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Identification of work activities as a source of professionalization: a methodology of research. Case study from France

Identyfikacja czynności zawodowych jako źródła profesjonalizacji: przykład metody badań. Studium przypadku z Francji

Key words: construction-professionalization, capacity, experience, interaction, autonomy.

Słowa kluczowe: konstrukcja-profesjonalizacja, zdolność produkcyjna, doświadczenie, interakcja, autonomia.

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia rezultaty badań prowadzonych przez autora we Francji w latach 2010–2014 na temat profesjonalizacji, konstruowanej i wdrożonej w życie przez dyrektorów ośrodków szkolenia zawodowego pracowników młodocianych (CFA-BTP) należących do systemu szkolenia zawodowego koordynowanego przez Krajowy Komitet Koordynacji Nauczania Zawodów Budowlanych (CCCA-BTP). Głównymi celami tych badań, prowadzonych pod kierunkiem Jean'a Clenet'a na Uniwersytecie w Lille, były zrozumienie i interpretacja zjawisk wzajemnych reakcji i uzależnień, które pozwalają różnym podmiotom rozwinąć ich zdolności i przyjąć nowe postawy zawodowe dzięki różnorodności sytuacji pracy, jakie spotykają.

Przeprowadzone badania, bardziej jakościowe niż ilościowe, zbudowane zostały na takich kryteriach jak wiarygodność, transfer i weryfikacja rezultatów. Opierały się one na analizie zebranych danych empirycznych polegających przede wszystkim na rezultatach bezpośrednich spotkań i wywiadów z dyrektorami wybranych ośrodków kształcenia, jak również na materiałach (preskrypcjach) zebranych w instytucji koordynującej (CCCA-BTP) na temat procesów profesjonalizacji. Celem tego artykułu jest prezentacja wybranych metod, które pozwoliły autorowi na poznanie i przestudiowanie, jak krajowe instrukcje płynące z instytucji centralnej (preskrypcje i intencje) są, z jednej strony, rozumiane przez dyrektorów w terenie i, z drugiej strony, jak dyrektorzy je wykorzystują na potrzeby swojej własnej profesjonalizacji. Specjalna uwaga zostanie poświęcona

analizie sposobu, w jaki dyrektorzy rozwinęli swoje zdolności kierownicze i pedagogiczne dzięki zaangażowaniu w edukację ustawiczną nauczycieli i instruktorów pracujących w ośrodkach przez nich kierowanych.

Introduction: choice of the method for the research on professionalization

This research takes its origin from the will to question work situations as potential sources of professionalization for the subjects and actors involved. Like Durand (2013), Maubant (2013) or Quéré (1997), we started from the supposition that adults having a professional activity develop their capacities, above all, thanks to work situations in which they are involved, in both informal (intentional) and non-formal (non-intentional) manners. Moreover, subjects and actors belonging to educational systems managed, on the one hand, by the social partners and, on the other hand, linked by convention to the French Ministry of National Education, which is the case of the directors of training centres acting in the construction industry in France, have to face complexity (Morin, 2005) due to institutional prescriptions and structural evolutions influencing their missions and activities. Thus, we decided to analyse situations in which the directors are likely to produce effects for the others and, simultaneously, to construct their own capacities reinforcing their performance and professional identities (Samurçay & Rabardel, 2004) through permanent processes of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction (Clénet, 2005) and thanks to situations of interaction and interdependence established within collaborators, hierarchy and different players and decision makers at local, regional and national levels.

Through this research, we analysed the professionalization within the current French approach where its main sense remains in the development of individual capacities of subjects as a source of flexibility for themselves and as an origin of adaptability to different contexts and situations (Wittorski, 2008). In particular, we examined the complexity of the process permitting the exploitation of professional experience for individual and collective capacity building (Barbier, 2013). To do this, we situated the professionalization within a larger context and we confronted it with institutional evolutions, with organisational and technical changes, as well as with individual and subjective motivations.

From the methodological point of view, we carried out a qualitative research, considered as *a discursive approach of reformulation, explanation and theorisation of testimonies, experiences and phenomena* (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010), having progressively become *interpretative and based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmation of the results obtained* (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). We also adopted the options proposed by Leplat (2008) concerning *regulation and automatism within complex activities*, as well as by Clénet (2012) about *identification and understanding of interactions and tensions*. Besides, we opted for the axiomatic and inductive method (Le Moigne, 1999) where *analysing* takes more importance than *conceiving* in the process of *learning*. Thus, for us, a qualitative and interpretative

research aims at a better understanding of meanings attributed by individuals to their own life and experiences their live. Instead of searching objectivity, we decided to give more value to observation, understanding and interpretation of subjective and individual attitudes, embedded within institutional and social contexts. Of course, we admit that social and political interests and priorities influence choices and interpretations made by the subjects and actors concerned.

The professionalization means for us, above all, a transformation of individual capacities, where the subject and actor is its main issue. Thus, the professionalization is an intention and a process where adults are linked to work situations to be considered as sources of productions (for the others) and constructions (of their own capacities). Therefore, we consider that the triangle *situation-activity-capacity* is activated, above all, by the subject-actor himself. To position the subject-actor in the centre of his professionalization means that we firstly took into consideration his internal resources (aptitudes) to which we add his knowledge (acquired in a formal, informal and non-formal way). But internal resources and knowledge are in a constant evolution (positive or negative) and that is why the professionalization of individuals must be analysed with the evolution of *professional experience*, to be considered as a *process* and as a *result* (Bourgeois & Durand, 2012).

To understand and interpret the professionalization of the directors concerned, we carried out interviews with 25 of them (out of 103) and we simultaneously analysed documents describing prescriptions. Therefore, we went through institutional intentions, as well as their understanding and interpreting by the directors themselves. After that, we tried to analyse and interpret use and achievements made by the directors starting from the prescription. To give a more operational dimension to our research, we decided to focus on the interactions-mediations that the directors build up or in which they participate when they are involved in the process of training and accompaniment of new trainers, which is compulsory within the CCA-BTP network. This training is conceived as a sandwich course composed of one regional module (three days), three national modules (one week each) and permanent accompaniment in the work situations, where the directors have to combine the roles of a supervisor, of a substantial resource and of an evaluator.

First step: identifying environment, context and spectrum of the research

Being practitioner in charge of institutional and operational processes of professional development of staff working in the vocational training centres, we realised that the directors were confronted to multiple missions, activities and actions: external and internal communication, development of vocational education and training in accordance with various national, regional and local prescriptions, operational organisation of training centres, leadership of projects as well as management of human, financial and material resources for both immediate and strategic purposes. Thus, we questioned their activities we considered as a source of

construction and of development of their professional capacities. Through this research, we tried to understand to which extent and how their activities and actions contribute to the construction of their professionalism; do these activities and actions really contribute to the development of their professional capacities, considered as a result of their aptitude and knowledge? Are they capitalised and disseminated and if yes, how and among whom? Are they exploited and if yes, how and by whom? Are the learning outcomes based on the exploitation of professional experience sustainable and if yes, under what conditions?

By searching answers to these questions, we tried to detect and analyse main stages and main events likely to make evolve professional capacities of the directors concerned. We considered the principles of the qualitative research not only as an opportunity of scientific rigour, but also as a space of creativity where we learned to be confident in our own interpretation of collected data. The contacts with the directors, the analysis of the interviews carried out and the interpretation of their various productions were for us the main source of understanding and of interpretation of the phenomena studied. Thus, we started the exploration phase with a first set of interviews to identify relevant topics to be treated in greater depth later. Through this first stage we intended to find out how the directors perceived their environment and their professional contexts, how they interpreted the evolution of institutional prescriptions related to their missions and activities, and what components of their professional context and various intentions they consider as the most relevant for the evolution of their own function, especially taking into account the transitions of the vocational and educational training in the construction industry currently in force in France.

We conceived the first set of interviews without any specific grid containing oriented questions, given that the purpose was to enable the directors to express as freely as possible their ideas and opinions. We intended, at this stage, not to interfere significantly and to give priority to listening instead of expressing our own points of view. Through this open and not directive attitude, we hoped a natural emergence of singular concerns coming from activities and experiences. We made our choice of the directors to be interviewed according to the heterogeneity of their professional situations and profiles. The analysis of the results of these interviews enabled us to identify contexts, situations, missions and activities listed by the directors as potential sources of their professionalization. We observed, already at this stage, that the contexts, situations, missions and activities that contain uncertainty, tensions and difficulties were considered as the most significant origins of professionalization, as they appeal not only theoretical knowledge and personal aptitudes in several domains but, above all, the capacities of combining them, according to contexts and situations met.

Parallel to this, we had to shape our own attitude in this qualitative and participative research, focussed on the directors with whom we also have an institutional relationship. Thus, we had to combine, on the one hand, our posture of practitioner, expert in capacity building representing the institution (CCCA-BTP) and,

on the other hand, our posture of researcher in human sciences and in continuing training working in an independent manner with the University of Lille 1. To reach a unique and coherent attitude starting from two different and complementary postures (Paillé & Muchielli, 2010), we had to accept, especially at the first stage of our investigations, a certain break-up of the manners in which this research was carried out (Anadón, 2006). We consider that managing and combining different postures are probably one of the most complex aspects of a social research conceived and led by a practitioner.

When summing up the results of this first stage, we realised that, during the interviews, the directors related rather their intentions of doing than pragmatic testimonies of their concrete actions. In fact, we had difficulties to identify and analyse specific achievements (considered as activity outputs) contributing to the production of results for the others and, at the same time, to the development of their own professional capacities. Instead of listing situations and activities contributing to their professionalization, the directors rather took the opportunity of our investigations to initiate a kind of interior dialog with themselves, better structured and coherently formulated thanks to our presence, to question the sense of their mission and function in the evolving professional environment where uncertainties are numerous and solutions proposed by institutions are not unanimously accepted. In addition to this, the directors stressed that their missions and the actions they undertake are not a simple sequence of tasks and decisions, but, above all, a “*combined altogether*” according to the expression of one of them. With the distance we have today, we realise that an open methodology, based on the vast questions at its initial phase and containing broken-up components enabled us to better understand the current concerns lived by the directors. We also decided to study these concerns in a more detailed manner at the second phase, to identify to which extent they can be considered as a source of professionalization.

Second step: exploring institutional prescriptions and real experiences for professionalization

During this phase, we tried to identify - through interrogations, explorations, understandings, projections and reformulations – different situations and activities to be considered as singular and significant from the point of view of their contribution to the professional development¹ of the directors aimed. Thus, we formulated the hypothesis that professional development and capacity building processes are a basis of a multi-dimensional professionalization with various and changing objectives, systemic and depending on the individual person placed in a position of principal actor of his own professionalization. To measure potential distance between institutional

¹ We make a difference between « professionalization » and « professional development », the first term being more global and embracing not only actions contributing to the capacity building of individuals and to their professional ascension, but also emergence of professions (Wittorski, 2007) and other identity processes (Kaddouri, 2008) based on the social recognition of capacities and competences.

prescription-intention and individual perception-interpretation, we first analysed formal texts related to the missions and function of directors, published by the CCCA-BTP as a leader of a national network of apprenticeship in the construction sector in France. When doing this, we looked for theoretical background enabling us to understand better institutional programmes (Dubet, 2002) and reasoning (Douglas, 2000). After that, we analysed interactions between prescriptions (macro level) and their perceptions by the directors (micro level), as a dynamic process evolving in a longer perspective and characterised by change and uncertainty. To detect these interactions, we particularly examined the projects achieved by the directors for recent eight years, by searching inside the evolution of themes, of publics and of methodological approaches. Our method, based on systematic analysis of interviews and texts written by the directors between 2007 and 2013 about their activities, enabled us to detect an enlarged set of contents likely to contribute to their professionalization, often not listed within the institutional prescription, containing both cognitive and affective dimensions, where things are often hidden or blurred.

The CCCA-BTP provides directors with detailed instructions on how the training centres should be organised in terms of training provisions, human, financial and material resources, as well as regarding quality criteria according to which they will be evaluated. Moreover, national prescription imposes procedures to be respected. Therefore, we tried to understand how these obligations are interpreted by the directors and really included in the operational functioning of the training centres. In fact, we paid greater attention not to consider prescriptions as automatically put forward. Thanks to specific analysis with grids, we intended to detect the manner in which the directors used the prescription. Their individual goals are always not in line with what was foreseen by the institution. Thus, we analysed both: the evolving institutional situation and the progressive autonomy of the subjects-actors capable of using the environment and the prescription for their own cognitive and affective purposes.

To study the results of our investigations, we used the grid proposed by Collette (2013) that we adapted to our context. This grid, presented below, made it possible to identify professional attitudes of directors when facing the evolution of the professional environment and the prescription.

We also decided to conceive a typology of professional attitudes of directors towards environmental change having enabled us to formulate later the hypothesis regarding links between these attitudes and the degree of engagement in the exploration of the work situations for capacity building processes. Above all, we analysed the relationship the directors establish with uncertainty, instability and professional turbulences that characterise almost each change where antagonist logics, both individual and collective, are often confronted. Within such contexts, *complex because they are alive and unpredictable* (Morin, 2005), we intended to identify how the directors evolve and make their arbitrages between external inputs and internal motivations.

	Director follower of the environment and of the prescription		Director leader mastering the environment and the prescription		
	<i>A high degree of passivity</i>	(-)	(0)	(+)	<i>A high degree of autonomy</i>
Relationship with the environment	Subjected to the evolution of the environment and not much interpreting it neither for himself nor for his training centre.	Environmental evolutions taken into account rather like obstacles breaking up with current practices.	Punctual adjustments to environmental evolutions, but without building up a relevant long term strategy.	Systematic taking into consideration and adapting to environmental change by conceiving adjustments negotiated and having a status.	Mechanisms of anticipation and vision of environmental change to build up adaptation strategy and not only to be subjected to it.
Relationship with the prescription	Subordination to the prescription without interacting with it in an active manner. The main purpose is the execution of the prescription.	Difficult acceptation of the evolution of the prescription. Every change is rather perceived as a potential danger likely to destabilise the organisation established.	The goal of the prescription is perceived as an obligation to be fulfilled, but the initiative is admitted concerning the manner in which it will be put forward.	The prescription is considered as a potential field of adaptation and interpretation, whereas his contractual aspect is not perceived as determining for the development.	The prescription is transformed in a strategic opportunity for personal and organisational development, even if its compulsory character continues to exist.

To do so, we conceived new grids likely to help us not only to identify work situations and activities considered by the directors as the most useful for their own capacity building processes, but also to understand how these processes were empirically put forward. Thus, the grids we conceived contained concerns listed by the directors and potential sources of their professionalization, their comments concerning these concerns, the description of the actions undertaken, as well as our own comments enabling us to capitalise the information collected. The grids highlighted tensions and breaking ups frequently present in the activities of the directors, as well as the manner in which the directors exploit them as additional and often valorising professional experience.

The fact that we carried out our second phase investigations within a rather long period (2011–2013) appeared positive, as it made it possible to measure the evolution of attitudes towards some phenomena. Thus, we avoided describing only punctual situations as we situated more easily our research within the framework of long lasting processes where attitudes of directors towards their own capacity building changed. We also took the opportunity to explain a perceptible tension between personal ambitions and collective objectives. The most important action at this step was the detection, thanks to the method described above, of the manner in which the directors

became more autonomous towards institutional prescriptions and instruments, as well as of the way in which they learn to interpret and to integrate environmental change to their own managerial strategies. Thus, we tried to demonstrate how and under what conditions some directors leave progressively their role of executors of prescription and demonstrate growing interest in pragmatic and constructive engagements in the projects that the institution proposed.

Third step: focus on a specific experience to identify a process of professionalization in detail

To detect with more details how processes promoted and set up by the institution contribute to the professionalization, we examined the experience of accompaniment of the new trainers² participating in the compulsory training conceived by the continuing training department of the CCCA-BTP. According to the prescription, the directors are in charge of conceiving, setting up, carrying out and evaluating these accompaniment and training process. Thus, we decided to understand the value of this experience for the professionalization of the directors concerned, especially by exploring and interpreting mediations-interactions the directions initiate with new trainers. The institution conceived this training path, on the one hand, to communicate and transmit to the new trainers pedagogical and methodological knowledge³ considered as indispensable for their function and for the construction of pedagogical strategies to put forward with companies receiving apprentices. On the other hand, the training was conceived to enable new trainers to acquire specific postures and professional attitudes. The periods of learning and accompanying in work situations are considered by the institution as more important than theoretical learning modules.

When analysing the involvement of the directors in the accompaniment of new trainers, we intended to detect:

- The characteristics of the mediations-interactions between the activities undertaken and the development of professional capacities of the directors.
- The relation between the capacities newly acquired and the evolution of the perception of their own functions.
- The manner in which professional identities of the directors evolved thanks to professional experiences.

Thus, we situated our investigations in the field of the professionalization concerning simultaneously the individual, the craft and the society, where the subjects-actors *reflect thanks to the action, for the action and on the action* (Wittorski, 2007), where we examined interactions among individuals, among individuals and

² It is a matter of mostly full time trainers hired by the training centres under long term contracts, having in charge vocational education and training of apprentices participating in sandwich courses shared with companies where the apprentices spend, in average, two out of three weeks. Only construction crafts are concerned.

³ Technical and technological knowledge, considered as already mastered by the new trainers and checked within recruitment procedures, is not a topic of the proposed training that is composed of four non sequential modules situated within 16 months.

actions, as well as among actions themselves, with their reciprocities and interdependences.

To go more in depth to understand the prescription, we started with the analysis of texts describing intentions, finalities, contents and methodology of the training paths conceived for new trainers. Simultaneously, we analysed written documents produced by the directors where the training of new trainers is tackled, like grids for interviews with new trainers, pedagogical and evaluation reports, as well as more personal reflections on the accompaniment to be put forward. In fact, we tried to understand where the formative role of the directors is only an institutional intention or they really take this opportunity to improve their notoriety, their pedagogical knowledge and the manner in which they make evolve professional capacities of trainers. We examined the documents produced by the directors for the last six years, to detect potential evolution of their attitude towards accompaniment of new trainers. Parallel to this, we went through the transcriptions of the interviews we achieved with them, to detect differences between reflexive (written) analysis and spontaneous (spoken) reactions. The comparison of both of them gave us a new and complementary light on the perception of their role (saying) and their actions (doing) as actors accompanying new trainers.

When carrying out this phase of research, we paid attention to identify real, pragmatic and measurable practices of accompaniment in order not to be in a simple collecting of ideas and points of view the directors could have regarding their role in the process identified. Thus, our grids of analysis were focussed on the identification, in both written documents and spoken testimonies, of the following data:

- Exhaustive description of empiric practices put forward in real conditions with new trainers, to measure their frequency, thematic span and quality.
- Chronological classification of the practices identified, to measure in time the intensity of the events.
- Explanation of the potential tensions between prescriptions and the use the directors made of it.

Confronting and analysing various research corps made it possible to end up with more nuanced results, especially in terms of explanation of tensions likely to exist between collective intentions and individual goals, not always expressed.

In the ultimate phase of our research, we also examined opinions of the new trainers on the accompaniment as lived by these final beneficiaries of the proposed training paths. As a support, we used reflexive documents written by the new trainers. We based this work on the methodological approach proposed by Hyman (1972) and refined by Biocaldi-Rinaldi & Vezzoni (2012) for the “secondary analysis”, understood as *a new examination of data collected in the past and for other purposes, newly organised to respond to objectives of a new research*. This new resource was particularly valuable due to the fact that it was produced without any previous scientific intervention from our part among the target group. Thanks to this additional approach, we discovered several aspects of accompaniment the trainees highlighted as important contributors to improve their professionalism, whereas the directors tackled as secondary. Thus, we realised the importance of the complementary character of

different sources in the social and educative research, in order to approach more objectivity thanks to the confronting and blending of various publics and opportunities of investigation. In fact, by doing so, we discovered more unexpected aspects of accompaniment of new trainers by their directors in both managerial and pedagogical spectrum. We also observed a multiplicity of significations of the concept of accompaniment, depending on meanings, understandings and interpretations given by various subjects-actors. And finally, the method chosen enabled us to understand and analyse training and going along with new trainers by their directors as a phenomenon situated at the crossing of three conceptual frameworks: complexity, change and professionalization, each of them acting clearly on two others, as well as each of them having both dimensions: announced and hidden.

Conclusion: a qualitative method to discover unpredictability of situations-experiences at work

The method presented above seemed appropriate to highlight and interpret sources of professionalization of the directors. As the work situations are principal sources of their professionalization, the investigation set up made it possible to understand and interpret the complexity expressed by paradoxes of motivations, confusions of objectives and finalities, as well as by the diversity of expectations issued from the activities undertaken. In fact, complex and unpredictable situations and activities that contain a high degree of professional risks are considered by the directors the most useful for their own professionalization.

This qualitative method revealed that the directors could act only little on the system in which they work, but they can, therefore, exploit it for their own professional and personal purposes, likely to be shown (contractual) or discrete (inward). Thanks to the method we chose, we found new proves that work situations enabled the directors to learn:

- New visions of their functions, missions and professional objectives in the context that evolve permanently.
- New processes to achieve actions and objectives by using appropriate resources (concepts, methods, as well as human and material means) in a more effective manner.

Both are unpredictable processes, possible to be set up as a phenomenon, but impossible to be fully programmed in terms of results. They contain dimensions simultaneously individual and collective, with mutual expectations, which are hardly detectable with rigid models of investigation.

Besides, we realised that one of the most powerful sources of professionalization was located in the capacities and opportunities to coordinate complex activities in an environment and contexts being in transitions-transformations. Furthermore, instead of talking about *multiple capacities*, we consider that it is more relevant to talk about a *combination of capacities* the director must be able to demonstrate as a leader having strategic visions. Our research has shown that this combination is singular and specific

to each subject-actor and depends not only on *what he knows*, but above all on *who he is*. His capacity to combine aptitudes and knowledge are determinant for understanding, interpreting and assimilating complex situations, as well as for building up relevant actions not only in his own training centre, but also at regional and national levels, to affirm his capacities and his professional position. Thus, the methods we used made it possible to come to the conclusion that the professionalization, as an intention, as a process and as a result, is a progressive maturation of individuals based on the research of objectives, processes and means to find a balance enabling them to achieve finalities assigned or freely chosen. Within such a context, the professionalization means construction of capacities to join a movement, to find and keep one's own space and to make evolve the professional identity. Thus, the subject-actor learns from situations (Maubant, 2013) in parallel with learning from his own inside (Clénet, 2005), thanks to a certain propensity to be auto-regulated.

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