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Improving the connection between schools and work - new approaches in Sweden and Germany

by Dr Hubert Ertl

(Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford)

The DfES consultation document *Success for All* represents the government's attempt to initiate a wide-ranging reform process in further education and training. Two of the main aims of this process are to offer '[...] 14 - 19 learners greater choice and higher standards with academic and vocational programmes' and to offer '[...] employers much more productive engagement with a transformed and responsive network of providers committed to meeting regional and sub-regional skill needs' (DfES, 2002, p. 10).

Despite a consultation process on the document and the continuation of the government's relentless review and restructuring agenda, there seems to be precious little evidence for both, a significant improvement of qualification structures and an increasing involvement of employers in school-based training provisions in particular. Therefore, this paper outlines two reforms of school-based training in Germany and Sweden that seem to fulfil both aims quoted above.

School-work connections: a European challenge

The transfer of real-life challenges as they arise in work contexts into teaching and learning at school-based contexts is one of the questions that have to be addressed in all systems of vocational training. The transfer of changing challenges posed by economic systems that are more than ever characterised

by processes of globalisation seems to be a particular topical challenge. In most European countries both government policy makers and the social partners are currently concerned with developing close links between school-based education/training and the work-place. At the same time we are facing growing participation in school-based training programmes throughout Europe (Green et al., 1999).

Looking at the national contexts, it appears that different national training systems have found diverging answers to the question of how the interplay between the world of work and vocational education can be organised. From an institutional point of view, the different roles school contexts play within training systems are an indicator of this diversity.

The way in which the transfer of work-related challenges into school-based training contexts takes place seems to be a key element in the development of what Brown et al. (2001) have described as a system of 'high skills formation'. However, there seems to be a lack of systematic investigation into how this transfer takes place and how it can be improved in order to accommodate the challenges of the dynamic economic world.

Research carried out for and funded by the SKOPE network has identified three interdependent elements linking school-based training and the world of work: organisation, curricula, teachers/professionalism.

Systems of vocational training are organised by a variety of institutions as well as the rules and agreements that regulate the co-operation of these institutional actors. Institutions determine the way in which work challenges enter teaching and training contexts. In most European countries, employers' and employees' associations are involved to varying degrees in identifying typical work situations for which trainees should be prepared.

Curricula translate the knowledge and skills regarded as relevant by the institutional actors into the formulation of contents and aims of school-based training. Curricula include documents such as training plans and lesson plans.

Teachers translate the contents and aims set out in the curricula into teaching and learning situations on a day-to-day basis. In addition, they are sometimes part of the institutional framework since they assume roles in school administration and curricula commissions. The way in which they fulfil these functions depends on their qualifications and their interpretations of their professional role. The degree to which teachers have contact with the world of work varies; some of them might consider this contact as less important than pedagogical skills and knowledge.

It needs to be emphasised that these three areas do not influence the transfer processes between school and work contexts in isolation from each other. The

elements provide the basis for an investigation of structures and reforms in a number of European countries. In this paper, these elements are used to highlight two distinct reforms in vocational education and training (VET) in Germany and Sweden.

The German Lernfeldkonzept

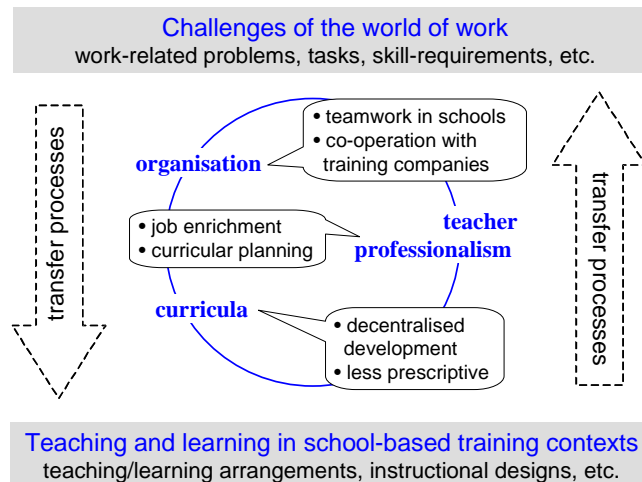
The German dual system of initial training combines training at training companies and vocational colleges. While the system has been relatively stable and successful since its formal establishment in 1969, there is a cautious process of modernisation underway at the moment. This modernisation is regarded as necessary because of a lack of training places in recent years and the rapidly changing economic climate in Germany and elsewhere.

The concept of so-called learning areas is arguably the most important step in the reform. The main idea of this concept is the reconstruction and/or simulation of vocational processes at vocational colleges. Traditional subjects are transformed into a cross-curricular structure in which comprehensive tasks have to be fulfilled and real-life problems have to be solved by the trainees.

First and foremost, the 'Lernfeldkonzept' is a curricular reform. Whereas curricula for vocational colleges used to be strongly prescriptive in terms of contents, aims and time allocated, curricula developed on the basis of the concept of learning areas are formulated in an open way. The processes of curriculum construction are transferred from the state level to the level of individual colleges.

This means that the work and the role of teachers at vocational colleges have changed. The translation of curricula into instructional designs becomes part of the work of teachers. This task can only be fulfilled in close co-operation with the teaching staff, which has consequences for the organisation of vocational colleges. For instance, teachers have to co-operate as a team in order to develop schedules and lessons plans on the basis of the curricular guidelines. In order to be able to plan teaching and learning processes on the basis of vague curricular guidelines, teachers have to take real-life work contexts into account. This entails that teachers have to co-operate with training companies while planning their lessons.

Thus, the potential changes in the transfer mechanism between the world of work and college-based training context resulting from the introduction of the Lernfeldkonzept can be illustrated as follows:



The Swedish KY-Scheme

The KY (Kvalificerad Yrkesutbildning)-scheme started as a pilot project in the sector of advanced vocational education in 1996. Funded by the Swedish government, it aims to provide school-based but practically-oriented training for students that have completed upper secondary education. The basic idea is to provide state money for training providers who manage to develop training programmes in close co-operation with local employers. The national agency responsible for the administration of the KY-scheme only provides vague guidelines for individual programmes. It is up to training providers and companies, who work together in so-called Management-Boards, to develop coherent, up-to-date and challenging training programmes.

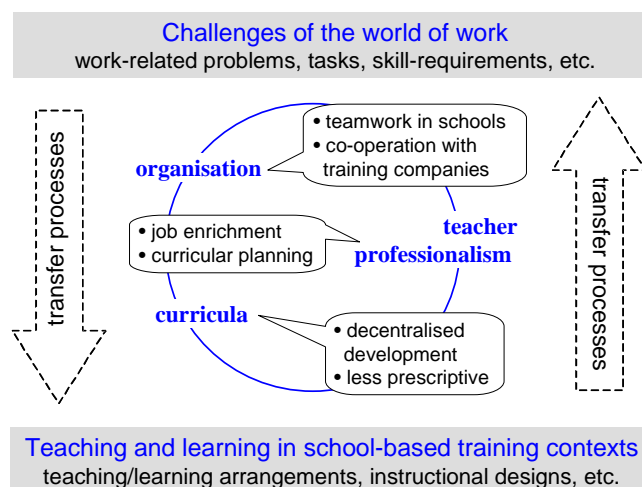
Programmes can be developed in twelve occupational areas, ranging from IT and media to industry and health. The duration of programmes varies between one and three years, with the norm being two years. All programmes include internship phases of at least one third of the overall training time. Individual programmes are approved and funded for a maximum of three years.

Curricula are developed at local level, with training providers, companies, teachers and students all having a say in terms of contents and aims. The limited time of approval of programmes result in a pressure to keep the curriculum up-to-date and in line with the needs of the employers.

In terms of organisation, the co-operation of training provider and companies is vital for the success of programmes. In the programme Management Boards this co-operation is institutionalised. It is also a decisive approval criterion.

Teachers for school-based instruction are often recruited on a part-time basis from companies in the relevant occupational area. Therefore, they have direct access to the latest developments and challenges in the world of work.

Programmes funded by the KY-scheme have proven very attractive to employers and students. Employers particularly value the flexibility of provisions, while students' praise focuses on their excellent chances for employment after completion of KY-training. The scheme was recently opened beyond the pilot status to all Swedish regions. One of the main factors for the scheme's success seems to be effective transfer mechanisms between school-based learning and the world of work:



Conclusion

These findings from current research might provide answers to the problem of a lack of responsiveness of school-based vocational training in England and Wales. The positive attitudes of students and employers towards the innovations in Sweden and Germany seem to be of great significance for the success of the reforms; a factor missing in past reforms of GNVQs and similar qualifications.

The conceptual reason for the success of the reforms seems to be that Sweden and Germany have developed promising new ways of connecting school-based vocational training and the world of work. Central to the approaches applied in the two countries are the re-conceptualisation of curricula used at vocational schools and new ways of initiating institutional co-operation between schools and local companies. This seems to be the lesson that can be drawn for future reform agendas in this country.

References

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