Programme “Education and Acting in Society and Professional Life” together with a boom of Swiss youth sociology in the run-up of the international youth year 1985 tickled a few sociological studies on vocational education (especially in French-speaking Switzerland, see Perrenoud 1992).

Yet, the early sociological attempts to illuminate VET passed without triggering a sustainable research initiative of national significance. Due to its lack of continuity and institutionalization, sociological analyses of VET-related structures, processes and their impact on Swiss society remain weak until today. However, since a few years, one can observe some substantial sociological research initiatives emphasizing the social selectivity of VET and the associated social trajectories of VET participants, and stimulating debates on VET related structures.

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Sociological VET research in Switzerland seems promising as the country offers a veritable “life-size VET laboratory” (Meyer 2009). In coincidence with the VET systems of its neighbours Germany and France, apprenticeship based VET is accentuated in the German speaking part of Switzerland, whereas general, academically oriented education is more prevalent in the French speaking part. Despite the different societal configurations a considerable part of young people benefit from VET education and qualification in these three countries. Given that VET accounts for a central pillar of upper secondary education in Switzerland, Germany and France, this special issue aims at spurring VET sociology.¹ While we wish to encourage further sociological VET research we keep in mind that interdisciplinary approaches are essential to appropriately understand the complex VET realities.

Sociological VET studies have been continuous and numerous over the last decades in France and Germany. The relationship between qualifications and employment, a central research perspective to the analysis of vocational training and professional education in both countries, has become a growing research field especially for French educational sociologists (Trottier 2001). The relatively strong sociological coverage of VET research in France is probably due to the fact that French VET never really attracted the interest and attention of educational sciences, the latter being primarily concerned with issues of general and academic education. In Germany, by contrast, the academic discipline of vocational and economic education (*Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik*), which is closely related to the university level training of teachers for part-time vocational schools, has traditionally been a strong contributor in the field of VET research concerning contents and processes of teaching and learning. Still, economic and social science studies have become increasingly relevant in Germany since the seventies. Thereby, a sociological literature review by Corsten (2001) shows that German sociological VET research has started off as part of the sociology of occupations and professions (*Berufssoziologie*) and of industrial sociology. Other important contributions to VET sociology in Germany came from research on occupational and professional socialisation, from biographical research and from the life course sociology to name only some of them.

Mainstream sociological topics in both countries are educational and occupational pathways with regard to social class and social inequalities as well as their interrelation with life course trajectories, especially in Germany. While gender has become an increasingly important category to analyse unequal trajectories and occupational sex segregation since the late eighties, categories of migration background have been applied since the mid-nineties or even more recently, particularly in France. Today, the relevance of *competencies* acquired through VET for occupational pathways and careers – rather than the pure weight of certificates – is becoming more

1 See Imdorf, Granato, Moreau and Waardenburg (2010) for further information on the different VET-systems as well as on past and current sociological VET research in France, Germany and Switzerland.

important in Germany. Similarly the traditional French research on academic and vocational certificates (*diplômes*) competes today with research on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*). While occupational socialisation and identities in company-based apprenticeships have formerly been a characteristic topic for German VET sociology, the analytical focus has recently turned towards school-based VET and the system of tide-over measure between school and VET which has considerably expanded since the nineties. In contrast, French VET sociology has drawn its attention more and more towards company-based training and apprenticeships as a result of establishing alternance training in France since the late eighties.

As far as methodological approaches in VET sociology are concerned, both German and French scholars have applied high methodological standards. Both statistical and interpretative methods are well represented in German VET sociology, although mutually enriching mixed approaches have been rare (see Corsten 2001). In France, applied sociological research has remained mainly quantitative, while university-based research showed more openness to both interpretative and historically founded approaches (Tanguy 2000). In both countries, sociological VET research includes process-orientated longitudinal as well as internationally comparative research designs.

Despite the considerable sociological work which has been accomplished so far in the field of VET in France and Germany, many fundamental sociological questions and “black boxes” remain. In France, where questions of VET are more and more reduced to labour market access and needs, sociological research on initial VET still remains sparse and often fails to consider its public, the apprentices and students beyond their skills and certificates. In this respect an epistemological reflection of the normatively loaded vocabulary denoting the research subjects (e.g. *apprenti* vs. *étudiant en alternance*) is pending. In Germany, VET sociology has generally focused on VET participants rather than taking into consideration organizational perspectives of the involved institutions (such as training companies, full- and part-time vocational schools).

Thus, many questions of sociological relevance remain unanswered: What happens *during* VET and within VET-organizations? Who are the trainers and teachers at the different training venues, and how do they relate to the apprentices and students? How do organizational cultures and requirements interfere with vocational selection, competence building, dropout and vocational examinations? How do different organizational forms and types of VET impact on participants' social and professional identity (e.g. gender) and social trajectories? How do VET leavers use both their incorporated VET knowledge and their vocational qualification in their social (re-)positioning? On what (historical, local and institutional) grounds do the involved VET organizations, including public authorities and professional associations, sustain their coordination? How is power embedded and exerted in

VET organizations and systems? Why seem countries with dual VET systems to have the most gender segregated labour markets? What *sociological* frameworks² account for different educational and vocational systems to enable international comparative research?

Such research gaps indicate that a more or less pronounced lack of VET sociology in Switzerland, Germany and France substantially hinders the understanding of vocational identities, trajectories and labour market entries. To shed a first light on some of the above questions, this special issue presents eight sociological analyses of VET issues in these three countries based on manifold theoretical and methodological approaches.³

Sandra Hupka-Brunner, Stefan Sacchi and Barbara E. Stalder analyse in their paper how social origin impacts on the access to upper secondary education in Switzerland. The authors compare entry patterns of school leavers into company-based apprenticeship and exclusively school-based programmes. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's social theory and on event history analyses of Switzerland's first nationwide longitudinal survey of young people (TREE), their paper shows that cultural capital of the family of origin is highly relevant for access to school-based programmes, whereas the economic capital of the family – as perceived by the employers – favours the entry into apprenticeships.

Based on in-depth interviews in the Swiss graphical industry, *George Waardenburg* analyses the social production of educational inequalities through the schooling trajectories of the apprentices. Likewise referring to Bourdieu, but using a complementary perspective compared to the one of Hupka-Brunner et al., Waardenburg explains the entry into apprenticeships with individual orientation processes triggered by past school experience. He concludes that a conflict-ridden relationship of apprentices towards the disciplinary system of schools plays an important role in the orientation of school leavers towards company-based apprenticeship training.

Analysing the case of French apprenticeship, *Prisca Kergoat* reflects on inequalities at the crossroads of education and work in France. Kergoat ties educational and work sociology together to study the processes of apprentice selection in four large companies based on interviews and observations. The author concludes that the French 1987 reform – contrary to its initial ambitions – did not succeed in overcoming gender and ethnic inequalities, but gradually reconfigured traditional hierarchies by combining educational inequalities and those of the work environment.

2 See for rare theoretical offers the French socio-economic comparative framework of Maurice Sellier and Silvestre's Societal Analysis – as distinguished from Hall and Soskice's more politico-economic "Varieties of Capitalism" approach – or the comparative approach of the Bremen life-course sociology.

3 We would like to thank 36 international reviewers, who have commented on 15 selected papers out of 34 initial propositions for this special issue. Their critical reviews have considerably contributed to the selection and quality of the eight published papers.

While the first three articles explore issues of entry into VET, *Gilles Moreau* takes a closer look into VET processes to understand how one becomes a professional in France. He uses a mixed method approach based on questionnaires and interviews with apprentices in the car mechanics' trade and applies Robert Castel's French distinction between *affiliation* and *désaffiliation*. With this Moreau shows that car mechanic apprentices build a different relationship with their trade depending on their social and educational background, as well as on their empirical experience during training and work values. The author thereby empirically distinguishes weak, strong and distant forms of affiliation with one's trade.

Peter Streckeisen takes up a historical perspective on VET in the chemical-pharmaceutical industry of Basel. Based on industrial history and semi-structured interviews with employees and managers, the author explains the evolving role and meaning of VET for the societal integration of the factory workers and laboratory employees over time. Going beyond their mere industrial functionality, he analyses skills as important carriers of social values in a changing social order. Referring to different industrial sectors and considering different forms of VET experience, both Streckeisen and Moreau point to the social positioning of VET qualified groups in relation to each other.

Reinhold Sackmann and *Thomas Ketzmerick* investigate whether the dual VET system in Germany has been able to moderate the recent rise in inequality caused by a global trend towards a shrinking middle class. The authors focus on two forms of institutional differentiation within the dual VET system as a reaction to these challenges: The development of dual community college (*Berufsakademien*) on the tertiary level in the upper VET segment, and the expansion of non-company based vocational training, considered as "lower segment". Sackmann and Ketzmerick thereby explain different frictional unemployment rates caused by non company- vs. company-based dual VET with a sociological life course model. By using statistical analyses of regional data exemplarily, the authors conclude, that, in sum, the dual system in Germany enforced the rise in inequality caused by globalization.

Whereas the preceding paper analyses frictional short- to medium-term unemployment, *Anja Hall* offers a gender sensitive analysis of employment below the level of qualification obtained after long-term transitions from full time school based versus dual based VET into the German labour market. Based on a representative survey of employed persons in Germany, the author shows that the segmentation line in accessing adequate professional positions does not run between different forms of VET, but between different occupations (*Berufe*), which are gendered and blended in those forms. Hall concludes that qualifying women does not suffice. Rather it is necessary to recognize gendered jobs as equally qualified work.

Finally, *Ursula Beicht* and *Joachim Gerd Ulrich* expound the problems of survey-based evaluation designs, where those completing initial training are asked to assess the utility of taking part in such a training. The paper adopts Hartmut

Esser's Action Theory to examine the functions of retrospective utility evaluations for respondents. The authors test to what extent those evaluations correspond with inter-subjectively measurable unequal training effects, such as the higher frictional unemployment rate after non company based training as highlighted in the paper of Sackmann and Ketzmerick. Beicht and Ulrich show that respondents tend to make positive utility evaluations whilst neglecting actual occupational developments following the training. They conclude that respondents perceive their utility evaluations not primarily as an assessment of the training course they have attended, but first and foremost as a judgement on their own role as structurers of their occupational biographies.

The eight contributions clearly show that the VET system in each society does not just produce human capital available to the labour market by applying adequate pedagogical strategies. VET goes much beyond these processes and has an impact on the (re)production of social inequalities, on the development of social identities and citizens, as well as on the future social status of VET participants (d'Iribarne and d'Iribarne 1999). Keeping in mind that different educational systems reflect different societies, the sociological insights from France, Germany and Switzerland may help to better understand the social impact of VET in each country. We hope that the papers of this special issue stimulate sociological VET research in Switzerland and beyond, both in national and international comparative perspectives.

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