

## **Establishing Caseness, Institutional Selves and “realistic perspectives” - A German Case Study on the Transition from School to Work**

*Jan Düker and Thomas Ley, Bielefeld University, Faculty of Educational Science, Germany*

### **1 Setting the Scene**

We start with a short framing of the current situation in the vocational training sector and the educational system in Germany, which are the main contexts determining the position of and conditions for vulnerable youth in the transition from school to work. We contend that the current situation is characterised by three main problems: (a) The basis of the German transition sector, the general four-tier school system<sup>1</sup>, has been repeatedly criticised for the early selection for secondary schools and the resulting lack of equal opportunities. As a consequence, social inequalities are not compensated but reinforced in educational and vocational settings (cf. for example Solga/Rosina 2009). (b) In the annual national reports, an “extended“ definition of supply and demand on the vocational training market is advocated, which includes not only unplaced applicants but also young people who have started an alternative to an apprenticeship (e.g. vocational preparation measures, work experience etc.) but are still looking for placement in vocational training. In 2009, the ratio has been 89.9 apprenticeship training positions for 100 applicants (cf. BMBF 2010). Thus, there is a lack of 200.000 training positions in Germany (Solga 2011a). Furthermore, according to a ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court from 1980, the constitutional right to free choice of employment is only guaranteed as of a ratio of 112.5 vocational training places per 100 applicants (cf. BVerfGE 55, 274). We argue that this constitutes a systematic injustice, the causes of which are to be found in the structure of the transition sector. This injustice severely limits the possible effects of institutional and pedagogical efforts. (c) Furthermore, disadvantaged youths in particular are facing an increased risk of unemployment and poverty in later life (Solga 2011b). This is why Heike Solga coins the term of „certificate poverty“, where young people not exceeding a graduate in lower secondary education are in a vulnerable position as well as those 15% of young adults who can not obtain a training position in the course of their transition process (cf. Solga 2011b: 415).

These three aspects – inequality in the school system, insufficient training positions on the apprenticeship market and the aspect of “certificate poverty” – are not only characteristic for the situation (and the expansion) of the transition sector, they are relevant to all efforts within this context. Again, the question arises if the established institutions and organisations reproduce inequalities rather than reducing them.

---

<sup>1</sup> The school system is usually differentiated into Hauptschule (lower secondary school), Realschule (secondary school) and Gymnasium (grammar school). In addition, about 7.5% of young people do not manage to get any lower secondary school certificate (“early school leavers“), and 54.5.% of those come from schools for special needs (Förderschule, not exceeding lower secondary school). This is also one of the reasons why Gomolla and Radtke talk about a four-tier system and highlight the “institutional discrimination” of this type of school (2007).

From the perspective of the Capability Approach, these structural contexts are most important in terms of the real opportunities they provide or withhold. In the following, we want to advocate an understanding of inequalities that does not only focus on the allocation of material goods and the classification of status hierarchies. Inequalities are not only relevant in respect to unequal resources and commodities, but are to be understood as constraints and enablements of the life young people want to realise and of having access to objects, relationships and practices they appreciate and have reason to value. Insofar, poverty is not merely understood as material poverty, but as the absence of capabilities (cf. Otto/Scherr/Ziegler 2010: 150). In this perspective, educational interventions into the life conduct of individuals are relevant to questions of inequality and vulnerability and thus to social justice.

Capabilities - in this case study - are regarded as a relational concept, that is a concept that has to be explored 'between structure and agency', as real opportunities and the dispositions to make use of them to be able to realise one's concerns are both preconditions for capabilities. The realisation of what one reasonably values is always bound to the social context people find themselves in. However, before the process of realising valued beings and doings, aspirations are formed and institutions enable or prevent the creation of spaces where such realisation might occur. Hence, we scrutinised the context in which capabilities might be realised, based on the assumption that institutions in the transition from school to work should act as enabling structures. This also means that capabilities 'themselves' were not identified in the course of the research. Our perspective is on 'talk', not on 'action' and we took a retrospective (ex-post) perspective so that decisions in action could not be grasped.

Furthermore, it turned out that sometimes it is hard for young adults to reflect on what they value, on their social positioning as the major predictor of life chances and especially on the desirability of different options which are all essential preconditions for moving beyond functionings, that is valuable beings and doings that are already realised, and towards capabilities, that is the enhancement of options for a flourishing life that might be chosen by the individual. Major reasons for this barrier to the enhancement of capabilities could be found in the almost exclusive focus of the institution – contrary to its conceptual underpinning – on the functioning for work (in terms of the labour market). On the other hand, this hints at the basic question of agency in the Capability Approach, which is still in need of more clarification. In this respect, we want to emphasise the concept of institutional selves, which could be a contribution to embedding the concepts of agency into the Capability Approach. Agency should not just be regarded as a 'rational choice' to be taken by individuals who are on a level playing field. Rather, the different individual preconditions for being able to reasonably choose and the provided 'pedagogical space' need to be taken into account, that is a space in which aspirations and desires are reflected upon and formed.

After illustrating some empirical findings from the case study, we tackle the question of how capabilities for work, education and voice can be formulated as an evaluative framework and as goals for interventions in the transition sector.

## **2 Research methods & main research questions**

The research was designed to answer the question of what kind of (pedagogical) space was provided by the institution and the social work professionals by employing expert interviews. Document analysis was applied in order to provide contextual knowledge and embed the programme into social policy agendas. Secondly, it aimed at capturing a subjective account on the formation of aspirations (interviews with young people). In this article, we want to

especially focus on the expert interviews, which see the interviewees as representing a specific field of knowledge. Thus, the professionals are the 'hinge' connecting policy and practice as they have to 'translate' objectives of social policy to the lives of individuals and interpret what they could mean with regard to specific cases.

In our broader case study (for details see Düker/Ley 2012) we focused on a 'Local Transition Management Institution' (LTMI) in a middle-sized Western German town which serves as a single point of contact ('one-stop-shop') for young people with 'difficulties' in the transition from school to work. The LTMI's two basic aims are firstly the creation of a coherent local structure of support, and secondly the constant and conceptually coherent guidance and individual counselling of young people in their transition process. In the following, we want to focus on one specific programme situated in this LTMI, namely the 'Competence Agencies'. We contend that the concept of transition management and this programme represents one main strand of policy answers to youth unemployment and is characteristic for newer ways of dealing with this social problem in the German transition regime in that it is committed to 'steering from a distance'; both with respect to the local transition sector (similar to the idea of 'care management' in health services) as well as with respect to the individual case, implying an emphasis on personal responsibility and a 'pedagogisation' of social services.

Focusing on this programme, several (basic) research questions can be specified: (a) How is the current policy context translated into institutional settings? What kind of social policy space is created for and through these institutions? (b) Which pedagogical space is constituted in these programmes? How is 'caseness' established<sup>2</sup>, maintained and transformed? (c) Who is addressed in which manner? What can be said, what is (not) problematised? (d) How are counselling settings arranged and intentions, aims and goals (i.e. integration into the labour market) of counselling (institutionally) processed and (interactively) negotiated?

### **3 No youth left behind? – Embedding Competence Agencies into the social policy agenda**

By choosing the Competence Agency and situating it within a socio-political context derived from theoretical analysis, one constructs a case study in a specific way (rather than 'finding' it as a readymade entity). This process of case construction and modelling the object of research is especially important in our study as it aims to say something about current social policy that influences and is reproduced through pedagogical practices.

Competence Agencies target young people under the age of 25. Established in 2002 as a pilot project, there are now over 180 of such agencies in Germany. They are financed by the European Social Fund through the Federal Government, but are locally adapted to the situation in every municipality and integrated into the local transition management institution(s). The Competence Agencies are clearly oriented towards the rationale behind child and youth welfare services incorporating modern social work methods, mainly case management. This rationale includes forming a 'working alliance', which is based on the agreement between social worker and client about goal and counselling tasks of the intervention and explicitly includes the personal bond that develops between them.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Establishing caseness' refers to a concept (mainly derived from conversation analysis) that in social work interactions available information about the client is matched with the institutional options and in consequence a subject with its own life story and specific problems is transformed into a case, which can then be worked on (White 1999).

Competence Agencies are supposed to be a 'guide' through the transition sector (with its many commercial, half-commercial and non-commercial actors) for young people.

According to the Federal Ministry, the mission statement of Competence agencies is to:

*"...support particularly disadvantaged young people in finding their way into an occupation and into society. They offer help for those who cannot - or cannot anymore - be reached through the existing system of interventions for the transition from school to work. Contact persons locate young people and jointly agree on an individual support and qualification plan. The social worker then guides the realisation of these plans. They accompany the young people on a long-term basis and involve their families and personal context. (...) The goal is to enable them to lead an independent life" (BMFSFJ 2012, transl.).*

Competence Agencies combine streetwork and networking processes to gain access to young people with providing long-term support and counselling on their work orientation and transition into work. They act as guides through competence testing, case management and counselling. Many concepts of these agencies point out that this provides an opportunity to tailor interventions towards individuals, instead of trying to fit young people into pre-existing interventions. This is facilitated through contracts that are supposedly voluntary, with the Competence Agencies "offering help" and young people themselves taking the lead. Furthermore, their "families and personal context" are involved, so it seems not just to be about labour market related skills, but life conduct in general. Therefore, young people aged 15 to 25 who are ascribed multiple problems have to align their life plans, aspirations and desires to their transition into the labour market. Competence agencies seek to regulate and support this transition, mainly through case management and counselling.

As a federal guideline puts it, case management should be about "individual career and life planning leading to labour market integration through comprehensible steps." This also implies that, although the measures should be tailor-made, the goal is the 'primary' labour market. Further on, the concept points out:

*"Competence Agencies target especially disadvantaged young people who 'got lost' after school on the way to their vocation and who can hardly be reached by the different social support systems, viz. (vocational) school education, active labour market programmes and communal youth welfare." (BMFSFJ 2012, transl.)*

On this conceptual level it becomes obvious that a clear notion of a defensive social policy is put forth, addressing the danger of young people getting lost or being unprovided for ("Down, but not out"). This on the one hand reflects the idea of "no youth left behind" (quite similar to the idea of "no child left behind" in North American or "every child matters" in European child welfare; i.e. Garrett 2009). On the other hand, the idea (and sometimes myth) of a pedagogical feasibility to solve these (structural) problems on the individual level is purported. In this context, the issue of 'certificate poverty' plays a major role for the Competence Agencies: They are not meant to be an intervention themselves, but steer cases from a distance and network existing measures. As a consequence, formal qualifications cannot be obtained, which severely limits their scope of agency in terms of labour market integration – although it is not clear how adequate jobs could suddenly be created and made available to young people even if they had higher qualifications. The lack of formal qualifications and hence concentration on the more pedagogical (people changing) aspects of interventions is a major feature of most measures in the transition sector.

The risk of young people 'getting lost' is one of the dominant problematisations in this context legitimising the intervention on a social policy level. Accordingly, case management in the Competence Agency is also mandated to monitor the structural demand for transitional measures on a municipal level and establish new interventions if necessary. 'Getting lost' can thus be seen as a complex and demanding problematisation social work has to react to.

As also stated in the concept, this programme aims to "empower young people for an independent conduct of life" which does not directly and at any cost lead to a school qualification or vocational training. Here, a clear notion of pedagogical premises and an explicit 'life-first approach' – in contrast to a purely labour market-oriented 'work-first approach' – are advocated. Nevertheless, in the expert interviews, the (bureaucratic) diagnostic terms of a "lack of apprenticeship entry maturity" or "multiple placement handicaps" are often emphasised and the professionals turn to a clear notion of integration into the labour market (which points to a work-first approach). The "lack of apprenticeship entry maturity" or the "multiple placement handicaps" are based on ascriptions from the perspective of the labour market, leading to a reappraisal of the dynamic correlation of ascription and personal growth. As was also stated in the expert interviews, this programme is not meant to be general life coaching, but remains job oriented counselling. Insofar, this programme is neither fully driven by a life-first nor a work-first approach. Furthermore, the question has to be raised whether and how the balance between a work-first and life-first approach is held in individual counselling. As in our opinion the conceptual relationship between these two is crucial for the question of how capability enhancement is supported by the institution, we will elaborate on this in more detail in the following chapter.

#### **4 Empirical Findings**

The empirical findings are condensed into three aspects: Beginning with the questions of which pedagogical space is constituted and how caseness is established, maintained and transformed (4.1), the issues of identity work and institutional selves within these programmes are pointed out (4.2). Finally, the handling and negotiation of "realistic perspectives" is a crucial point within this work and a link between the institutional and individual levels (4.3).

##### **4.1 Establishing, transforming and maintaining the case: Which pedagogical space is constituted in these programmes?**

According to Yeheskel Hasenfeld's organisational theory (1983), three modes of technologies in human service organisations can be distinguished: a) people processing, b) people sustaining and c) people changing technologies. People processing technologies attempt to confer a social label or public status on clients. The core technology of people-processing organisations "consists of a set of boundary roles which define the input of clients to the organization and mediate their placement in various external units" (Hasenfeld 1983: 256). People sustaining technologies attempt to prevent or retard deterioration in the personal welfare or well-being of clients; an example is the use of income maintenance programmes by municipal social services. Lastly, people changing technologies aim directly to alter clients' personal attributes to improve their opportunities and well being. These technologies include, for instance, psychotherapy or pedagogical and social work interventions.

Although these three dimensions cannot be exclusively assigned to specific organisations – rather, they converge in every social institution – the predominant working mode of the Competence Agency is people processing. In their own conception they call themselves "pilots or guides through the widespread transition system". After the assessment, the process

of people changing is transferred to an intervention that is usually at the same time pedagogical and labour market oriented. The further development of the case is then monitored and evaluated by the case manager, who comes in again if modifications or changes in other programmes are needed.

When taking a closer look at people processing in the Competence Agency, it can be divided into the aspects of establishing, maintaining and transforming the case. Pedagogical aims are embedded into these processes to varying degrees such that Hasenfelds aforementioned 'technology' of people processing is not merely bureaucratic treatment, but always includes the reference to young adults' aspirations, desires and preferences. Hence, people processing is not a technology in the sense of a predetermined programme, but part of a negotiated order constituting a 'pedagogical space' in which young people themselves take part in constructing and managing their case.

Each of the social workers has about 100 cases in their databank, of which 40 are active cases and 15-20 cases demand more intensive attention (weekly contact). People processing starts with securing access to hard-to-reach young people based on an initially unspecified "need for help":

*„there are enough of those without support still scurrying about in X-town who would never go somewhere of their own accord and say help, I need help” (Marie, 72-74).<sup>3</sup>*

After reaching them, they are offered long-term support (up to three years or even more) and counselling. A support plan is set up that regulates rights and responsibilities of all parties. This support plan encompasses more than work-oriented goals which is also crucial for the legitimization of the Competence Agency as a whole:

*„just to show everyone that we do good and successful work (hm) which cannot be evaluated simply through successful placement statistics (yes yes), success means something different for us ( yes) [laughing] (Björn, 1356-1368).*

Here, a demarcation is jointly drawn by interviewee and interviewer which creates a distance from societal demands and problematisations, namely the political fixation on placement figures. These are not completely rejected as indicators of successful work, but rather are relegated to the background and are not seen as the primary goal of the Competence Agency.

Bernd Dollinger offers a theoretical perspective on this common way of constructing cases in social work: „Social-pedagogical action entrenches in its clients the idea of a general legitimacy of the social order by pedagogically translating and flexibilising regulations and behavioural imperatives of superordinate institutions” (Dollinger 2011: 232, transl.). For the social workers, this translation and flexibilisation is a central characteristic of their work:

*„Interviewer: So, this was also my impression that you are really pedagogically-minded, in a positive sense of course (laughing), so to speak...*

---

<sup>3</sup> The interview partners are anonymised, the audio recording of the interviews have been transcribed, line numbered and translated into English by the authors; interviewers' interjections are shown in brackets.

*Marie: That is indeed the case and the project Competence Agency really works pedagogically in contrast to the other colleagues, because they do a more pure counselling presenting facts. Of course they also look at what fits, but we also do this social-pedagogical work which is also important because if you do not solve the problem of the youngster somehow, you cannot look towards a job, an apprenticeship or whatever, that just doesn't work, their head is always full of other things" (Marie, 659-670).*

In this longer quote, the self-conception of the Competence Agency is presented in a nutshell: It is about more than placement figures, namely about pedagogical relationship building in addition to the more prosaic, issue-oriented 'pure' vocational counselling. This perspective includes solving young people's problems in terms of life conduct, but at the same time, wage labour and apprenticeships remain the backdrop to this work on the individuals life conduct. To this end the "social-pedagogical work (...) is also important".

Taking a closer look at the case work itself, this professional demonstrates (when asked for a typical counselling process) an idea of people processing with its dimensions of establishing and processing caseness.

*„ok in the first counselling session, at least this is the way I do it, mostly I look at, it's like somebody is sent because of a recommendation by someone or he already knows us and somebody comes and makes an appointment. Well, and then in principle the first counselling session is a bit about clearly determining what happened up to this point, and what brought this about and what does the adolescent want ehm what are his ideas and then I already end the first meeting" (Peter, 797-803).*

First of all, this description begins with the constitution and establishment of the emerging case. The reason for their presence is clarified - mostly, the person is known and referred by other actors in the wider social support system -, first information is gathered and the case trajectory is reconstructed, notably including failures and breakdowns within the transition process. Within the next counselling interviews, a formalised case management logic emerges, characterised by a detailed anamnesis, a self-assessment by the young people complemented by an assessment by others and a process of care planning.

In respect to maintaining the case, "stabilisation" is seen as a central pedagogical aim in the Competence Agency.

*The young adults just had extremely bad school experiences and it is difficult to lead them back and as I said before, stabilisation is the first thing that has to happen. They have to learn to be punctual in the morning, to appear there at eight, half past eight and to sit through a whole day, which they all don't manage (Marie 229-232).*

The issue of 'stabilising' their clients in the long run in terms of minor virtues (such as punctuality, reliability, discipline) points to a general problem that makes the 'working alliance' between client and social worker fragile: Its primary limit is the motivation of the young people, which is often emphasised as the basic condition of working with them (lack of motivation might also be a legitimisation for cutting social benefits).

*„then you know it reaches the point where you say, ok, then ehm I unfortunately can't work with you, because it's always a mutual thing and I simply want that you come along in the*

*process and at some point in time you have to say, eh, the adolescent does not want to be counselled by me anymore, the case is being closed for now" (Björn, 941-946).*

Although support by the Competence Agency is voluntary, understanding the relevance of the need for help is a necessary condition. "Troubled selves" have to be constructed, processible problems have to be identified and "untroubled selves" have to be opposed as an ideal type (Gubrium/Holstein 2000, see below).

Young people, as has become a very popular reading of modernity (for a scientific account of this argument see for example Beck 1992), have to shape their own biographies, which means they have to independently develop aspirations and life plans and take responsibility for their realisation. Doing the right thing and being the right person out of one's own volition is the most important aspect of being an 'untroubled self' and a central precondition for the identification of capabilities. A 'pedagogical space' precisely consists in eliciting these volitions:

*„I always try to give the young people the feeling they can decide for themselves and it only works like this, if I would just present them with something and say 'You have to do this', that doesn't work" (Marie, 989-932).*

It is noteworthy however that this is not only an ethical argument in the sense of not forcing anyone to live a life they do not want to live. Rather, voluntariness also has a functional dimension: Orienting and regulating young people's transitions demands their cooperation and compliance, otherwise it "doesn't work" – at least young people should have the *feeling* that they are making their own decision.

Counselling with its principles of voluntariness and respect for the autonomy of the consulter works on the knowledge young people have about themselves. To this end, knowledge producing methods are applied such as the obligatory competence testing at the first meeting. This is pedagogical knowledge as it is not merely about facts about the outside world, but about what the subject should know about itself to be able to act accordingly. The results of such testing are in turn processed pedagogically, as knowledge which can not be standardised and applied technologically, but is used for reflection on life plans and aspirations:

*"or they have completed a longer internship and so on, and it is clear for him what he wants to do, then I don't need a Geva-test<sup>4</sup>. If he says to me I tried this and this, it works, then it's ok, but it [testing, T.L./J.D.] is the thing to do if it is afloat" (Björn, 1254-1258).*

Testing is only necessary if „it“ is „afloat“, that is if everything is unsure and young people's ideas about what to do with their life are imprecise. At the same time, it is always the institution that decides which wishes, plans and aspirations are to be worked on. The participatory dimension is central for this way of governing young peoples' lives: As Stefanie Duttweiler (2007: 269) has pointed out with regard to the ideal of counselling, it would be irrational to not align one's actions to knowledge that has been produced in a voluntary and open-ended discourse.

As could be shown so far, institutional and professional processes precede and frame the space for biographical reflexivity of the young adults as well as their aspirations within the

---

<sup>4</sup> The 'Geva-test' is a standardised instrument for testing vocational aspirations and skills.



counselling setting. However, as could also be seen, constructing the case in a pedagogical intervention indispensably includes the construction of the client and the production of pedagogical knowledge to this end. In the following chapter, we want to go deeper into this issue while at the same time retaining the institutional perspective.

#### **4.2 Institutional Selves – Who is addressed in which manner?**

The Capability Approach focuses on the possibilities of individuals to realise what they reasonably value. Accordingly, institutions of social work are ideally designed to offer a framework in which young adults can orient themselves in terms of forming and critically reflecting their conception of the 'good life' (practical reasoning) and where they can 'translate' their concerns, aspirations, desires and needs into 'realistic life plans' and concrete steps and actions. The concept of biographical reflexivity seems to be adequate in this context, where the genesis of the individual biography and subjectivity are seen as a starting point for pedagogical interventions (cf. e.g. Alheit 1995 for a theoretical grounding, Schneider/Rieder 2011 for a practical application). Nevertheless, the question must be raised whether and how institutions provide space where reflexivity within the pedagogical relation is enabled or constrained.

In this respect, the concept of 'institutional selves' seems to be helpful (cf. Gubrium/Holstein 2001, Koch 2010). It is defined as an interactionist concept of identity work. Institutional selves are therefore alternative identity formations and meaningful life stories offered by social work institutions. These narratives orient professionals as to which kind of life conduct should be accomplished through social work interventions. For the clients, they are not direct instructions of what to do, but enable young people to make sense of their situation and prepare them for a certain kind of conduct associated with these identities and life stories. Within this concept, 'troubled' and 'untroubled selves' are essential parts of identity work. In social work settings, a troubled self (i.e. disadvantaged youths with missing competencies, lacking 'apprenticeship entry maturity' or having 'placement obstacles') has to be identified and constructed, on the other hand a – positive and socially accepted - untroubled self has to be juxtaposed (i.e. one able to pursue a gainful occupation and/or a job seeker with 'realistic perspectives'). If a young adult has certain job prospects which seem to be unrealistic and not accomplishable in the view of the counsellor, this is seen as an occasion for working on problematic preferences. The young adult has to revise his or her primary aspirations to commit to the proposed identity formation. Here, interventions are seen as necessary to bring the young adult to reason and to make clear that his or her attitudes are (socially) problematic. This makes attitudes the legitimate object of institutional work. Insofar it is a characteristic of pedagogical fields to attribute and label persons with a deficit that can be removed through learning processes. With this addressing of the person and the following identity work, new and specific options (of people processing and changing) are evoked.

In the context of taming aspirations, another basic problem in the view of the social workers is young people's unidimensional fixation on a specific aim like a school leaving certificate, an apprenticeship or gainful employment:

*„that is a very very rigid systematic, systemic perspective somehow, right, it works like this and not any other way and [bang] and then one has to crack that open, these thought patterns which many of them have internalised (hm), through school and also through their parents” (Björn, 771-774).*

This citation emphasises the ambivalence of counselling within the transition process. "Nonproductive" aims and perspectives (here the fixation on specific aims) have to be broken up. New forms of reflexivity have to be anchored ("cracking thought patterns") and therefore, new possible courses of action can be established to accomplish what young people "really need" and even "desire". These new orientations mostly involve less pay and recognition, hence the young people need to be 'cooled down' to become an untroubled self, which very often takes the form of confronting them with 'reality' (see 4.3):

*„as I said before, at first you have to the basis, and then of course to jointly work on the self-conception of the individual, meaning which conceptions has the, does the person develop himself and then to link this to reality (hm) is it feasible (hm) that is to say to always clarify that is, a lot of things are feasible but not everything can be realised immediately, meaning to clarify the process again and again, (yes yes) that it needs a certain period of time to get there" (Peter, 840-847).*

This idea of "jointly working on the self conception" points to the relevant aspect of oscillating between a troubled and an untroubled self. However, constructing troubled selves can be problematic when the "link to reality" and the existing resources and commodities ("is it feasible") are seen as indissoluble and thus the client has to be adapted to the current opportunities instead of widening their possibilities.

By utilising the concept of constructing and handling (un)troubled selves, we do not mean to portray the case work done in the Competence Agency as being totalitarian and a deformation of subjectivity. Indeed, the construction of a troubled self and a deficit oriented perspective are indispensable for social work to legitimise interventions into the life conduct of individuals, but the professional task to reflect on these labelling processes and the underlying mechanism of social inequality needs to be institutionally embedded into everyday practice.

#### **4.3 The handling and negotiation of "realistic perspectives" – Regulating aspirations?**

Essential for the constitution and processing of caseness and the working on 'institutional selves' is that life plans, concerns and aspirations are matching with or can be connected to the demand of the local transition sector. This is reflected in the topic of 'realistic perspectives'. Within the interviews, experts often describe young people as:

*evaluating themselves in an "unrealistic" manner (Björn, 872),*

*as being "unrealistic because they don't have any idea of the demands in the working world" (Peter, 534f.),*

*having an "unrealistic conception of the labour market" (Björn, 922f.)*

*"and one has to see, what is fitting to the youth and what is realistic" (Marie, 1275f.)*

These 'realistic perspectives' are adaptable to many dispositions exhibited by young people, as in the perspective of the social workers, it is not them who morally demand a change of attitudes and behaviour, but reality itself demands these changes, which can hardly be argued with. They are also multi-faceted as they have to be aligned to the self-concept and to the demands of the apprenticeship and labour market.

The code of 'realistic perspectives' can be read in two directions: in a positive version as the creation and support of a biographical reflexivity - or in CA terms as a condition for practical reasoning. In a negative reading it could be seen as a form of adaptive preferences (Steckmann 2008).<sup>5</sup>

In a negative interpretation, individual reflexivity is transformed through institutional practices with the aim of aligning individual aspirations with institutional demands. In this respect, aspirations and opportunities are curtailed by the adaptation to circumstances. This can be considered as the problem of "adaptive preferences". As Otto/Ziegler (2006: 276) declare: "The problem of adaptive preferences points to the insight that people tend to adapt to circumstances which may be 'objectively' unfavourable [...], because people's desires and preferences respond to their beliefs about norms and about their own opportunities. Thus, people usually 'adjust their desires to reflect the level of their available possibilities' (Nussbaum 1999, 11). As David Swartz (2000: 103) puts it, the adaptive internalisation 'tends to shape individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated. Chances of success or failure are internalized and then transformed into individual aspirations or expectations; these are then in turn externalized in action that tends to reproduce the objective structure of life chances.'" In this sense, unobtainable aims are excluded from the horizon of aspirations (see also Steckmann 2008).

As adaptation of ones' preferences to prevailing circumstances is inevitable (unless 'pure', inborn aspirations, desires and preferences are presupposed), they might legitimate inequalities and suffering and potentially provoke passive suffering and a further curtailment of the capacity to act.

Nevertheless and despite the aforementioned aspects, there is a positive reading of 'realistic perspectives', which can be defined as necessary biographical reflexivity or in terms of the Capability Approach as "practical reasoning" (Nussbaum 2001: 42): "Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life." This entails "protection for liberty of conscience" and the negotiation of pedagogical aims and interventions. Corresponding to this, the CA emphasises the relevance of the "informational basis of judgements of justice" (IBJJ), which is in large part negotiated in counselling processes. The IBJJ is defined as "the set of information that will be considered as relevant when assessing a person, be it a worker, a welfare recipient or any other member of society. The IBJJ constitutes the yardstick against which people, their behaviours, wishes, beliefs, etc. are assessed and considered as legitimate or illegitimate. In the capability approach perspective, the selection of the informational basis should not be the prerogative of the government, public administration, experts, managers or shareholders" (Bonvin 2012: 12).

## **5 Reframing the case study through the three relevant capabilities**

The aforementioned analysis already gives an indication of the conditions for what could be understood as capabilities in this particular context. Within this chapter, we examine three

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, a reference to the concept of 'cooling out' is useful as well (cf. Goffman 1952, concerning the transition from school to work: Scherr 1997: 164ff; Walther/Walter/Pohl 2007). Within a "process of redefining the self" (Goffman 1952: 5), it has remarkable consequences for the client (called "the mark" by Goffman). "For the mark, cooling represents a process of adjustment to an impossible situation – a situation arising from having defined himself in a way which the social facts come to contradict. The mark must therefore be supplied with a new set of apologies for himself, a new framework in which to see himself and judge himself. A process of redefining the self along defensible lines must be instigated and carried along; since the mark himself is frequently in too weakened a condition to do this, the cooler must initially do it for him" (ibid. 5).

capabilities: (1) the capability for work, (2) education and (3) voice and thus reframe the empirical findings in the terms of the CA.

### **5.1 Capability for work**

If we follow Martha Nussbaums reasoning, it is a governmental responsibility to secure the opportunity to live a dignified and flourishing life for all citizens. Everyone should among other things be provided with "Control over one's environment". This capability includes: "having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others ... in work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers" (Nussbaum 2001: 42). Therefore, "the main objective of public action in the field of welfare should not be to put people back to work at all costs (i.e. a functioning), but to enhance their real freedom of choice with regard to the labour market." (Bonvin 2009: 2) In our view two points have to be emphasised when looking at the dimension of work.

#### **(a) The dilemma of orientation within the employment-centred transition sector**

The flexibilisation and erosion of traditional employment structures is currently turning discontinuous employment histories as well as temporary and precarious employment situations into those fragments from which subjects are confusingly forced to derive some sense of "security". This construction process of generating a sense of self-confidence or security is made even more difficult by material and social inequalities and deprivation. The "dilemma of orientation" as described by Michael Galuske (1993) refers to the crisis of the promise of realisable lives and life plans, as held out by the model of normal employment, which are to ensure social and cultural participation. The dilemma of youth vocational counselling services refers to the (homeo)static 'standardised pattern' of a continuous employment history, which however corresponds to an ever diminishing degree to the real freedoms and possibilities in the life worlds of youths. To put it differently: the prospects of permanent employment or secure transition from school to the labour market as promised at present are illusory. Galuske contends that the labour-market-oriented youth vocational counselling services have to face the end of the full-employment society, creating apparently insoluble dilemmas. In addition, because of its institutionalised fixation on the labour market, it wastes the chance to establish individualised learning settings within the framework of projects that promote the development of young people and make it possible for them to lead sufficiently self-determined private and vocational lives.

#### **(b) The unanswered question of what "good" work means on all levels**

Within all interviews with stakeholders, professionals and clients, we asked for their idea of "good and meaningful work". Mainly, the response was silence, irritation, perplexity or just a questioning look. This circumstance indicates that a normative orientation - and institutional reflection on what 'good work' should and could be - is missing within the transitional sector. It shows that placement is the overriding concern and ideas of and aspirations for valuable work are not developed. The aforementioned normative yardstick of the Capability Approach in terms of work could provide an appropriate orientation in this context.

### **5.2 Capability for education**

Even though the emphasis on education as an end in itself has been stated many times by scholars working in the framework of the Capability Approach, a sharp definition of the capability for education is hard to find. The conceptually important difference between

capabilities and functionings is stressed throughout, placing the essential weight on each individual's "freedom to choose one kind of life rather than another". "However, the ability to exercise freedom may, to a considerable extent, be directly dependent on the education we have received, and thus the development of the educational sector may have a foundational connection with the capability-based approach." (Sen 1989: 55) Therefore, in the words of Melanie Walker: "A just education would promote a good life constituted by what is reflectively good and valuable to individuals and communities" (Walker 2010: 913). In our view, two points have to be emphasised when looking at the dimension of education:

### **The inequality of the educational system and the aspect of "certificate poverty"**

This case study concerns interventions on a municipality level that promise to prepare youngsters whose educational achievements in compulsory school are regarded as not sufficient and who have no upper secondary graduation that would grant them access to further education. Even preconditions for a graduation seem to be lacking in the eyes of providers and policy consultants. In this view, the youth in question have all "lost their track" in the transition from school to further education or work. In that sense, not very surprisingly, we find inequalities in the capability for *formal education* (cf. the statistical data of the two chosen measures mentioned in chapter 1) as discussed via the question of "certificate poverty". The question is whether this structural problem of unequal distribution of educational capabilities should be compensated at this later stage or rather be avoided at earlier stages of the educational path, providing in Walkers (2010) terms "a just education"? This could also mean to level differences in outcome in terms of status position (income and recognition) based on educational achievement, that is to equalise the remuneration of jobs that are socially deemed valuable.

### **Practical reasoning and biographical reflexivity**

The second notion is the aspect of capability for education as "Bildung". A precondition for processes of Bildung is to create a context for and stimulation of practical reasoning and the enabling of biographical reflexivity. "*Bildung* points to a way of integrating knowledge and expertise with moral and aesthetic concerns. (...) It entails openness to difference and a willingness to self-correct. *Bildung*, in the classic sense, thus also contains a projective anticipation of the 'good life', of human freedom enacted with responsibility for self and others in the open-ended project of self-creation." (Bleicher 2006, S. 365) The identification of these processes of Bildung would have demanded a vastly enlarged research design. Curiously however, the stimulation of practical reasoning and the enabling of biographical reflexivity could not be found as a goal of the working alliance, neither in the expert interviews nor in the interviews with the young people themselves. This is striking as conceptually, these processes seemed to be of major importance.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Rather, processes of 'Bildung' in the sense of cultural self-formation were to be found in the way young people interpreted and dealt with the institutions they faced. Often, they exhibited a clear understanding of the problems and dilemmas of the interventions described above, nevertheless rationally trying to make the most of their situation. This mainly involved questions of remuneration and strategies to prevent interventions into their life conduct which they deemed to be too intrusive, thus widening their understanding of the world and adjusting their actions to retain or augment their agency.

### **5.3 Capability for voice**

The concept of “capability for voice” designates the real freedom to voice one’s opinion and to make it count within the public policy process on the one hand and social work practice on the other hand. “It implies that he/she can choose between either loyalty to the collective prescriptions or norms, or voice in order to contest or negotiate the content of such prescriptions without being subject to heavy sanctions, or exit so as to be able to escape these collective norms at an affordable cost (e.g. by refusing to take up a badly remunerated job without having to abide by excessive financial penalties imposed by the unemployment insurance)” (Bonvin 2009: 12). According to Hans-Uwe Otto and Holger Ziegler, this implies “the creation of places where individuals get the opportunity in public and social work action to express their own opinion, as well as the creation of a space for the ‘meta-capability’ of reflection [...]. This ‘meta-capability’ can be referred to the ability and opportunity to “form a conception of the good” (Nussbaum 2000: 79). It is also a basic precondition for processes of generating informed and considered decisions that matter to plan and shape one’s life” (2006). In our view, two points have to be emphasised when looking at the dimension of voice:

#### **Participation and managerialism**

Participation is a longstanding issue in social work, which is often related to the (broad and often proclaimed) concepts of citizenship and the democratisation of social work practice (i.e. Arnstein’s ladder of participation, cf. Schnurr 2001). But this process of democratisation is even more important when looking at the dominant practices of managerialism which implement formalised measuring tools meant to capture the quality of the pedagogical work that is done and enforce the processing of (un)troubled selves. As participation is necessarily an open-ended process and standardisation implies prefixed ends, managerialism is inherently hostile towards participation. Participation has to be implemented as a permanent phenomenon, so that in each step of the support process the client can choose between exit, voice and loyalty.

The question is whether young adults have the capability for voice in these arrangements. As shown before, referring to young people’s aspirations is central to the Competence Agency. However, the restrictions of the available opportunities severely delimit what can be the object of negotiations and thus voice. The case study unveils that young people in these institutions often need to learn to adapt to the de facto possibilities on the job market and, more frequently, in the transition sector. Thus, loyalty seems to be the most plausible option, as the price for exit is relatively high and the voicing of one’s concerns remains without consequences. In effect, participation is not fully realisable considering the whole support process. Furthermore, these restrictions are often anticipated by the young people leading to an adaptation of their aspirations and curtailing the number and quality of concerns that could be voiced, leading to the issue of a sense of constraint.

#### **Sense of entitlement or sense of constraint?**

Voice is enhanced by something Annette Lareau (2003) defines in her study ‘Unequal Childhoods’ as a „sense of entitlement“ (which especially shows in middle and upper class kids) on the basis of Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of field and capital. It is a self-conscious expectance of young people that institutions and their agents respond to their own desires, needs and expectations. Lareau opposes a „sense of constraint“, which is typical for underclass youth (and our target group as well). They are not seeing themselves in the position of demanding anything and remain sceptical and doubtful towards agents of social

institutions. Furthermore, they tend to comply with the decisions and actions of these authority figures and do not expect that their needs and requirements are a legitimate basis for social work interventions. According to the concept of a 'capacity to aspire' (cf. Appadurai 2004) this points to the pivotal role aspirations and the exercising of voice play with respect to social and public issues. Concerning disadvantaged groups, there is a need of strengthening the capability for voice "to debate, contest, and oppose vital directions for collective social life" (ibid.: 66).

As the trends in unemployment and transitional regimes reveal, we are in urgent need of a justice based analysis of the transition from school to work in a comparative European perspective, such as strategies for strengthening the capabilities of young people to actively shape their personal and working lives in societies and become capable of tackling the economic, cultural, demographic and technological challenges of today.

To sum up briefly, if institutions in the transitional sector are to enhance capabilities, they need to take seriously their pedagogical task of creating a space where young people can reflect on their concerns and enter an open-ended process of grappling with the realities of the labour market. At the same time, structural conditions have to be set up that make opportunities to function in the desired ways (as a 'productive worker' and as a citizen) a real possibility. This demands first and foremost the democratisation of processes in the transition sector so as to avoid cooling out mechanisms and open pedagogical spaces in which the realisation of young people's reasonable concerns can become the paramount aim.

On a societal level, a further fundamental question has to be raised: Is the (German) transition sector an institution of social mobility or is it merely about class-based allocation to status positions through pedagogical means (down, but not out)? Are young people provided with real opportunities and a perspective for a good life? If valuable options and choices are effectively missing, the processual dimension of freedom within public and social work action turns out to be a chimera.

## References

**Alheit, P. (1995):** Biographizität als Lernpotential. Konzeptionelle Überlegungen zum biographischen Ansatz in der Erwachsenenbildung. In: Krüger, H.-H./ Marotzki, W. (eds.): Erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, pp. 276 – 307.

**Appadurai, A. (2004):** The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. In: Rao, V./Walton, M. (eds.): Culture and Public Action. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 59-84.

**Beck, U. (1992):** Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. London: Sage.

**Bleicher, J. (2006):** Bildung. In: Theory, Culture & Society, 23 (2-3), pp. 364 – 365.

**BMBF (2010):** Berufsbildungsbericht. Bonn/Berlin

**BMFSFJ (2012):** Das Programm Kompetenzagenturen. [http://www.kompetenzagenturen.de/das\\_programm\\_kompetenzagenturen/](http://www.kompetenzagenturen.de/das_programm_kompetenzagenturen/) [05.04.2012]

**Bonvin, J.-M. (2009):** Der Capability Ansatz und sein Beitrag für die Analyse gegenwärtiger Sozialpolitik. In: Soziale Passagen, 1 (1), pp. 8 - 22.

**Bonvin, J.-M. (2012):** Individual working lives and collective action. An introduction to capability for work and capability for voice. In: Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 18 (1), pp. 9 -18.

**Düker, J.; Ley, T. (2012):** The German Case Study. In WorkAble – Making capabilities work (ed.). Final report Work Package 4 URL: [www.worable-eu.org](http://www.worable-eu.org).

**Dollinger, B. (2011):** Die politische Identität der Sozialpädagogik. Bruchstücke einer herrschaftstheoretischen Reformulierung. In: Neue Praxis, 41 (3), pp. 228 – 242.

**Duttweiler, S. (2007):** Beratung als Ort neoliberaler Subjektivierung. In: Anhorn, Roland./ Bettinger, F./ Stehr, J. (Hg.): Foucaults Machtanalytik und Soziale Arbeit. Wiesbaden: VS, pp. 261 – 275.

**Galuske, M. (1993):** Das Orientierungsdilemma. Jugendberufshilfe, sozialpädagogische Selbstvergewisserung und die modernisierte Arbeitsgesellschaft, Bielefeld: KT-Verlag.

**Garrett, P.M. (2009):** Transforming children's services? social work, neoliberalism and the 'modern' world. Open University Press, Maidenhead.

**Gubrium, J. F.; Holstein, J. A. (2000):** Institutional selves. Troubled identities in a postmodern world. New York, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

**Goffman, E. (1952):** On Cooling the Mark Out. Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure. In: Psychiatry: Journal of Interpersonal Relations, 15 (4), pp. 451-463.

**Gomolla, M.; Radtke, F.-O. (2007):** Institutionelle Diskriminierung. Wiesbaden: VS.

**Hasenfeld, Y. (1983):** Human Service Organizations, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

**Koch, M. (2010):** „Pioniere einer neuen Zeit“? Identitätskonstruktionen in einem Integrationsprojekt der Sozialhilfe. In: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie, 36 (3), pp. 431-449.

**Lareau, A. (2003):** Unequal childhoods. Class, race, and family life. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Nussbaum, M. C. (2001):** Humanities & human capabilities. In: Liberal Education, 87 (3), Washington, pp. 38-45

**Otto, H.-U., Scherr, A., Ziegler, H. (2010):** Wieviel und welche Normativität benötigt die Soziale Arbeit? Befähigungsgerechtigkeit als Maßstab sozialarbeiterischer Kritik. In: Neue Praxis, 40 (2), pp. 137-163.

**Otto, H.-U.; Ziegler, H. (2006):** Capabilities and Education. In: Social Work and Society 4(2), pp. 269 – 287.

**Scherr, A. (1997):** Subjektorientierte Jugendarbeit. Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen emanzipatorischer Jugendpädagogik. Weinheim [u.a.]: Juventa.

**Schneider, K., Rieder, F. (2011):** myPROfile - Leitfaden zur biographischen Reflexion. Luxemburg: Inter-Actions FORWARD.

**Schnurr, S. (2001):** Partizipation, in: Otto, H.-U.; Thiersch, H. (Hg.): Handbuch Sozialarbeit / Sozialpädagogik, Luchterhand: Neuwied, pp. 1330-1345.

**Sen, A. (1989):** Development as capabilities expansion. Journal of Development Planning, 19. pp. 41-58.

Solga, H., Rosine, D. (2009): Soziale Ungleichheiten in schulischer und außerschulischer Bildung – Stand der Forschung und Forschungsbedarf. Arbeitspapier der Hans-Böckler-Stiftung Nr. 171. Düsseldorf. [http://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p\\_arbp\\_171.pdf](http://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_arbp_171.pdf) [14.03.2011]

**Solga, H. (2011a):** "Viele Jugendliche drehen Schleifen". In: Die Tageszeitung - taz, 16.11.2011, <http://www.taz.de/!82006/> [18.11.2011]

**Solga, H. (2011b):** Bildungsarmut und Ausbildungslosigkeit in der Bildungs- und Wissensgesellschaft. In: Becker, R. (eds.): Lehrbuch der Bildungssoziologie. VS, pp. 411 - 448.

**Steckmann, U. (2008):** Autonomie, Adaptivität und das Paternalismusproblem – Perspektiven des Capability Approach. In: Otto, H.-U., Ziegler, H. (eds.): Capabilities – Handlungsbefähigung und Verwirklichungsschnacchen in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Wiesbaden: VS, pp. 90-115.



**Walker, M. (2010):** Critical Capability Pedagogies and University Education. In: Educational Philosophy and Theory, 42 (8), pp. 898 - 917.

**Walther, A.; Walter, S.; Pohl, A. (2007):** "Du wirst echt in eine Schublade gesteckt ..." Junge Frauen und Männer im Übergangssystem zwischen Wahlbiografie und Cooling-Out. In: Stauber, B.; Pohl, A.; Walther, A. (eds.): Subjektorientierte Übergangsforschung. Rekonstruktion und Unterstützung biografischer Übergänge junger Erwachsener. Weinheim/München: Beltz, pp. 97-127.

**White, S. (1999):** Examining the artfulness of "risk talk". In: Jokinen, A.; Juhila, K.; Pösö, T. (eds.): Constructing Social Work Practices. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 87-102.

**Author's Address:**

Jan Düker / Thomas Ley  
Bielefeld University  
Faculty for Educational Science, Center of Social Service Studies  
P.O. Box 100131  
D-33501 Bielefeld  
Germany  
Tel: ++49 521 106 3324 / ++49 521 106 3322  
Email: [jan.dueker@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:jan.dueker@uni-bielefeld.de) / [thomas.ley@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:thomas.ley@uni-bielefeld.de)