

What occupational future are we preparing youth for? The coping with discontinuous employment biographies

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While the silver bullet of the youth career assistance, the vocational training and subsequent transition into the working life, can only be warranted for a minority of disadvantaged adolescents, the majority of the persons concerned is staying in the waiting loops of the provisions for employment and phases of unemployment. Addressees and professionals are equally faced with the question, why the for more than 30 years raging youth unemployment could not be eliminated despite continuing discussions and socio-political reform intentions.

The traditional idea, that disadvantaged adolescents are the primary target population of youth career assistance, is in consideration of the economic recession invalid. In fact, the youth career assistance needs to open itself to all adolescents who in succession of the crises show difficulties in the transition from school to the vocational life.

Because of the structural unemployment and the accompanying ascending youth unemployment, new crossovers from school to the labor market need to be created, which with the help of employment and training programs enable these transitional passages.

The vocational socialization includes that the employment and training programs coordinate themselves with the formal systems of education and formation and therefore guarantee the linking-up of complementary offers for education and help (Heinz 1995). In this, by status passages and transition periods determined, (lifelong) process of (re-)integration in the gainful employment life, learning opportunities for the unemployed of are major importance. More and more adolescent vocational biographies are shaped by lasting phases of job-seeking and additional qualification. This parting of the linear normal biography requires flexibility, adaptation, mobility and coping with crises. It has to be a common goal, to offer opportunities for integration and coping strategies, which enable coping with discontinuous phases of employment in the context of a limited perspective of the future. In succession of the ascending number of adolescents with discontinuous phases of employment, a capability for subject-oriented coping with life should precede the onset of this critical phase of life (Böhnisch 2005: 1119). With this, the social pedagogical elements of the youth career assistance provide not only compensating offers, in the sense of qualification for adaptation, but become an integral component of a subject-oriented youth career assistance and for a life-world oriented social work (Thiersch 2005). The integration, appreciation and de-stigmatization of social pedagogical employment and (post-) training programs support the preventive claim of the youth career assistance, which hitherto catches the victims of segregation arising from the system in the shadow of the formal educational system.

The strongly labor market-oriented approach of the education and training system entails a widely excluding stigmatization of drop-outs of vocational trainings and unemployed adolescents with and without an education certificate. The equality of status of the offers by the youth career assistance and the formal education and formation system would counteract the stigmatization and the accompanying social exclusion. With this, it could also be achieved, that discontinuous phases of employment do not form a disadvantage for a reintegration on the labor market and therefore disadvantaged adolescents of the category "lost generation" (Peukert 1987) could find their way back to the circuit of employment.

Furthermore, the modularization of the education system (BBJ 2007: 28ff) would have a positive influence on the transition into a flexible system of vocational training regarding the validation and accreditation of constituent competences, as it was recommended by the EU-

Commission on the occasion of the European Year for life-long learning 1996, and on the occupational development of disadvantaged adolescents (European Union 1995). This would not degrade the youth career assistance to a waiting loop, but raise it to a part of the education system.

Subject-orientation and networking

Because of the broad range of offers by the youth career assistance regarding themes of discontinuous phases of employment (Lex 1997), applied methods and instruments for the coping with transition from school to the vocational life can be offered to all young adults. With this, the popular and successful concept of youth career assistance, which concentrated its work in the past on the transition phases of disadvantaged adolescents, would become an instrument of life coping in the context of passages of transition from the education respectively the vocational training system into the working life. While the youth career assistance and its offers are highly respected, disadvantaged adolescents have, facing missing appropriate jobs, almost no chance of a placement onto the first labor market. This is reflected in ascending numbers of long-term unemployed adolescents. Thus, it is of major importance for the future, that employment opportunities for disadvantaged adolescents are developed, which meet their profile of qualification. According to that, new subject-oriented structures of transition and possibilities of access need to be created within the scope of the youth career assistance.

The integration of separate stakeholders and the transition to flexible offers are, in consideration of the precarious situation on the labor market, of major importance for the new direction of youth career assistance. Facing a society which is shaped by the dissolution of standard employment relationships, social work needs to provide network oriented offers for help. With this, social economics move toward the focus of the public discussion of the solution of the blatant employment situation of unemployed adolescents. This is partly caused by the recommendations of the European Union.

Competence orientation and capability

In contrary to the deficit-orientated approach of the promotion of the socially disadvantaged, the concept of competence orientates itself on the resources or rather on the capacities of the persons concerned. Coping competence requires an accord between self (identity) and social status, despite an ascending fragmentation of employment biographies. Thus coping competence is based on a lifelong process of identity development and the compatibility of discontinuous vitas. Furthermore, this biographic process requires a capacity to act and an experience of efficacy regarding the conduct of one's own life (Grundmann 2008).

The structural change of the working society and the existing societal challenges force the adolescents with professional qualification and experience into major occupational flexibility and adaptation efforts in a largely uncertain labor market situation (Krafeld 2008).

The coping with unemployment and reoccurring phases of transition requires situation-oriented competences. Because of the dynamic of the concept of competence the importance of the coping competence is located above the popular concept of "employability" (Kraus, 2006). While the improvement of the employability constitutes an adaptation-oriented, labor market-focused concept, the concept of competence goes beyond the mere goal-oriented usage of abilities and skills and locates itself in an enduring capability to resolve fragmented employment biographies.

In this context, competence orientation and capability to act include the participation of adolescents and the disposition of choices to unfold potentials (Bonvin/Farvaque 2003).

Coping competence and capability

As an alternative to the human capitalistic model of employability, the capability approach by the English economy philosopher and Nobel prize laureate Amartya Sen, not only focuses on

the usability of resources and abilities regarding a usage-oriented application on the labor market (Sen 2000: 348 ff; Dean et al.: 5ff). Sen extends the approach of usage maximization, “rational choice”, (Rawls 2009; Sen 200: 339; Sen 2003: 19; Nussbaum 2001: 88ff), by trusting in, besides the individual thinking of advantage, the societal sense of responsibility of all individuals. The realization of individual goals requires societal access (“process aspect of freedom”) and equal opportunities (“opportunity aspect of freedom”), which enable options for freedom of choice (Sen 2003: 5; Sen 2000: 28f). “Sen’s primary use in the notion of capability is to indicate a space within which comparisons of quality of life (...) are most fruitfully made. Instead of asking about people’s satisfactions or how much in the way of resources they are able to command, we ask, instead, about what they are actually able to do or to be” (Nussbaum 2001: 12).

By this definition, poverty, unemployment and social disadvantages are not reduced to a lacking access to income, but are a consequence of a lack of freedom. In the sense of the availability of access and ability to trade, this freedom is defined as “capability” (Sen 2000).

This is not only a theory of distributive justice, which compromises the access to goods like living space, nutrition, education, work, health care or access to culture. In fact, the approach discusses, if on the societal macro level, all humans are provided with the material, institutional and societal premises, which enable a successful life (Otto/Ziegler 2008: 9ff). Based on this model, Martha Nussbaum developed a catalogue with criteria, which includes ten items (Nussbaum 2001: 77ff). “Most importantly, Sen has never made a list of the central capabilities” (Nussbaum 1999: 86). This “list of capabilities” presents a catalogue of claims, or rather, a test catalogue, to capacitate all citizens to a self-determined, good life (Nussbaum 1999: 86). This capability to a good life (Grundmann 2008: 132) is the core of the “capability approach”.

In the consequent application of this concept, all job seekers have to be offered jobs, or rather employment, in order to assure their existence.

With the concept of enduring capability to act, as well as distributive and participative justice, the developmental potential of adolescents opens itself (Bonvin/Farvaque 2003). Following this, the biographical failure of young adults moves out of the context of stigmatization of a selective education system and the responsibility for biographical failure, ascribed to the adolescents.

According to the coping concept by Lazarus (Lazarus 2006: 101ff), adolescents have to be empowered to (re)produce their sense of self-efficacy and to feel themselves as actors of their own biographies. Following this model, phases of unemployment are seen as a crisis, which may cause psychological and physiological destabilization, social isolation delinquency and disintegration (Hurrelmann 1989; 13ff; Kieselbach/Wacker 1991). The coping with discontinuous life courses is still determined by the social background. While the occupational perspective of the middle and upper class presents itself as well as never before, the chances for integration of adolescents without academic background continue to deteriorate despite intense promotion of the disadvantaged as well as enduring school reforms. This “growing social injustice (...) and the consolidation in culturally marginal milieus” (Nolte 2006: 148) shapes the conditions of socialization of disadvantaged adolescents. The coping with this situation requires, that the persons concerned pick up themes of coping with critical life situations within the scope of social pedagogical work or rather in the course of interventions of the youth career assistance and that the isolated, young adults on retreat are capacitated to act within the scope of the offered actions and the social companionship.

In consideration of the continuing strong fixation on a regular employment, the implementation of this concept turns out to be difficult. For disadvantaged adolescents, the desire for a permanent employment und the accompanying status is of major importance.

Even though the structural unemployment and the impact of the economic crisis strongly constrain the chances of employment for disadvantaged adolescents, the pursuit of recognition through employment is undiminished strong. The transition from the second to the first labor market is also constrained by the fact, that the second labor market is seen as second-rate by the adolescent participants as well. This hierarchy causes that the participants in the initiatives for employment attribute the label of inferiority to themselves or rather incorporate it into their self-concept (Hurrelmann 1989). This negative identification impairs the self-confidence and the coping competence. The feeling of the participants to not get out of the initiatives of employment anymore and therefore to not get back to the first labor market, leads to resignation and constrains their capacity to act. A valorization of the social or rather solidary economy as well as an equality of status between the first and second labor market can promote, that the transition between the two systems becomes easier, due to the potentials of the participants regarding their qualification and capability. In addition to that, the initiatives for employment should offer long-term employment and qualification opportunities, allow for an occupational, financial and social stabilization of the participants and strengthen the self-determination ability. (Bonvin/Farvaque 2003: 16).

The isolation of work and income present another debate, which, as an alternative to regular employment, allows for an identity creating employment in the honorary or public office (Gorz 2000: 113ff). This freedom of choice of a meaningful employment "Capability for work" (Bonvin 2007) is also part of the "Capability Approach" (Sen 2000: 342) illustrated above.

Furthermore, an enduring and low-threshold social mentoring have to be warranted. An important indicator for the success of employment and training programs is the linking-up of structures and the coordination of the social pedagogical offers with the employment promoting structure of the employment office. Local networks for employment serve as the coordination of complementary offers and enable a subject-oriented, enduring development, qualification and employment.

Conclusion

The utilization of social resources and the strengthening of self-confidence promote a proactive handling with unemployment. Efforts for coping with unemployment should be geared to the individual resources of the persons concerned. Furthermore, the support systems, that is counseling centers, employment offices, as well as employment and qualification institutions should not only concentrate on compensating support efforts, but ensure the capability to act of the individual to cope with discontinuous biographies. Therefore the societal framework has to be optimized and the general access to education and meaningful employment for a successful life needs to be warranted.

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