

Teachers and Trainers in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

Professional Development in Asia and Europe

29-30 June 2009 in Bergisch Gladbach/Germany

Alexander Schnarr

Pedagogical Professionalism of Teachers in Vocational Education in the P.R. China

Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung
German Institute for Adult Education

URL: <http://www.die-bonn.de/asem/asem0903.pdf>

Published: 09.06.2009

State of information: 09.06.2009

This document is published with the following [creative commons](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/) licence:



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/>

Pedagogical Professionalism of Teachers in Vocational Education in the P.R. China

Alexander Schnarr

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Understanding of “Pedagogical Professionalism“ for the study	3
3. Theoretical Presumption: „Professional Antinomies of Teacher Action“	5
4. Object and Area of Research: Professional Pedagogical Action in Mid-Level Vocational Education in the P.R. China.....	6
5. Research Questions	7
6. Research Design	8
7. Expected Outcomes and Aims of the Project	9
Resources and Further Reading.....	10

1. Introduction

Within the debate about criteria for professionalizing teaching and learning a fundamental question which needs to be raised is “what is professionalism?” or what does “acting professionally” mean in lifelong learning teaching and training contexts? Answers to these questions both from a European as well as an Asian perspective would allow for drawing conclusions on criteria that need to be applied in arrangements to professionalize teachers and trainers in lifelong learning contexts.

This contribution presents a research project on pedagogical professionalism as well as professional pedagogical action of teachers in vocational education in the P.R. China. The research is conducted as a Ph.D.-project at the Department of Vocational Education and Human Resources Management at the Otto-von-Guericke-University of Magdeburg. The department is engaged in different international co-operations in the area of vocational education with universities in the P.R. China, S.R. Vietnam, Mozambique and others and, moreover, participates in further education measures for international vocational education specialists (beside the countries mentioned above also, amongst others, from Indonesia).

In the first part of this contribution, an understanding of the term “pedagogical professionalism” will be elaborated by giving an overview of the discourse on the different concepts of “profession” and “acting professionally” in the German context and by relating these concepts to the teaching profession. Then, the model of “professional antinomies of teacher action” by Werner Helsper will be introduced. It serves as a theoretical framework and a starting point for the research study. Following this, the subject of the study (vocational education in the P.R. China) as well as the target group (teachers and trainers in mid-level vocational education in the P.R. China) will be described in more detail; the research questions will be explicated, as well. After explaining the research design, the contribution will conclude with an outlook on expected results and anticipated findings.

2. Understanding of “Pedagogical Professionalism“ for the study

The discourse on the term “profession“ has been led quite intensively in the German speaking research in recent years always recurring to the question whether or not the teaching profession should be regarded as a “profession” in scientific terms in the first place. In addition, the need for and the form of own professional criteria for the teaching profession were subject to discussions (see for example Terhart 1992; Osterloh 2002; Tenorth 2006; Oevermann 2008). This discourse will be summarized briefly at this stage to give a basic understanding of the concept of “pedagogical professionalism” underlying the research project.

In the German scientific discourse on the concept of professionalism as a whole, the term or concept is usually characterized by central aspects like high autonomy in decision-making, a focus on social core values, working with individual cases, a privileged income and an academic education (see for example Oevermann, 2008, p. 56).

Looking at the term from a knowledge-sociological perspective, professionals would be described as “solution managers” (“Lösungsverwalter”). This term was developed by Pfadenhauer/Brosziewski to describe actors who can interpret problems they are faced with in such a way that the range of solutions these actors already possess can be applied to that

specific problem (see Pfadenhauer/Brosziewski 2008, p. 83). Schütze describes a profession as a form of occupation which owns a social mandate to be able to carry out special tasks of problem solving and to manage certain social values assigned to the profession like health, adding to social and private welfare, technical manageability and problem-solving ability. Furthermore, professionals in his terms are granted the right by society to apply inconvenience, pain, and/or even limited damage to their clients in order to protect and defend their clients' interests (see Schütze 1996, p. 191). Furthermore, Helsper is differentiating between experts – possessing a certain set of rules and profound factual knowledge to solve certain problems – and professionals, who can also draw upon skills and factual knowledge but, because of dealing with individual cases (individual human beings), are always faced with a certain kind of ambiguity in their daily work environment (see Helsper 1996, p. 529).

Summarizing these explications, “action autonomy”, “social mandate”, “problem-solving ability” as well as “single-case-specifics” can be seen as key elements of the term “**profession**”.

According to Helsper, „**acting professionally**“ is characterized by the fact that professionals are, because of the nature of their occupation, always involved in constitutive action dilemmas as core elements of their daily work. These action dilemmas can never be completely solved, but only handled reflexively (see *ibid.*, p. 528). Schütze regards the open contention of these unsolvable core problems of the respective area of work as paradoxes by the professional as a possibility to intentionally and effectively control potential mistakes at work (see Schütze, 1996, p. 188). These paradoxes, according to Schütze, are expressed as opposing and reciprocally misleading calls for action which have antinomous characteristics for the professional. These core problems can never be completely solved, but only handled cautiously (*ibid.*, p. 252).

Tenorth now establishes a relationship to **pedagogical work** – teaching and training – by explicating that in learning and teaching contexts, too, ambiguity, uncertainty and a lack of transparency mark central aspects of the daily work. These ambiguities take the shape of contradictory calls for action, for which crisis would have to be assumed as normal (see Tenorth, 2006, p. 583). Thus, putting the above mentioned characteristics of professionalism into a learning and teaching context, we are able to talk about a concept of “pedagogical professionalism” with certain characteristics of “acting professionally in pedagogical contexts.” This concept and discussion is seen by Helsper as an unconcluded topic area, which, furthermore, seems to be characterized by a great number of different approaches and terms, for example “classical”, structural-theoretical, interactionist, knowledge-sociological, or system-theoretical terms of “profession” (see Helsper et. al. 2008, p. 10). According to Helsper, though, all these approaches aim at a re-orientation of, for example, the relationship between profession and organisation in the face of the paradoxes of the teaching profession already mentioned, the ambiguities as well as the weakly developed ability to standardize pedagogical action (see *ibid.*, p. 14.)

Wenzel, too, sees aspects like “weak ability to standardize”, contradictory calls for action and a high level of ambiguity in teacher behavior and the act of teaching. However, at the same time this also holds for a high level of professional action autonomy, because working on the case “student” can only be done case-individually (see Wenzel in *ibid.*, p. 10).

Pfadenhauer/Brosziewski are talking about known ambivalences of pedagogical action in this context (pedagogical professionalism) between autonomy and heteronomy, between personal appropriateness and justice of selection, between single case and rule and between consistency of values and plurality (see Pfadenhauer/Brosziewski 2008, pp. 79). Professional action of pedagogical personnel in their terms can be seen in the firm establishment, definition and handling of these ambivalences.

Summarizing this paragraph it can be stated that pedagogical action is characterized to a high degree by uncertainties, ambivalences and contradictory calls for action. People acting pedagogically professional possess strategies to handle the (hidden) antinomies and paradoxes of teaching action cautiously and reflexively.

3. Theoretical Presumption: „Professional Antinomies of Teacher Action“

For the research project, the theoretical model of “professional antinomies of teacher action” (see Helsper 2004, p. 81) will be used as a basic orientation and for structuring the object and area of research. Because of this, the model shall be explained in brief at this point.

Helsper takes up the discussion about pedagogical professionalism and about the characteristics of pedagogically professional action and relates the core elements of those to the modernization discourse (see for example Giddens 2006; Bauman 2007; Sennett 2007, also van der Loo/von der Reijen 1992). Thus, he develops a model, in which the (as he calls them) constitutive action dilemmas (action antinomies) are embedded into a horizon of modernization antinomies. Regarding teacher professionalism as an antinomous action structure, four different levels are to be distinguished: first, there are the constitutive, non-solvable antinomies of teacher action, which characterize the work of teachers and which present themselves as reciprocally misleading calls for action. Examples for this level are the ambiguity antinomy, the symmetry antinomy, the trust antinomy, etc. (see Helsper 2004, p. 67). The second level, according to Helsper, is made up of contradictions of teacher action which result from different forms of societal organization of the education system. These contradictions may be transformable and solvable; nevertheless, they constitute the action frame in which those overlapping structural problems are formed which are significant on the first level (see *ibid.*, p. 68). Organizational routines and abstract rules, compulsory education and disciplinary action, selection- and authorization system as well as universal and specific distance are classified here. To be distinguished from this level is the precise design of action dilemmas and ambivalences which are formed specifically in the direct action area (3rd level). Finally, on the 4th level as a framework, there are the so called “modernization antinomies” (*ibid.*, p. 68), which have an impact on the teacher action based on modernization and rationalization stimuli which can be experienced in society. These are the rationalization antinomy, the differentiation and pluralization antinomy, the individualization antinomy as well as the civilization antinomy. The leading thesis here is that modernization processes further exponentiate the constitutive antinomies of teacher action on all levels of the model.

The model of “professional antinomies of teacher action” by Werner Helsper briefly outlined here seems to be appropriate to sharpen the view on the question of pedagogical professionalism in vocational education in the P.R. China and to serve, to some extent, as a

theoretical presumption or a line of vision on the object and area of research outlined in the next section.

The education system and with it the vocational education system of China are underlying strong reform movements and change processes at the moment. It can be assumed that these change processes, akin to the model developed by Helsper, extend a significant influence on teacher action in vocational education in the P.R. China.

4. Object and Area of Research: Professional Pedagogical Action in Mid-Level Vocational Education in the P.R. China

The vocational education system in the P.R. China differentiates three levels. On the lowest level ("Junior Vocational Education") are the so called "Vocational Middle Schools". "Junior vocational education is part of the 9-year compulsory education and lasts for about 3 to 4 years. It is aimed at training future workers, peasants and employees in other sectors with basic professional knowledge and certain professional skills" (Schnarr/Sun/Gleißner 2008, p. 24). Vocational education on the middle level is called "Senior Vocational Education". "Senior vocational education begins after the 9-year compulsory education" (ibid., p. 25). In the area of mid-level vocational education, different school types can be identified. However, this differentiation – across the whole country – varies between provinces. For this reason, a further differentiation is abstained from at this point. The highest level of vocational education in the P.R. China is labeled "Tertiary vocational education". It is comparable to the level of universities of applied sciences ("Fachhochschulen") in Germany.

"Tertiary vocational education mainly accepts graduates from regular high schools and secondary vocational schools. The schooling lasts 2 to 3 years. [...] The entrance requirements for tertiary vocational education are the successful graduation from senior vocational education or general middle schools (senior level). In addition, the graduates from senior level still have to take part in the National College Entrance Examination to enter the tertiary vocational education schools. The entrance requirements of the tertiary vocational education are reasonably lower than those of Bachelor education" (ibid., p. 26).

In recent years, there have been strong efforts on the side of the political leaders of the P.R. China to strengthen and reform the country's education and vocational education sector. These reform efforts are in line with the aims of the 11th Five-year-plan (2006-2010) to form a "harmonious society". „China is currently drafting the 11th Five-Year-Plan, with its basic tenets of building a harmonious society based on scientific development, and this includes the development and reform of education until 2020, as well as alterations to the Compulsory Education Law.“ (Yang 2007, p. 263). The 11th Five-year-plan was published on October 20th, 2005 (see Embassy of the P.R. China in Germany, 2009). Prime Minister Wen Jiabao argued for accelerated reforms of the whole area of education and specifically named vocational education as one of the areas that should receive more attention: "The Premier demanded that education system reform be sped up, that compulsory education be popularised and consolidated, that more attention be given to vocational education, and that the quality of higher education be improved"(ibid., p. 269). A main reason for this is likely to have been a significant lack of qualified personnel, especially in the urban areas and the coastal regions.

“Serious shortages of skilled workers have appeared in recent years in the prosperous coastal regions and large cities, illustrating the backwardness of vocational education. According to the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Labour and Social Security, Beijing businesses need a skilled employee percentage of 40%, but this currently stands at only 30%; in other words, a further 100,000 skilled workers are needed” (ibid., p. 271).

In efforts to strengthen the vocational education system, the middle level of vocational education plays an important role. After the number of students in this area had been declining before the year 2004, a gain in student numbers has been noticed from 2004 onwards.

“36.69 million students were registered in senior middle school in 2004. Of these, 22.2 million were studying in regular senior middle schools, 1.9 times the figure in 2000. The remaining 14.09 million students were studying in mid-level vocational schools, marking the first reversal in the continuous decline in recruitment to such schools” (Yang 2007, p. 264).

According to Yang, one of the reasons for this lies in successful measures and adjustments in the scope of the 10th Five-year-plan.

Another justification to put the focus of the research project introduced here on teachers in the area of mid-level vocational education can be seen in the fact that this level marks a school-based form of vocational education and training which, in its basic structures and in comparison to lower level and higher level vocational education in China, is suited best to be compared to vocational education at vocational schools in Germany (thinking of age structure of students, educational goals, etc.). For the research study it is assumed that the professional teacher action in the sense of the model Helsper introduced can be researched most authentically and accessibly in this level of vocational education in the P.R. China. The research questions underlying the research project will be outlined in the next section.

5. Research Questions

Taking into account the change processes in the P.R. China in general and in the education and vocational education system specifically as outlined above and considering the underlying model of teacher action, the following research questions can be posed for the research project:

- 1.) Which antinomies of teacher action can be found in the teacher action of vocational education teachers in mid-level vocational education in the P.R. China?
- 2.) To what extent are politically induced reform processes with the aim of forming a Harmonious Society represented in the action of Chinese vocational education teachers?
- 3.) To what extent is the model of „Professional antinomies of teacher action“ (Helsper) suitable to explain professional pedagogical action in the Chinese context and therefore adaptable to the Chinese context?

6. Research Design

To answer the research questions outlined above, a qualitative research design is chosen. Looking at the leading research question about paradoxes of professional teacher action in Chinese vocational education, it seems to make sense to combine different basic designs of qualitative research to be able to illustrate the approach taken in the research project. Flick et al. differentiate basic designs of qualitative research along a time- and a content dimension.

For the time dimension, they contrast retrospective studies, snap shots and longitudinal studies, whereas case studies and comparative studies form an axis in regard to the dimension of the content (see Flick/Kardorff/Steinke 2008, pp. 253). Keeping in mind the theoretical model of „Professional antinomies of teacher action“ by Werner Helsper underlying the thoughts on research methodology as well as the aim of the research project, it seems feasible to try to answer the research questions using a comparative approach.

Cropley further differentiates the basic design of the case study and identifies “intrinsic”, “instrumental” as well as “collective” research studies. Instrumental research studies are, according to Cropley, conducted with the intention to develop insight into a phenomenon or to differentiate and renew a popular theory (see Cropley 2008, p. 94). Furthermore, he explains (in accordance with Kromrey) the benefit of case studies in general as (a) a useful means to develop empirically justifiable theoretical concepts, theories, hypotheses, (b) a means to justify theories or hypotheses or (c) useful in illustrating quantitative research results (see *ibid.*, p. 97). Especially in regard to (b), which shows links to the aim of the research project, it seems to make sense to also work with case studies for the project.

To answer the research questions introduced in the previous section and keeping in mind the aim of the research project, an instrumental-comparative case study will be conducted. This research design is characterized by the fact that a multitude of single cases is analyzed regarding the question of “professional antinomies of teacher action” in the scope of change processes in the Chinese vocational education system (comparative study). During the research process the question of a possible transfer and further differentiation of the above mentioned model in the Chinese context will be explicated (“instrumental” case study).

As a research method, a linguistic approach (interview) is chosen. It seems to be appropriate for the object and area of the research (pedagogical professionalism and teachers in mid-level vocational education in the P.R. China) to use a manual-based interview with narrative passages. By basing the interview on lead questions, a structural comparability of the interviews in the sense of a comparative case study is ensured. Furthermore, narrative passages allow for case- and situation narrations in the scope of which latently existing paradoxes and antinomies in the teacher action might be exposed. For the development of the lead questions and the manual, the so called “SPSS-principle for interview manual creation” proposed by Helfferich was used (see Helfferich 2005, pp. 161).

7. Expected Outcomes and Aims of the Project

The research project outlined and described here follows the idea of further differentiating the model of „Professional antinomies of teacher action“ proposed by Helsper and embedding it into an international context on the basis of an empirical study. The project therefore contributes to the further theory development in the area of profession research.

In profession research, studies on professional action and the paradoxes connected with it are well known in the area of social work and social welfare (see Schütze 1992, 1996); research in this field has also been conducted in the area of adult education and general pedagogy (see Helsper 1996, 2004a, 2004b; Helsper/Busse/Humrich/Kramer 2008) for many years.

Furthermore, as stated above, an intense discourse on the term “profession” in conjunction with teaching work can be traced in the German speaking scientific community (see for example Terhart 1992; Osterloh 2002; Tenorth 2006; Oevermann 2008;). In vocational education science as a scientific discipline and in vocational education as a practical center of reference studies on (vocational-) pedagogical professionalism of teachers and trainers in this regard are not known. An anticipated added value of the research project lies in the application of the model conceptions introduced in the beginning of the paper to a vocational education and vocational education science context. Furthermore, the discussion tendencies and presumptions underlying the research project relate to studies and research in the German speaking scientific community. A further theory development in an international perspective serves as another added value for the project, especially by focusing on vocational education in the P.R. China. The reform- and change processes observable in China at the moment are well documented; however, studies about the “inner perspective” of the actors directly involved in and affected by reforms in vocational education – namely the teachers (here: in mid-level vocational education) in the P.R. China are still lacking.

Getting back to the question of „what is professional pedagogical action?“ raised in the beginning of this paper, empirically justified outcomes and results in regard to pedagogical action of Chinese teachers in vocational education and training can be expected from the research project. These could contribute to and enrich the discussion on criteria to professionalize learning and teaching in lifelong learning contexts based on empirical data. Thus, making use of this discussion and the application of these criteria, measures for the professionalization of vocational education experts in the P.R. China could be further developed and expanded.

Resources and Further Reading

Bauman, Zygmunt; Jakubzik, Frank (2007): *Leben in der flüchtigen Moderne*. Orig.-Ausg., 1. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Botschaft der Volksrepublik China in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (2009): 11. Fünfjahresplan des ZK der KP Chinas veröffentlicht. Verfügbar unter: <http://www.china-botschaft.de/det/jj/t217574.htm>, 01.06.02009, 13:42 Uhr.

Cropley, Arthur J. (2008): *Qualitative Forschungsmethoden. Eine praxisnahe Einführung*. 3. Aufl., Nachdruck der überarb. 2. Aufl. Eschborn bei Frankfurt am Main: Klotz.

Flick, Uwe; Kardorff, Ernst von; Steinke, Ines (2008): *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. Orig.-Ausg., 6., durchges. und aktualisierte Aufl. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verl. (Rororo Rowohlts Enzyklopädie, 55628).

Giddens, Anthony (2006): *Konsequenzen der Moderne*. [Nachdr.]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Helfferich, Cornelia (2005): *Die Qualität qualitativer Daten. Manual für die Durchführung qualitativer Interviews*. 2. Aufl. Wiesbaden: VS Verl. für Sozialwiss.

Helsper, W. (1996): *Antinomien des Lehrerhandelns in modernisierten pädagogischen Kulturen: Paradoxe Verwendungsweisen von Autonomie und Selbstverantwortlichkeit*. In: Combe, A./Helsper, W.: *Pädagogische Professionalität: Untersuchungen zum Typus pädagogischen Handelns*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996.

Helsper, Werner (2004): *Antinomien, Widersprüche, Paradoxien. Lehrerarbeit - ein unmögliches Geschäft*. In: Koch-Priewe, Barbara; Kolbe, Fritz-Ulrich; Wildt, Johannes (Hg.): *Grundlagenforschung und mikrodidaktische Reformansätze zur Lehrerbildung*. Bad Heilbrunn/Obb.: Klinkhardt, S. 49–98.

Helsper, W./Busse, S./Hummrich, M./Kramer, R. (2008): *Einleitung*. In: Helsper, W./Busse, S./Hummrich, M./Kramer, R. (Hrsg.): *Pädagogische Professionalität in Organisationen: Neue Verhältnisbestimmungen am Beispiel der Schule*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008.

Oevermann, U. (2008): *Profession contra Organisation? Strukturtheoretische Perspektiven zum Verhältnis von Organisation und Profession in der Schule*. In: Helsper, W./Busse, S./Hummrich, M./Kramer, R. (Hrsg.): *Pädagogische Professionalität in Organisationen: Neue Verhältnisbestimmungen am Beispiel der Schule*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008.

Osterloh, J. (2002): *Was heißt "pädagogische Professionalität"? Überlegungen zum Grundverständnis pädagogischer Berufe*. In: *Pädagogische Rundschau*, Jg. 56, H. 5, S. 391-401.

Pfadenhauer, Michaela; Brosziewski, Achim (2008): *Professionelle in Organisationen – Lehrkräfte in der Schule: Eine wissenssoziologische Perspektive*. In: Helsper, W./Busse, S./Hummrich, M./Kramer, R. (Hrsg.): *Pädagogische Professionalität in Organisationen: Neue Verhältnisbestimmungen am Beispiel der Schule*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008.

Schütze, F. (1996): Organisationszwänge und hoheitsstaatliche Rahmenbedingungen im Sozialwesen: Ihre Auswirkungen auf die Paradoxien des professionellen Handelns. In: Combe, A./Helsper, W.: Pädagogische Professionalität: Untersuchungen zum Typus pädagogischen Handelns. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996.

Schnarr, A./Sun, Y./Gleißner, K.: Vocational Education and Training and the Labour Market – a Comparative Analysis of China and Germany. Bonn: InWent gGmbH/UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2008.

Sennett, Richard (2007): Der flexible Mensch. Die Kultur des neuen Kapitalismus. 3. Aufl. Berlin: Berliner Taschenbuch-Verl.

Tenorth, H. (2006): Professionalität im Lehrerberuf: Ratlosigkeit der Theorie, gelingende Praxis. In: Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, Jg. 10, H. 4, S. 580-597.

Terhart, E. (1992): Lehrerberuf und Professionalität. In: Dewe, B./Ferchhoff, W./Radtke, F. (Hrsg.): Erziehen als Profession: Zur Logik professionellen Handelns in pädagogischen Feldern. Opladen: Leske+Burich, 1992.

van der Loo, Hans; Reijen, Willem van (1997): Modernisierung. Projekt und Paradox. Dt. Erstausg., 2., aktualisierte Aufl. München: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag (dtv, 4573).

Yang, Dongping (2007): Pursuing Harmonious and Equal Education. In: Ru, Xin; Lu, Xueyi; Li, Peilin (Hg.): The China Society Yearbook (2006). China's Social Development; Analysis and Forecast. Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, S. 263–300