Social Work Practice and Hegemony in the German School to Work Transition System

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1   Introduction to the German educational structure from school to work

The genealogical side of analysis, by way of contrast, deals with series of effective formation of discourse: it attempts to grasp it in its power of affirmation, by which I do not mean a power opposed to that negation, but the power of constitution a domain of objects.

Michel Foucault

School to work transition in Germany is institutionalised by two thresholds: the first is school to vocational education, and the second vocational educational to employment. This research project focuses on the first threshold, that is, vocational education under the university system. As a backdrop to the study, it is necessary to understand the German school system which qualifying degrees are obtained and access to vocational education is acquired. In Germany there are three main kinds of general schools and accompanying qualifications:

1. Basic Secondary School (Hauptschule) leads to the Certificate of Compulsory Education (*Hauptschulabschluss*) after five years (nine including primary school). This track typically prepares young people for vocational education. In most cases students complete secondary school by age 15.

2. Middle Secondary School (Realschule) provides a Certificate of higher status after six years (ten in total), with approximate age of completion by 16 years of age.

3. Grammer School (Gymnasium) provides a qualification (Abitur) giving access to higher education after nine (thirteen in total) years. This diploma from German secondary school allows for university admission or matriculation and the university-entrance diploma (*Abitur*) prepares young people for university education. This is complete by 18 or 19 years.

Primary education in Germany lasts for four years (from 6 to 9 years). After these four years the teachers have to separate the students into three kinds of secondary education outlined above. The issue here is an early selection is made according to a hierarchical system of secondary education:

In the German education system, the transition from the primary to one of the lower secondary school types constitutes an area where marked social disparities are evident. Few people only make amendments to a decision for transition by transferring to another school type later their lives (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2008b: 15).

After the school degree, vocational education is the expected path. Vocational training in Germany is traditionally organized in the Dual System.

The Dual System offers training in two settings: the enterprise and the vocational school. Apprenticeship contracts are made between young people and companies thus giving them access to the social insurance system and assuring an apprenticeship wage. Federal regulations define and set the standards of the 355 recognised trades. The Dual System is renowned for its high quality vocational training and has in the past virtually guaranteed successful labour market integration (Walther et al. 2004: unpaginated).

In recent years, the dual system has, for various reasons, come under considerable pressure. Many companies have opted out of the formal dual system introducing flexibility in available training options. According to Walther et al. (2004: unpaginated), many young people are channelled into 'second choice compensatory training measures' and as many as 20% drop out of apprenticeships in the first six months. While the bulk of jobs (70%) is provided by the services sector, only 35% of training places come from this sector. Many young people find that they do not like the profession they have chosen and 43% of former apprentices who complete their vocational training do not end up in the occupation for which they have trained resulting in serious mismatches between training and employment. Only 40% of women and 40% of young people with a migrant background enter the post-school vocational education system, with most young women opting for school-based training courses. There are also regional variations (Walther et al 2004: unpaginated).

According to *Life Situations in Germany,* the German Federal Government's 3rd Report on Poverty and Wealth:

Unemployment has gone down markedly since 2006. The increase in gainful employment benefits both the group of long-term unemployed persons and the – partially overlapping – groups of *young people*, older people and foreigners as well as the recipients of benefits under Book Two/Book Three of the social Code (SGB II/SGB III) and people with disabilities (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2010: vi).

This statement ignores the fact that so-called 'youth in the transition system' are ignored in official statistics. Many young people become trapped in the transition system and this pattern is set early on by the highly structured nature of the German schooling system, where parents and teachers have to make decisions about educational pathways at various crucial points that determine the path they will take from school to vocational education and from vocational education to employment (Walther et al. 2004: unpaginated.). On leaving school, young people enter a dual – or two-tier - vocational education system: vocational training followed by nearly 60% of young people and the higher level of full-time vocational schooling for professions in the health and care sectors, followed by nearly 20% of young people (Walther et al. 2004: unpaginated). The so-called 'dual system' of vocational education refers to the possible settings in which vocational education is provided: the enterprise (apprenticeships in 355 recognised trades) or vocational school, both of which lead to a recognised qualification at the diploma or degree level of skilled workers. This system of vocational education offers high quality education and most young people coming through this dual system achieve labour market integration (Walther et al. 2004: unpaginated).

The so called `transition system` aims to improve the individual skills of young people to take up vocational training or employment (Baethge, 2010: 53). It is a separate system. In most

cases, vocational training and placement depends primarily on the school degree. The transition system, described below, arises from the differentiation and segmentation of general school education and vocational training in Germany (cf. Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2008: 153).

2 The German transition system or 'welcome to the jungle'

The transition system is based on a variety of measures and schemes for young people who have not yet entered regular training or are unemployed. The establishment of the transition system in Germany goes back to the 1960s, when specific measures were developed for vocational and employment training. At that time, these policies concerned only a limited proportion of school leavers (between 7% and 12%). Since 2000, nearly 40% of all school leavers go into the transition system (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2006: 80).

Almost 80% of school leavers without the Certificate of Compulsory Education; over 50% of school leavers with the Certificate of Compulsory Education; and 28,2% of school levers with the Middle Secondary degree are in the transition system (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2008: 80). All of these categories of young people do not get captured in unemployment statistics and show that the transition system in German vocational training occupies a very central role. Diverse measures have been designed for those school leavers from general school education who cannot immediately enter a fully qualifying vocational training path. The structure of the transition system is divided into several areas:

1. School-based training courses (*Berufsfachschulen*) to get a (higher) degree.

2. State-funded pre-vocational and pre-employment promotion.

3. (*Berufs[ausbildungs]vorbereitende Bildungsmaßnahmen*).

4. Year of pre-vocational preparation (*Berufsgrundschuljahr*).

5. School-based pre-vocational year (*Berufsvorbereitungsjahr*)

6. Introductory qualifications for vocational training (*Einstiegsqualifizierung*)

This institutional heterogeneity means that the different types of measures follow different types of controlling and organisational principles. For example, the school-based training courses are regulated by the sixteen German state laws, and the state-funded pre-vocational and pre-employment promotion is regulated by the German law for employment promotion (Book Two/Book Three of the social Code [SGB II/SGB III]):

On the one hand, the transition system records drop-outs while on the other hand, some of its students transfer from [one] measure to the next. Only one third of the largest group of students in the transition system, that is youth with or without the secondary general certificate only, manage to obtain a fully qualifying training placement within 18 months. The rate goes up to 50% after 30 months after leaving school (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2008b: 17).

In reality, 50% of young people are still in the transition system 30 months after leaving school.

3 State-funded pre-vocational and pre-employment promotion

Just over 20% of young people are in state-funded pre-vocational and pre-employment training (Baethge, 2010:55). This measure is fixed in the third book of social codes (SGB III). The target group for this specific measure are young people under 25, without a vocational education, that have completed their compulsory school attendance but do not yet have the maturity and necessary qualifications for a working life. In 2004, with the influence of `politics of behaviour` (Ziegler 2008) and activation policies[1] (Kessl 2005), the measure was restructured into four levels, each of which is controlled or determined by an educational or vocational counsellor (*Bildungsbegleiter*).

1. Test of clients` acceptability (*Eignungsanalyse*)

2. Basic level (*Grundstufe*)

3. Advanced level (*Förderstufe*)

4. Transition qualification (*Übergangsqualifizierung*) (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2009).

3.1 Test of clients' acceptability

Since the 2004 restructuring, the test of clients' acceptability has been seen as the central precondition of the measure. The main goal of this test is a 'realistic' assessment of the young person's strengths and weaknesses *vis a vis* labour market needs to identify reasons why he or she is having difficulties achieving labour market integration. The test of maturity for working and vocational life (*Kriterienkatalog für Ausbildungsreife*) examines the following criteria:

1. Basic academic skills, such as spelling, reading ability, and mathematical knowledge.

2. Psychological factors, such as level of attention, logical reasoning, and speed of operation.

3. Physical abilities

4. Work-related psychological factors, such as ability to communicate and deal with conflict, reliability, and punctuality.

5. Level of maturity relating to occupational choice (*Berufswahlreife*), such as self-knowledge, competence, and awareness of labour market needs.

Tests of acceptability rely on three kinds of diagnostic procedure: Biographic, action-oriented, and occupational, and also include systematic behaviour observation. Hence these tests can take up to four weeks whereafter the vocational counsellor constructs an intervention (*Bildungsbegleiter*) based on the qualification level that the young person can realistically attain in terms of the assessment test outlined above:

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[1] Butterwege et al. (2008: 184) speaks in this context of the `social investment state` which is a constitutive part of Giddens` (1998) `third way` that was promoted by New Labour in the UK under Blair´s government.

1. *Basic level* is built on the test of the acceptability with the goal of developing and consolidating personal skills and abilities, and motivating the young person to pursue further vocational training (*berufliche Ausbildung*) or work. The main focus is the young person's orientation to and choice of an occupation (*Berufswahl/-orientierung*). This process can take up to six months.

2. *Advanced level* aims to improve individual professional or occupational skills to prepare the young person for vocational training. The process can take up to 10 months.

3. *Transition qualification* is for young people who have decided which occupation they would like to pursue and to enable them to receive the qualification needed for work in their chosen area. The goal is the improvement of occupational competence, especially through the attainment of the correct occupational qualification for the job.

3.2   Basic level

This level is built on the diagnosis or assessment of acceptability and has the goal to develop and consolidate personal skills and abilities. Another goal is the motivation of the clients for further vocational training (berufliche Ausbildung) or employment. The main part of this level is the orientation and choice for an occupation (Berufswahl/-orientierung). The maximum duration, including the assessment, is six months.

3.3   Advanced level

The aim is to improve individual professional skills, which prepare for a vocation or for any kind of employment (without a vocation). The main aim of this advanced level grade is the development of occupational skills. The maximum duration depends on individual qualification needs. But the grade ends if the client in the transition qualification gets a job The total duration of the measure is ten month.

3.4   Transition qualification

This qualification is for young people who have decided which kind of vocation or employment option they would like to pursue. This group does not get a vocational qualification, because there is still no consensus between labour market needs and the personal profile of applicants. To participate in the transition qualification the client has to have met the test of acceptability for the target vocation or job. The goal is the improvement of professional and occupational competence, especially by occupational qualifications. The qualification must be aligned to the targeted vocation or employment.

3.5   Vocational or educational counselling (Bildungsbegleiter)

The goal of the vocational counsellor is to successfully integrate the young person into the labour market. Priority tasks in this process include the following:

1. Draw up a qualification plan in consultation with the participant and experts of the measure.

2. Set target agreements with the participant.

3. Check or control the passing of the qualification.

4. Respond in an appropriate form to deviations

5. Acquire a suitable employment position to place the young person in the labour market.

6. Document the integration success

The development and promotion of soft skills or basic life competencies focuses on the whole personality and are important in preparing young people for labour market requirements. These include:

1. *Personality competencies*, such as motivation, productivity, efficiency, and self-perception.

2. *Social competencies*, such as teamwork, empathy, and communication skills.

3. *Technical competencies*, such as problem solving and job-related skills

4. *Practical competencies,* such as dealing with money, personal self-care, self-image, and recreational activity to achieve work-life balance.

5. *Intercultural competencies*: Understanding, tolerance of, and dealing with other cultures.

6. *IT and media competencies*, including computer and communication skills.

Having described the research context, the discussion now turns to the research questions and aims.

4   Research questions and research goals

A significant problem within this transition system – and with the specific measure of state-funded pre-vocational and pre-employment promotion – is that (social) workers tend to reproduce the tendency towards disengagement: they often underestimate the qualifications and experiences of participants and ascribe motivational problems as individual shortcomings (Walther et al. 2004: unpaginated.). The assumption is that the `politics of behaviour` (Ziegler 2008) and activation policies (Kessl 2005) – and the categorisations and classifications on which they are built – have an influence on the thoughts and ideas of social workers vis a vis clients. They create a hegemony through which their worldview and the order of things will be generalised (Demirovic 2008: 17). The enforcement of the hegemony depends on its recognition and acceptance by social workers and clients. Hence this study concerns the roles that social workers play in the German school to work transition system. To address this question requires knowledge of social workers´ understanding of broader political context in which school to work programs are situated. The main research question, therefore, is why do social workers accept the existing categorisations of clients within the school to work transition system? Is it because they agree with the categorisations or because they are compelled to conform to the policy that determines them? By beginning with social workers´s perceptions and experiences or working within the school to work transition system, it might be possible to develop further understanding of the problems the policy seeks to address and to draw conclusions as to its effectiveness in addressing that problem.

Social policies and social programs, like the school to work transition system, are built on certain understanding of social reality and interpretations of social problems, often discernible in the language used (Krasmann 2003: 71-77). Rather than see the problem of youth unemployment as a broader structural problem, the school to work transition system tends to problematise young people's behaviour which is why professional social workers are called to deal with them on case-by-case. This study will conduct an analysis of the practice of professional social workers in relation to the political program of school to work transition system as a field of topics (Kessl 2005:127ff.) to be decoded. These fields of topics are fields of regularities of ways of thinking at a certain historical-specific time. This means that they will not be analysed by timeless principles and rules but in terms of ways of thinking or thematisations or, Laclau/Mouffe´s (2006: 112), they nodal points within fields of topics. These nodal points make the structure of regularities comprehensible or subsumable and their surface describable. The deconstruction of discourses aims to show how new reconstructed thematisations come to unseat and replace the dominant thematisations. Unlike Foucault´s concept of gouvernementalité, the focus is not on how the machinations of state regulate social workers but how social workers as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1983) reinterpret and use policy for the benefit of their clients. The focus is on the structuring action of the social workers who participate in this process based on the idea that:

Truth is not outside of power or itself lacking in power….Truth is of this world; it is the product of multiple constraints….Each society has its own regime of truth, its general politics of the truth….There is a combat for the truth, or at least around the truth, as long as we understand by the truth not those true things which waiting to be discovered but rather the ensemble of rules according to which we distinguish the true from the false, and attach special effects of power to "the truth." (Michel Foucault, cited by Dreyfus et al. 1983: 117).

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