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COMMENTARY

Good Counsellors are Made, Not Born

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Dear readers,

It is almost a platitude nowadays that the world of work and occupations is constantly changing. For the individual, opportunities and risks are hard to calculate. This heightens the need for information and counselling. This becomes apparent above all at the interfaces, during transitions within the education system, when it comes to the recognition of school leaving certificates, when entering a profession and generally at times of crisis and change in one's occupational biography. With a view to individual development as well as to the optimization of resource deployment, these changes should be as smooth and purposeful as possible.

Many Models – Not Much System

Educational counselling is a public service, that is, the counsellors are accountable to the public. Such counselling must be open to all those interested as a normal part of life-long learning and must have professional support ready for those seeking advice. This was already pointed out by the German Education Council more than thirty years ago. However, the reality of educational counselling is still a long way from meeting that target. We know little about educational counselling, the occasions for it, the processes and instruments involved and the motivation of those seeking advice. There is not much transparency regarding provider structures, regarding the qualifications the counsellors have and how they upgrade their skills. The quality of counselling – its impact and the level of satisfaction of the recipients – is also to a large extent unclear. All this is in no small measure the consequence of the unclarified role of counselling in the public education sphere.

The forms and contexts of counselling differ widely. It receives both private and public funding. In part it is a statutory task, as in the case of the training counselling provided by the relevant

authorities or the vocational counselling provided by the Federal Employment Agency. Participation is mostly voluntary, but in some cases it is mandatory. It is mandatory when public resources are used to finance continuing education and training, for example in the case of continuing education and training under Social Code III, the use of education bonuses or the use of education checks.

Counselling is offered as a service by institutions specializing in that service, so it is generally provider-neutral. But it is also often rendered by the education providers themselves, in which case it serves as a marketing instrument at the same time. Counsellors sometimes work on a volunteer basis – for example in the function of apprentices' supervisors – and often in projects of limited duration. Transparency, continuity and professionalism can hardly be guaranteed under such conditions.

The diversity of the funding landscape could be interpreted as the expression of a differentiated counselling system reacting to differing needs. But then the opportunities provided would have to be related to one another and cross-linked with one another to a greater extent or there would have to be agreement on common guidelines and working principles. But for the most part that is not the case.

Professionalism and Professionalisation

Anyone who goes for educational counselling – of any kind – is entitled to professional service. Counselling must be competent, that is, the counsellors have to know all about the subject they are giving advice on. They have to be in a position to provide access to sources, have relevant information on hand and make it usable for the addressee.

There is much more to professional educational counselling than just information about educational opportunities. That could be obtained just as easily from brochures or databases. What is relevant for decisions that will have far-reaching consequences for one's whole biography is case-oriented counselling about the utilization of qualifications in the labour market, about job requirements and individual career opportunities, about prerequisites for examinations and matters of funding. Another increasingly relevant question concerns the extent to which vocational competencies – whether they have been acquired in formal, non-formal or informal contexts – can be put to use in continuing education courses or when returning to one's occupation or transferring to a different occupation. Professional counselling means that the person seeking advice and the specialized counsellor find a solution to a problem together in a prolonged process. Counselling thus becomes a discursive and reflective process. The involvement of the person seeking advice is just as important for its success as the competence of the person providing it, who should

possess a high degree of sensitivity, the ability to engage in dialogue, creativeness and reflectiveness.

A basic course of study, not necessarily specific to counselling situations, would seem to be a prerequisite for practicing the profession. But that is hardly enough to cover the complex profile of requirements. Continuing vocational education and training is just as important as work experience in the relevant labour market segments. Special continuing education and training courses in which counsellors are specifically prepared for their tasks or assisted in performing them are rare. Much is left to chance and the individual initiative. There is a need for systematic continuing education and training. A graduated initial and continuing education and training concept (cf. SCHIERSMANN/WEBER in this volume) is a step in that direction.

Expansion and Perpetuation of Structures

The counselling landscape being as heterogeneous as it is, the task of dovetailing the services offered presents itself. An important, indeed crucial role in building up a country-wide counselling infrastructure independent of supporting institutions falls to the vocational counselling service of the Federal Employment Agency. The advantages are its country-wide presence, the long years of experience of its counsellors and its access to the vocational information centres. However, vocational counselling has lost some of its significance in the course of the so-called Hartz reforms. Human resources were redeployed in favour of placement; the differences in organizational models in regional labour market policy were not exactly conducive to quality assurance and professionalisation either. Users complain about long waits for counselling appointments, too little time for individual counselling and insufficient responsiveness to individual cases. The BA's new counselling concept (cf. RÜBNER in this volume) promises a quality enhancement.

In the spirit of a contribution to life-long learning, vocational counselling must be transformed from an institution for informing and counselling young people looking for an initial course of training or a first job into one that provides comprehensive information about training and careers, continuing education and (occupational) learning. At the same time, this should be coupled with a reorientation in terms of content, training for counselling staff and quality assurance. These, however, are benefits that cannot be reconciled with the insurance principle. A legal opinion by DURNER/FASSBENDER rightly calls for counselling tasks of the Federal Employment Agency to be made autonomous and for counselling services to be funded by the taxpayer.[1] This conclusion is inescapable for anyone who wants to turn (occupational) counselling into a professional institution that accompanies and supports working, living and learning processes.

[1] The legal opinion was commissioned by the Deutscher Verband für Bildungs- und Berufsberatung e. V. (dvb) and can be accessed through the association's website.

Marketing Counselling Services More Aggressively

It is often said that counselling should be open to all those interested. Opportunities should therefore be easily accessible. That is easy to demand but hard to realize, especially in rural regions and for people from less educated family backgrounds. Yet precisely such outreach counselling could break down barriers and activate latent interest.

In addition to the classical person-to-person counselling, new forms will need to be developed and tested. Examples from other countries, such as the telephone vocational and educational counselling tested in Great Britain (cf. KÄPPLINGER in this volume) could constitute new pathways. Such models need to be screened and tested for portability. Generally speaking, it would be reasonable to make much more intensive use of the Internet. Continuing education and training databases could be provided with elaborate search strategies and knowledge management systems. In that way, education and training opportunity queries could be flanked, for example, with background information on occupations and labour markets, possibilities of exploitation and earnings structures (cf. MAIER and KANELUTTI in this volume).

Counselling agencies should also pursue more active marketing of their own services. There is too much that is still blooming in the shadows. To attract customers, one has to approach potential users, present one's services more actively, and not wait until a customer knocks at the door one day and asks for an appointment.