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## The Relationship Between Theory and Practice in Vocational Education: De-Sign Elements from the Perspective of Teachers

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### Abstract

**Context:** This article is dedicated to the relationship between theory and practice in social pedagogical vocational training courses and discusses this against the background of the discourse on professionalisation. The article is based on a research project that investigates the question of the design of the theory-practice relationship in vocational education and training. The first interim results of an interview study with teachers in Germany are presented and discussed. In this context, an insight into the understanding of a theory-practice link from a curricular point of view as well as from the perspective of teachers in vocational education is given, which should provide a starting point for international discussion. For a comprehensive understanding of the German system of socio-pedagogical vocational training courses and the corresponding design of theory-practice links, it will also be presented in comparison to international systems.

**Methods:** The interview study can be classified as qualitative social research and was evaluated with the help of qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz.

**Findings:** Many opportunities to shape the relationship between theory and practice became clear.

**Conclusion:** Teachers argue their approaches to the design of theory-practice linkages via modes that on the one hand enable differentiation and at the same time open up connectivity for the international theory-practice discourse.

**Keywords:** vocational education social pedagogy, theory-practice relation, learning processes, international view

### 1 Introduction

“(…) social work education in Germany is an important part of the whole profession with all its current problems and challenges” (Laging et al., 2021, p. 102). So first of all it is important to understand that the profession includes not only social pedagogical practice but also social work education. And both are affected by current social, political, economic and global changes (Laging et al., 2021, p. 108). And at the same time, social work is still struggling for its own identity, both in Germany but also in other European countries. Against this current background, the following article addresses a problem that has existed for a long time: the relationship between theory and practice in social work education in Germany.

The project is dedicated to the relation between theory and practice, which is a recurring point of discussion in social pedagogical vocational training courses and is still to be understood as an unfinished debate. Above all, the abbreviated juxtaposition not only separates actors and



activities into two supposedly definable areas but also action and reflection seemingly unambiguously. Linked to this is the question of how a design of theory and practice in vocational education and training can succeed. Little is known about the appropriation processes of learners in this context and is, therefore, a desideratum in research on social work education. The article is therefore based on the first results of the interview study with teachers on the design of theory and practice in social work education. This basic research is intended to open up future research potential, also in an international perspective on social pedagogical training and vocational education in particular.

## **2 The ‘German System’ of Social Pedagogical Education in International Comparison**

Not only within Germany is there still a high demand for social pedagogical specialists (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2019, p. 148), but also internationally (Matthies, 2011, p. 95). A common overview of international qualification pathways is hardly feasible due to their diversity (Matthies, 2011, p. 97). Therefore, in the following, an insight into selected international qualifications is given. Subsequently, the German system will be explained in a more differentiated way. With regard to international qualification paths, the first decisive factor is orientation. A low level of qualification is often sufficient for purely vocational training. Overall, qualification requirements in social work education range from a master's degree in Finland, for example, to the necessary qualification in Portugal, which stipulates that daycare workers should be able to read and write (Egge, 2009, p. 46, quoted after Matthies, 2011, p. 96). Also, within Slovenia, a degree is considered a prerequisite for working in daycare centres. Social pedagogues, there also work in schools as counsellors and in centres for social work. For the study program in social pedagogy, there is the possibility of studying full or part-time. Compared to full-time studies, part-time studies combine the practical parts at a very early stage. It is interesting to note that full-time students attach great importance to the practical and theoretical parts of their studies, whereas part-time students focus more on theoretical knowledge (Kobolt, 2005). Entry into the social pedagogical field in comparison in the United Kingdom is possible without at least an undergraduate degree. Often, a vocational qualification is considered sufficient, which must be viewed critically in terms of professionalism (Bondi et al., 2011). Furthermore, the understanding of social pedagogy is reduced to inpatient childcare and occasionally also to work with individuals or groups in other phases of life (Petrie, 2013).

The international view of social pedagogical training formats within early education showed that it is also worthwhile to look outside of vocational education with a view to a growing theory-practice link. However, since vocational education is the central training format within early education in Germany, it will be presented below with its associated special features.

Within Germany, there is a low proportion of academically trained personnel in early education (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 110). In the school year 2016/ 2017, however, an attempt to modularize training started in the federal state of Lower Saxony (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2016a; Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2016b). Modularization is a curricular organizational and structural principle that is based on the European system for credit transfer in higher education and enables horizontal as well as vertical permeability that underlies the concept of lifelong learning (KMK, 2011, p. 8). As has already become clear in the international comparison, the social pedagogical training landscape in Germany can also be described as "diverse". The students are similarly heterogeneous.

For the further presentations, the focus will be on the social pedagogical for vocational training courses for social assistants or children's nurses, and the vocational training course for state-certified kindergarten teachers, as the internationally known training. Kindergarten teachers have a special position because they are considered the largest occupational group within the field (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 110). The training programs differ in

their assigned socio-educational fields of action. Social assistants qualify for the occupational fields of crèches, daycare centres, after-school care centres and elementary schools. In addition, kindergarten teachers take on educational and childcare tasks in all-day school programs, educational assistance and facilities for open child and youth work (KMK, 2011, p. 5f.; Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020, p. 2f.). Furthermore, they are classified at different levels. In this context, the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (DQR) should be mentioned, which records all qualifications of the German education system across all educational sectors and takes into account the requirements of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with regard to the specifics of the German education system (AK DQR, 2011, p. 3). Accordingly, the vocational training courses for a social assistant is classified at DQR level four and the vocational training course for a state-certified kindergarten teacher at DQR level six (Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsstelle für den DQR, 2021, p. 3). Both types of schools belong to the full-time school system (Gudjons & Traub, 2020, p. 318). Like the more familiar dual system, this also consists of two learning locations. The full-time school-based system has the learning site 'school' and the learning site 'practice' with its different socio-pedagogical fields of action. Compared to the dual school-based vocational system, the responsibility for both the theoretical and the practical part of the training lies with the institution school or the teachers (Schäfer & Tessmer, 2021, p. 153), which is why one can also speak of a dual function on their part in this context. With regard to the legal requirements, the full-time school system does not have a "two-instance jurisdiction" (Schanz, 2015, p. 36), as in the dual system; instead, there are legal bases that apply nationwide or state-specifically, which differ in their binding nature.

With regard to the theory-practice link in both systems, the practical part of the training in the full-time school system comprises one-third (KMK, 2011, p. 7; Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020, p. 15). In contrast, the proportion is much higher in the dual system. At this point, a different organization with regard to theory-practice relationships thus becomes apparent, which brings the question of how to design the theory-practice linkage(s) into focus. This will further elaborate the fourth chapter. At this point, however, the following should be pointed out: There continues to be a shortage of social pedagogical specialists in Germany. Due to the continuing high demand for skilled workers, in recent years additional training systems have been developed, in addition to the classic full-time school-based variant (usually two years of training in a vocational course of social assistant and another two years of the vocational training course for state-certified kindergarten teacher), which does not include remuneration (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2019, p. 148). This led to a "pluralization of training formats and a broadening of access options" (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 110). With regard to training at vocational course of social assistant, in addition to the full-time school-based format, there is also practice-integrated training, which provides for remuneration (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 112). Within the vocational training course for state-certified kindergarten teachers, in addition to the practice-integrated variant, there are also the options of part-time training (with an extended training period) as well as in a so-called activity-based or part-time form. The prerequisite for the part-time form is usually a paid employment within a socio-educational institution, which provides for half of the usual working hours. The practice-integrated variant, on the other hand, does not require an employment contract. Due to the higher proportion of practice within the alternative forms of training to the full-time school system (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 116), a modified form of theory-practice linkage will be necessary in the future, as well as associated teaching-learning forms.

A further look at the research landscape makes it clear that too little attention is paid to teacher training for vocational education and training. There are desiderata with regard to qualification and curriculum research, profession-theoretical as well as subject-didactic research and furthermore with regard to methodological and teaching research (Friese, 2010, p. 311;

Friese, 2018, p. 39). For reasons, Friese named the specific training and occupational structures, because it is predominantly trained within the framework of the full-time school system. In this context, Friese speaks of a so-called "semi-professionalism" (Friese, 2010, p. 314), which she sees as being due to the lack of standardization with regard to regulatory and curricular requirements.

### 3 Theory and Practice in Social Work Education

The relation of theory and practice is a "basic concern of all pedagogical training" (Dittrich, 1987, p. 92). This does not only refer to social pedagogical study programmes and training, but also to other pedagogical training such as teacher training. A similar discussion can be presented from the latter area: "The terms theory and practice thus do not describe a precise or generally valid construct, but as a pair of opposites they refer to a relation which, on the face of it, can be related to a variety of relations" (Rothland, 2020, p. 133).

Therefore, the article is dedicated to the different relations in the context of vocational education in social pedagogy. It is therefore necessary to clarify. Why is this relation still so unclear and why are the relations so diverse? First of all, this is due to the low concretisation of the concepts (theory/practice) on the one hand and the didactic design of the learning arrangements in vocational education and training on the other.

First of all, the understanding of theory and practice. The term theory, in relation to practice, only rarely refers to a specific scientific theory. Rather, it is about a kind of knowledge. Theoretical knowledge, in the sense of the abstraction of specifics, can thus be understood as professional knowledge. In contrast, practice is embedded in the individual case, the concrete situation and institution-related frameworks (Dewe & Otto, 2012, p. 206).

"Moreover, the hereby reformulated theory of professions is based on the assumption that academic knowledge as a supposedly objective, 'true', and 'correct' form of knowledge can by no means be used directly in practice. Instead, professionalism manifests itself in the ability to relate academic knowledge to routine or practical knowledge: professional social work effects a situation-specific transformation of academic theoretical statements into information relevant for professional practice" (Dewe et al., 2019, p. 385).

Professional action can thus be understood as the linking - or relation - of this professional knowledge and the practical professional skills (Dewe & Otto, 2012, p. 213) or the relation of "different action and knowledge structures" (Dewe & Otto, 2012, p. 213). The individual professionalisation of social education professionals thus aims at the acquisition of "professional knowledge" (Dewe, 2009, p. 59).

In the context of the professionalisation discourse, the relation is a highly relevant question. Theory and practice must therefore be related to each other situationally in the sense of reflexive professionalism.

After this first, brief discussion of terms, the focus now turns to the question of how this relationship between theory and practice can be shaped and learned in vocational education and training. Or, in other words, how can the diversity of conditions be shaped? Didactically, there are different concepts of theory and practice in vocational education.

There are the dominant concepts from the field of vocational education and training, such as "Lernfeldorientierung" (learning field orientation) (e.g. Tenberg, 2006, p. 27ff.), "Handlungsorientierung" (task-based approach) (e.g. Küls, 2017, p. 116f.) and learning location cooperation (e.g. Pätzold, 2016, p. 634f.). But even in the genuine field of social education and social didactics, there are a wide variety of formats such as theory-practice linkage and double mediation practice (e.g. Karsten, 2003, p. 354f.), inquiry-based and reflective learning (Karber, 2021, p. 171ff.) and biographical learning (e.g. Thiessen & Schweizer, 2000, p. 197ff.). In particular, the concept of learning location cooperation is leading the way in German vocational education and training. At the same time, from a didactic point of view, this leads to a simple

juxtaposition: vocational school here, socio-educational practice there. There is often a lack of a learner-centred educational perspective here and often remains at a level of formal cooperation. (Pätzold 2016, p. 634f.). The concept of the learning field or action orientation is again related to teaching. This means the orientation of learning situations to vocational case studies. It remains to be clarified which understanding of forms of knowledge in which relation is meaningful to work through here, as long as the learning field orientation assumes seemingly clear and delimitable theoretical and practical structures.

However, it becomes clear that there are not enough didactic-theoretical discussions as well as empirical discussions on these concepts. Some initial empirical approaches to forms of practice reference can be mentioned. According to the study by Stadler and Uihlein (2021), different forms of practice reference (simulated practice; reported practice; observable practice and didactically prepared practice) are often combined in the evaluated teaching units (Stadler & Uihlein, 2021, p. 83). In the context of inquiry-based learning in social pedagogical training, on the other hand, a didactic concept was investigated that aims at a reflection-oriented design (Christ et al., 2021). In particular, the concept according to Gruschka (1986) is convincing here in the form of its didactic differentiation (also Sauerwein, 2020). Here, the individually experienced observations and actions in practice are considered the starting point for teaching and are subjected to a structured analysis in a structured framework so that this approach can be counted among the casuistic formats (Sauerwein, 2020, p. 366). Despite the investigation of individual didactic concepts, there is a lack of knowledge and basic research on the fundamental differentiation of the relationship between theory and practice and how this can be acquired.

#### **4 Teachers' views on the theory and practice of social work education - research methods and interim results**

The pilot study already presented focused on the development of teachers' practices and perspectives on the design of theory-practice relationships in the context of appropriation and learning processes on the part of students in social pedagogical vocational training courses. These were approached by means of a qualitative and meaning-understanding research approach. First of all, a literature study was carried out in which the appropriation of the term, relation as well as theory and practice were in the foreground. A document analysis was carried out for both federal and state-specific curricula in Lower Saxony. The procedure described above laid the foundations for the subsequent survey phase by means of guided interviews conducted with teachers of vocational education in social pedagogy in Lower Saxony. In February 2022, the intensive evaluation of the first interviews began. This was carried out by structuring the content with the help of qualitative content analysis according to Udo Kuckartz (2018).

In the following, relevant results of the document analysis with regard to the design of theory-practice relationships in social pedagogical vocational training courses (4.1) as well as first interim results of the pilot study and thus the views of teachers on these relationships (4.2) are presented.

##### **4.1 Theory-practice linkage from a curricular perspective**

In the nationwide curricular specifications of social pedagogical training, the "pedagogical interaction with individuals and groups" (KMK, 2011, p. 6) is described as part of the "everyday work" (KMK, 2011, p. 6) of the prospective social pedagogical specialists, which is emphasized as a special feature. This must also be reflected in the "teaching practice" (KMK, 2011, p. 6), which is why a close "theory-practice linkage" (KMK, 2011, p. 7) is pointed out. In particular, the linkage should be "didactic" (Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020, p. 13), which is possible in different variants. In the form of linking teaching content with socio-educational practice, for example, job shadowing can be mentioned at this point. The state-specific guidelines in Lower Saxony further state that learning at the two learning locations "theory" and

"practice" should also be linked through written assignments (e.g. job shadowing) that take into account the respective requirement level of the vocational training (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 7). In this way, the competencies acquired at school are to be applied and deepened in the practical field (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2016a, p. 4; Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2016b, p. 5). This is justified by the fact that it is only through application in socio-educational fields of action that students learn how previously theoretically acquired competencies can be implemented in practice. At the same time, students become aware of the relevance of their specialized knowledge through practical work (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 3f.).

Overall, the learning location 'practice' is given special significance with regard to the professionalization of future social pedagogical specialists (KMK, 2011, p. 7; Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020, p. 15). The curricular specifications in Lower Saxony elaborate on the following: In connection with the levels of the German Qualification Framework to be achieved and the related professional action competencies to be developed (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 3), the ability to act independently in "complex pedagogical situations" (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 3.) is relevant and should be supported accordingly. Therefore, the focus at the learning location 'practice' is placed on "practical learning through pedagogical action and its professional reflection" (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 3.). Here the learning place 'practice' would differ "in essential points" (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2017, p. 3.) from the learning place 'school'.

#### **4.2 Theory-practice linkage from a teacher's perspective**

In the third chapter it was already pointed out that the understandings of 'theory' and 'practice' can be described as largely undifferentiated even within the scientific discussion. The teachers interviewed in the pilot study understood theories, among other things, as developing out of practice, which they described, for example, as knowledge from practical experience. This knowledge, in turn, can be found in literature or is recorded in this form (L1, l. 72 - 76). Likewise, theories are also to be understood as a basis or research and practice is the "doing" (L2, 126f.; 131f.) in this context. This was justified by the fact that without theoretical foundations, practice could not take place (L1, l. 131 - 136). Thus, a predominantly functional understanding of theory was evident (Neumann & Sandermann, 2018, p. 11). Furthermore, one teacher differentiated into different levels of theory. Thus, she named everyday theories, scientific theories, and furthermore a meta-level of theories (L3, l. 124 - 131). Further, the theory(s) were predominantly located in the school as well as the practice in the socio-educational fields of practice (L1, l. 91 - 95; L2, l. 128 - 143; L3, l. 153 - 158; L8, l. 138 - 145), although theory and practice were described, among other things, as a "ping-pong" game (L3, l. 152) and thus a clear need for linkage. This could also be found in the document analysis. In this context, teachers see the teaching of theoretical basics as their task in class. Students, on the other hand, are supposed to put what they have learned in theory into practice. Teachers thus ascribe to themselves a task of mediation and students, on the other hand, the activity of appropriation (Gruschka, 2002; Pollmanns, 2019). But how do teachers shape the theory-practice relationship and, at the same time, the associated learning and appropriation process? In this context, teachers named modes (ways of acting) to describe and at the same time to structure the circumstances. In this context, teachers have as a goal perspective that theory(s) learned in school should be applied in practice or in the socio-pedagogical fields of action, as it has already been mentioned within the curricular guidelines. Teachers understand the prior linking of theory and practice in school as a prerequisite for this. In order to achieve this goal, they apply practice in school. This can be done, for example, by including practical situations that students experience in the socio-educational fields of action. At the same time, it is possible to convey theories in this way. Great importance is attached to the understanding of theories on the part of the

students, which is developed or should be developed in the course of the training. On the one hand, a transfer from theory to practice or from practice to theory and, on the other hand, the reporting of personal experiences, in which initial references to theories are already made, are considered to be preliminary stages (L1, l. 269 - 275).

Regarding the mode of applying, it was noticeable that contrary to the understanding that theory cannot be applied in practice (Dewe & Otto, 2010), it was mentioned by all teachers as well as in the curricular guidelines, but 'only' one interviewed person differentiated it further (in the following L3). Thus, this person refers to the application as a pedagogical action, which is understood as a superordinate goal. For this, however, students must "think through these complex everyday pedagogical situations, assess them and (3) deal with them" (L3, l. 293f.). As far as this is possible, there is a professional pedagogical action as well as reflexive acting (L3, l. 294ff.).

## 5 Conclusion and outlook

The first results of a German pilot study were presented as an insight into concrete approaches to structuring theory-practice relationships in socio-educational vocational training courses from a teacher's perspective. In this context, the question of how the relations of theory and practice can be learned in the context of a (vocationally oriented) learning process was explored. The following became clear: Teachers understand the linking of theory and practice as a necessity with regard to the appropriation and learning processes on the part of students. In their understanding of the concepts of theory and practice, it becomes clear that they make a hierarchy or assign different functions. For example, theory functions as a basis for being able to act in practice. Practice seems to take on a more 'active' part here. With regard to the design of the theory-practice relationship, the teachers described modes that were also hierarchized differently. There are superordinate modes that take over the function of a target perspective and helping modes that act as support. In this context, it also became clear that teachers as a whole understand the theory-practice relationships more diversely than the curricular specifications, which became clear in the number of modes mentioned, among other things. However, the diversity should not be viewed critically in this context, as it opens up different possibilities for stimulating students' learning processes and also takes into account the diversity that also exists there. In addition, the modes and the associated wording of the teachers open up a basis for international discussions about basic learning processes. The connectivity of the modes must be brought into focus and discussed in the future. This has to be done for vocational education as well as for social work education.

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