

“Barriers to Inclusion – an Ethnographic Study of an Austrian Primary School”

In my multi-sited school-based ethnographic research (Spindler 2000, Erickson 1984, Abu El-Haj 2007), I focus on inclusive schooling policies and practices in Poland, Austria and Germany. I explore the ways that schools carry out the translation of inclusive policies into school practices. Hence, I treat the term of inclusion as a liquid concept. I ask the question: How is the concept of “inclusion” filled with meaning in each of the schooling sites that I encountered and how are barriers to inclusion constituted? To answer these questions I take field notes of classroom activities, I document school spaces and artifacts, informal conversations among students and teachers, as well as conduct interviews with teachers, pedagogues and directors.

Today, I want to limit my presentation to the Austrian research context where the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the right to inclusive primary and secondary education for all children within mainstream schooling was ratified in 2008. In the following, I will first give an overview of the wider research context in terms of the policy level and pressure points of the Austria education system. Then I will give an overview of the narrower research context which means the school and the classroom in which I conducted my ethnographic research. Second, I will read from my ethnographic field notes and highlight how the pressures outlined in the wider research context play out in the school community that I observed. Third, I want to close with a few comments on teacher education.

The wider research context

Inclusive education policies challenge the Austrian school system, which has relied on the logic of special education (pedagogy) without rupture from the 19th century until today. The strong commitment to special education pedagogy and terminology remains regardless of euthanasia killings and forced sterilizations from 1939 to 1945, as well as forced mass internment in religious and welfare institutions of people with disabilities until well into the 1990s. The confinement of the “disabled” body in special facilities has been exercised and promoted on the basis of the medical model of disability. This model assumes a biological deviation from the norm that needs to be treated and taken care of in individual and specialized institutions under expert care from the field of medicine and psychology. Since the 1980s, parent initiatives have pushed for the right to choose mainstream education for their children with disabilities which was finally granted in 1993. Inclusive pedagogy as

opposed to special pedagogy does not look at the limitations of an individual but takes barriers to participation into view. The paradigm of inclusive pedagogy seeks to forge alliance with all minority groups whose access to social goods, such as education, are reduced on the basis of ability, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. Theoretically, I use the framework of DisCrit, Disability Studies and Critical Race in education by Beth Ferri, Subini Annamma and David Connor to read practices of exclusion in school.

Taking a closer look at the student body of special schools in Austria, it can then be observed that disability overlaps crucially with identity markers, such as race/culture, class and gender. Looking at the student population intersectionally we can see that more children and especially males whose first language is not German but Turkish, Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian attend special schools than regular mainstream institutions. The Austrian National Action Plan Disability 2012-2020 highlights that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, as cognitive impairments or the inability to communicate verbally places them especially at risk.¹

This double system of mainstream and special schooling on the primary school level is situated within an education system that is based on early tracking by performance. In the fourth grade at the age of 10, children are grouped into performance levels which determine the secondary education facility that they are allowed to enter. No parent may oppose the ruling of the teacher on whether his or her child is good enough to attend the academic “gymnasium.” At this point, we should bear in mind the National Education Report Austria from 2012 states that the highest predictor for school success in Austria is the educational degree of a student’s parent. Therefore, the report speaks of “education heredity” to grasp the reproduction of social class through early educational tracking and the placement of children with disability at the bottom of the educational hierarchy.

The narrower research context

Let us now step down from the macro level and enter the micro level of my educational research. My research site was a school located in an area that one teacher described to me as “ghettoized.”² She explained that the catchment area of the primary school

¹ “Frauen mit Behinderungen werden neben behinderungsspezifischen Belastungen zusätzlich durch geschlechtsspezifische Benachteiligungen belastet (**Mehrfachdiskriminierung**).“ National Action Plan Disability 2012-2020, p. 20

² “Es ist so, dass dieser Stadtteil eher mmmm... böse Zungen würden dies als ghettoisiert bezeichnen.“ See: Transcript 6 Austria, Interview with Teacher B, May 2, 2017, ll. 3-4

was the result of “political failures” due to which the “social underclass, many unemployed parents, uneducated classes, people with a migration background” lived here.³

So from March to July 2017, I observed the fourth grade of this primary school. The school was considered mildly inclusive in the narrow sense of including children with an attributed special needs status because of the fact that it had recently employed a special pedagogue who provided additional classes for three children with a diagnosed status. Applying a “wider inclusion term” this school was highly inclusive since it was attended by 240 children of 14 different nationalities, which means that 70 percent had a migrant background. In addition to German, language classes were offered in Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Turkish. Religion class was offered for at least six different orientations, such as Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, Free Church, Islam and a branch of Islam, called Alevi.

In the classroom in which I immersed myself and observed lessons, there were 19 students, four boys and 15 girls. Two children were of Austrian decent, all other classmates came from Central and North Africa, from Turkey, from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. No one had an official special-needs status, but six students received additional lessons in German during the regular school day. The class unit 4x, was taught by two female teachers in their 30s who shared all curriculum subjects.

Ethnographic Data and Analysis

Tuesday, May 9, 2017

*Ceren receives her test back and turns around to the kids sitting behind her. She shows her class test to the other children; her mouth is open, her eyebrows are raised. **She mouths “everything is red.”** She takes the paper and shoves it into her school bag. While the children continue with another task, the teacher shows me previous class work of Ceren. Almost every word is underlined with red ink. **“She writes ‘Busmann’ (bus man) instead of ‘Busfahrer’ (bus driver) to describe the man who drives the bus,”** the teacher points out to me. **She tells me about her daughter, who has to recount a fable in old, very difficult German. “Unimaginable to do something like this here,”** she says.*

Thursday, June 8, 2017

³ “Also..., meiner Ansicht nach sind einige politische Versäumnisse... sind die soziale Schicht ist eher Unterschicht und viele arbeitslose Eltern, bildungsferne Schichten, eben Leute mit Migrationshintergrund.“ See: Transcript 6 Austria, May 2, 2017, ll. 4-6

*The children may choose where they want to sit and work. Some sit on the carpet in the book corner, some on the floor, some outside the classroom, and others stay at their tables. The atmosphere is calm; the children are focused. I am asked to listen to and correct interviews in English that the kids had to prepare and now present to me. After several other pairs, it is Tim and Kevin's turn. Tim asks: "How do you want to be tattooed?" Kevin wants to have two children whose names he will each tattoo on one side of his chest and underneath their names he wants to write their dates of birth. He imagines having a son and a daughter. **Tim also wants two children, a boy and a girl. Their exchange continues until Kevin asks, "Would you rather go into the past or into the future?" Tim hesitates. "Into the past," he answers "so I can't ruin the future."** Kevin agrees. He would also choose the past as a place to visit so he can see his mom when she was a little girl. "I would go to her school and say, 'Hi! I am your son.' " They giggle. Then Tim replies, "But the school would be all torn down and in ruins, wouldn't it, that school?" By now they have switched into German and Kevin shakes his head vigorously. "Oh, because your mom went to school in Bosnia?" Kevin asks. "My mom already went to school here," pointing at the ground. Tim nods.*

Analysis

I want to draw your attention to the three students that play a role in these notes. There is Ceren who received her class test back which was covered in red ink, attesting her complete academic failure. Although national and international education reports have criticized the double rise of children with special educational needs status in both special schools and inclusive settings, the example of Ceren showed that the mechanisms in store also failed to address impairment where it should have been recognized. Although her teachers were aware that Ceren had had ear surgery and consequently experienced impaired hearing, the girl did not receive any extra help in class, such as visualized tasks or prompts with which she could better follow class discussions. She also did not receive counseling on hearing aids. Her weak performances in class were attributed to her low German-language proficiency, which her teacher proved by pointing out that a "bus man" was not the correct word to describe a "bus driver." Ignorant of her own child's privilege as a native Austrian, the teacher compared Ceren's performance to the performance of her daughter who was able to even recite a fable in old German flawlessly. That Ceren's failures might have been inflicted by her hearing loss rather than a cognitive weakness was not considered. Ceren was simply a very poor student who had trouble hearing. Contextualizing my observations with the preceding wider research context analysis, I would like to suggest that various disadvantageous categories intersected in

the person of Ceren. She was a female with the non-German mother tongue of Kurdish and a hearing impairment. As she did not wear hearing aids, her parents had not pushed for the recognition of her hearing impairment, exposing her to an alarming state of vulnerability. The assets the Austrian education system provided for children like Ceren, such as special pedagogical treatment for hearing impairment, counseling for parents and advice on hearing aids, were not mobilized on her behalf because her family did not exercise their right to these services and her teachers remained inactive.

Furthermore, there were Kevin and Tim. Both shared a sense of future failure that they wanted to escape. They imagined themselves as their past-selves, instead of their future-selves for fear of “ruining the future.” This fear I would like to set next to an experience that Kevin had as a response to his work. When he wrote about a boy pointing a gun at a stranger who had entered the boy’s room at night, the teacher commented: “I hope you will never point a gun at somebody.” These were future assumptions that Kevin was confronted with. Though Kevin’s current living situation might not leave much room to imagine the situation differently, the teacher did not use her power in a way that would open positive fields of action, but rather expressed to a 10-year-old child an expectation of failure and misconduct. I argue that this sort of judgment points to the way the Austrian school system expects teachers to make assumptions about their pupils’ schooling careers. As early as in third grade, pupils start building a record of performance that will be considered in formulating recommendations for gymnasium or middle school. Sadly, the teachers of 4x might even be right in their judgment if we consider the statistics on upward mobility gathered by OECD. In Austria, among the 25- to 44-year-olds whose parents were born abroad and did not acquire a secondary school diploma, 50 percent do not finish school successfully.

Lastly, I want you to take notice of the fact that their teacher labelled her class as “Generation Unemployment Benefits.” Kevin and Tim’s language game tragically mirrored this label that their teacher had shared informally with her colleague in a moment when I was listening.

Comment on Teacher Education

In conclusion, it can be said that inclusion tied to the mobilization of additional resources functioned only as a very narrow concept in this primary school since three students alone received special pedagogical help. In the case of Ceren, I would like to go as far as speaking of racializing school failure since multilingualism was used as a means to tolerate poor

performance instead of investigating in other reasons that could stand in the way of her learning and her successful participation in class.

Tim and Kevin's fear of the future captures the pressures that the early tracking system produces within students. Geared towards spotting weaknesses instead of highlighting potentials, these two students assumed nothing positive for their own future since a recommendation to the academic gymnasium was sold to them as the reason for working hard and doing well. If they failed this option, they belonged to the second choice - a choice that their teachers judged as the road to unemployment benefits.

Teacher professionalism cannot define itself in any other way than a commitment to inclusive education not as an act of mercy but an essential right to participation that cannot be reserved for some and forgotten and immobilized for others. First and foremost, I argue for cultural therapy of teacher students who belong overwhelmingly to the dominant, able-bodied group of society. Future teachers must realize their own privilege and power they hold over their students on an often times material, cultural, able-bodied and heteronormative basis. Only then, they can build an alliance with those they discriminate against in everyday classroom interactions.