

Adjusting the Research Focus in Apprenticeships

Developing a more efficient labour market includes making improvements in the linkage between apprenticeship training and employment. A coherent, sustained research program can contribute to this effort. For several years we have defined our research agenda in relation to issues such as attrition, trade attachment, literacy levels, and the portability of qualifications. Analyses of these presenting problems have not lead to any very satisfactory result. If anything, the general condition of the various provincial apprenticeship systems has deteriorated. While no research program can produce a definitive set of policy prescriptions, one that asks different questions can offer an improved understanding of the linkage between training and work.

Recent policy documents such as British Columbia's ITAC Report *Ensuring a Skilled Workforce for British Columbia* indicate the complexities involved in preparing youth for vocational careers. This is particularly apparent in attempts to engage the interest and participation of youth in apprenticeships as they prepare to graduate from high school. Developing a different research agenda for the study of apprenticeships reflects the altered nature of school-to-work transitions. With fundamental changes in the labour market -- occasioned by technological innovation and the reorganization of work -- pathways to employment have become increasingly non-linear and unpredictable. This accentuates the level of ambiguity in a training system that has never made strong attempts to regulate or manage the transition process. Individuals are seen as agents in making training and career decisions that shape their futures. In the words of Walter Heinz who has spent some years analyzing school-to-work pathways in various OECD countries: "Youth are increasingly responsible for writing their own biographies". This strongly developmental view frames and is fundamental to developing a list of research priorities that would improve our knowledge of factors that influence the passage to adulthood and the importance of meaningful work in that process.

1. Issues related to transition continuities/risks of adolescents and young adults

1. How to define school-work transitions in relation to the *life-course*.
2. How to make apprenticeships fit the *developmental imperatives* of adolescents and young adults.
3. How to acknowledge the role of *families* in the educational and career *planning* of adolescents and young adults.
4. How to make apprenticeship learning *attractive* to adolescents and young adults.

2. Apprenticeships in Canada lack research on:

1. Public perceptions of vocational work and the value of 'intermediate' skills'.
2. The conditions of 'alternation' learning -- at the worksite and in the (college) classroom.

3. The characteristics of apprentices – educational and work pathways, individual differences, social address, etc.
4. The distinctive features of the ‘emerging adult’ stage of socio-emotional development.
5. The role of personal agency in the transition process from school to apprenticeship registration.
6. Longitudinal and sufficiently comprehensive data bases.

3. Comments

These research needs suggest examination of many topics. The following are only some of the more salient:

1. Transitions

Apprenticeships in Canada typically are described as ‘adult’ rather than ‘youth’ oriented training systems. The average age of entry is 26 or 27. Although there exist apprenticeship opportunities for high school students, they offer training in a very restricted set of trades and enroll few students. Canadian youth aged 18 to 25 are described in recent OECD documents as ‘milling around’ – aimlessly trying to gather work experience in a segment of the labour market that offers only contingent work and virtually no opportunities for career development. It is important to inform these descriptions with research based on developmental views that take into account the unique characteristics of this age group. Increasingly they are seen to possess characteristics that are neither adolescent nor adult. Termed the ‘emerging adult,’ young people in this age-range differ demographically, subjectively, and in terms of their identity explorations. As a basis for understanding the dynamics of school-work transitions, the emerging adult concept offers a potentially useful source of developmental principles.

2. Gender

Women have been strongly encouraged to participate in non-traditional trades. These attempts have met with little success and have tended to perpetuate the devaluing of traditional occupational choices such as hairdressing. However, increasing numbers of apprenticed trades associated with emerging sectors such as aerospace, film, and tourism may be less sex-segregated and biased and therefore more attractive. These so-called ‘Knowledge-Based Service Industries’ also would make better use of young women’s established investment in education. Girls’ educational aspirations and participation has exceeded that of boys since the 1970’s, giving rise to considerable concern among educators as to the dysfunctional nature of ‘masculine’ attitudes towards learning and involvement in school. Research is needed on the socialization of vocational preferences among youth and the potential of new areas of apprenticed work to change established perceptions of ‘gender-appropriate’ employment.

3. Public Attitudes

Attitudes toward vocational training and work are decidedly negative in Canada. Recent surveys indicate that less than 7% of Canadian parents would encourage their children to learn a trade. While there is a voluminous literature on school-based career counseling, we know relatively little about career planning within families. We are ignorant of the role played by parents in determining the career intentions of their children. We do know, however, that this process involves the transfer (or activation) of a wide range of social, cultural, and financial resources and is driven by attitudes, hopes, and aspirations that both reflect and shape public attitudes towards vocational work. These insights derive from the HRDC *Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning* which is unique in its attempt to examine complex family influences on the development of school-age children's academic and vocational interests. Support for (and expansion of) this kind of research initiative is essential.

4. Conditions of Learning

Combining both work and classroom learning experiences, apprenticeships are seen by many as the quintessential form of 'alternation' training. While the alternation concept is increasingly attractive to youth -- as evidenced in the growth of work experience and coop programs at all levels of the post-secondary system -- traditional apprenticeships have, with few exceptions, failed to expand in any significant way. To some extent, this is due to a perception of apprenticeships as a form of employment rather than learning. Evidence from the National Apprenticed Trades Survey suggests that most journeypersons lacks essential instructional skills. Equally problematic is the college curriculum that fails to offer apprentices either relevant or complementary knowledge. This suggests a basic curricular and instructional design problem. Yet the principles of situated learning are well known and could be applied to the development of applied curricula. Their application in the pedagogical training of journeypersons is even less well understood or managed.

Jobs increasingly are more complex and their execution less obvious. Understanding the principles on which a machine functions is more important than its operation. Simple observational learning models are inadequate to the task of instructing apprentices in complicated manufacturing, construction or service environments. There exists an appropriate literature on workplace learning but its application to flexible modes of delivery is lacking. The need for more flexible forms of delivery such as short, intensive modes of instruction, distance education, or on-line virtual 'classrooms' requires a significant investment in research.