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Reconfigurations of teaching between education and employment: opening a national window on a global phenomenon

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Background

Background to the topic

This paper addresses the key concept of teaching, and the re-configuration of the teaching occupations which is occurring in the field between education and employment as a result of a globalising labour market of human service work. I am especially interested in researching how educational politics transform teaching (and learning), i.e. how macro-level politics of lifelong learning for a knowledge society play out on the micro-level of interactions.

While concepts like "educational borrowing" or "travelling reforms" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009) present a comparative research approach on global teaching, my focus is on the question of what happens when travelling ideas about teaching end their journey in local learning settings. The particular context here is vocational education and training (VET) and support for young people's transitions to VET in Germany. I will ask how teachers and other education professionals actively build their occupational projects (Heikkinen 2002) as boundary work. How do teachers, youth workers, career advisors - in the multiplicity of new job concepts - negotiate their collaboration, negotiate their agency and negotiate their job identity? How do they build their knowledge, and how do they negotiate their competence? Under what terms are they responsible for educating young people in school-to-VET transitions, and legitimated to do so?

Research Questions

Research questions/focus of the enquiry

Against the background of education politics and the politics of professional education, this paper will focus on the perspective of the subject. Changes in professional teaching and education are realised through situated interaction in any learning context: it is the individual educator who is changing her/his practice - or not. While professional action is not limited to mediating knowledge, it is understood as an active process of constructing professional identity and professional communities, by applying specific tools and strategies in a way that makes sense to her/him. It is this process of "making sense", as an active, individual but situated construction, which is the focus of this paper.

How do the actors in the field deal with political reforms that affect their practice? How do they contribute to a reconfiguration of their profession? How do they negotiate occupational boundaries? What are the tools and procedures for constructing professional communities across institutional boundaries - or to safeguard these boundaries as a protection of occupational projects and identities? Where are the places to grow and keep expertise in new activities related to teaching and who is ruling there? How are educational reforms, and the reconfigurations of teaching professions which go along with them, interpreted by teaching professionals? How are they put into practice? What are the new, emerging "politics of we"?

Methods

Research methods and/or mapping of the literature

I will base my argument on a case study of the so-called transition system in Germany, which includes general and vocational schools' activities to prepare and support young people's job decisions and placements, as well as educational and training programs for young unemployed people.

My analysis of occupational boundary work draws on a series of research projects on concepts of school-to-work transition and school programs for career orientation (observation reports, expert discussions, focus interviews with teachers, social and youth workers). The key arguments will build on narrative interviews from a current project on the re-configuration of education professions, focusing on career histories of teaching professionals, both from school-teachers and from educational staff outside school institutions. These narrative interviews from a contrastive theoretical sample will be extended into case studies of institutional arrangements for collaborative practice, to identify strategies for the construction of meaning and frames of orientation among teaching and educational professionals.

This data collected in national and European projects have been read through the lens of an international research team, as outlined in the symposium statement above, leading to the methodological concept of grounded globalisation (Seddon 2009).

Frame

Analytical and/or theoretical frame

The background of the research builds on Sennett's (1998) concept of flexible characters. His picture of flexible individuals actively moving between jobs and communities, adapting skill profiles and live worlds to changing job demands, who are able to deal with uncertain working conditions, short term relations and decay of qualifications, is challenging education systems and their professional actors in a double way. The first question is, how to conceptualise and organise education, teaching, learning in a way that enables the future generation to live and work and be happy in a flexible world. The second question refers to the teaching and education professions as part of a flexible economy - how are teaching professions flexibilised? What kind of flexibility is demanded from teaching professionals? And how do they make sense of these demands within their career stories?

As the analytical frame for the interpretation of the career-focused interviews serves the model of communities of practice, which allows identifying the activities and instruments of the construction of a professional project.

Research findings

Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge

Opening a national - German - window on the global phenomenon of the reconfiguration of teaching occupations by adapting a specific subject centred perspective allows to identify patterns of flexibilisation of the educational system and how they are enacted by teaching professionals. It will provide an insight in the subjective construction of meaning in processes of education reform and help to identify patterns of a "politics of we".

Professional teaching in the field of school-to-VET transition is shaped by paradoxes and dilemmas between education and work, between local and global (teaching is one of the most static professions in Germany), between continuity and change, stability and uncertainty. The reconstruction of how these dilemmas are solved by teachers, youth workers, job coaches or counsellors et al. will help to understand the intended and unintended effects of a flexibilised education.

In addition the contrasting interpretation of case studies from differing national contexts will help to understand and reconstruct global reconfigurations of teaching occupations and the global organisation of teaching as part of human service work.