Participation as a pedagogic concept and strategy for the innovative alleviation of poverty
Illustrated by the example of an EU model project on providing residential accommodation for low-income persons and groups

Inaugural dissertation by Hildegard Stumpf, Munich

Summary

The present work deals with options for participative social work which were realised with city dwellers threatened with homelessness and poverty within the framework of a publicly subsidised housing rehabilitation project in Munich designed over a term of two years. The manner in which, through participative socio-pedagogic forms of working, the experience of target group members in terms of the way they deal with everyday life is incorporated consciously, i.e. as a methodically reflected aspect, into professional implementation is the central point of the question guiding cognition. The theoretical perspective of the life-world orientation that is justified here (Thiersch, Habermas) therefore relates to the experience of reality of a primary behavioural correlation of the target group for the poverty alleviation project. The traditional tasks of compensatory support are expanded by the explicit creation of an area of learning and experience that is new for the target group and also for the professionals. The ability of the target group members themselves to cope with specific crises on their own initiative as far as possible is decisive for the forms of intervention that pedagogic action will take. The successful approach was a form of integral social services which was linked with the intermediary working methods of the housing rehabilitation project.

The constellations of social problems experienced by the target group members were not dealt with on a subordinate basis, i.e. after the households had been provided with accommodation. Instead, the future rental households were included in the technical-organisational planning and building process of the residential building to be refurbished. In this way, it was possible to establish a communication structure which allowed the broad range of specific problems and resources of the target group members affected by poverty to be summarised, so that well-worn risky coping strategies could be recognised and dealt with.

The dissertation, which is set out as an empirical study, reconstructs this process-oriented participation procedure. A three-part summary evaluation design was implemented. This comprises (1) the interpretative description of the participation process (Bohnsack, Peirce), (2) an experts' discussion with the persons involved in the project and (3) the group discussion with the target group members; these are the later occupants of the development (Mangold, Meuser/Nagel). The research approach adopted picks up the concern of the further development of participative social work and is also to be classified as social work research (Beywl, Heiner). In particular, the increase in competence and problem-solving skills of the target group members is illustrated. Similarly, questions of feasibility, intermediary collaboration and the benefits of participative processes in local authority housing supply are also covered. The combination of the research stages opens the way to an analysis rich in aspects of the theme of "poverty prevention as a socio-pedagogic area of activity".

In terms of the interlinking conditions relating to the individual supply situation of people affected by poverty, the areas of education, health, work, living and participation in social, cultural and political life are at least partly limited. Deprived living conditions go hand in hand with this situation. Subjective experience can considerably strengthen objectively restrictive living factors. In the theory and practice of social work and in discussions relating to social and educational sciences, this connection is nothing new. But within the sphere of social housing supply, such categories have attracted little attention to date. And this is true both as regards the experience of exclusion undergone by households threatened by homelessness and their different opportunities and resources which can break open the contexts of poverty if encouraged accordingly.

The participation process with the target group members which was institutionalised in a way that can act as a model was made up of three dimensions: the dimension of interpersonal relations (interaction, inter-subjectivity), the relationship to the world of objects and finally the perspective created between these two relationships. The pedagogic demand made on such a group process lies here in coping with the differentiated combination of methodical and non-methodical action.

Both the conceptual purposefulness and the methodical structuring of the participation is produced and perceived on the basis of traditional socio-pedagogic working methods, although these are restructured. On the basis of the fact that social reality represents neither fundamental natural facts that cannot be changed nor normative-rational necessity, which should not be changed, a paradigm for action was applied that depends on using the possibilities of participation to stabilise actions and the associated adoption and pursuit of intentions – whether these are certain forms of rationality, the ability to make choices and decisions, etc. – so that the members of the target groups in question become involved in learning processes. This concept is based on the fact that individuals are basically motivated to form opinions, make decisions, express themselves and demonstrate independent decision-making capacities. Different empirical backgrounds – such as migration, age, gender – are welcome in such a group arrangement; heterogeneous experiences are not eliminated. They are the starting point for the encouragement of individual development processes. Different methods of approaching a question energise the group process and also represent a part of the "solution" of social problems. In organisational and methodical terms, a participation process that is directed in this way offers a platform on which the members of the target groups for the social work can discursively develop a power of judgement. As a direct practical consequence, it is found that standards of value then become conscious and can be recognised and discussed. In the dimension of the application, members of the target groups can relate rules and expectations to complex social contexts. Language is experienced as a means of achieving social relations.

This process of participation is reconstructed by means of documentary methods. Selected study results show how the openly structured pedagogic situation opens up new constructive experiences for the target group members. Results in terms of orientation, competence enhancement, aids to decision-making, network promotion and gender organisation were worked out in the related group discussion process with the target group members (later occupants). The study results not only illustrate the intention of the process but, above all, provide proof of successful participation.

In the theoretical and methodical discussion context, participation is examined as a "poverty alleviation strategy". The life-world concept as used by Habermas is compared and contrasted with the life-world concept as used by Thiersch. Here, a link is established to the Habermas concept of communicative action. This view evokes in turn methodological and methodical considerations which are focussed under the aspect of self-evaluation, as an impulse-giving possibility of making empirical knowledge accessible through reflective knowledge and thus at the same time bringing it into the consciousness as a constituent element of the socio-pedagogically desired participation process.

Against the background of the completed research process, the study then discusses, in summary, the question of what should be understood by the socio-pedagogic project intention, namely the long-term "improving of living conditions": the ability to relate, the experience of networking and negotiating possibilities in terms of a rediscovery of alternative communication patterns, justice and fairness, self-determination in the context of an advocatory ethic (Brumlik), coming of age, integration in the context of intercultural coexistence and skills (Rommelspacher), particularly of women, developing integratively effective social skills. As an aspect emerging from this, the danger of the reification of existing social roll patterns by those operating professionally is examined in this context.

The study presented reflects the positive balance of the socio-pedagogic access that was adopted and comprehensively theorised and justified. As a pedagogic concept and strategy for the alleviation of poverty, participation hypostatises the practice-oriented world approach established in the area of social work and can consequently be positioned against charity-based concepts.

Keywords for the inaugural dissertation
by Hildegard Stumpf

- Summary of a concept of poverty prevention as a socio-pedagogic area of action (empirical study).

- Participation of target group members; pedagogic working methods and strategies for innovative poverty alleviation.

- Methodically reflective reference to experience and viewpoints of experiencing reality of homelessness and poverty of threatened people as a task for pedagogic action.

- Three-point summary evaluation design (Beywl, Heiner): (1) Reconstruction of the pedagogic process (Bohnsack, Peirce), (2) Experts' discussion with the acting professional parties involved, (3) Group discussion with the target group members (Mangold, Meuser/Nagel).

- Theoretical discussion of socio-pedagogic action from the viewpoint of the life-world concepts of Habermas and Thiersch.

- Demonstration of effective improvement in living conditions through participative social work: communication skills of target group members, integration in the context of intercultural coexistence (Rommelspacher), fairness, coming of age (Brumlik), self-determination, networking and negotiation opportunities, but also the danger of the reification of existing social roll patterns.