# Module – Power Relations

Christa Markom / Jelena Tosic / Martina Sturm / Paul Sperneac-Wolfer (AUT)

## Why teach this module?

If one looks at the institution of the school in terms of power structures, teachers appear as having a double role: On the one hand, they are involved in hierarchical structures – (e.g. the headmaster, school board or the national curriculum). On the other hand, they play the dominant role in teacher-pupil relationships which they have to manage in a sensitive pedagogic way. This double role implies the necessity to navigate both sides of the everyday school life. The following module aims to introduce basic anthropological texts on education, power and (in)equality in the context of educational systems in order to equip the students to better understand this double role and to be able to manage it more consciously. The aim is to develop a critical, self-reflective view of the educational system and one's own role within the system by acquiring, consolidating and discussing knowledge based on seminal anthropological findings.

## Ethnographic Entry Points

The forms power structures can take in everyday school life have been richly documented ethnographically: In a special issue of the scientific journal Power and Education, researchers show in six different contexts how social processes such as increasing privatisation or the focus on marketability for the main groups in the primary school sector have a considerable negative influence on the experience of school (Hall & Pulsford 2019). How in the American context the creation of so-called "third spaces" can reduce power asymmetries between teachers and students without teachers losing their authority (Coleman 2020). The close intertwinement of language and power structures becomes visible in a private multilingual school in Cyprus, where students strategically switch between different languages in different situations (Christodoulou & Ioannidou 2020). Social power structures can often be reproduced by institutional discrimination, as documented for Peruvian students in Spain. There, a public discourse about deficits and a stereotype about "the Peruvian" was internalized by the students and led to a rapidly decrease of school performance within the first year after arrival (Lucko 2011).

## Ways of understanding

These are just a few examples of the many forms of power structures in everyday school life. At the same time, theoretical approaches are needed that describe the connection between power and education. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1996), educational inequality is rooted in differences between majority and minority groups in terms of access to different types of schools, opportunities for advancement to higher education, and the academic goals that can be achieved. Educational inequality generally means that school prospects for children from the majority and minority groups are unequal (Bourdieu/Passeron 1996: 158). In this sense, the term minority refers to a structural disadvantage of the respective groups, which is based, among other things, on the

TRANSCA

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

choice of the type of knowledge to be taught in schools. According to Bourdieu and Passeron, by defining certain concepts of achievement, schools focus on certain groups that are considered essential to society. These are the socially best positioned groups in terms of most power resources. This orientation of instruction towards the majority society, for example with regard to the language of instruction or the type of knowledge, can result in various challenges for minority groups (see Bourdieu / Passeron 1996: 160ff; Witherspoon 2015: 84).

Furthermore, the French theorist Michel Foucault has done much work on the relationship between knowledge and power. According to Foucault, it is possible to analyze how education functions in concrete historical configurations, in terms of the actual processes, techniques and effects that come into play when certain individuals teach or receive certain knowledge (Ball 2013).

Approaches to power relations are useful for discussing and understanding:

- The many actors involved in the educational process (teachers, students, administration, educational system, parents, etc.) and to question their powerful and powerless positions.

## Suggested Exercises

In this module, participants will be asked to explore their surroundings and see where they can find which kind of power dynamic in the streets and public spaces. To whom, how much and why is space given? Who designs public spaces and for whom are they designed? Which types of transport are promoted and which are merely tolerated etc.?

After this first part of the observation, the participants shift their focus to education and start looking for indicators of power structures in schools, universities, teacher-training colleges and other public institutions. Participants are expected to raise questions on issues such as the degree of accessibility of certain places within the school building for teachers, students and headmasters; the hierarchies in places such as the schoolyard;  the buffet or the teachers' room, the place and manner of power shifts, or the degree of freedom to act in a certain way; and whether this is acceptable depending on the place, time and context. It is crucial that participants observe the power relations not only between certain groups in the educational institutions, but also within the groups. Which children have the most power in the class? What is this power based on and what does it allow? Are all school children allowed to speak in their mother tongue? Do newly hired teachers have the same privileges as those who have worked in the institution for years?

## Learning Prospects
- participants are familiarized with fundamental texts on education and power and educational (in)equality
- participants have developed a critical, self-reflexive view on the educational system as well as their role within it
- participants are familiarized with the basics of participant observation and other ethnographic research methods to utilize them in their own educational setting
- participants are able to deconstruct their own privileges and their perception of the world as an objective reality as well as on the hegemonic structures in formal and informal educational settings

TRANSCA

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

# Literature

Journal "Power & Education", Sage.

Blasco, C. M., Vargas, C. A., (2011). Educational Policy, Anthropology, and the State. in Pollock, M. und Levinson, B. (Eds.). A Companion to the Anthropology of Education. Chichester [England]: 368-387.

Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C. (1996). Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture. London [u. a.].

Flick, U. (2014). An Introduction to Qualitative Research (5th ed.). London: SAGE.

Further Readings

Adorno, T. W. (1971): „Erziehung zur Mündigkeit". Suhrkamp.

Amit, V. (2000). Constructing the Field. Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World. London: Routledge.

Ball, S. J. (2013). Focault, Power and Education. London: Routledge.

Christodoulou, V. & Ioannidou, E. (2020). Classroom communities, language choices and accessibility to discourse: the case of a multi-ethnic/multilingual class of a private school in Cyprus, International Multilingual Research Journal, 14:1, 58-75.

Coleman, A. (2020). Room for a third space with testimonio as curriculum and pedagogy, Journal of Latinos and Education, 19:1, 3-17.

Foley, D. (2011). The Rise of Class Culture Theory in Educational Anthropology. In Pollock, M. und Levinson, B. (Eds.). A Companion to the Anthropology of Education. Chichester [England]: 81-96.

Gladney, D. C. (1998). Introduction: Making and Marking Majorities, in Gladney, D. (Eds.). Making Majorities: Constituting the nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States. Stanford: 1-9.

Gladney, D. C. (1998). (Eds.). Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States

Karakasoglu, Y., Mecheril, P., & Goddar, J. (2019). Pädagogik neu denken!: Die Migrationsgesellschaft und ihre Lehrer_innen. Weinheim: Beltz.

Lucko, J. (2011). Tracking Identity: Academic Performance and Ethnic Identity among Ecuadorian Immigrant Teenagers in Madrid. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 42:3, 213–229.

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. Annual Review of Anthropology, 24, 95-117.

Mecheril, P. (2016). Handbook Migrationspädagogik. Weinheim: Beltz.

Spivak, G. C. (1996). Subaltern studies. Deconstructing historiography. In D. Landry & G. M. MacLean (Eds.), The Spivak reader: Selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York, NY: Routledge: 203-236.

Steffensen, T. & Havgaard, M.H. (2020). Knowledge and behaviour management in the multi-ethnic classroom: an ethnographic study of teachers' classroom-management strategies and minority pupils' participation in different school subjects, Ethnography and Education, 15:1, 64-78.