

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN FRANCE:

The importance of “work-based” learning in training.

EUROPE - “UNITED IN DIVERSITY”.

“United in diversity” is the EU slogan. We all of us could hear, yesterday, how appropriate this is to social work education : we're all united by certain values that are shared by those within the profession. We're all different too - in our qualifications, our routes into education and, of course, in our idea of the skills that we believe are essential to the profession.

In France, the organisations offering social work training leading to a qualification are usually non-governmental and non-profit organisations (NGOs) and not the Universities. Annamaria told us yesterday about this issue.

The reason is that during the 1960s and 70s, when French public authorities wanted to develop social work training, which involved implementing training programmes, they did not approach their own Ministries. Instead, they were approached by non-profit organisations, most often made up of volunteers who were setting up establishments and services for children, teenagers and adults with disabilities or social problems.

These organisations were already in short supply of trained, qualified and skilled professionals, so they were ready to develop training programmes necessary for recruiting the professionals they needed. So, for about fifty years, and still now, French schools of social work are tightly tied to the job market needs. In June 2008, a regional review indicated that 92 % of students who had obtained their diploma one year before (i.e. in June 2007) had found an adequate job as social workers.

They are about 170 schools of social work in France, and many differences between them. Some are *care workers* training centres, giving skills to practitioners. Others are are Regional Institutes for Social Work Education, quite alike Universities.

The AFPE, of which I am General Manager, is one of these associations. It was created in 1969 and has been constantly developing its training activities, both for care workers and social workers, thanks to funding and support from public authorities.

STATE-CONTROLLED TRAINING.

In France, the Law specifies that : “*public and private institutions offering social work training contribute to the qualification and promotion of professionals and salaried and non-salaried staff working to combat exclusion, prevent and overcome handicaps or maladjustments, and to promote social development. They participate in the public service of training*” (Art.L.451-1).

Training defined in this way leads to, following a final exam, a professional qualification, in the form of a **State Qualification**. It is known as “Training leading to a Qualification”.

Public and private institutions offering social work training must first satisfy the declaration obligations with the regional State representative (RSR), and are subject to State control.

Since 2005, these social work training programmes have been “free of charge” as they are a core training element. They are subject to agreement and funding by the local authority concerned.

But the agreement and funding apply only to “core” training, meaning that in principal it can only be taken by those who, following education, want to obtain their first qualification for their first profession.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND RESEARCH.

On the other hand, French Social work training institutions (EFTS) also offer training programmes for social workers so they can improve or update their knowledge and skills or acquire new skills with the aim of professional promotion or redeployment, to build on their professional careers.

This “continuous” training is mainly funded by the employer, most often by way of compulsory contributions made by social worker employers.

Finally, the French Social Work Training Institutions also carry out social work Research. But trainers are not first of all University researchers, they are experienced professionals above all else. However the SSW in each region carry out specialised research, in collaboration with the Universities such as research “platforms” and “Regional Social Work Committees”.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FRENCH SOCIAL WORK TRAINING.

In France the various qualifications have always been characterised, up to now, by a “Qualification Level”, which depends on the position in relation to the French Baccalaureate and the *number of years* spent in education after the Baccalaureate.

But at the same time, and because of our history, we do not think of settling “core courses”, but we have been thinking, for a long time, of “how to acquire “core competences”.

Precisely, the recent French reforms in social work training can be seen in the “**skills standards**” that now describe precisely which skills have to be acquired in training. These skills are divided into “**skills areas**”.

In this way, for the equivalent of a “Social Worker”, we have :

- a “Social Services Assistant” Qualification and skills standard,
- a “Specialist Youth Worker” Qualification and skills standard,
- and a “Young Children Worker” Qualification and skills standard.

All of them are considered as “Social workers”.

The one element all these training programmes have in common is that they are work-based : at least half of the training course is carried out in the workplace, in a social services or medical services institution.

Our idea is this: work-based learning must be seen as a means of acquiring skills.

We say : “**work-based learning is a series of training periods organised between the training centre and the workplace**”.

But it is not simply about having some training sessions at the centre and others in the workplace.

Work-based learning targets the ability to analyse one’s own professional practices, as far as possible, by linking theory and practice in a professional context. A permanent trainer in the Centre ensures this link is maintained by giving one-to-one support for each student.

Moreover, for each student’s course, we strive to integrate 3 issues :

- apprenticeship and experience in all kinds of professional situations, accompanied first and foremost by the professionals involved (“tutor”, “trainer”, “apprenticeship supervisor” etc.), but also by all the professional teams,
- theory lessons not only with specialists or permanent trainers, but also with working professionals who have hands-on experience in the field in question,
- apprenticeship and experience in the training centre, with a wide range of teaching resources and techniques provided (lessons, conferences, professional practice analysis, resource centre study, workshops, group work, etc.).

We must point out that these “professional practice analysis workshops” add up to 60 or 70 hours a year, mainly consisting in reflection upon what students live during their placement periods. This requires the students to feel free of talking, free of thinking.

They are expected to describe frankly and accurately what happens in their workplace, in any professional situation on their mind, upon which they will think and talk within the workshop.

Indeed we take for granted every student should develop his own ability to think by himself. Any professional situation is somehow a new situation. Thinking on one’s own is the first base of all necessary skills in accompanying somebody else, isn’t it ?

But we also believe that this link between theory and practice in a professional context encourages learning and building up experience.

Professionalization is achieved by permanently linking the workplace, currently known as the “*qualification site*” with the training centre. To achieve this, we establish work partnerships with each of the workplaces (named “qualification sites”).

In this way, work-based learning requires long-lasting partnerships with workplaces. Therefore, we have put various actions into place such as (4) :

- Regular meetings between professional teams and trainers (internship visits and workshop visits, etc.),
- The organisation of themed days for professionals in the field,
- Individual training leading to a qualification for tutors, apprenticeship supervisors and field trainers,
- Group training aimed at improving the teaching methods of the teams working with the interns.

The importance of quality and content in internships is currently not fully recognised by French public authorities, and this makes it difficult for French Social Work Education to integrate the Bologna process.

So, one of the main objectives for us at the moment is to obtain better European recognition and clarity.

The two challenges we have are :

1. to complete the linking up of French training levels with the European ones (European Qualification Framework) - which defines 8 levels from 1 to 8 in “knowledge, skills and competences”,

2. to succeed in grading our Social Work educational system into European Credit Transfer System - which is not achieved yet.

Then, we will be able to give all our partners, both in Europe and across the world, a much clearer idea as to what we do and the qualifications we award, for the benefit of professional mobility and all social workers.

*May 24th, 2009,
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- **DANVERS. F.,** *500 mots clefs pour l'éducation et la formation tout au long de la vie,* Editions Septentrion, 2003, (p.70: *“The purpose of analysing practices is to deal with professional experiences more effectively, understand them better and share examples of difficulties or solutions in order to regulate how work is accomplished, to improve and become aware of your subconscious personal limits which may be a source of renewed difficulties and to establish or strengthen your professional identity”*).

- **D.G.A.S. Bureau des Professions sociales et du Travail social,** Octobre 2003, (*“The expression, “qualification site”, which is used for the employer’s premises and training centre, aims at recognising that these sites have an essential, even dominant role in the training process. The notion of a qualification site implies supporting the trainee(s) with a multi-professional (or multi-disciplinary) team under the responsibility of an advisor appointed by the employer from the host centre. The trainee must be supported by an advisor and, if possible, by a multi-professional (or multi-disciplinary) team as the training project will be validated by the employer’s organisation”. In the context of “work-based” learning, the internship visit, led by the trainee, is an opportunity for the various partners to evaluate training progress and suggest areas which need to be worked on”*).

- **G. LE BOTERF** *« L'ingénierie de la compétence »*, Editions d'organisation, (*“Competence is acquired through the relevant combination of various resources. It is best to distinguish between: the “resources” required to act competently; the activities or professional practices to be carried out competently which correspond to each individual’s “projects” (“how to manage them”); assessable results from measures implemented (quality indices, client loyalty rates, production quantity, turnover, value rates, error rates etc.”*).

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