Presentation at the European Social Work Conference 2023. 21-24 May 2023, Prague and online. AGAINST ALL ODDS, A SOCIAL EUROPE IS POSSIBLE WHERE NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND![1]

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Education as the key to a good life? Social Work Perspectives on the political dimension of a contested concept

The topic of education is discussed in many different ways in different disciplines, in the media and in politics, sometimes controversially. It is a scientific and a political and at the same time a contested term. In German speaking debates on social work, it is becoming increasingly important, with good reasons in my opinion, because education as a topic affects social work on many different levels: As a human right, social work training or education, as a disciplinary topic (also implicitly as empowerment, autonomy) or explicitly as a mission/aim of social work practices.

I would like to reflect upon some aspects from the debates in the German speaking world, with focus on Austrian debates and use these findings to critically reflect on the study of social work.

1) I first would like to introduce the ways in which the concept of education is shaped in contemporary political discourse,
2) take a look at the equity in educational systems,
3) then have a look at the concept of education in social work.

Education in political discourse - between inclusion and …

The notion of education in policy contexts predominately refers to formal educational pathways. Formal education or qualification is often associated with the expectation of progress, of a better future not only for the individual, but potentially for society as a whole. Accordingly, the page of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research states:

"A well-educated, capable and qualified population is essential for Austria's social and economic well-being. Education is a crucial factor in ensuring that individuals have the

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[1] The presentation contains essential parts of the keynote speech held at the University of Applied Sciences in St. Pölten on 11 May 2023. I modified the presentation for the IFSW conference and translated it from German into English.

knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies to participate effectively in social, economic and cultural life."[2]

In societies that are wage labor societies, "effective participation" is mostly linked to inclusion in the labor market. This is true for schools, but it is especially true for higher education institutions and, more specifically, universities of applied sciences, where Social Work as a study is embedded: Examples for the tight linkage of education and the labor market are the very prominent idea of "employability" as a key goal and feature of the so-called Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area in general.[3]

In Austria the education system is largely funded by the government, with reference to the economic and social effects education has on society, the so-called return on investment. Empirical studies show that the money invested in formal education systems is money well spent. The Austrian institute of economic research has found that the "rate of return on government investment in higher education institutions due to graduates alone [...] is 5 to 7 percent" because less money is spent on social benefits (such as unemployment benefits) and at the same time the government gets higher tax revenues due to the higher incomes of university graduates (Janger et al. 2017, p. 7). Higher qualified people are less affected by unemployment, are more satisfied with their job and income as well as their health and their lives in general. They are also more likely than average to be involved in social and political issues (cf. ibid., p. 12f.). Higher education is even associated with a longer life expectancy. Not only for the "educated" but also for their children (cf. Marginson 2012, p. 6, referring to McMahon 2009). It is an empirical fact, that "Individuals with a university degree have an expectation of healthy life years that is three to six years higher than those with a compulsory schooling." (Aiginger 2011, p. 39). But not only is Higher Education considered to be an engine for economic and societal development, there are also empirical studies that show how the achievement of basic competencies in school education is tightly linked to the economic growth of a country (Hanushek and Wößmann 2019).

And although the formal education systems (schools and universities) remain the focus in policy actions and research, in recent education policy documents in Austria there have been a slight shift in this regard. The so-called informal and non-formal education is increasingly considered to be crucial for the productivity of the work force as well (Bock-

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[2] https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/schulsystem.html (20.5.2023)
[3] http://www.ehea.info/pid34423-cid102533/employability-historical-review.html (11.5.2023) The idea of employability applies in particular to the Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria, which have the legal mandate to provide scientifically based vocational training through their degree programs. https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009895, (11.5.2023)

Schappelwein/Janger/Reinstaller 2012, p. 142ff., cf. also BMWFW 2017). Informal and non-formal education refers to competencies acquired in leisure time, family or social work institutions. These competencies are for example empathy, moral judgment, frustration tolerance, etc. (Renner/Tomic Hensel 2020, S. 47, referring to Thole und Höblich 2008, S. 76 ff.).

Generally, it can be stated that education within and outside formal institutions is not only considered relevant, but to a certain extent of an existential importance for society and the individual. Education seems to be the key to a "good life".

… distinction

Education is also an element of social distinction, creating dividing lines between those who are educated and those who are not, those who invest and those who do not (cannot) invest. "Education marks the difference between the educated and the uneducated." (Thiersch 2018, p. 166). It determines social inclusion, and moreover, it is obviously a question of one's own existence.

When we look at the positive individual effects of a good formal education, such as better health and longer life expectancy, the question arises what effects low education has on people's lives? This question is important to be asked, because in Austria the education system is highly selective and it is reproducing social inequalities, rather than reducing them. This means that children and young people have different chances of successfully passing through the education system or even achieving a higher educational qualification (cf. Gerhartz-Reiter 2019, p. 524). The researcher Gerhartz-Reiter (2019, p. 524) points out that children and young people, whose native language is not German, whose parents have a low educational background and/or a low occupational status are at an "increased risk" of "not realizing" educational potentials - and life chances." This is shown in the following two statistic data:

1) "The chance of attending a (Gymnasium), an academic secondary school (in Austria), is 3.3 times greater for children of parents who are managers, scientists, or technicians than for children of unskilled workers (Gerhartz-Reiter 2019, p. 525, referring to Breit 2016a).[4]

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[4] Compulsory schools are as follows:
Grades 1 – 4: primary school (Volksschule)
Grades 5 – 8: choice of either a lower secondary school (Neue Mittelschule) or the lower level of an academic secondary school (the „Unterstufe" at an „Allgemein bildende höhere Schule" (AHS)
https://www.innviertel.at/austrian-education-system

2) "The probability of studying is in Austria about 2.38 times higher for students with higher educated parents than for those who are not." (BMWFW 2017, p. 13, referring to the 2015 Student Social Survey).

Gerhartz-Reiter elaborates that those who leave the education system early (cf. Gerhartz-Reiter 2019, p. 523) have significantly worse starting conditions, e.g., in terms of employment, material security, social participation, and health (cf. Gerhartz-Reiter 2019, p. 524). And if we look at the informal educational pathways, opportunities are unequally distributed here as well. This is because the opportunities for spending leisure time, using media and belonging to peer groups also depend, among other things, on the economic, social and cultural capital of their families (cf. Renner/Tomic Hensel 2020).

It can be said that opportunities for education are characterized by inequality at all levels.

On the one hand there is a promise of a better future through education, promoted by the government, on the other hand it is an empirical fact that this promise obviously does not apply to everyone.

In the academic discourses these contradictions are being analyzed and also criticized, especially in social and educational sciences. One of the critiques in the discourses which is characterized as a "Critique on Economization of Education" is that focusing on education as a resource or investment and increasing the link between education and the labor market, is making the education system even more selective. It is argued that defining education as a return on investment suggests that opportunities in education are simply a matter of one's investment, while neglecting the fact that not everyone has the economic, social and cultural capital to invest. There are also questions raised about what counts as a "good life" and for whom, In the following I would like to highlight some of the aspects from these discourses and then focus on social work debates, the political context and research.

Is Education (more than) labor productivity? – Concepts of Education in Social Work

Defining education as competence-based while matching the competencies to the needs of the labor market, raises the question, what knowledge and what skills are considered to be important and which are not, and who decides on what basis what usable competencies are. The concern – in Social Work debates – is that education would not only lose its social and also ethical dimension, when directly linked to the needs of the labor market and its economic value. But the origin and humanistic idea of education (Bildung), which is often attributed to Wilhelm von Humboldt in the German speaking world and is associated with enlightenment, self-

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determination, critical thinking are also seen as being at risk. How does Social Work deal with this concern?

According to Rauschenbach, a German educational scientist, the topic of education generated hardly any attention in social work two to three decades ago (cf. Rauschenbach 2009, p. 210). According to Rauschenbach, this has changed significantly since the 2000s, because of the results of the first PISA "shock" (Program for international student assessment), that showed not only a lack of competencies gained in school (in reading, mathematics and science, especially in Germany, but also in Austria, when it comes to reading and science), but also a correlation between the performance of students and their socio-economic status. Since then a new concept of education is being discussed, a concept which refers not only to the education in institutions, but also takes into account the informal and the non-formal places of education, like families, peer groups, etc. (cf. Rauschenbach 2009, p. 210, Thiersch 2018, p. 167). During this period, triggered by the reforms in schools and higher education systems (e.g. Bologna strategy), a critical debate about the concept of education at universities (of applied sciences) (e.g. Miller/Ostertag 2017) also emerged. Education is also being increasingly discussed in the practical fields of Social Work - in child and youth welfare (Rauschenbach/Otto 2008, Thole/Höblich 2008), school social work, (Bliemetsrieder 2016), in elementary education (cf. Sting, 2013, p. 14) etc. Concepts of educational justice (Gerhartz-Reiter 2019) and education as a human right (cf. Dangl 2016) are often the basis for the critique on the reforms. The concepts of education in Social Work debates differ in many ways, but have one thing in common: they highlight the social, the ethical and political dimension of education.

This dimension is described as participation, inclusion, justice and redistribution (Tauchner 2016), education for capacity for democracy (Kilb 2020), as the right to inclusion (Dangl 2016), as critical reflection of power mechanisms (Biemetsrieder 2016), as critical reflection and solidarity (Braun/Wetzel 2013), as global citizenship for the promotion of democracy (Radwanowsky/Stattmann 2022), as a critical-reflexive concept (Miller/Ostertag 2017), etc. These dimensions reflect the professional ethical principles of Social Work. Social work is by definition not only responsible for strengthening the autonomy and self-determination of the individual, but also for social cohesion.[5]

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[5] "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels." https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/ (20.5.2023)

The competencies in the concept of education in Social Work are in particular the ability to think critically, the ability to be democratic and the ability to reflect. The educational concept of social work has its foundation in a humanistic vision of society. Looking at the theory I asked myself as a lecturer how inclusive my field of practice is, what kind of education do I or we as a University of Applied Sciences provide, since we train Social Workers to work towards social justice. I would like to share my thoughts on that in the following.

Social Work study – an inclusive education model?

In the policy paper GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING (IFSW 2020)[6], which was adopted in 2020 by The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), two of the main objectives are:

1) Ensure consistency in the provision of social work education while appreciating and valuing diversity, equity and inclusion.

2) social work schools to become thriving, well-resourced, inclusive and participatory teaching and learning environments.[7]

Taking these goals into account, in following I would like to reflect on the diversity of our student body and our teaching in terms of diversity and inclusion.

Although the education systems have expanded since the 1960s, "there is only a weak correlation between the expansion of higher education and the heterogenization of the student composition." (Wolter 2013) As mentioned before, education systems are reproducing social inequalities, rather than reducing them. According to available data, the student body in higher education systems is far from being diverse. Students from a low educated background, students with disabilities, students with migration background, etc. are still under-represented in HEI, and also in Social Work Study.[8] As part of the HEI, Social Work does not offer a more inclusive education per se, but as a human rights profession it is committed to creating inclusive learning environments. This is an ambivalence we deal with, but it is a topic which is not much discussed in the Austrian debates in Social Work.

For this reason, we had a research project from 2020 to 2022 on diversity in Social Work Studies at the universities in Austria and the question was, how inclusive and diverse the Social Work study is. 16 qualitative interviews were conducted.[9] This study showed that students with

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[6] https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/ (12.5.2023)
[7] https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/#1educators (11.5.2023)
[8] https://www.sozialerhebung.at/images/Berichte/Austrian-Student-Survey-2019-At-a-Glance.pdf (11.5.2023)
[9] You can find more information on the following website: https://research.fhstp.ac.at/projekte/diversity-parole-

migration background, students with children or students in poverty, are not only under-represented, but often face many more challenges than their peers in finishing studies in time, for different reasons (the lack of support and resources, more stress due to lack of time to study or higher workload e.g. to translate articles from German to native language, etc.). Also, there was the critique from students, that Social Work as a human rights profession should provide education in which critical thinking and reflection on power structures (e.g. related to racism) should be in the core of the education, but from their perspective are often not. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I cannot elaborate on the results, but what they show – and this is very important – is that the study of social work as part of the selective education system is not only not inclusive but excludes in particular the already marginalized population.

This brings me to my final remarks: The findings from the academic discourse and the empirical research marks the relevance of a self-critical reflection on social work study as well as a critical reflection of the political discourses. Skills, which are defined as central for the productivity at the labor market may not be the same as the professional goals, which are defined in GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING[10].

Bringing the social and the political dimension of education into focus, however, means that we have to make sure (according to global standards for social work education and training), not only that the curricula are based on human rights principles and the pursuit of justice, but that the educational practice itself should be based on human rights and inclusiveness.

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oder-programm (10.5.2023)

[10] https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/#1coremission

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