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Transition of Refugees into Vocational Training and Guidance in Companies

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Abstract

Context: The concern of integration of refugees into the labour market has become increasingly important in Switzerland in recent years. In 2018, a pre-apprenticeship integration programme (PAI) has been introduced by 18 cantons, with the aim of preparing refugees for dual vocational education and training leading to a Swiss VET certificate. Among the various players who collaborate in the PAI, in-company trainers play a key role. Guidance in companies has a major influence on the learning of work-related skills and thus on the development of apprentices' professional skills (Stalder et al., 2024). The literature on workplace learning highlights the importance of workplace guidance for the success of VET (Billett, 2001; Swager et al., 2015). But while the importance of learning conditions in companies has been documented in the field of workplace learning in general (Mikkonen et al., 2017; Swager et al., 2015), we still know little about guidance with refugees within training companies.

Approach: The research project conducted at SFUVET addresses the issue of vocational training for recently arrived refugees in Switzerland and adopts a psycho-social, sociological and workplace learning interdisciplinary approach. Taking into account the complexity of the issue of guidance provided by various players during the apprenticeship in a company, we are focusing on support of agency development, addressing the research question "What are the different guidance practices for refugee apprentices in companies and how can they foster the development of agency?" Various qualitative research methods are mobilised to bring a comprehensive understanding to complex research questions and considering different perspectives. Interviews with in-company trainers and former PAI apprentices are at the heart of the study, but we also lead professional practice analysis groups with trainers and expert interviews.

Expected findings: This research helps understanding workplace-guidance provided to refugees who find themselves in a particularly complex period of transition, and whose life history



and current living conditions interfere with their learning opportunities. Thus, our research will contribute to comprehension of how oppressed agency can develop through the acquisition of new skills and responsibilities during in-company training. All in all, our findings will offer insights into how the learning environment and the guidance provided during vocational training can either foster or impede apprentices' agency in training, at work, and in daily life.

Keywords

refugees, vocational education and training, workplace guidance, agency, transition process

1 Introduction

Refugees have often experienced danger and violence (Fedrigo et al., 2021; Onsando, 2014; Pestre, 2019). When they arrive in the country of exile, they face social exclusion linked to their legal status, and socio-economic insecurity (Bolzman, 2016; Felder, 2016). They have to rebuild their lives in a new socio-cultural context and learn the local language. Their education and professional experiences are often not recognised (Bolzman, 2016; Luimpöck, 2019; Wehrle et al., 2018). These factors influence their integration into the labour market and, during vocational education and training (VET), have an impact on their ability to learn and the development of agency. In this specific learning context, in-company guidance demands particular attention. While the importance of learning conditions in companies has been documented in the field of workplace learning (Mikkonen et al., 2017; Swager et al., 2015), we know little about guidance with refugees within training companies.

After completing the asylum procedures, recognised refugees and temporarily admitted persons face a long and arduous path towards social and professional integration. Their employment rate remains significantly lower than that of the resident Swiss or foreign population, between 41% and 43% in spring 2024¹. The difficulties they encounter are manifold and reflect great vulnerability linked to living conditions, the ordeal of violence and persecution (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021; Onsando, 2014), training trajectories in sometimes defaulting education systems (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021), the lack of local language proficiency, non-recognition of diplomas and acquired skills, and to discrimination in recruitment (Keyhani, 2020; Roesti, 2019).

The Swiss government has set up the "Swiss Integration Agenda"² with the aim to improve the integration of refugees and temporarily admitted persons into the labour market. In addition, it launched the "Integration Pre-Apprenticeship" (PAI) pilot programme through the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) in 2018, with the intention of rapidly and sustainably improving the professional and the language skills of refugees and temporarily admitted persons in a given vocational field over a period of one year, in order to start initial VET (Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2019). In fact, VET through a dual apprenticeship combining practical work in companies and theoretical courses in vocational schools has great potential for integrating refugees into the labour market, enabling them to learn a trade³ and to find qualified work (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021).

The aim of the programme (SEM, 2017) is to make better use of the work potential of refugees and temporarily admitted persons, to reduce their dependence on social assistance and to ensure the next generation workforce in occupations with a skills shortage (Kammermann et al., 2022; Stalder et al., 2021). The PAI was set up with the cooperation of 18 cantonal

¹ <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/fr/home/publiservice/statistik/asylstatistik/archiv/2024/05.html>

² <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/fr/home/integration-einbuengerung/integrationsfoerderung/kantonale-programme/integrationsagenda.html>

³ Noting that the 'dual' training system actually includes inter-company courses as a third learning site. They are offered by trade associations in certain cantons also in PAI.

authorities, 12 trade associations, VET administrations and the SEM. It offers 800 to 1,000 training places per year and is implemented by the cantons, which are responsible for informing, selecting, and supporting apprentices⁴. This one-year programme is divided in two parts where apprentices generally work in a company three days and attend school for two days a week. The training includes the development of language skills in the workplace, basic school skills, norms and values, the main professional, technical and transversal (personal, social) skills, basic practical knowledge and skills in the company (Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2019). Ultimately, apprentices take an assessment and receive a certificate enabling them to follow a two- to four-year apprenticeship leading to a recognised VET certificate. A wide range of vocational fields are on offer, such as automotive, agriculture, bakery and confectionery, chemicals, retail sales, railway construction, health trades, meat processing, catering, gastronomy, hotel industry, graphic arts industry, logistics, mechanics and automation, cleaning, building technology, media practice and construction trades.

Guidance is one of the pillars of workplace learning and the integration of apprentices within companies (Billett & Somerville, 2004). Companies taking part in the programme offer guidance within their teams to enable the apprentices to achieve the apprenticeship objectives defined in accordance with the ‘competence profiles’ drawn up by the trade associations.

Some initial studies have been carried out on the PAI. The work of Aerne and Bonoli (2021) for example analyses the reasons of the broad participation of companies and trade associations. An evaluation study of the programme commissioned by the SEM (Stalder & Schönbächler, 2019) highlighted the importance of strengthening inter-institutional and inter-cantonal cooperation. Furthermore, one aspect of particular interest to our research is the lack of exchange and communication between different companies mentioned by the trainers in companies (idem). However, the evaluation study (Kammermann et al., 2022; Stalder et al., 2021) concluded that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the apprentices completing PAI proceed to a certifying two- to four-year apprenticeship.

Moreover, Stalder et al. (2021) pointed out that the diversity and the number of tasks performed in the company are of significant influence on the practical skills’ level achieved by apprentices. This result highlights the importance of guidance quality within companies.

The research project addresses the issue of vocational training for recently arrived refugees in Switzerland, and adopts a psycho-social, sociological and workplace learning interdisciplinary approach. Considering the complexity of the issue of guidance provided by various players during the apprenticeship in a company, we are focusing on support of agency development, addressing the research question "*Which are the different guidance practices for refugee apprentices in companies and how can they foster the development of agency?*"

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Exile, transition and education and training

While refugees have suffered multiple psychological, social, emotional and economic traumas (Newman et al., 2018), arriving in the country of exile is an upheaval that also confronts them with numerous obstacles such as learning a new language, non-recognition of acquired certificates and skills, stigmatisation and low social capital (Wehrle et al., 2018).

Migration and exile confront people with a range of constraints, but also offer new opportunities. Hence, as a transition process, these can also be experienced as an opportunity for development when meaning can be made of their experience (Almudever, 1998; Baubion-

⁴ In 2021, the programme has been extended to young adults from EU or EFTA member states and third countries (PAI+). Circulaire Dépôt pour le programme pilote préapprentissage d’intégration plus (PAI+), Confédération suisse (2020).

Broye, 1998; Baubion-Broye & Hajjar, 1998; Zittoun, 2008, 2012). On this background, acquiring new knowledge and skills helps adapting to a new social and cultural context, such as learning a language or a trade, in order to interact in society and evolve in everyday life.

Periods of transition (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2002) often bring adults into education and training (Bourgeois, 1996). As a process of transition, the training period may also reflect refugees' ambiguity between the fear of loss, for example of professional identities already formed in the past (Luimpöck, 2019; Wehrle et al., 2018), and the chance of vocational development.

Wehrle et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of stability and a feeling of security for refugees to be able to invest effectively in a vocational project. Given a feeling of security and a path to vocational training, workplace training in a company is particularly beneficial, as it provides an opportunity to build on a professional network and practical experience in the world of work with its work conditions and expectations. This workplace training provides a better understanding of the education system, regulations, cultural practices, access to resources and knowledge as well as of concrete training options.

2.2 Affordances, guidance and agency

Learning conditions, affordances, workplace guidance and agency are key concepts for workplace learning. Workplace guidance is essential for the successful completion of initial VET, since it is decisive not only for learning the trade, but also for constructing the meaning in training (Capdevielle-Mognibas, 2015). In a negative case, it can lead to exclusion and maintain social inequalities (Duc, 2016; Filliettaz et al., 2013) and even lead to a breach of the apprenticeship contract (Capdevielle-Mognibas, 2015; Lamamra & Masdonati, 2009).

According to Billett (2001), learning in the workplace is composed of a duality between the learner's commitment and *affordances*: companies set up a framework enabling apprentices (and employees) to take part in a variety of activities and tasks, and thus gain experiences serving their learning. The concept of affordances encompasses available structures as "invitations" for engagement (Goller & Billett, 2014). These structures differ in their effectiveness for learning and need to be engaged by the learner according to their personal perception and motivation (Billett, 2009). Affordances therefore are preconditions for people's commitment (Goller & Billett, 2014, p. 10) and differ from one company to another. Companies are dynamic places undergoing various internal and external pressures. Their corporate history and culture, work organisation, treatment of employees and performance all change over time (Unwin et al., 2007) and thus affect guidance provided to apprentices. Research carried out in Switzerland on workplace trainers and their guidance approach and practices (Lamamra & Besozzi, 2019) reveals the decisive role played by the trainers by setting up a suitable framework to carry out their role, such as allocating sufficient time for guiding tasks as well as recognition and remuneration of their role.

Guidance, understood as any form of support for socialisation and acquisition of occupational skills (Billett, 2002; Swager et al., 2015, p. 361), is part of the affordances. According to Swager et al. (2015, p. 367) effective affordances must be adapted to apprentices' needs and agency. They distinguish three sets of actions supporting both learning and integration into the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), namely psycho-social, structuring and didactic interventions.

However, guidance goes beyond the direct relationship between a trainer and the apprentice. Indirect guidance (Billett, 2001; Mikkonen et al., 2017) takes place within the wider training framework, encompassing arrangements that allow apprentices to have access to observation and listening to more experienced colleagues.

According to Goller and Billett (2014), *agency at work* is defined by active engagement in work and interactions, intentionality and introspection. More specifically, it refers to "the active

and directed component of an individual's thinking and behaviour, which can manifest itself as much in confrontation and opposition, as in marked adherence to social realities" (Billett, 2009, p. 43). Agency is also deployed in response to affordances. It is therefore not based solely on the learner's individual ability but bound to the learning context and its affordances (Evans, 2007). It supports the learning process, but also helps becoming a member of the community of practice (Ferm et al., 2018; Wenger, 1998), and therefore has an influence on occupational development (Goller & Billett, 2014, p. 10). Agency is particularly evident when individuals pursue their goals, seize opportunities, and transform unfavourable situations to their advantage (Nagels et al., 2018, p. 5). However, it extends beyond the strict confines of the learning process to encompass action regarding the conditions and relationships within the team. Apprentices' agency is also at the heart of our study, i.e., how it is taken into account in guidance and how it can be strengthened. Here, we refer to two approaches, namely agency at work, addressed by research on workplace learning, and the personal agency of refugees.

2.3 Exile and personal agency

For refugees undergoing a period of transition, the question of coping, understanding and taking control of their lives is important beyond education and training. In this context, the concept of personal agency allows to grasp people's ability to influence their life circumstances and control their actions (Bandura, 2006). According to Bandura (2006), personal agency is characterised by *intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness*. Similar to agency at work, the aspects of awareness and reflection are important, as is the intentional nature of action (Billett, 2006). In addition, self-efficacy, referring to a person's belief in their ability to organise and carry out action and achieve desired results (Bandura et al., 2007), is an essential variable in human agency. Previous studies highlighted that refugees' life trajectory, coupled with arrival countries' resettlement policies, tend to dramatically diminish their agency (Onsando, 2014; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). Before fleeing, refugees' lives are marked by danger, violence and war, which can lead them to experience the feeling of being treated as an object without the possibility to act according to their will (Onsando, 2014). Their journey to the country of exile is marked by violence and a lack of control over a trajectory that can often span several years. However, the decision to flee can be understood as a first order agentic ability (Onsando, 2014), as is the very fact of surviving in these difficult circumstances. At their arrival to the country of exile, refugees are at risk of experiencing marginalisation and social exclusion, which in turn negatively impact their ability to develop agency (Hayes et al., 2008). European countries' migration policies can have a negative long-term impact on their empowerment (Bertrand, 2020; Luimpöck, 2019; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019), particularly by maintaining them in a state of passivity (Bertrand, 2020). For Scheibelhofer and Täubig (2019) the "migratory environment" constitutes a restrictive and inhibiting context for refugees' agency, as they are de facto excluded from the labour market by the multiple restrictions (e.g., access to language learning, restricted individual rights during the asylum procedures, non-recognition of previous professional experience and diplomas) (Bertrand, 2020; Bolzman, 2014).

Hence during asylum procedures, people experience the feeling that work is forbidden to them (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019) - even if they are formally entitled to it, that it is practically impossible to learn the language and the doors to life in society are closed to them. This marginalisation is even stronger for temporarily admitted persons (Atitsogbe et al., 2020; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). While waiting for asylum decision, people face long times of deprived privacy and self-determination leading to passivity and resignation (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019).

VET can be an initial opportunity for refugees to develop agency in the country of settlement (Onsando, 2014). In this view, it is therefore important for VET institutions to provide a

welcoming and secure environment for apprentices and to be aware of the need to recognise their life history as refugees.

As the literature presented above points out, agency is oppressed by refugees' trajectories and current living conditions. In this sense, supporting refugee apprentices within the company by helping to develop their agency becomes a central issue, and agency development is, as we pointed out before, not relying solely on individuals, but strongly connected to their living, learning and working environment and their relations.

Research on agency in the context of work restricts its analyses to aspects of working and learning. However, based on the literature on the needs of reconstructing the lives of refugees, we believe that developing agency within a company goes beyond aspects of work and influences the construction of life more generally. This is in line with socialisation theories based on the interdependence of different areas of life (Baubion-Broye & Hajjar, 1998). In other words, agency developed in the context of work will have an impact also on the private and social life.

3 Methods

We adopted a qualitative approach to develop in-depth and well-founded knowledge about the role of in-company guidance and refugees' and temporarily admitted persons' development of agency. To answer the research questions, we favour a comprehensive approach enabling us to capture various points of view from professionals involved in PAI and initial VET, and PAI apprentices themselves. We favoured a triangulation of different data (Flick, 2011) to foster a supported and sustained understanding of guidance processes and agency. Therefore, we constructed our interview guidelines around the concepts of guidance and agency. The study is conducted in four Swiss cantons, which were selected to represent a diversity in terms of organisation, trades, and linguistic regions, as well as the number of participants in the PAI programme.

Various qualitative research methods are mobilised to bring a comprehensive understanding to complex research questions and considering different perspectives. Interviews with company trainers and former PAI apprentices are at the heart of our research.

Forty qualitative interviews (Blanchet, 1991; Flick, 2009) are conducted with *people in charge of in-company training in different trades*. As key persons for establishing a training relationship, they help us understand guidance practices. In addition, we seek to highlight trainers' representations of refugees' life and training paths, their skills and difficulties, their learning progress, and the development of their capacity to action, according to the concept of agency, both in vocational training, and also in their lives outside work. A variety of companies are selected in terms of size, professions, and type of management, to provide a broad view of the different forms of guidance.

Qualitative interviews with 20 *former PAI apprentices*, some of them from the same companies as the trainers we interview, enable us to capture their own experiences with the training. We chose to interview former PAI apprentices to benefit from their more distant perspective of guidance and learning. Above all, we seek to gather information on the next stage in their training or professional pathway, and to adopt a subjective perspective on the evolution of their agency. Our focus is on their experiences with training, their activities during in-company training and the received guidance, also in relation to their life trajectory, training achievements, current living conditions and plans for the future. The sample is diversified in terms of gender, age, migratory background, occupation and training path.

Professional practice analysis (PPA) groups with people in charge of vocational training in companies will complement the interviews and provide a deeper understanding of the various guidance practices and the context in which they are deployed, as well as an opportunity to discuss experiences and difficulties encountered. Each group consisting of six to ten people will

meet twice within a year (leading to a total of six PPA). This analysis of professional practices in a collective setting is part of an action-research approach, and the group discussions are designed as ongoing training for participants.

To gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of the PAI (e.g. rules, routines, mechanisms, collaborations), as well as of the constraints and expectations of the world of work with regard to PAI apprentices, we also conduct twelve expert interviews (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010) with various players involved with PAI apprentices and companies, such as career counsellors, professional coaches, teachers from vocational schools, social assistants, representatives from cantonal authorities and trade associations. The aim of these interviews is to understand what forms of support are offered to PAI apprentices and to gain insight into particular challenges in vocational training for refugees and temporarily admitted persons.

We rely on *PAI statistics* (i.e., monitoring of trajectories after the PAI and success of the programme in the four selected cantons, and SEM data based on the national evaluation study) to establish systematic data on the PAI within the cantons over the years.

The interviews are analysed using thematic analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012), identifying and systematically grouping themes that emerged from the interviews and professional practice analysis. We are also favouring an inductive approach (Bardin, 2013) when new themes emerge during data analysis.

The collection of a variety of data within companies (individual interviews with trainers and former PAI apprentices, PPA groups) will give rise to *case analyses* in order to describe guidance given to refugee apprentices and the development of agency in its various contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2010).

4 Expected results

While there is a consensus in the cited literature on the importance of guidance for apprentices in companies, there remains a gap on studies involving refugees. This research therefore helps understanding workplace-guidance provided to refugees who find themselves in a particularly complex period of transition, and whose life history and current living conditions interfere with their learning opportunities. Thus, our research will contribute to comprehension of how oppressed agency can develop through the acquisition of new skills and responsibilities during in-company training. All in all, our findings will offer insights into how the learning environment and the guidance provided during vocational training can either foster or impede apprentices' agency in training, at work, and in daily life.

Preliminary results have been presented at the conference.

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