

“You Don’t Pay Fees if There Are Relations and You Work Well.” Rural Boys’ Dependence on Migrant Networks to Train for Off-farm Work in Burkina Faso

Dorte Thorsen¹

¹University of Reading, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Reading, United Kingdom

d.thorsen@reading.ac.uk

This paper focuses on rural youth aged 14-25 years, who work in non-formal apprenticeships in rural towns in the Centre-est of Burkina Faso, in the capital Ouagadougou and in Abidjan in neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire. For youth originating in remote villages where farming is the primary source of livelihood supplemented with trading activities of limited scale, relocation is a precondition for learning skills that will enable them to move towards occupations with better prospects. School enrolment and retention remain relatively low in rural Burkina Faso and, as the provision and quality of formal education varies considerably, only few children succeed in proceeding beyond the ‘Brevet d’Études du Premier Cycle’, hence their chances of gaining formal employment are minimal. The low priority given to formal education does not mean, however, that parents or other people involved in bringing up a child are not concerned about guiding the child onto a path towards a good and secure life. Many seek to arrange apprenticeships for their children with or through close kin, or encourage youth to approach kin who are able and willing to impart technical skills. Children’s educational mobility to learn ‘modern’ skills such as mechanics, carpentry, masonry and tailoring, is thus premised on the mobility of others. Drawing on ethnographic material about child and youth migrants from the Centre-est and, in particular, interviews conducted between 2005 and 2008 with ten young male apprentices and their parents back in the village, the paper aims to explore the dynamics of this double-step mobility - of children and youth relocating to come under the guidance of established migrants - and vocational training. The analysis will address the linkages between the relationship between a child’s parents and a relative willing to take on an apprentice or finding a placement, the social position of the relative and how this may influence the quality of an apprenticeship. The motivation of children and youth to work in apprenticeships will also be discussed, as will their views on the benefits and disadvantages of vocational training. The objective of the paper is to bring to light the opportunities available to rural boys in the field of non-formal education as a contribution to the larger discussion of enhancing African youth’s employability through skills training.