



Occupations, work, and work-oriented education in three African countries

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Contribution

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This paper presents preliminary findings and analysis from research underway comparing the relationships between labour markets and education and training systems in three African countries: Ghana, Ethiopia, and South Africa. This is part of a broader project comparing these countries with three wealthy countries: Canada, Sweden, and Switzerland. The key research question for the broader research is: what is the currency and viability of the notion of occupations as a way of organizing work, organizing technical and vocational education and training, and supporting pathways from education to work in different countries across the world? The focus is on the ways in which labour markets organize occupations, and alternative ways in which education and training relates to work. The three African countries have very different levels of economic development, industrial development, and technical and vocational education and training.

Two key bodies of literature are drawn on. One is institutional political economy (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Thelen, 2004). This literature provides insights into the ways in which education and training systems are embedded in modes of capitalist production and social protection, and in networks of “political and socioeconomic institutions, such as collective wage bargaining, corporate governance and financing, labor market and welfare state policies, as well as industrial relations” (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 7). While this body of literature has substantially shaped the way skill formation systems are understood in the developed world, there is very little application of this literature either to African countries or to the challenge of development.

The other body of literature focuses on occupations and occupational identity formation. The notion of occupation is important in understanding the idea of specialization, which is central to educational preparation for work. Where occupations are able to exert control over division of labour, it is the occupations themselves which control the criteria for the licensing or credentialing procedures (Freidson, 2001). Freidson and Abbott (1988) have argued that the acquisition of bodies of knowledge and skill plus meaningful opportunities to practice know-how (practical knowledge) protects workers in organized occupations or professions.

The two bodies of literature—institutional political economy and studies of occupational labour markets and occupational identity formation—come together in studies of vocational education. Successful vocational education and apprenticeships systems have generally been focused on education for an occupation. In other words, they develop competence and identity for a regulated occupational labour market where an occupation is a formally recognized social category, with regulations in terms of aspects such as qualifications, range of practical and theoretical knowledge required, and promotion requirements and procedures (Brockmann, 2011, drawing on Rauner, 2007). The notion of occupation is also important in terms of the meaningful organization of people's lives and reproduction of society (Standing, 2009).

In today's changing labour markets, the notion of occupation is shifting, its relationships to education and training systems increasingly unclear, and the relationship of education and training systems to economic and social development is increasingly uncertain. Improving insight into the ways in which occupations are organized and the viability of the concept of occupation in today's rapidly changing labour markets could assist in understanding (and where possible, improving) how education prepares people for work. In particular, in this paper we consider the implications for vocational education and training in developing countries.

Method

The current phase of the project focuses on developing an overview of occupational structure and the ways in which occupations are organized and regulated across the countries. We aim to develop a picture at the broadest possible level of the labour market—what it looks like in terms of levels of employment and unemployment, main trends in terms of sectors and levels of employment, what kinds of work are regulated and how, and their relationship to education and training. This will include the extent of organized occupations (including professions). In other words, how much of the labour market consists of organized occupations, and what the mechanisms are for regulating occupations (including legal frameworks, regulation of educational levels for entry into occupations, and collective bargaining). We are looking at a broad macro level at the institutions which regulate occupations, the number of professional/trade bodies with legal responsibility for occupations and what they have power over, the role of the state, the number of occupations requiring licenses to practice, the points of regulation, and the nature and extent of collective bargaining across different sectors and levels of the labour market.

Some of the data that we are examining include:

- minimum wages, national or sectoral;
- legally mandated minimum conditions nationally or by sector;
- protection for unemployed workers, if any;
- ILO conventions signed and how they are expressed in law, if at all;
- regulation of the informal economy;
- nature of public and private retirement schemes;
- number of occupations with license to practice occupations and professional bodies;
- informal license to practice rules;
- sectors and levels of unionization and union density; number and percentage of workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements;
- public versus private sector employment;
- migration and immigration patterns in the labour market: is the education system training people for labour markets elsewhere for the poor countries? Is a particular sector entirely immigrant workers in the developed countries?

This is being collected from published literature and official sources, supplemented with some key interviews. Data sources include official national sources as well as the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and International Labour Organization statistics and publications. It will be located in a brief overview of the development or economic trajectories, as well as jobs trajectories of the countries, based on existing literature.

Expected Outcomes

The paper aims to provide an overview of the concepts on offer for structuring education/work relationships, and test the purchase of the notion of occupational labour in developing countries.

The focus is on macro trends in the ways in which labour markets are organized and regulated. We hope to gain a broad picture of how labour market regulations as well as other regulatory, social, cultural, and economic institutions classify, protect, fragment, or casualize work, and how occupations are understood and organized, what kinds of vocational and professional programmes are part of occupational regulatory systems, and what other mechanisms regulate work in the different labour markets.

In the broader project, we hope to gain insight into the ways in which occupations are understood and organized in different societies and economies, as well as the ways in which education and training systems relate to occupational divisions. It is hoped that a comparison of different countries at a macro level will contribute to tools of analysis for understanding skill formation systems, and enabling further research that investigates specific aspects of these countries' systems in more details, particularly with regard to the positive and negative feedback mechanisms that keep a system on track or dysfunctional, and the potential critical junctures that disrupt existing institutions.

By focusing on the macro, with some detailed supplementary studies of micro issues, the study will contribute to conceptualizing skill formation systems. This research aims to complement research currently underway at the Centre for Researching Education and Labour at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg which involves a detailed examination of specific occupations in order to understand socio-economic processes in the labour market and in the broader socio-economic environment which enable and constrain flourishing specialized work.

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