

Balancing Instrumental, Biographic and Social Competencies: Enhancing the Participation of Young Adults in Economic and Social Processes

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The research has been commissioned by the European Commission (fourth framework - targeted socio-economic research) to a collaborative of six universities/research centres. It is a two year project which will end in September 2000. The objective of the project is to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the potentialities and limitations of current approaches to post school education and training for unemployed young adults in six European countries. It juxtaposes the espoused theories aims and assumptions about "education and training effectiveness" of those who are responsible for educational programmes with the different ways in which their choices, practices and messages are being understood and negotiated in the life-world of the learners. Its methodology is situated within a framework of assumptions about research quality, ethics and rigour that combines features of collaborative action inquiry and participatory research, with narrative and case study research.

By the time of the conference presentation, two case studies will be finished in each participating country. In these case studies, significant themes have been identified and explored, using the second case to deepen and widen insights that were gained in the first. The first case study related to so-called mainstream projects where the researchers expected to find an emphasis on the training of instrumental competencies. The second case study was executed in so-called alternative projects where a more balanced integration of instrumental, social and biographical competencies was assumed. The results we present here, in this paper, relate mainly to the first case study. At the occasion of the conference, we will be able to say more about the findings of the second case study. The findings will be presented with reference to six themes which will eventually also organise the report to the European Commission at the end of the research project.

Balancing Competencies: Revising the Assumptions

With respect to the triangle of instrumental, biographical, and social competencies, we distinguished between mainstream and alternative cases. Mainstream was supposed to be guided by an "instrumental view", whereas alternative was expected to be guided by a "holistic view" on competence building. Yet, the data of the mainstream case showed that the three competencies distinguished were all present in the education and training programmes across countries. Even mainstream education appeared to be permeated by a "humanistic" approach incorporating client-centeredness, individual counselling and guidance, and attention paid to social and in some cases even biographical competencies. These observations in their turn led to attempts to reconceptualise what guidance, education and training for the unemployed nowadays is about. A promising distinction which has to be elaborated further is the distinction between strategies of adaptation, insertion, and connection.

Experience of Agency: The Undercurrent of Motivation

Those young adults who succeeded in continuing a programme in a meaningful way could, in broad terms, be characterised as expressing feelings of agency— the belief in control over one's own life as an autonomous individual. Feelings of agency seem, even among the 18 to 25 year old, related to family support and a relatively satisfactory relationship with the parents. Hence, the family plays a crucial role in the participant's self-esteem and emotional support. Training programmes can influence feelings of agency through the quality of support provided, through an approach that recognises people's integrity as social actors, and through a degree of flexibility available in the system to allow creative "*connections*" in case of tensions between the system and the participants. Also of great in-

portance is the availability of a supportive, empathic and committed advisor or teacher who functions as a “significant other”.

Creating a Space for Encounter and Dialogue

In order to empower unemployed young adults, an authentic encounter should be created in which one genuinely attempts to meet the young adults. The capability of professionals to get involved with young adults is one of the competencies that both young adults and professionals emphasise as being very important in the encounter. To respect the young adult’s autonomy seems to be a key issue to build up a relationship of trust that enables the interventions. In general, an authentic encounter can only be realised when guidance, counselling and training increasingly take into consideration the biography and social situation of the client. Attention should be paid not only to the “*life course*” of an individual in a standardised way, as related to curriculum, qualifications, work experience and so on, but also the “*life story*” of a client, including experiences of competence development outside standard institutions and situations. A competency approach rather than a deficiency approach seems to be more desirable here.

Conflict between Inner and Outer Logics

Young people today are confronted with conditions of increasing instability and insecurity creating identities which are less and less stable. Against this backdrop, transitions towards employment may function as an extra burden for those who are already in a vulnerable position. We found that for many young people, navigating out of unemployment is often compromised by the reality of choices and opportunities open to them. Facing this multiplicity of choices, creates difficulty in organising one’s life. Especially those young adults who lack clear personal goals determined by labour or education seem to be overwhelmed by the continuous necessity of decision making about even minor issues such as what to do the next hour and the next minute. Furthermore, we have found, among these

young adults, a fairly traditional view of work. In their eyes, work is there to secure income, to create independence from the social security benefits, to enable them to establish a traditional family life. This traditionalism definitely contradicts the demands of flexibility and employability which currently govern the labour market.

The Interpretive Professional

Guidance, counselling and training have turned out to be very complex practices lacking traditional standardised routines. The professionals are constantly under threat of disempowerment related to the contradictions they experience on the institutional level. A person centered policy and emerging questions about ethical and social responsibility vis-a-vis the clients contradict the urge to direct them towards lowly paid and unskilled work and the threat with sanctions related to that. The professional has to find a delicate balance and has to act as a broker mediating between different worlds and discourses. She has to “*connect*” *standardisation* and *singularisation* strategies. Standardisation is regulated by output demands, predetermined procedures and a tendency to reduce complexity. Singularisation is regulated by the demands of an authentic encounter, a readiness to deal with complexity and with someone’s competencies as a point of departure in view of the individual life-story.

Collaborative Inquiry

The project aimed at involving different actors at various levels and stages of the research activity so as to do research with people and not on people. This process of collaborative inquiry has been fairly satisfactory, both for the researched as for the researchers. A combination of focus group activities, in depth interviews and participatory observation revealed basic issues and dilemma’s in everyday guidance, counselling and training practice. The various moments of “bridging” between empirical data and theoretical notions and within and between the various countries involved have proved to be very inspiring and productive.