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Strengthening quality care in professional alternative child and youth care in group homes through continuing professional development

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Abstract:

Between February 2021 and December 2022, a large-scale project developed the 'curriculum for the dual practice-oriented continuing professional development for professionals in professional alternative child and youth care in group homes' in Austria (FICE Austria, 2023). The project was initiated by FICE Austria. Sixteen experts from 20 organisations across Austria took part in developing the curriculum. It aims to further the development of the quality of care in professional alternative child and youth care settings in Austria. Existing and recognised training courses can only qualify professionals for alternative child and youth care settings to an extremely limited extent. This article presents the need for development and presents the cornerstones of the curriculum.

Background for the development of the curriculum

The curriculum aims to contribute to ensuring quality care for children and youth in group homes in Austria. It also sets out to promote development and health across federal and organisational boundaries. The curriculum was developed as part of the so-called *C Circle*, which was made up of 20 experts from 16 organisations who met for 130 hours online and in person. Parallel to the *C-Circle*, a group of eight people was set up, who were responsible for the development of the learning and teaching methods and met 12 times. In addition, five *sounding board* meetings took place. Managers from organisations relating to child and youth care settings, and representatives from research and teaching institutions and related support systems took part in these *sounding boards*.



The background for the development of the curriculum is the quality standards for the processes in professional alternative child and youth care in group homes (FICE, 2019) developed between 2017 and 2019. The successful implementation of these standards in practice across federal states depends to a significant extent on the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of the professionals involved. In addition, other factors play an important role in implementing the quality standards. These includes previous support planning, as well as rosters and available human resources. Existing and recognised training courses can only qualify professionals for alternative child and youth care settings to an extremely limited extent. This is due to their broad content (generalist) and/or lack of practice-oriented learning. They are also characterised by high inconsistency in content. Sting and Lauermaann (2020) explain in their study the inconsistency in the training that qualifies workers for child and youth care settings. The authors also point out that there is no explicit child and youth care-related content in the curricula of current degree programs and that the extent of compulsory internships varies considerably.

Thus, it can be assumed (and is also confirmed by managers of institutions) that graduates of training courses have at the end vastly different professional qualifications for their care work. This outcome is exacerbated by the fact that differing training courses for working with children and youth at risk are recognised in different states due to the federal structure of child and youth care settings in the federal states. In some states, only the professions of social work, social pedagogy¹, pedagogy, educational science, psychotherapy, or psychology are considered to be relevant, while in other federal states, qualifications as teachers, early childhood educators or counsellors are recognised (Riedl, 2022). It cannot therefore be assumed that professionals employed in group homes of alternative child and youth care settings hold equivalent qualifications. This is also confirmed by a survey of the *Volksanwaltschaft* (Austrian ombudsman for protecting and promoting compliance with human rights as part of the UN mandate), which indicates that only about half of the professionals had completed training in social pedagogy (Volksanwaltschaft, 2022). As a result, it seems urgent that professionals are given the opportunity to undergo further training to ensure uniform professional standards and equivalent high-quality care in Austria, and to maintain an Austria-wide professional perspective (Sting, 2023). All children and young people in Austria should have the same right to high-quality care, regardless of which federal state or facility they live in – a circumstance that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has criticised (UN, 2020).

¹ Social pedagogy is the discipline underpinning direct work with children, youth and families across most of Europe, its roots stretching back, primarily, to 19th Century Germany. The concept has struggled to find a place within social work in the English-speaking world, partly because of difficulties in translation and partly because of different welfare traditions (Smith and Whyte, 2008).



Another centrepiece for the development of the curriculum is the quintessence of a learning theory which states that the reflective and theoretical work and study of professionals on and with their own real-world experience is relevant for the needs-based management of practice requirements. By switching between pedagogical practice on the one hand and the reflective framework on the other, experiences in practice and theoretical understanding can be best linked. Thus, professionals' reactions can be reflected in a protected framework (Polutta, 2020). The further training should therefore be designed dually, which means that participants can switch between two locations for learning, and reflect on their own questions, case studies, practice challenges in a protected location of further education.

Finally, practice-oriented dual training ideally contributes to counteracting the current lack and high fluctuation of professionals. Structured supervision and professional support are particularly important if employees are to remain in this highly complex, challenging and at the same time enriching professional field for a longer period. To support the development of children and young people, it is essential to ensure that well-trained, reflective, and stable caregivers are available. Further education can be one way to achieve this (among many other necessary measures).

Didactic orientation of the curriculum

The following didactical approaches to learning are considered trendsetting for further training of professionals in alternative group homes.

Understanding-oriented and reflective approach

The curriculum assumes that the answer to the question of appropriate social pedagogical approaches is always guided by the interpretation of the situation, the needs for support of the child/adolescent, and what (ideally) 'was previously understood' (Nauerth, 2016, p.35).

It is about learning to understand the feelings, behaviours and developmental tasks or potential of children and young people. One needs to consider their past experiences and current situation to be able to derive needs-based and pedagogical approaches. The main objects of understanding in the context of professional alternative child and youth care are the dynamics of the children and young people in their wider surrounding (Schwabe, 2021). Furthermore, family dynamics and relationships, the psychodynamics of the growing child, and associated developmental milestones (understanding of developmental pedagogy), are essential for in-depth understanding. It is particularly relevant that the factors of situations and societal contexts, in particular opportunities and social disadvantages (discrimination, stigmatisation), are included in the process of understanding. This means that the current experiences and support needs of children and young people cannot be explained solely in terms of family or inner mental states, but that the current situation and the currently active



forces in the given field of power (Lewin, 1951) must always be considered. This includes experiences with the support systems of the children/adolescents and their (family) background.

Ultimately, the understanding-focused approach also refers to the self-understanding of the professional. As social-pedagogical processes and the formation of relationships develop as a so-called co-productive process, the professionals inevitably help shape the processes of support and relationships: their work is influenced by their own biographical experiences, and they are inevitably confronted with transference and countertransference. A lot of space should therefore be given to self-reflection on one's own assumptions, entanglements, and biographical experiences. There should also be the possibility for professionals to bring challenges and experiences of their negation of previous knowledge and established patterns of interpretation and action into their own practice and to reflect on them. Current learning theories suggest that learning benefits in a distinct way from situations and occasions in which practiced routines or implicit patterns of interpretation and action do not (any longer) prove themselves useful (Meyer-Drewe, 2010). This requires self-reflection and a protected space for allowing one's own insecurities and the opportunity to learn with and from one another in a manner of appreciation.

However, it is always important to recognise and acknowledge the limits of understanding regarding the grasping of developmental stages, patterns of behaviour, needs, etc. of the growing child or of their parents. In the same way the professional caregiver's self-understanding is limited. Neither self-understanding nor understanding of others is fully possible. Not-knowing and the confrontation with a non-translatable rest (Kläui, 2015) is therefore a core feature of social-pedagogical practice. It is about dealing with this not-knowing as well as with the inevitable tensions of social-pedagogical practice. These always give rise to new inquiry, which can/may also be enjoyable and can offer valuable jumping off points for the professional and personal development of professionals.

Response- and practice-focused

The curriculum is considerably response- and practice-oriented. In line with practical theories of social science, the assumption is made that informed responses cannot be produced through knowledge alone. It also requires corresponding experiences, reflection upon these, and a corresponding framework of interpretation. Theoretical knowledge therefore serves to expand observations, to develop evidence-based pedagogical approaches, and to create a space between pedagogical moments and one's own entanglement.

The curriculum states that further development of the self-efficacy of professionals is considerably dependent on practical experience being linked with theoretical knowledge of interpretation, and on using one's own practical experience to



undergo critical (self-) reflection. This means that the professional experiences of participants are specifically included in the learning, exercise, and reflection processes. The move from pedagogical practice on the one hand to the reflective framework in further education on the other, can link challenges in practice to theoretical understanding, as well as offering a protected framework for practicing professional responses.

Focus on *Haltung*²

The curriculum assumes that *Haltungen* are of crucial importance for the further development of social-pedagogical skills. According to Ader and Schrappner (2020), an inner *Haltung* can be understood as a basic attitude, conviction, and inner compass (see also Kuhl et al., 2014). *Haltung* therefore includes notions of what is desirable, which is intricately linked to basic ethical assumptions. It is important to be aware of this, as they have a normative character, and serve as orientation and reflection for pedagogical action.

Combination of different methods of teaching and learning

Based on the basic didactical orientation of the curriculum, different teaching and learning methods were developed. Central elements are:

- Webinars/learning videos to convey declarative knowledge and pedagogical concepts.
- Self-study, for which materials for learning are provided.
- Block courses (face-to-face courses) that provide for the following group formats:
 - Stage group (overall group of the course) to deepen content of learning and to reflect on the learning and group processes.
 - Practice groups (small groups) that offer a safe space for practice- and response-focused learning (working on case studies, practicing methods, role-playing, etc.).
 - Group Supervision to reflect on one's own biographical and professional experiences with a view to understanding one's own emotional parts and transmission processes in professional relationship dynamics.
- Peer group to deepen the topics covered (literature study, collegial advice, exercises).
- Practical training, in the context of which practice tasks are implemented during normal working hours in your own facility (e.g., biography work, projects of participation, etc.) and then reflected on in small groups.
- Buddy system for discussing open questions, writing joint assignments, reflecting on challenges in professional practice, etc.
- Writing three intermediate and one final assignment.

² *Haltung* is a German word which is finding its way into the English language, not least because there is no direct translation. The term *Haltung* comes closest to the English terms attitude or mind set.



In addition, (voluntary) supervision talks in a one-to-one setting totalling 20 hours are recommended.

Focus of content of the curriculum

The training should comprise at least 60 ECTS credits so that the thematic priorities can be worked out in their necessary depth. The following table details the subject areas:

Table 1

Subjects
1 BASIC PEDAGOGICAL UNDERSTANDING AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK
2 CASE UNDERSTANDING OF DEVELOPMENT- AND LIFEWORLD-ORIENTATION
3 ATTACHMENT-RELATIONSHIP-TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY
4 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIP AND MENTALISATION
5 PARTICIPATIONS OF YOUNGSTERS IN THE FACILITIES
6 THE FACILITIES AS A SAFE PLACE
7 ADMISSION PROCESS AND CARE PLANNING
8 DOCUMENTATION/RECORDING
9 EVERYDAY LIVES IN THE FACILITY
10 GROUP DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL PEDAGOGICAL WORK IN AND WITH THE GROUP
11 PROMOTIONS OF EDUCATION
12 GOALS TO ACHIEVE AND ACCOMPANYING ADOLESCENTS
13 SEX EDUCATION
14 COLLABORATIONS WITH FAMILY
15 ACCOMPANYING TRANSITIONS FROM FACILITIES
16 HEALTH CARE AND PROMOTION
17 BASICS OF CHILD PSYCHIATRY
18 ADDICTION PREVENTION AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH RISKY SUBSTANCE USE
19 MEDIA EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT
20 QUALITY DEVELOPMENT IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE SETTINGS

It is particularly important for the orientation of further education that the thematic focal points are not implemented as separate, self-contained learning units, but are closely interlinked. For example, cross-cutting issues and theoretical approaches should be considered repeatedly (e.g., participation in case studies, in care planning, in everyday life, in transitional support, trauma informed-



pedagogical approaches in relation to sex education, dealing with high-risk consumer behaviour, etc.). The repeated focus on topics and approaches should help to sustainably promote both the understanding and the responses of participants. Furthermore, the above approach should foster the deepening of interlinked, context bound comprehensive professional skills.

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