2.4

INTRODUCTION TO A CAREER AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN SOCIAL WORK

Based on our own experience, theoretical concepts and other empirical research, we wished to explore the hypothesis that the year of qualification for post-graduates in Social Work is in a crisis.

The results of written questionnaires however contested this assumption. The mostly positive answers to questions on conditions, procedure and success of the qualification year were analysed to test the hypothesis. Here it was found that the degree of satisfaction of those questioned depended often on the degree of work-specific previous experience rather than on their academic records.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL PHASE FOR THE FORMING OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The way in which one embarks on a professional career after completing education sets the course for the forming of professional identity.

Firstly, this first phase of "socialisation for and through the profession" (Heinz 1995) differs from the previous education phase: whilst education puts the teaching of central concepts and issues and the learning of basic skills first, working professionally is characterised by responsible action, decision-making and concrete performance orientation. The protected area offered by education for experimenting and - initially - reflection without consequence, is faced with the demand for action in the profession, taking into consideration all imaginable consequences for the client as well as colleagues, for the employing organisation and back then to the acting person in the role of employee.

Secondly, the phase of embarking on a career is still strongly connected to the preceding educational phase. Since it offers the opportunity to practise the knowledge and capabilities gained from education, it is a test of education. Or more precisely: especially at the

beginning of professional work, the employee is "tested" to ascertain whether he/she has the necessary knowledge and skills, whether he/she is capable of putting previously acquired knowledge into practice and whether or how far he/she is prepared subsequently to fill any apparent gaps in knowledge.

Finally, and this explains the relevant term of "socialisation", in this phase new learning and experience processes are at work which will affect future professional identity. These include especially the following:

1. the expanding of professional competence - or else narrowing in the case of a specialisation;
2. the strengthening or weakening of motivation for the profession;
3. the adopting of basic work orientations in social work, i.e. a "helper" or "control" perspective (see Blinkert et al. 1976)
4. the (further) development of professional identity with distinction between own and other professional groups and in relation to own colleagues, i.e. standing;
5. (in scientifically-based professions) a scientific outlook or else the withdrawal from it sooner or later.

2. RESEARCH SUBJECT: THE YEAR OF QUALIFICATION

What is the year of qualification? Practised earlier in all, but now only in six federal states including North Rhine Westphalia, the year of qualification or professional placement describes a one-year phase at the end of degree qualification. Only after having completed this educational phase successfully under the supervision of the University is state recognition as a social worker granted - a type of professional licensing by the state. In short, the year of qualification is a hybrid: on the one hand, the graduates have employee status, if badly paid; on the other they are non-independent qualifying social workers, being supervised at work by a practice teacher and by a lecturer from the University.

I was - and am - such a supervisor. As such, I had the impression from the groups I supervised that the year of qualification is not taken seriously enough, either by the employing institutions or the practice teacher in the workplace.

3. MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH AIMS

Using a database, I aimed in my research to:
- contribute to constructive discussion with practical teachers
- initiate discussion on reform within and outside the social studies departments
- gain material to improve the situation of the qualification year workers

4. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

4.1 Theoretical and empirical considerations

Based on the individualisation theory, the manifold contradictions related to socially expected educational efforts and the resulting self-development- and autonomy aspirations on the one hand and the narrowed entries into the labour market on the other can be examined. The so-called "refeudalisation" of chances and risks on the labour market (Ulrich Beck) for example, ran parallel to a devaluation of formal educational qualifications and would produce renewed gender-specific selection and other discrimination mechanisms.

This impression seemed to be confirmed by previous empirical material on the subject: despite continuous expansion of the social sector, images of unstoppable economic pressure were evoked, influencing willingness and limiting the possibilities of providers to educate, thus encouraging increasingly selective employing strategies.

4.2 Contradictory results

My research, carried out in the form of part-standardised interviews with 67 postgraduate qualification year workers [1] and preceded by a qualitative enquiry phase led to the following, at first surprising, results:

The interviews carried out with the *supervisors* of the qualification year workers led to results which correlated with the tendencies observed in empirical literature in relation to rationalisation strategies in social work organisations, the narrow spectrum of choice of professional placements,

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[1] The research deadline was 30.8.1998, the returns quota of social workers was 46.5%, social pedagogues 42.6%. The returns were, despite being low, still representative in terms of gender distribution and of the distribution between state and voluntary institutions for both courses.

worse working conditions and stronger tendencies to exploit by the employing institutions and practice teachers.

In contrast however, the results of the interviews with *qualification year workers* themselves were surprisingly positive. They documented an overwhelming sympathy for the year of qualification experienced at every level and in almost all aspects. Apart from between 10-30% minorities with negative evaluations, there were accordingly varying but mostly positive marks for:
- the practice teachers and their competence
- dealing with - relatively few - differences of opinion
- the behaviour of colleagues
- the quality of their own learning, integration and performance results and
- the placement itself.

4.3 Explanation of positive results

These - at first surprisingly positive results - require explanation. This is to be found, apart from possible distortion factors on the technical side of the research[2], in the seemingly more favourable conditions for carrying out a placement in the Dortmund area, differing from the subjective view of teachers and students and as ascertained in other research: the labour market for social workers in the University of Dortmund area was more open to graduates than in the preceding years and than comparison research for regional labour markets had shown[3]. These favourable conditions had the effect that two thirds of the graduates made no or a maximum of three applications for positions and that nine tenths of all questioned found a position for the qualification year in their preferred field of work.

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[2] These are explained under the terms "glossing theory", (a tendency to make experience during qualification year appear more positive than in actual fact at the end of the year), "bias theory", (those with negative experiences have possibly not filled out the questionnaires) and "positive selection theory" (in the case of several practice teachers having been responsible for them, these students were asked to choose only one practice teacher as an example for the questionnaire; here we can also expect that the better would be chosen).

[3] See Maier (1995, p.206.) Rauschenbach/Schilling (1997, p.29) In contrast, the postgraduate questionnaire carried out by Dondit/Schuba (1997) in the Dept. of Social Work in the Fachhochschule Dortmund regarding the chances of entering the profession in 1995-7 also came to the positive conclusions even in comparison to earlier postgraduates of the department; 89% had found a position immediately after their qualification year and the rest during the following year (ibid, p.34)

Apart from advantageous starting conditions, for the majority a further reason for positive judgements could be that most of the qualification year workers (four-fifths) already had related work experience in their chosen placement fields. Therefore one can assume that most of the qualification year workers were motivated, qualified and suited for the chosen placements, which in its turn meant disappointment was avoided on both sides in most cases. Also, two-thirds of the interviewees were taken on by state providers, where the year of qualification's educational character was taken more seriously than by the voluntary organisations. Regarding the latter, however, a higher proportion of postgraduates here had even more work-related previous experience; they saw the positive aspect of being integrated as an additional worker and being accepted as an equal; they were more likely than those in state placements to be taken on in the same field.

5. LOOKING BEHIND THE CURTAIN: PROBLEMATIC TENDENCIES REDISCOVERED

Despite these seemingly welcome results, the examination of the hypothesis has nevertheless shed light on some critical aspects which would confirm the alleged development tendencies. We shall address these below.

5.1 Financial constraints burden education

Looking at the differences between the state and voluntary sector regarding educational needs of the qualification year workers, it must be mentioned that, although voluntary organisations in Germany have a special status, being funded up to 90% by the state and fulfilling many provision tasks on the state's behalf, in the previous years rationalisation has had an increasingly stronger influence and the introduction of free market mechanisms has led to changes and streamlining within organisations.

(1) The uneven representation of professional placements in each sector (state: two thirds, voluntary: one third) can be seen as an indication of less willingness on the part of the voluntary providers to accept qualification year workers.

(2) Work performance expectations of qualification year workers were expressed in the fact that those in voluntary organisations had more

extensive work-related knowledge at the beginning of the placement (average previous knowledge: 2.7) than the state sector's qualification year workers (average: 1.5). Consequently, the actual performance of placement workers in voluntary provision was 10% higher than that of qualification year workers in the state sector (88% to 78.5%, median: 92.5 to 80%).

(3) Instead of being relieved of other duties, most of the practice teachers in the voluntary sector had other functions as well as their own work and practice teaching tasks to fulfil. This was the case in only one-fifth of state placements. Practice teachers in the voluntary sector therefore expected the qualification year worker to reduce their own workload.

(4) In the state sector, the practice teaching function was more often described as an enriching experience by the practice teachers (49% to 20%) rather than welcoming an additional worker (10.3% to 30%).

(5) Consequently, in the state sector, qualification year workers received a systematic introduction to the work twice as often and considerably more regular reflective discussions from their practice teacher as compared to those in voluntary organisations. However, they were less frequently considered "colleagues", but rather as being "on placement".

(6) In the results, the practice teachers in the state sector had a better average evaluation regarding their teaching function and expertise than those in the voluntary sector (average marks for practice teaching: 2.1 to 2.6; on a scale for expertise ranging from -3 to +3: +1.9 state to +1.5 voluntary sector).

To sum up, it was found that rationalisation strategies at the cost of education were evident, if weaker than expected, in the voluntary sector.

5.2 The predominance of practical experience to academic education

(1)The expression of contentment with the qualification year was not in correlation with the degree of the subjective feeling of being qualified at the end of it, and this was again not in correlation with the workers' being taken on more quickly in qualified employment.

For example:

- many questioned said they had harmonious relations with their practice teachers and were content with their workplace despite deficits in the practice teaching received,

- the tendency to be employed quickly of those who avoided conflict with their practice teachers was in contrast to the degree of general professional
  qualification and vice versa,

- the percentage of women (despite worse practice teaching and working conditions) who had already been offered positions was higher than that of their male colleagues; however the estimation of their professional qualification was the other way around.

(2)A correlation between University education on the one hand and professional standing of the postgraduates on the other is not evident, but the effectiveness of the practice systems for professional qualification processes as compared to those in the University is:

- e.g., there is no correlation between degree marks and any of the above named indicators for success of the qualification year[4],

- In contrast, the subjectively achieved level of qualification at the end of the qualification year correlated strongly with the amount of work-related previous experience, e.g. practical experience in the same workfield or similar themes for degree theses,

  - Finally, from the qualitative as well as quantitative research data, it is evident that the qualification year workers would welcome even more intensified practice- related skills, as opposed to the expansion of basic academic qualifications during their studies. Considering the fact that social work education in Germany already includes up to 4 placement phases (as in Dortmund, for example), I am inclined to say that our students have got an "addiction to practice"!

6. CONCLUSION

During the 70s and partly the 80s - to the chagrin of the established "practice" - social study graduates were the main originators of new ideas and processes.[5] These days, we cannot expect any new impulses from graduate career starters unless they have been developed in the University

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[4] This is not surprising, since the degree marks in the Depts. of Social Studies have little to say about the actual knowledge acquired during studies: The calculated arithmetic mean mark of the participants in the research was 1.9 (In Germany, marks range from 1(best) to 5 (failure).

[5] See for example the research of Koch/Ohlenburg (1982) carried out under this premise and with regard to the conflict between educational institutions and social work employers.

and the students have made the best of the potential and chances their education offered.

Here we speak of the phenomenon complained of by many University lecturers that the courses of social studies are seen as "Mickey Mouse courses" or "soft options" (Maier 1995, Grohall 1997) in general, allowing part-time and module studies and still being compatible with the regular study period (see Grohall 1997, p.65).

What can be done? Evidently the departments of social studies are at a crossroads: either they give in to pressure:

- of the economic kind (students must work to finance their studies);

- of the social kind (late starters, mothers etc. who can only spare part of their time for their studies);

- and of the administrative kind (ministries and University directorates are eager to shorten the length of study time and reduce staff levels; in North Rhine Westphalia for example, the capacity regulations have reduced the amount of requirements for entry to examinations drastically.).

If the Universities give way, they should take into account that the effectiveness of education will henceforth decline, as will that of the practice.

Or else the departments of social studies use the remaining and/or new opportunities (e.g. strengthening the identity-building elements of University socialisation by means of politically sponsored quality improvement of teaching). Two somewhat disparate ideas should be mentioned here:

1. The politically sponsored schemes to improve the quality of teaching (including evaluation programmes to be carried out by lecturers, peers and students).

2. Bearing in mind my discovery that among those qualifications which most strengthened professional performance of our qualification year workers were degree theses which were related to the field of work, I would suggest an ideal social work course should include (more) exercises in *academic* work on practice-oriented questions. The University would then only do to a further degree what the University already stands for - instead of attempting to copy unreflected practice.

Also, in this way, education could contribute to the professional identity of social workers.

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