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Formation of a new occupational group: small entrepreneurs — trainers in Slovenia

1. Introduction

Throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th century, education ‘in alternation’ was the prevailing model of occupational socialisation in Central Europe. This meant that vocational education and training (VET) was directly linked to co-operation with the working environment. The German model of dual system represented its most typical form. This tradition was mostly interrupted by the introduction of socialism, but has reappeared after 1990 Slovenia and others countries.

It is becoming clear today that VET is being extensively reintroduced in the working environment. These changes in education, however, also require changes within companies. In this sense we are witnessing the occurrence of a new socio-professional group, consisting of small entrepreneurs — trainers (or educators), who are taking over the responsibility for occupational socialisation of youngsters by implementing practical training of apprentices or by accepting students for long periods of practical training within educational programmes. This requires considerable communication skills and pedagogic knowledge of this new „trainers” as well as adequate adjustments in their professional self-image and in social recognition of their double role of entrepreneurs and educators.

We will try to establish, by means of empirical analysis, to what degree we can already talk about the existence of a special socio-professional group.

2. Responsibility for the Development of VET for Youngsters in Entreprises

The tradition of alternating education in Slovenia derived, as in all other Central European countries, from the awareness that VET and occupational socialisation of young people can only be successfully implemented directly in the working process.

The White Paper on Education and Training of the European Commission, which also refers to methods and ways of gaining important skills and competencies for employment, underlines one of the basic VET postulates:

„Social aptitudes concern interpersonal skills, i.e. behaviour at work and a whole range of skills corresponding to the level of responsibility held, such as the ability to co-operate and work as part of a team, creativeness and the quest for quality. Full mastery of these skills can be acquired only in a working environment and therefore mainly on the job”

(*Teaching...*, 1996, p. 14).

Therefore, the working environment is becoming an educational place not only because of practical working skills, but perhaps even more because of the development of the social dimension of qualifications. The prevailing tendency in this respect is a decreased relevance of the so-called ‘paper qualifications’ and an increased focus on education oriented toward competence in terms of acquiring practical skills. Different strategies have been used for this purpose.

To quote the White Paper on Education and Training of the European Commission:

„Some Member States are seeking to provide for the acquisition of basic skills within the education system placing an emphasis on trainee/apprenticeship schemes. Some have opted for twinning arrangements between schools and businesses. The main concern being both to place young people in a «work situation» while maintaining the quality of teaching. Other Member States prefer to delay the initial vocational training phase.

The involvement of businesses and social partners in organising initial training and young people’s transition to working life appears to be an established trend, notably in the form of on-and-off-the-job training (for instance in the «dual» system)”

(*Teaching...*, 1996, p. 26).

This trend was also supported by the UNESCO Commission (Bertrand, 1994). It advocates the development of alternation in VET (See: Muršak, 1994), where the labour sphere itself takes over parts of VET in terms of its content, organisation, implementation and evaluation.

Already since 1988, the development of the education system in Slovenia has been directed towards strengthening of the labour sphere in direct implementation of education. It was at that time that the first ‘programmes adjusted for small trades and businesses’, appeared. Out of 124 weeks of education, 49 were carried out in the working environment. With the adoption of a new VET system in 1996, the number of different alternation forms has increased: on the one hand a typical dual system, related to the German dual system model was legally introduced, and on the other hand, the part of practical education in the so-called „school forms” of education has increased, in particular in 4-year secondary professional and technical schools and in post-secondary vocational education. Both forms require involvement of the labour sphere and its specialists dealing with training and taking over new tasks.

3. Responsibility for the Implementation of Practical Training in the Working Environment

Only one trend in the development of VET, important for training in companies, is described here. It has considerable consequences because it requires new types of

educators, mainly part-time trainers. This has a double impact on the human resources aspect. On the one hand, it is necessary to introduce new elements in the existing training of such workers, mostly entrepreneurs in small business and, on the other hand, it is necessary to include new categories of workers in such education who will deal with VET for both young people and adults.

Foremen and equivalent profiles have to be mentioned first. In the new organisation of the dual system they assume an independent role in the implementation of practical education of apprentices, in spite of the fact that they work as independent entrepreneurs who manage small businesses and trades. Special pedagogic preparation is foreseen for them which is compulsory for passing the foreman, managerial staff or other exams.

Previous pilot programmes, adjusted for small trades and businesses already required short pedagogic courses (approx. 40 hours) for trainers in those enterprises in which the employers had taken over a considerable part of practical training. Trainers were acquainted with the main aims and topics of training and relevant literature, and introduced into methods of independent study. Although this education of trainers was insufficient, it was an introduction to the systematic work which is currently under way.

The empirical results presented in this paper, already show an important contribution of these courses to a different role and self-awareness of entrepreneurs/trainers.

Experience shows, and precise legislative regulations of apprentice contracts ensures that the required pedagogic competence will be achieved and maintained. This competence will include basics of the pedagogic communication process, expertise in training methods psychological basics of education. Such training is not compulsory for other implementers of VET, but they can also participate in it.

The second group of implementers are mentors in companies. They train non-apprentice students and those who are following 3 – 4 year VET programmes other than those for small trades and businesses. No pedagogic training of mentors is required. Their pedagogic and didactic adequacy depends only on their natural abilities, motivation and sense of responsibility. Most likely, the negative experiences of these students with regard to their first contact with the working environment, is the main reason why the majority decide for continuing education and not for a professional career in terms of in-job training. Companies do not invest in pedagogic training of educators because they are not formally responsible for pedagogical work and are not bound by any contracts to ensure pedagogical competence of their mentors. As our results show, however, systematic introduction to pedagogic work is the key element in developing the sense of responsibility and awareness of a new professional role of individuals.

There are other categories of implementers, especially at higher levels of vocational education, with specific requirements. Also these implementers are potential initiators of the pedagogic process in the labour sphere, and can contribute to a gradual development of workplaces to both working and training posts.

It is clear from our discussion that trainers in practical education, especially those who take over practical training in the working process, teachers of practical education and instructors, have to develop a double competence, we could even say a double occupational identity:

- professional or practical occupational working competence, which enables successful implementation of basic occupational tasks and
- training competence, which enables a successful transfer of knowledge and experience. It supports successful professional socialisation of young people.

4. Development of a Special Socio-professional Group of Entrepreneurs — Trainers

The question emerging from our analysis of the situation concerned is whether today we can actually talk about this double competence in Slovenia. Is there indeed a special socio-professional group with some common characteristics, consisting of small businessmen, craftsmen and workers in larger companies who take over responsibilities for students and apprentices training. We will try to answer the question on the basis of empirical research carried out in Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (Hojnik, 1998).

The survey included 63 employers: 42 were small businessmen or employed in private small companies and 21 were employed in enterprises of mixed ownership. They have all been involved in education as trainers, either by accepting apprentices for practical training or students from secondary vocational or post-secondary vocational schools, and they are all registered as trainers in various responsible bodies.

Acceptance of students/apprentices to practical training in companies is connected with a great deal of pedagogic and other involvement of the worker in charge and requires a certain degree of pedagogic preparation. 44 persons or 70% of the subjects of the survey underwent between 30 and 70 hours of such preparation.

Suprisingly, 48% said they did not have sufficient pedagogic knowledge for such training, and 38% said they did not have enough practical experience in working with students. These answers reflect a relatively high level of the awareness of importance and responsibility of the subjects with regard to their new/additional function.

The subjects were also asked whether they thought of themselves as 'trainers'.

The answers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Do you see yourself as a trainer?¹

	Trainers in small businesses		Trainers in enterprises		Sum	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
yes	17	80.9	37	88.1	54	90.5
no	4	19.1	5	11.9	9	9.5
Sum	21	100	42	100	63	100

In total, 90% of the answers are positive, which means that these subjects identify with the additional function of 'pedagogic competence' function. The result thus clearly points to the development of a 'double competence' of these subjects. They develop, besides their own professional identity, the identity and self-awareness of trainers, educators or people transferring knowledge to others.

When asked to try and explain this double identity, more than half of them described their role of trainers as an important part of their vocation or occupation (in the sense of German „Beruf“). They feel responsible for adequate transfer of their knowledge.

¹ answers of trainers in small business and answers of trainers in enterprises are shown both separately and together

Their status of 'trainers' places employees in a new situation also with regard to their colleagues. Our hypothesis was that their role of trainers and the knowledge they gained in the course of pedagogic training improves to their ability to communicate and co-operate with co-workers. Those individuals who had acquired pedagogic competence through systematic education were therefore asked whether the development of this competence contributed to an improvement of co-operation with other workers. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Has the development of pedagogic competence improved your co-operation in the working group?²

	Trainers in small businesses		Trainers in enterprises		Sum	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
yes	5	35.7	24	68.6	29	59.2
no	9	64.3	11	31.4	20	40.8
Sum	14	100	35	100	49	100

$$\chi^2 = 4.47 > \chi^2 = (P = 0.05, g = 1) = 3.841$$

A separate comparison was made between businessmen/employees in small companies and trades on the one hand and employees in bigger enterprises on the other. It is interesting that 59% of all share the opinion that their pedagogic competence, obtained by systematic training for educational work, contributes to the development of their capability to communicate and co-operate with co-workers. Even more interesting are the statistically significant differences between employees in small businesses and in big enterprises. It is obvious that small businesses allow for bigger influence and a more pronounced role of the individual, and that communication in small businesses is more important for their work to be efficient. It can be claimed that the development of pedagogic competence is important not only for a successful training of young people, but also for the development of the social dimension which is a necessary component of occupational qualification, i.e. the social competence.

The answers we obtained show that pedagogic training improves communication, leads to more efficient discussions about existing problems and contributes to better organisation of team work.

The next question concerned the attitude of trainers to self-education.

Table 3. Has your attitude to self-education improved?

	Trainers in small businesses	Trainers in enterprises	Sum
	f%	f%	f%
yes	70.6	69.4	69.8
no	29.4	30.6	30.2
Sum	100	100	100

² only those with accomplished systematic pedagogic training in any form were asked

The results confirm that the influence of pedagogic training is positive also in this respect: 70% answered that they are involved in various forms of education more often than before. When asked whether they have changed their self-image after pedagogic training, 73% said that their self-image is different and that the development of pedagogic competence has influenced their occupational identity.

The following group of questions refers to the social status of the individual within the working group. No significant changes were detected. The first question was whether after taking over their additional function, the expectations of their colleagues have changed. The answers are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Have the relations between you and your colleagues changed?

	Trainers in small businesses	Trainers in enterprises	Sum
	f%	f%	f%
yes	9.5	2.6	5.0
no	90.5	97.4	95.0
Sum	100	100	100

We can see that neither these expectations nor the relations between the subjects and their superiors have changed to any large extent. See Table 5.

Table 5. Have the relations between you and your superiors changed?

	Trainers in small businesses	Trainers in enterprises	Sum
	f%	f%	f%
better as before	0.0	15.0	10.0
the same as before	100	85.0	90.0
worse	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sum	100	100	100

It can be concluded that the social relations in the working environment have not changed much. The results are quite interesting if we compare them with those concerning the self-image of the subjects. Obviously, their changed self-identity is not reflected in a different social status.

The last question concerned the subjects' own views regarding their double competence. They were asked whether they thought they had developed a double competence. The answers are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Do you think you have developed a double competence, that is a pedagogical and a professional one?

	Trainers in small businesses		Trainers in enterprises		Sum	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
yes	13	69.9	39	92.9	52	69.8
no	8	39.1	3	7.1	11	30.2
Sum	21	100	42	100	63	100

$$\chi^2 = 9.31 > \chi^2 = (P = 0.05, g = 1) = 3.841$$

Prevailingly, the answers are positive. It is interesting that a statistically significant difference can be observed between trainers in small and those in larger enterprises, with considerably more positive answers of the former.

5. Conclusion

The survey indicated a gradual development of an additional element in the occupational self-identity of workers/trainers, in particular those of small businesses and enterprises, resulting from their self-awareness as educators. This awareness is connected with the development of a sense of responsibility for transferring knowledge and of their 'occupation' in the sense of German 'Beruf'. Through this, the trainers self-image and their relation to their own knowledge also change. These characteristics are more pronounced in the case of small businessmen and craftsmen. For the time being, however, their social environment accepts them in the same way as before they assumed the role of 'educators', although their awareness of a double competence clearly exists and points to the development of differentiation from other workers. In this sense, our hypothesis about the emergence of a new occupational group has been confirmed to some extent. It is still too early to conclude, however, whether a separate socio-professional group with all its inherent characteristics will actually be formed or will remain only a subgroup inside wider occupational categories.

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