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**Introduction to the Special Issue on retrieving and
recontextualising VET theory**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency have drawn attention to the vulnerability of our way of life and VET's responsibilities for its foundations. At the same time, the rise of populist and far-right political currents in older industrialised countries implies that any form of education and upbringing still has to address urgent questions about the purposes and aims of education. Further developments, such as digitisation and automation, now advancing in many areas of life, need to be further examined in terms of their implications for educational theory and philosophy.

Against this background, we review the way these ideas have been shaped by the previous genesis of vocational education and training (VET) formation and the shaping of individual theories – either reflected in the context of their historicity (retrieval) or in the context of their topicality (recontextualisation). Furthermore, these retrieving and recontextualising horizons are not only intended to illustrate the current status and perspectives of these theories, but also to provide possibilities for the further development of methodological approaches and theories in VET.

Fundamental to the concern to publish a paper with a focus on educational theory in the field of VET is the question of why a discipline that is currently strongly characterised by empiricism and practical relevance should address such concerns. Friedrich Paulsen (1912) formulated the still contemporary statement on the role and academic relevance of educational theory formation as follows:

Theory teaches to see; it cannot give prescriptions which, applied indiscriminately to all cases, promise infallible success. [...] Theoretical concepts are the eyes of the mind, or better telescopes and microscopes, for they presuppose the natural organ of vision, but they sharpen, widen, deepen the view. (Paulsen 1912, 34–38).

In presenting Special Issue (SI) 19, it is necessary to clarify what is to be understood by its actual object of discussion, VET theory. According to Ketschau (2018, 88–89), VET theory, understood here as an academic category, is the medium and product of VET-related philosophising. In this form, it becomes the formulation of normative basic concepts and guiding ideas of VET and the orientation of VET action, up to the formulation of theoretical constructs in the form of VET paradigms. Nevertheless, VET theory can refer to other horizons,

i.e., understanding, explaining and forecasting VET phenomena, and is then to be developed with corresponding empirical, hermeneutic or phenomenological approaches.

Thus, especially with increasing proximity to practice, it should be remembered that VET theories are not an academic goal in themselves, but rather a set of concepts, categories methods and tools that make possible interpretation and understanding of the development of VET, as with all academic work. VET theory is therefore first and foremost a cognitive and reflective orientation to VET. For VET studies, this means not only explaining what VET is in all its facets and how it is created and disseminated, but also asking what VET should and should not achieve for the individual (cf. Ketschau 2018). Just as VET theory contributes to the understanding of its subject in a descriptive, explanatory and prescriptive horizon, it becomes a sense orientation for VET action with a normative horizon.

Despite numerous different approaches, the basic conception of VET theories *sui generis* is based on normative educational goals, a didactic conception for achieving these educational goals as well as entailing (especially educational) policy implications. For example, Kerschensteiner (1901, 1966/1904) defined civic virtues as a central educational goal and used ‘work’ as a pedagogical category to achieve this goal. Critical approaches of the post-war period, which are regularly based on critical theory (cf. Habermas 1968; Horkheimer/Adorno 1947) and can be dated to the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, name autonomy and emancipation as central goals of education (e.g., Lempert 1971; Blankertz 1974, 1979, 1982). The main task of VET theory was to explain how these goals could also be achieved through VET.

Particularly since discussions of VET theory in the DACH region have so far been predominantly nationally oriented, it is a concern of SI 19 to transcend this traditional limitation and, alongside the multinational editorship, to consider international approaches on an equal footing. In English-speaking countries, influential theories addressing the issue of VET have been largely based less on philosophical than on social science concepts. These theories were largely developed in the context of policies and practices that positioned VET as an inferior pathway and severely limited its educational value. In contrast, the DACH region is exceptional from an international perspective, both in terms of the development of VET theories *sui generis* and in terms of their influence on policy and practice.

In engaging with the debates that make up our SI 19, the reader will find responses that range widely in their national origins, theoretical approaches and proposals for future theory and theorising around VET. Nor do these debates end either with this introduction or its concluding review, as a further round of papers for the SI 19 is planned for later in the year. In this introduction, and in the papers introduced here, we only set out the ground on which such a debate can take place, and even now we can expect the debate to transgress its boundaries.

(1) In our first paper, Bill Esmond and Volker Wedekind place the discussion in an international context that contrasts with the unique way that German VET has been rationalised by traditions that can be characterised as ‘VET theory’. Whilst such concepts as *Bildung* and *Beruf* have currency in other countries, these have never attained the same dominance as in Germany: we

can at best speak of ‘theorising VET’. This practice is illustrated here in relation to English-speaking countries, where the relative social significance of VET and the university-based production of knowledge about VET both carry significantly less weight. Yet these countries have brought rich and diverse traditions of theory, especially from the social sciences, to bear on the policies and practices of VET, including in ways that problematise many of its normative concepts.

(2) Philipp Gonon and Lorenzo Bonoli, by contrast, begin with a historical account that draws on decades of scholarship about the German founders of VET and especially Georg Kerschensteiner. They also place this foundational work in its social context and draw attention to the significant societal changes that have in turn undermined these foundations. This leads them to conclude that VET needs a middle range theory, and to explore tentatively how such a theoretical approach might be established.

(3) In his contribution, Thilo J. Ketschau analyses the importance of the principles of emancipation and functionality for understanding what vocational training is. He comes to the provocative conclusion that it is not possible to take them into equal consideration at the normative level.

(4) In his contribution, Günter Kutscha addresses the question of the constitution of the ‘subject’ in educational processes. Reflecting on his own life, he deconstructs the idea of being able to plan the constitution of the ‘I’ as a subject and emphasises the relevance of contingency. As a consequence, using the theoretical term of a ‘contingent subjectivity’ (Norbert Ricken), he proposes new ways of thinking about VET and its normative base in VET theory.

(5) In his contribution, Stephan Stomporowski shows how theoretical discourses on vocational training can be related to current social challenges. To this end, he outlines the foundation of a critical-ecological vocational training theory and thus calls for a new enlightenment, the scope of which exceeds the previously prevailing projection areas of vocational training.

(6) In their contribution, Andreas Slopinski and Christian Steib analyse learning theory didactics (the ‘Berlin model’), which goes back primarily to the work of Paul Heimann’s working group from the 1960s, but is still one of the most popular didactic models in Germany. Building on the guiding assumptions and elements of that time, the authors design a ‘Berlin Model 2.0’ that offers points of reflection on lesson design in a culture of digitality.

(7) Geoffrey Hinchliffe, writing from a UK perspective but having familiarity with German VET, contrasts the language of UK government documents to the concerns of German VET founders. From their concerns with the civic, he seeks to recover social dimensions and meanings of work which have been largely submerged in English-speaking countries.

(8) Naomi S. Alphonsus uses the case of South Africa to explore occupational theoretical concepts to the dominant Anglo-Saxon competency-based training (CBT) approach which is characterised as non-holistic. She conceptualises occupational capacity instead of using the

holistic Beruf-centred VET dominant in German-speaking countries associated with institutional arrangements that, she argues, are difficult to mimic in other national contexts. Alphonso applies ‘occupational capacity’ by introducing and further explicating the concepts of specialised knowledge and the social organisation of work. While specialised knowledge refers to systematically organised knowledge, skills, occupational practice and autonomy, the social organisation of work refers to professional bodies, institutions and state regulation. The theoretical concept is compatible with Anglophone concepts of expert practice in occupations which are holistic and normative, thus, providing opportunities to further theorise VET with a more nuanced understanding of German concepts of ‘Bildung’ and ‘Beruf’.

(9) In the paper of Junmin Li, Steven Hodge and Elizabeth Knight the differences of concepts of the Anglosphere concept of vocational competence is compared to the Germanosphere concept of vocational competency is discussed. Thereby, the historical evolution as well as the current understanding of both concepts is analysed subsequently. Finally, the differences are discovered by comparing the concepts with each other. The authors conclude that despite their linguistic similarity, the concepts carry different meanings due to their different origins which can lead to misunderstandings when used internationally.

In comprehensively reviewing the papers, James Avis challenges the authors as to whether their reconstruction and recontextualisation of VET theory takes us far enough to meet the challenges facing contemporary VET. At a time when, even in Germany, VET educates so many who cannot access valued apprenticeships, can it continue to be based on principles that centre on preparation for work, no matter what autonomy the concept of *Beruf* conveys? Or when TVET embraces the former colonial world, its mass unemployment and its informal economies? Or at a time of climate emergency? Avis reflects on the hidden antagonisms that lie beneath many of the concepts discussed in this SI, reminding us that, just as Germany and the balance of its social forces have changed dramatically since the time of Kerschensteiner and Spranger, the world is experiencing new convulsions that undermine many of our preconceptions and claims to normativity.

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