

Access to Education, Organisational Discrimination and Ethnicity

Christian Imdorf
Institute of Sociology, University of Basel
christian.imdorf@unibas.ch

Abstract

In my research, I try to understand social inequalities and reproduction by taking serious the organisational context of education and work. I ask what organisational logics underlay the distribution of and access to educational opportunities, and I question the function of ethnicity for the survival of educational organisations. Educational organisations can be located on the meso-level where social representations of students and their families interact with organisational constraints, needs and beliefs.

I analyse the school to work transition of students focusing on vocational education and training (VET) in Switzerland, which is predominantly based on apprenticeships in training firms (learning on the job). Based on face-to-face interviews with gatekeepers of 65 Swiss firms, I reconstructed the logics behind the distribution of apprenticeship places using argumentation analysis¹. The empirical question to be answered was how firms justify their selection of trainees.

Trainee selection as a research topic can be considered as a special case of personnel selection. Training firms need to choose one of numerous applicants using non-professional and non-regulated procedures of recruitment and selection. The big challenge is to assess the future trainability and employability of youth who solely have school but no work experience.

Referring to several organisational theories I will outline how trainee selection can be conceptualised. A functionalistic organisational approach presumes that firms have a need to endure over time and to survive. As a perfect matching of trainee positions and applicants is impeded by numerous structural problems, training firms do not search for the best candidate, but for an adequate one, respecting the firm's own constraints, needs and anxieties. Furthermore, educational organisations must be capable to justify their decision. I will show how firms justify their selection and how an organisational understanding of trainee selection can shed light on ethnic discrimination.

The dominant selection logic of trouble avoidance appears clearly from the justifications of the interviewees in my data. In fact, what is perceived as ethnic discrimination from outside can be

¹ The research project "The selection of trainees in small and medium-sized enterprises: Integration and exclusion at the transitional stage between school and vocational training" was subsidized by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the National Research Programme "Social Integration and Social Exclusion" (contract no. 405140-69088; see <http://www.nfp51.ch>). The research was carried at the Institute of Special Education, University of Fribourg (2004-2006).

understood from the inside of the firm as a consequence of anticipated troubles with perceived “foreign youth” in different spheres of the company.

Referring to the work of Boltanski & Thévenot (1991)², I talk about different ‘common worlds’. Each of the latter offers a unique norm system enabling social agents to justify their decisions in critical moments. Each world is based on a specific moral principle of equivalence. These principles guarantee for organisational gatekeeper (human resource manager, teacher etc.) to judge people (students, applicants) against each other. Some of these common worlds are called the “industrial”, the “marked”, the “domestic” and the “civic” world. In a training firm – and probably also at school – all these worlds interfere with each other.

The organisational exclusion of „foreign youth“ follows a selection logic that tends to prevent troubles within the marked world and the domestic world of the firm. Referring to the unique moral principles of the different worlds I will finally give some hints how educational organisations can struggle against ethnic discrimination.

I will conclude that ethnicity can be a useful organisation resource for problem solving. Ethnic discrimination can be functional for educational organisations if it allows for organisational flexibility, reduction of complexity or delegation of problem. Ethnicity can be considered as a symbolic resource used by training firms (or schools) to resolve internal organisational problems of decision making when they need to distribute short educational opportunities.

Research should further clarify if the claimed hypotheses are robust in different educational contexts. The research question could be the following: How and when does school staff exploit information and ascriptions adhering to distinctive social groups to assure the organisational functioning and to resolve organisational problems?

² English translation: Boltanski, Luc & Thévenot, Laurent (2006): On Justification - Economies of Worth, Princeton University Press