

**bwp@ Spezial 19 | August 2023**

## Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

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## Reflections on bwp@ Special Issue 19

Online:

[https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/avis\\_spezial19.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/avis_spezial19.pdf)

www.bwpat.de | ISSN 1618-8543 | bwp@ 2001–2023



[www.bwpat.de](http://www.bwpat.de)



Herausgeber von **bwp@** : Karin Büchter, Franz Gramlinger, H.-Hugo Kremer, Nicole Naeve-Stoß, Karl Wilbers & Lars Windelband

**Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik - online**

## Reflections on *bwp@* Special Issue 19

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### 1 Introduction

In this reflective engagement with the Special Issue (SI) 19, initially I want to say something about the papers, all of which are marked by high levels of scholarship and research. Inevitably each paper, in its own right, would warrant a detailed discussion. However, in this paper I am interested in the way in which, as a collection, the papers contribute to debates concerned with conceptualisations of vocational education and training (VET), its politics and theorisation. Such a project necessitates an acknowledgement of the contextualisation of VET in the different social formations in which it is located – an issue recognised by neo-institutionalism with its conceptualisation of path dependencies (Gonon/Bonoli this SI; Schmees/Smeplass this SI).

Gonon and Bonoli pose the question as to whether VET needs a theory. In varying degrees all the papers in this SI address this question, for underlying their analyses lie particular constructions of the social formation as well as the role and significance of VET – all of which constitutes a theorisation (Gonon/Bonoli this SI). This will even be the case for the most committed empiricist. In the introduction to this SI the editors have discussed each of the papers, thus in this conclusion I am not going to reprise this but rather draw out some of the pertinent debates and issues. These will address: theorising VET; emancipation; travelling theory; social partnership; functionalism, determinism and agency.

### 2 Theorising VET

My starting point is with the classical German VET theories of Kerschsteiner, Fischer and Spranger all of whom were concerned with the educative, moral and civic foundations of VET (see Kuhlee et al. 2022a). They conceived VET as intimately linked to the education sciences/studies as well as to individual self- and moral development which is set within an occupational construction of *Beruf*. The papers in this SI echo and engage with these concerns and it is now timely to re-visit these debates. In recent issues of the Journal of Vocational Education and Training (Avis 2023; Avis et al 2017; Avis et al 2023; and see Monk 2023) we encounter rather different understandings of VET research, for whom and what it is for. This can be seen as an interest in those who are marginal to the labour market and who exist outside the formal structures of waged employment – slum dwellers and the like. This resonates with an emerging interest in decolonisation and a re-imagining of VET and its politics and if addressed could increase its global relevance and reach beyond the West. Such a stance can be contrasted with an orthodoxy in which VET and VET research are perceived as the servants of capitalism, set within the ‘capitalocene’ (Monk 2023; VET Africa 4.0 collective 2023). It is possible to articulate these broader issues with the moral and civic concerns of the classical VET theorists. There is a caution here in that the interest in civic engagement, moral and self-development

was orientated towards loyalty to the state rather than with an emancipatory understanding of self-development. Kuhlee *et al.* (2022b) cite Kerschensteiner:

‘... education for professional efficiency (...) is the basis of all civic education, [because] in the education for zeal and enthusiasm for work, those civic virtues develop which we must regard as the basis of all higher moral education: conscientiousness, diligence, perseverance, self-conquest and dedication to an active life [in the service of society]’ (Kerschensteiner, 1901, 16). From these, ‘those supreme civic virtues which we call self-control, devotion to the common good and justice’ (*ibid.*) can develop (Kuhlee *et al.* 2022b, 389).

Here, we can discern an interest in the political integration of the young worker into the status quo, their socialisation, and the development of character – a deeply conservative orientation. These debates resonated with the paradigm wars of the 1960s, 70s and 80s between critical theorists and those designated disparagingly as ‘positivists’ (Gonon/Bonoli *this SI*; Ketschau *this SI*; Kutscha *this SI*). Gonon and Bonoli would describe the current field of VET research as fragmented and characterised by different theoretical approaches which has led them to call for the development of a middle range theory. In this instance they mobilise a broad definition of VET:

as the learning of an occupation or profession, understood not only as the acquisition of technical-practical skills, but also as personal development and socio-professional integration.

This definition preserves the specificities of the concepts of *Beruf* and *Bildung*, while recontextualising them in a more open theoretical framework, allowing the integration of other disciplinary perspectives and going beyond the German pedagogical tradition (Gonon/Bonoli *this SI*).

In addition, they reformulate the general aims of VET:

“(1) Economic aims include a wide range of purposes: improving competitiveness and/or providing enterprises with a skilled workforce and thus supporting economic growth. (2) Educational aims cover among other things safeguarding and supplementing the basic knowledge of compulsory education, furthermore civic education and the promotion of vocational knowledge and skills and encouraging and providing access to higher levels of learning and training. (3) Social policy aims comprise *inter alia* the integration into the labour market and society, including disadvantaged groups thereby contributing to the reduction of social inequalities.” (Gonon/Bonoli *this SI*)

Can we re-imagine such a conceptualisation of VET being able to accommodate those who are located in the informal economy? In what ways could it contribute to community and individual well-being? Can it engage with questions of worklessness? That is to say, those without a wage but who nevertheless engage in useful labour (however defined). Can it move beyond an orientation that seeks to integrate disadvantaged groups into the

labour market? Or is it trammelled by its conservatism which is set on a terrain which takes for granted current socio-economic conditions? In response to these comments, it could be argued that there is nothing about Gonon and Bonoli's conceptualisation of VET that precludes a more expansive understanding, albeit that its economic aims seem to constrain such a project. Amongst these aims they include, 'improving competitiveness and/or providing enterprises with a skilled workforce and thus supporting economic growth'. In addition, their conceptualisation of VET, unsurprisingly given the focus of the SI, is Euro-centric or DACH<sup>1</sup>-centric. They write:

“the learning of an occupation or profession, understood not only as the acquisition of technical-practical skills, but also as personal development and socio-professional integration” (Gonon/Bonoli this SI).

There are two points to raise. Firstly, I am not convinced that such a definition of VET would be applicable to the constituencies addressed by the VET Africa 4.0 collective. It could be suggested that such a critique is unfair in as much as Gonon and Bonoli were not concerned with these broader questions but were focused on the DACH context, one in which VET constitutes a recognisable and definable field of education research. Secondly, I was surprised that there appeared to be no reference to the climate emergency. Stomporowski (this SI) argues that climate change has to be seen as integral to VET and that environmental protection and sustainability should be placed centre stage – a call for a critical-ecological theory of VET. I am reminded of Gramsci's (1971, 276) notion of an interregnum. Fraser (2016) and Streek (2019) draw on this term to critique neo-liberalism and its 'extractivism' but it could also be used to describe the situation that VET faces – whereby 'the old is dying [or in this instance burning] and the new cannot be born' (Camfield 2023; VET Africa 4.0 collective 2023). It is however important to acknowledge that worries about climate change are ubiquitous, Stomporowski (this SI) cites the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB 2022, 2023), the Kultusministerkonferenz<sup>2</sup> (2021) and the World Economic Forum (2023). In addition, there are any number of supranational organisations calling for urgent action to address global warming amongst whom we could include the ILO (2020), UNESCO (undated) and indeed the World Bank (undated). At best this ecological agenda seeks to soften capitalist relations, though it is at some distance from a politics that aims to transcend the extractivism of capitalism and its constant pursuit of the accumulation of capital. It is far from an anti-capitalist project but we should be mindful that some of the radical social movements that address climate change will be anti-capitalist. This debate raises questions about the potential contribution of VET to a politics of social justice as well as its emancipatory potential. A number of the contributors to this SI address this issue from a variety of stances (Esmond/Wedekind this SI; Gonon/Bonoli this SI; Hinchcliffe this SI; Ketschau this SI; Kutscha this SI; Li *et al.* this SI; Stomporowski this SI).

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation for the German-speaking countries of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

<sup>2</sup> Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany

### 3 Emancipation

Some years ago, Anderson (2009) argued that (T)VET is embroiled in a productivist paradigm predicated on economic growth and waged work that silences the way in which it could serve alternative conceptualisations of labour. This form of critique is anticipated in Stomporowski's call for a critical-ecological theory of VET. In the SI there is a tension surrounding the way in which emancipation is understood as well as the accompanying Kantian notion of maturity. There are several points to be made. Ketschau (this SI) in a discussion of emancipation and functionality suggests that the dichotomy between the two terms is overdrawn. For both these paradigmatic streams waged labour seeks to produce added-value with VET facilitating this. Critical-emancipatory VET goes beyond critique and the notion of questioning and, as with functionality, should enable the trainee to perform whatever task is required at the appropriate level. This 'is a condition of participation in the development of society' (Ketschau this SI) with which members of the profession/occupation (*Beruf*) engage – *Berufsausbildung*. Notably in these paradigms, to reiterate, waged labour seeks to produce added-value thereby contributing to the development of society. But what is more, for the classical theorists – Kerschensteiner, Fischer and Spranger – the 'individual only realises their potential thorough service to the community' (Hinchliffe 2022, 479). This links to a number of associated ideas which address citizenship and democracy as well as the centrality of VET in education studies. Work rather than being 'a marginal and private activity' becomes central to the formation of a democratic society and, as in *Beruf*, the development of an occupational identity.

Hinchliffe cites six ways in which participating in work can be seen as preparation for democratic citizenship amongst which are included, the exercise of judgement, the salience of deliberation, the importance of service and the significance of collaboration. Members of a profession/occupation/*Beruf* as a community of practice will share particular ends and purposes and will do the best they can for their clients as part of an occupational democracy. These practices can then be extended to the wider society and contribute towards democratisation. Importantly these processes can be understood as a potentiality rather than an inevitability, but they nevertheless raise questions of power and its uneven distribution not only between but within various occupational and professional groupings. There is also the issue of those who are unattached to any *Beruf* and who lie outside these communities of practice, as well as the particular socio-economic conditions within which professional and occupational practices are placed. We could think of the comparison between DACH and Anglo-Saxon social formations and the softening of neo-liberal relations in the former (Alphonsus this SI; Esmond/Wedekind this SI; Li *et al.* this SI). It is argued that through the democratic practices and civic engagement of occupational groupings professional autonomy is developed – a process that aligns with an emancipatory and collective logic. Through professional practices there may be a shift away from heteronomy towards autonomy, though this in part falls back on the way in which we understand these terms.

Conceptualisations of emancipation and maturity are contested terms (Kutscha, 2023) which may be understood as the result of collective or individualised processes. Collective in the sense that through the *Beruf* and engagement in civic practices autonomy may be attained by the

individual. For Kant and Adorno maturity is a feature of emancipation in as much as it derives from the exercise of independent judgement that is not beholden to heteronomous patterns of thought. (Cook, 2020; Macdonald, 2011). There is a tension between an individualised notion of emancipation and conceptualisations of social justice, empowerment and collective well-being. The individual may gain maturity in the Kantian sense of being able to exercise independent and autonomous judgement yet be constrained (or indeed enabled) by the socio-economic context in which they are located. This discussion raises questions about the manner in which these terms are understood as well as the resulting politics. Is individual emancipation set on a neoliberal individualised terrain that undercuts the possibility of a progressive politics orientated towards social justice and empowerment? At best does an individualised notion of emancipation lend itself to meritocratic imaginaries? Li et al. suggest that the German:

Competence orientation characterises the basic understanding that teaching and learning should not be limited to merely imparting content and knowledge or practicing predefined skills... so that everyone gets as far as he or she can with his or her ability in order to unfold his or her productive power. Rather, it should be directed towards the interwoven development of knowledge and action, of reflection and action, of insight and implementation.” (Li et al. (this SI)

I take it that Li *et al.* have in mind VETs contribution to self-development allied with the ‘development of knowledge and action, of reflection and action, of insight and implementation’. Paradoxically, the former sits alongside an individualised notion of emancipation which leaves in place structural relations in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. Such a notion of emancipation can be compared with one that addresses collective processes that extend beyond individualised conceptualisations, here there is an echo of Kutscha’s discussion of contingent subjectivity.

## 4 Travelling Theory

By default, the Anglophone system of VET is frequently set against the DACH and in particular the German system, with the former being seen as inadequate. Hinchcliffe whilst, discussing the English white paper Skills for Jobs (DoE, 2021, 15–16) notes with pleasure that it references the German system. However, rather than adopting a partnership model the white paper calls for the centrality of employer interests. This leads Hinchcliffe to described English VET as a managerial democracy that seeks to develop ‘good’ employees and can be contrasted to German VET that through an occupational democracy seeks to develop citizens.

Paradoxically there is a dialogic relation between Anglophone and DACH conceptualisations of VET. This relation is also featured in international relations and the manner in which these different models are supported and promoted by supranational organisations. Anglophone conceptualisations of VET are frequently criticised for their association with marketisation and a narrow understanding rooted in neoliberalism. This can be seen in the different ways in which competence is understood. The Anglophone construction is narrowly focused on the immediacy of work tasks and requisite skills, whilst the German notion of *Kompetenzen*, although it

addresses work tasks and skills, extends considerably beyond these, with Winch (2012, 179) suggesting:

Kompetenzen is more than a bundle of skills, but is unified through a conception of agency which involves planning, control, co-ordination, self-monitoring and evaluation, as well as the performance of a variety of tasks requiring specific skills. It also includes the ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational action (Winch 2012, 179).

In this instance competence incorporates a wider brief, one orientated by professional and occupational concerns that go considerably further than a narrow focus on the specific needs of a particular employer. This can be seen in the reference to the ‘economic and civic implications of occupational action’. Li *et al.* argue that for those who wish to implement VET systems it is imperative that they understand the underpinning assumptions that surround conceptualisations of competence, whether rooted in German or Anglophone VET. These assumptions will inform the reasonable expectations surrounding the adoption and importantly the adaption of these systems to sit with local conditions. For example, Anglophone VET would fail to develop the civic engagement and expansive learning upon which German VET is set, which would be an unreasonable expectation of the former.

It is important to recognise that neither Anglophone nor German VET systems are static, rather they are subject to ongoing adaption to the socio-economic circumstances they encounter. Thelen/Busmeyer (2011, 69) point to a shift from collectivism towards segmentalism in the German system. In the latter there is a narrow focus on firm-specific skills whereas in the former there is a tendency to ‘over-train’, with workers developing a broad and portable range of vocational skills and capabilities. This shift towards segmentalism is in part shaped by changes in the competitive regime faced by the firm, the structure of the labour market, patterns of employment and associated costs as well as the affordances of AI. All these processes could have an impact which renders a move towards segmentalism more attractive. Emmenegger *et al.* (2019) suggest that cooperation in collective training systems such as in Germany and Switzerland is vulnerable to disruption. Conflict of interests can emerge that undermine cooperation. However, they point out that this is an empirical question that cannot be determined by theoretical fiat. This argument points to the salience of sectoral, regional and national differences in the manner in which VET systems are adopted and mobilised. This insight adds another degree of complexity to Li *et al.*’s examination of competence.

Schmees/Smeplass (this SI) whilst discussing the dual apprenticeship system note ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors that encourage countries in the developing world to reform their VET and to adopt the German system. Pull factors, in relation to the mythic belief that the implementation of the German dual system will, for example, address youth unemployment and result in a more efficient and dynamic economy. Push factors, in terms of the activities of international organisations such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, who marketise and promote the dual system globally, thereby increasing its global reach. Schmees/Smeplass draw on the notion of isomorphism to describe such processes that lead to institutional similarity

whereby VET systems become more alike. There are three points to raise, firstly the implementation of such VET systems will decontextualise them. Secondly, this results in the problems that Li et al. note, that is to say the obfuscation of the underpinning assumptions of different models of competence. Thirdly, VET systems will be recontextualised to suit local conditions that may be far from the intentions of the original model. Li et al. cite an Egyptian example whereby the implementation of VET programmes rather than leading to poverty reduction served different interests primarily those of the elite (Schippers 2009). (As an aside, it is important to acknowledge that there is an established literature that addresses policy borrowing and learning which examines the manner in which models of VET are recontextualised in different social formations.)

## 5 Travelling Theory

German VET draws on a model of social partnership that includes employers, trade unions (as representatives of employees), Chambers of commerce as well as representatives of regional and state government, with decisions being based on consensus. There are echoes here of corporatism and of pluralistic decision making. Whilst this description might seem overly optimistic it serves to illustrate the manner in which civic and moral concerns have a place in this system of governance, what Hinchcliffe refers to as an occupational democracy predicated on reasonableness. It should be noted that reasonableness is a social and ideological construction. There are two points to be made, the German model of VET is more inclusive and holistic than the Anglophone. In the German system the involvement of social partners results in a very particular construction of VET and its socio-economic role. This model operates on a very particular and ‘measured’ terrain which veers towards a conservatism that works within the status quo. It functions with a gradualist framework of ‘reasonableness’ that consequently undermines its radical or transformative potential. At the same time because of the involvement of social partners it can impact on policy and practice. Although a radicalised VET might have been a possibility in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s this appears to be no longer the case (Esmond/Wedekind this SI; Stomporowski this SI). Anglophone VET lacks the coherence of the German dual system, with the former being employer led and failing to possess the affordances that the dual system facilitates. The English model of competence is restrictive, being task and skill focused and is subject to robust critique by academics, practitioners etc. (Li *et al.* this SI). Unlike German VET English VET theory has failed to develop ‘its own concepts, boundaries and research methods’ (Esmond/Wedekind, 2023), rather it theorises the field from multiple perspectives. Whilst interdisciplinarity and multiple perspectives are also a feature of the broader context in which the dual system is placed these are subordinated as a result of the coherence of German VET as a recognisable field of education research and consequently have less salience regarding their contribution to VET. In the Anglosphere VET theorisations draw on multiple perspectives and interdisciplinarity. They serve to articulate the relationship between VET, social structures and inequality, calling forth a transformative politics that addresses social justice and has the potential to go beyond the reformism of dual system. Paradoxically, their strengths in raising these issues are at one and the same time a limitation, which constrains



their purchase on policy and practice. In response to this Esmond/Wedekind call for the fuller development of VET theory in the Anglosphere.

## 6 Functionalism, Determinism and Agency

This SI is focused on theorising VET and in particular engaging with German theorisations. This interest lends itself to analyses that operate on an abstract terrain, having little direct comment on the lived, biographical and pedagogic experiences of those involved in VET as trainees, teachers and so on. This tension can be illustrated in Steib and Ketschau's (2023) discussion of the vocational transition system, set at an analytic level which is at one remove from the lived experiences of trainees. It is at this juncture that the papers by Steib and Slopinski as well as Kutscha make an important contribution. Whilst Steib and Slopinski's paper is analytically focused it does address pedagogy and by default points towards the lived experiences of trainees. In this respect it makes a valuable contribution to the SI. Similarly, Kutscha's autobiographical paper illustrates the significance of autoethnography by enabling an exploration of contingency, pointing towards the salience of ruptures and as well as the impact of unpredictable biographical developments – a recognition of what Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) refer to as serendipity (Atkins/Avis 2017; Hodkinson *et al.* 1996). The significance here is that this serves to challenge the implicit functionalism and quasi-determinism of some VET analyses, offering a more nuanced approach that places the trainee and agency in a more pivotal position. This can be seen in Kutscha's discussion of 'contingent subjectivity' which works with a relational notion of the self, which is construed as one 'of becoming different'. A subjectivity characterised by an openness to a transformation deriving from pedagogic processes that refuses fixity as an autonomous subject. I am reminded of the work of Hodkinson and others and their conceptualisation of becoming and unbecoming in relation to occupational identities and pedagogic processes (James/Biesta 2007; James *et al.* 2007).

In some respects, this sensibility is reflected in a number of the ethnographically orientated studies that Esmond/Wedekind reference that draw on critical analyses of VET. Steib and Ketschau (2023) refer to what I take to be a new class fraction/section constituted by those young people who experience a broken transition to the dual system. Whilst their analysis draws on a reductionist functionalism it also calls for a fuller discussion of those who are unsuccessful in the transition from general education to vocational training and are placed in the vocational transition system which serves a warehousing function. Historically, there has been a tendency to pathologise these young people. In the Anglosphere critical analyses of broken transitions offer a corrective to these processes by interrogating them for the manner in which they are shaped and structured by relations of class, race and gender, and importantly the response of young people to these processes. In particular these Anglophone analyses draw on the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies which seeks to be attentive to the experiences of such young people and that refuses their pathologisation (Education group II 1991; Esmond/Wedekind this SI; Kutscha this SI)

## 7 Conclusion

The papers in this first volume of the *bwp@ SI* are wide ranging. Their importance lies in the depth of their analysis and the manner in which they pose questions about the way in which we theorise and make sense of VET. Their specific strengths, not only for English readers, is their engagement with German theorisations of VET. They serve to introduce the reader to discussions that go beyond the classic VET theories of Kerschsteiner, Fischer and Spranger. The paper by Esmond/Wedekind provides a valuable introduction to the SI and can be read profitably alongside Kutschka's. The latter engages with a range of German theorisations which complements Kuhlee *et al*'s, (2022a,b) collection of papers in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. For the most part there is limited Anglosphere engagement with theorising VET compared with that which takes place in the Germanosphere. There are some notable exceptions with Chris Winch and his co-writers coming to mind. There are some niggles – at times in the SI there is an overuse of masculine pronouns which might sit uneasily with some readers – this could be a translation issue that does not arise in German language texts. Nevertheless, the papers in the SI merit a close-in reading as they serve to illustrate a number of issues and questions that VET needs to address. Perhaps we need to reimagine VET in an expansive understanding that goes beyond the current doxa to one that recognises the messy and sometimes antagonistic relations in which it is set.

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## Citation

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Avis, J. (2023): Reflections on bwp@ Spezial Issue 19. In: *bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory*. Edited by Esmond, B./Ketschau, T. J./Schmees, J. K./Steib, C./Wedekind, V., 1-11. Online: [https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/avis\\_spezial19.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/avis_spezial19.pdf) (30.08.2023).

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