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Recommended Citation

Rose, Amy D. and Fleige, Marion (2014). "Making a choice? Vocational Training and Decision-Making for the Undereducated and the Unemployed in Germany and the United States," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/75>

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Making a choice? Vocational Training and Decision-Making for the Undereducated and the Unemployed in Germany and the United States

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Keywords: Career Counseling, cross-cultural adult education

Abstract: This paper compares the German and U.S. systems of career decision-making and re-training for the unemployed. Findings indicate similar issues in terms of pedagogy and the emphasis on development of systems, but differences in organizational specifics and the factors deemed to be important.

Introduction and research problem

Job training for the unemployed and the undereducated has received a great deal of notice in recent years. In the United States, massive efforts have been developed to streamline the job training process and to ensure that careers choices are tied to actual career pathways and job opportunities. In Germany, changing models of job training and career paths for unemployed and underemployed have been much discussed (Reutter, 2010). Each country has developed its own approaches to dealing with the unemployed and job training and career counseling. While, regardless the given differences in the fields of initial and continuing vocational training, both countries have struggled to understand what makes a successful program, it is clear that parts of the population are not finding lifelong work. In this paper, we begin an examination of the policies and programs in place for this population with particular attention to models of career counseling and career decision making. Over the past thirty years, much has been written and researched about the failure of economic policies to resolve reskilling issues. The issues and programs are different in the U.S and Germany, but both have tested their respective outcomes with mixed results.

This paper is the beginning of a larger cross-national project. Its purpose is to examine the federal initiatives in Germany and the United States related to the process of career decision-making for the unemployed and/or the undereducated. The specific research questions include: What are the federal initiatives in Germany and the United States related to the career pathways of adults? What are the structural differences and similarities related to the policy's implementation? How does the implementation affect particular programs such as the career one-stops in the U. S. and the programs of the Federal Employment Agency in Germany? Finally, we ask how both programs present and implement models of career counseling.

While career decision-making is not an understudied area, it has not been adequately studied for this particular population, especially from the perspective of adult education research (e.g. Rose, Giordano, & Click, 2004; Enoch, 2011). Additionally, much of this work has been conducted in a cultural vacuum. We feel that studying the career decision making processes of adults cross-nationally will add to our understanding of how adults throughout the world make decisions about career change and job searching as well as what ultimately helps and what hinders decision-making from the perspective of the individual.

Theoretical Framework and Method

This study is situated in the literatures of human service organizations and career-decision making models. Literature from this field helps to identify the chances and shortfalls of the career choice approach and its linkage to policy. In particular, we follow Hasenfeld (2010) who lays out the complexities and dualities of human service organizations. He notes the contradictions of agencies set up to “help” that also impose their own policies, rules and regulations on those for whom they were designed. In our design we are following Hasenfeld in attempting to identify cross-nationally the inherent contradictions of skills trainings programs.

This is the first stage of the larger study mentioned above. In this paper, we focus on analyses of policy implementation at the local level and the institutional structures of career counseling for unemployed and/or undereducated adults. Within this framework, we concentrate on the analyses of federal program data for the two countries and then attempt a critical comparison. We have utilized primarily printed government reports, secondary sources, and website materials.

Findings

U. S. Model

There has been a significant amount of literature devoted to the special welfare-to-work issues. Primary to these concerns has been the absence of job opportunities that represent full-time job hours, job security and a living wage. Jobs requiring few credentials and limited education seldom provide incomes that exceed the poverty line. At the moment, the current U. S. picture is still quite complex. There are myriad programs for the unemployed with little centralized structure. Since the late 1990s there have been some efforts to streamline the process so that it is easier to navigate and to find programs. This has resulted in a two-pronged approach epitomized by the One-Stop Career Centers found in every state as part of a Department of Labor program to make programs for the unemployed more accessible. More recently, this has been coupled with the Department of Education’s Career Pathways program which is a more integrated system of education and work. Of primary importance within this model is the development of connections between educators and employers so that students may transition into jobs once they have completed their education (at whatever level).

The One-Stop Career Centers were included in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. It called for the formation of centralized centers that could deliver workforce training services funded by the federal government. The initial mandate for the one-stop career centers was predicated on four principles: Universal Access; customer Choice; Service Integration; and Accountability (Imel,1999). So from the beginning, the emphasis on access meant an opening up of services and an interest in alternative delivery modalities. But attempts at collaboration have been mixed. However, all evaluations up to this point have emphasized that the one-stops have helped somewhat, but are not able to overcome the profound language and educational barriers that some groups bring to the job search (D’Amico et al., 2009). The problems of job training continue to be cast as an unraveling of the bureaucracy and learning how to access data. In conjunction with these concerns, the Department of Education adopted a Career pathways approach to vocational training that is predicated on a Career Clusters model. Utilizing sixteen basic clusters of careers, this model delineates programs of study related to specific jobs in each cluster. Thus, the Pathways are the courses, training and ultimately the jobs an individual may access. Within this model, each state and some localities offer slightly different services. Additionally, this idea of Career pathways integrates job preparation and job creation so that individuals are not being prepared for jobs that don’t exist. The research is still out on this, but what has been done does appear promising.

The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training or I-BEST Model in the state of Washington is the most cited example. Under this model, adult basic education instructors and vocational skills faculty design and teach community college occupational classes together. This model developed out of national initiatives and the work of several foundations highlighting the need for higher education and job training for everyone. Prince and Jenkins (2005) found that basic education students who went on to community and stayed a year earned substantially more than those who did not. They called this the “tipping point.” They also found that very few basic education students reached this tipping point. The idea behind this integrated model then was to promote continuation in higher education. This continuation was predicated on the integration of occupational skills development and basic education; and a structured career-pathways approach that laid out occupational requirements. Additional support services were also included. Wachen et al. (2011) found that financial support was one of the biggest issues for programs and students alike. The limitations of this model in terms of career counseling have become apparent. While the one-stop career centers offer career materials, utilization is limited. In fact, only the highly skilled access materials. This has led to a concern about the flow of information about careers. Recently, the Department of Education has funded several experiments on the integration of what they are calling career counseling into basic education and especially English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. This involves training instructors to access career information so they can then be available to support and teach their students. For example, in Texas they adapted part of the I-BEST model to ESL, with instructors taking over a counseling function after going through intense training. However, this training is really about the materials used for self-directed career exploration: that is learning how to access materials that are already on line but doing this in a systematic manner (Adult Career Pathways).

German Model

For Germany, training programs and career counseling for low skilled and unemployed people have to be seen against the background of the prevailing model of general initial vocational training below university/higher education. The dual model of initial training leads to a legally certified *Beruf* (*vocation/occupation*) with employers (associations), chambers, unions and the state all working together. Cooperation leads to standardized two-to-three-year-programs at school and at the workplace. Against the background of this model, continuing vocational education ideally aims at either adjustment of skills or further career development on the bases of a person’s vocation or academic profession. The system of continuing vocational training involves chamber-based programs, union-based programs, programs organized by the state-funded *Volkshochschule* (adult training center; offering vocational and particularly liberal adult education), programs at community-based organizations, and programs at State Academies for Administration (Gnahs & Reichart, 2013) as well as, more recently, at universities, and private, commercial institutions for continuing vocational training.

However, this model of initial training and supplementary continuing training prevents neither high school dropout nor problems in the labor market. Unemployment is addressed by social legislation and the Federal Agency for Employment. The Agency is supposed to function as a body for benefits, as well as job placement, counseling and continuing vocational training for clients both skilled and low-skilled who are unemployed or threatened by unemployment at the local level (Federal Employment Agency, 2014). (Re-)Training can be both full-time or part-time, leading to a certain certificate or even to a new qualification (Reichart 2013). Moreover, it may be linked to rehabilitation schemes. For adolescents who drop out from school, there exists a special model of vocational preparation which ideally leads into the dual system of training.

Within the past two and a half decades, Germany has undergone severe changes in the labor market connected to reunification, demographic change and economic crises. Moreover, the country is committed to the European Framework of Qualification. Against these backgrounds, which cannot be addressed in more detail here, labor market policies, social legislation, educational policies, pedagogical concepts, as well as the work of the Federal Agency for Employment have changed respectively. Several more recent shortfalls of the German model that are somewhat connected to these changes can be named: the contradiction of difficulty in placing young adults in apprenticeships while demands for skilled workers are rising (Mathes & Ulrich 2014); a growing sector of subcontracted labor; more competence-based approaches and workplace-based learning which are held to serve the low skilled at least to a certain degree; a shift in funding schemes for continuing training from dominantly supply-oriented (institutional) funding to partly demand-oriented (voucher-based) funding schemes for continuing vocational training (Dohmen, 2013).

Within the context of these changes, the role and work of the National Agency of Employment has become more controversial. There are evaluation studies on the effects of both the training schemes and the counseling. In particular, the – very controversial – 2005 reform of social legislation into the direction of focused active employment policy linked to a concept of active training and counseling, too, evoked a series of evaluation studies. While there is much public criticism about success rates, evaluation studies show that placement in the labor market becomes more likely on the basis of training and counseling – but that there are also deficits from the pedagogical and didactical point of view. In particular, counseling staff seem to not necessarily meet personal learning interests, career dreams or biographical situations of the clients. (Bernhard & Kruppe, 2012; Bartelheimer et al., 2012; Schütz et al., 2011). Moreover, the voucher-based system seems to be reach the most vulnerable target groups least (Käpplinger, Klein & Haberzeth, 2013)

Discussion

In looking at the two countries, we can see some similarities and many differences. Yet despite the many programmatic differences, some issues seem to be remarkably similar. In the United States, the vocational training model is one of integrated training. It is predicated on a close coordination of various systems including: federal funding for vocational training; unemployment funding; job skills and workplace training; and the community colleges. Yet the constant failure to coordinate is also apparent. In recent years, efforts to develop collaborative units that take individuals from basic education to jobs have focused on integration of basic skills into vocational training; the establishment of clear career pathways; and the installation of clear lines of accountability. This means that basic education is now geared toward career education and vocational training. In the U. S. there is no longer any discussion of the need for general education. In Germany, fewer people fall through the cracks, although the number seen to be at risk is growing.

Ultimately, we are left with further questions. How do clients experience these training programs? How does the counseling process actually work within these highly contextualized programs and how is their content framed by local knowledge? How do educational institutions that take over the actual training work within this framework? Ultimately, the most urgent question for both countries deals with the nature of decision-making and choice following participation in a class or in counseling. That is, how are the participants in these programs viewed and how much autonomy are they really given? This question is even more interesting against the background of two very different systems of vocational training and counseling – as

depicted in this paper – that are in themselves changing over time. In particular, we would like to ask: What are the respective advantages of those highly structured processes in Germany and of those more diffuse approaches in the US? What kinds of good practice can we identify? How do these relate to culture and in which ways could they be transferred to another cultural context?

So far, this study had yielded more questions than answers. Using Hasenfeld (2010) we are attempting to think about the underlying structures of these two systems. In the U.S. the prevailing model focuses on work first. There is a rational underpinning to this process which links the issue of career choice in these programs to issues of funding, access, length of program, and employability. There is some concern about students reaching the so-called tipping point, that is staying enrolled long enough (a year) to make a difference in their economic lives, but beyond that, the issues are framed in terms of information flow. In Germany, there is more coordinated and sustained planning at all levels of education with less interest in a work first approach and more emphasis on in depth skill development than in the U.S. In both countries, counseling has been adapted to the models with mixed results. In the U.S. the system of counseling has been relegated to the access of information. In Germany, counseling is so thoroughly integrated that it is difficult to tease out. While the U.S. often applauds the German model of apprentice as a way of overcoming the educational deficits inherent in its system, more recently there has been recognition that this alone will not solve the structural unemployment problems. Both countries focus on program evaluations as the way to decide efficacy. However, evaluation studies pose the risk of shortfalls and misinterpretation. Importantly, individual benefits may be hidden.

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