2nd International Conference on Education, Economy & Society
Paris 21-24 July 2010

Actes
Proceedings

Volume 3
Articles non-évalués/Non-Refereed Papers
Magyar-Haas – Yilmaz

Direction/Editor
Guy Tchibozo

ANALYTRICS
The Paradox of the Circle as a “Good” Educational Mode

Veronika Magyar-Haas¹, Melanie Kuhn²
¹University of Zurich, Institute of Education – Switzerland
vmagyar@ife.uzh.ch
²University of Bielefeld, Faculty of Education – Germany
melanie.kuhn@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract
Participants in circle rituals are exposed to other people looking at them and have little possibility to evade this surveillance. The others’ looks constitute the self, but they also make one feel ashamed, which shows the objectivating nature of looks. Based on a contrasting analysis of the field notes from two ethnographic studies at different educational institutions, this contribution will focus on this paradox nature of the circle between subjectivation and de-subjectivation. The paper will examine the following questions: Which ways of the participants’ (de-)subjectivation are made possible or are prevented by different ways of intervening practiced by education professionals? How do children and adolescents deal with the paradox nature of circle situations in the context of certain power relationships? The interpretation yields insights into the specific connection between the educational-material formation, disciplinary techniques, and power.

Keywords: ritual – power – (de-)subjectivation – disciplining – ethnography

1. Introduction

Primarily in the context of the kindergarten, primary school and youth work, circle rituals characterize and structure everyday educational life. The goals of circle rituals are the experience of mutual affection, equal rights, the softening of hierarchies, and more. Based on a contrasting analysis of a morning circle at a kindergarten and a circle meeting during a dancing project at an open social education institution for girls, this contribution will point out what core paradoxes are constitutive, across institutions, and how the ways in which actors deal with these paradox situations are reshaped.

From a performative theory point of view, educational reality is constituted by what happens in the course of performative acts (Austin, 1962/2002) that are staged in a ritualized way by social actors (see Wulf & Zirfas, 2007, p. 17). Circle rituals of the kind that are the focus of this analysis may be considered to be exemplary for the all in all strongly ritualized nature of the educational institutions kindergarten and open social educational institution. For the reconstruction of circle rituals, two of the social functions of rituals as worked out by Wulf et al. (2001) prove to be helpful: First, rituals produce collectively shared knowledge and action practices and reproduce them by way of this social order (see Wulf & Zirfas, 2001, p. 198). Second, due to their staging nature they establish exclusions and thus produce community (p. 204). In our opinion, what
is crucial for determining rituals is not superficially their regularity but rather their significance for the social. Also, what is constitutive for the ritualized staging of educational everyday life is the “physical co-presence of the people contributing to the event who commonly perform an action” and, by way of bodily-mimetic processes, produce a commonly shared reality (Wulf & Zirfas, 2007, p. 17).

If, according to the performative view, one understands the reality of educational everyday life as being created collectively by the children and adolescents together with the education professionals, then at the methodological level, the question of the how of these collective stagings is the focus of our empirical reconstruction. Accordingly, dense descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of educational everyday life were given in the course of the two ethnographic studies, which are located in the reconstruction of meaning paradigm. The interpretation of the data material was conducted using a sequential analytical procedure, in that the material, following suggestions developed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996), was coded in the following sequence: open coding, axial coding, theoretical coding.

2. Scenes

2.1 Morning circle at the kindergarten

What constitutes the ritual of the morning circle in this kindergarten group is that it always starts in the same way, in that the names of the children, present or absent, are called out in a playful way. By way of this ritual, the group is created performatively. The scenes presented in the following reveal how this constituting of the group is continued by means of the staging of a formalized circle game, and how the children are in addition verbally and physically introduced to the valid norms of behavior of the morning circle. The following scenes were selected to show fragile moments in these stagings. The focus is on situations in which (game) processes that usually run smoothly are interrupted, which prompts the educators to intervene in special ways.

(...) For the next game, “Turn, small spinning top, turn”, Mirja chooses Hannah as the next player. At once Hannah covers her face with her hands and, in a tearful voice, says, “no, no, no,” while shaking her head. “Should somebody else do it instead?” Irina, the educator, asks. Silently Hannah shakes her head. Then Irina tells Mirja: “Then do it again, Mirja.” Once more, Mirja turns around, pointing with her forefinger, and chooses another child. Hannah takes her hands down and loudly joins the singing during the next rounds. (...) When she is chosen for the third time, Hannah again covers her head with her hands and, shaking her head says, “No, no, no.” Angelika, the other educator, tells her: “There’s no need to cry, Hannah. You don’t have to do it. Who should do it instead?” “No, no, no,” Hannah continues, still shaking her head and not looking. “Shall I do it instead?” Angelika asks. “No, no,” Hannah shakes her head. “OK, Tami, then you do it again,” Angelika says.
(...). Then, several children, one after the other, present songs. Meanwhile, Mirja stands up again and again, (...) turns around, goes to Irina, and sits down on her lap. Then she stands up again and takes one step out of the circle. Irina holds her and draws her back onto her lap, saying silently, “Psst. Mirja, Hamid is singing a song.” Mirja makes a squealing noise, makes a face, and is now lying across Irina’s lap. She stretches her arm towards a small chair that is not far from the circle. Irina holds her, saying, “No, Mirja, stay” and “What is it that you want?” Again Mirja stretches her body towards the small chair. Irina tells her, “Wait, Mirja, stay here a while. Later you may do that” and holds her on her lap for a short time until finally circle time comes to an end. (...)

2.2 A dance project at a youth center

The dance project starts with a preparatory meeting, during which the six girls, ages 11 to 15, without having been asked, sit down in a circle in the almost empty room. The way of negotiating as well as insisting on valid rules for the circle formation constructs this meeting as an educational setting. The following scene shows, how power relations and disciplining strategies are connected to performatively constituting the group.

"Also, you must decide – yes, Renan, you, for example – do I want to participate or not, all right? Also you, Annemarie, and then you will have to come every time. And Indira, do you want to participate now, always?” Tamara, Sozialpädagogin, or social education worker [SE 1], asks each the girls who are sitting in a circle, addressing each of them individually. “Yes, I know this class, Ethel has shown them [the dancing steps] to me,” Indira says. “But Ethel is not here at all,” another girl shouts. “Well, exactly, well. Now this is something more serious, because it’s also a group, and you must be able to rely on each other now,” Tamara says. “Well, I would like to say something about relying on each other. For example, there are a few people,” Üzgül starts saying, after having had her hand up the whole time. “Now please listen to Üzgül”, the social education worker says, when two girls starting talking to each other. Üzgül goes on: (...) “for example, as Olga [another social education worker, SE 2] said, we want to do a presentation of the dance. But if some of us don’t come, I think this is dumb, because, what is the point, what is the point of this class?” “Yes, that is exactly what I’ve just said”, Tamara [SE 1] says. “Yes, I think it is dumb that they won’t come, because if we always have to stop because they haven’t learnt it yet, then I certainly don’t know, then somehow they shouldn’t be allowed to dance with us because” “Yes, exactly, girls who do not come regularly and don’t know the dance will simply not be allowed to perform with us,” says the social education worker. “But what if somebody is ill?” Renan asks. “Then that’s different, but still, if she doesn’t know the steps...,” Tamara [SE 1] replies. "Umm, Olga,” Üzgül does not finish her sentence and lifts her arm. “It will look stupid if everyone knows the dance steps and one girl doesn’t, won’t it? (2) That is why you must show the others the steps more,” the social education worker continues. (...
3. Formations of the Material and the Symbolic Circle

Circle rituals serve the constituting of groups, both in the spatial-material and the symbolic-immaterial sense. If the former is constituted by the spatial-material arrangement of the participants’ bodies forming a circle, then belonging functions as a criterion for the latter. Although in both settings physical presence means an obligation to take part in the circle ritual, at the same time it proves to be a fragile constitutional feature of belonging to the group, to the symbolic-ideal circle. The setting at the kindergarten is precisely also about communicating to the children that also children not present are part of the group, in the dance project by contrast, it is negotiated via the present girls present themselves, to what extent they are legitimate members of the symbolic circle. For the kindergarten, the formal aspect of being enrolled functions as the criterion of belonging to the group, and taking part in the circle is binding without question for all children present. For the voluntary dance group, in contrast, declaring to take part regularly proves to be a necessary, although not sufficient, criterion, for the young people are supposed to deliver performance and accept majority decisions. In this respect, belonging to the dancing group appears precarious and potentially shaming. At the day nursery the formal circle is the more strongly topic of discussion among children and professionals, in the dance group, via the discussion on ideally belonging to the group, the focus is primarily on the constitution of the symbolic circle. Thus, in both contexts it is not only about the in situ observable, formal-material circle, but also always about a symbolic, ideal circle, which is performatively created by the material formation.

4. Paradoxes of the Circle

Thus, circle situations have not only a formal but also an ideal group-constituting function. Viewed from the outside, this material formation presents itself as a closed entity that is seldom broken up, and only to let in legitimate members. Towards the inside, the circle is open; in both the kindergarten circle and the educational setting of the dance project the participants in the circle rituals are with their whole bodies always potentially exposed to the surveillance of others. In this way the circle provides protection against the “outside”, but not against the “inside,” for the possibilities to evade the group members’ looks are limited, and there is a certain degree of protectionlessness. This intimating construction provides a stage for the children and adolescents to produce input, to create an image, but also to lose face, if this space of presentation changes into a space of “being on exhibit,” or “being presented.” The analysis of further records showed that at both the kindergarten and the dance class, determining the phenomena of “presentation” and “being presented” functions as core elements or core paradoxes of the ritualized circle situations, which here, in a situation of being looked at, with the constant possibility of being looked at and thus being caught out, are explained in more detail as the paradox of subjectivation and de-subjectivation processes.

The objectivating and at the same time subjectivating nature of “the look” (le regard) is particularly relevant for Jean-Paul Sartre’s analyses. In Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, Sartre (1943/1966) explains the extent to which the constant possibility of being seen by the Other
may objectivate me – not for myself, however, but for the Other (p. 343, p. 364). The look is at the same time subjectivating, due to a feeling of being accepted as a living, personal existence, as a subject. At the same time, however, it is the look of the Other that can make us feel shame. With the circle formation, the potentially shaming nature of the situation is particularly increased, due to fact that possibilities to evade are restricted. With this formation there is no outstanding observing position, as Michel Foucault (1977) worked out for the Panopticon; instead, everyone participating in the circle is raised to a potential observer. Accordingly, for the analysis of circle situations, the term Zentrorama used by Gunnar Schmidt (2003) suggests itself: an observed focal point, where the subject becomes blind and knows that it is being made the object of a multitude of looks. In this contribution, this focal point is not grasped as geometric but as symbolic, in the sense of a guided (attention) focus on certain participants in the circle. The two recorded settings reveal the unequal power relations that are entailed in this construction of the symbolic center.

In both of the settings, this centering, this becoming a focus, takes place through the children and young people being looked and through their being addressed by name. As in circle situations there is highlighting of the individuals, individual children are made the focus of attention, made the symbolic center; they are in the spotlight, so to speak, and thus subjectivated. At the kindergarten, this occurs when the educators address the child by name who is not acting in accordance with the rules. During the dance class, this happens when three out of eight girls of the group are addressed by their names and are asked to attend the group meetings regularly. De-subjectivation results when those being addressed individually by looks and by their names are put on display with their (for the time being) inabilities or shortcomings. The shaming nature of such de-subjectivation processes is evident in that the participants here are constructed in front of everybody as children who are not yet able to correctly say the game question or as young girls who are unreliable attendees. What will be interesting in the following is, first, the possibilities of the children and young people to evade this structurally powerful, centroramic, educational setting, and, second, the interventions and disciplining that are applied to mark certain ways of evading as legitimate or illegitimate.

5. Ways of Dealing with the Paradox Circle Situation

5.1. Legitimate and illegitimate ways of evading

For the material and the symbolic formations of the circle, the paradox of the look proves to be a constitutive, although the individual’s possibilities to evade diverge strongly.

As to the morning circle at kindergarten, the participants struggling to (il)legitimately evade happens primarily at the level of the formal-material circle. Hannah evades the attention directed at her through verbality, by way of her massive “no, no, no” and her crying.
Both the material formations of circle and space and the additionally implied norm of not leaving the circle function as limitations of physical possibilities to evade. Covering her face, the most symbolic part of the body, Hannah evades the others’ looks as an entire person. Presenting this gesture several times means an almost absolute evading, which is marked as legitimate by the educator’s permissive way of acting. On the other hand, Mirja’s attempt to completely evade the formal-material circle by breaking out is constructed as being illegitimate through Irina keeping hold of her body. This sanctioning makes the previously implicit norm is now explicit.

If at the kindergarten evading from the formal-material circle on the whole happens by physical ways of evading, with the dancing project, on the other hand, it happens first of all through verbality. When Indira, by being addressed by her name and being looked at, is made the focus of everybody’s attention by the social education worker, she turns the focus from herself to Ethel, another girl who is not present. The harsh intervention by another girl: “But Ethel is not here at all,” marks this attempt at distracting an illegitimate way of evading. In contrast to the very much adult-structured and adult-dominated kindergarten, where exclusively the professionals mark legitimate and illegitimate ways of evading, with the dancing project this is done collectively. Indira’s attempt to move out of the focus of attention nevertheless comes along with stylizing her as a legitimate, ready-to-perform member of the symbolic circle. She refers to Ethel as having already shown her the dance steps. The strong need for negotiating legitimate and illegitimate ways of belonging to the symbolic circle of the dancing group is expressed by Renan’s hypothetical question, “But what if somebody is ill?” Here it is about testing legitimate reasons for not attending the formal circle without losing symbolic membership.

5.2. (Power and) Disciplining

Particularly Foucault pointed out the essential meaning of disciplining mechanisms at and for educational institutions. From a historiographic point of view Foucault reconstructed how disciplining at school succeeded at making the children’s bodies the subject of highly complex manipulation and conditioning (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). What he considers constitutive for disciplining at school is mutual and hierarchized observation, and thus Foucault (1975/1977) locates an “organized surveillance relationship” at the “center of the teaching practice” (p. 228). In contrast to traditional classroom instruction at school, this surveillance relationship is increased in the circle formation, due to its “centroramic” nature, which already has a disciplining effect due to the potential for being observed. Furthermore, in both educational settings the children’s and young people’s body and behavior practices are normed and normalized through a variety of disciplining actions by the educators.

Sitting on the educator’s lap may be seen as a subtle, disciplining strategy that is then also explicitly and verbally expressed (“No, Mirja, stay here”) when the child threatens to break out of the circle formation. The teacher’s taking hold of Mirja’s body makes leaving the circle illegitimate and draws a clear boundary. At the kindergarten, disciplining and regulating happens exclusively at the level of the formal circle, which as a place the children may not leave. Belonging to it
ideally is not a topic of discussion but is actively practiced by way of the material formation, although without making it further explicit. In the dance project, the ways of disciplining refer primarily to the symbolic circle, not to the ideal group; they are of purely verbal nature and much more subtle. Unquestioningly, so to speak as a matter of course, making the young girls form a formal circle prominently indicates an already practiced degree of self-disciplining. Üzgül’s initial question about the point, “What is the point of this class?” refers to the final result: the dance presentation. Latently, the statement by the social education worker, “it will look stupid,” refers to being looked at by outside observers and is of a disciplining nature. Subjectivating the dancing group as being successful is definitely necessary, in order to not be shamed in front of an imagined audience, which would be equal to de-subjectivation. By referring to the audience and the group as a whole, the formal, social, and normative criteria of belonging to the symbolic-ideal circle are legitimated.

At the kindergarten, the highest degree of disciplining in the sense of forced inclusion is physical holding of the child, to keep the child in the circle. In contrast, with the dance project, potentially exclusion from the symbolic circle functions as the highest degree of disciplining. It seems as if negotiating belonging and exclusion works as a strategy to reproduce the norms like reliability, willingness and the acceptance of majority decisions. The clearly hierarchically structured power relation between professionals and children or adolescents is reflected, among other things, by the educators’ unrestricted right to speak and intervene, for no reasons must be given, and it is also unequally distributed. The adults set valid norms of behavior for the circle, without of the need for any negotiations and without any need to explicitly formulate them as rules. In stark contrast to the dance project, where rules are legitimated by referring to the unity of the group’s majority decision, at the kindergarten no justification of existing rules seems to be necessary.

6. Prospects

The previous considerations regarding the paradox circle situation can be systematically theoreticized using De Certeau’s distinction between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic,’ which De Certeau applied to the analysis of possibilities to combine ways of acting (De Certeau, 1980/1988, p. 12). Through this, the focus of the analysis shifts from the subjects – the professionals, children, and adolescents – to the possible types of action within the educational setting of the circle.

‘Strategy’ requires a subject of will and power and assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and that is dominated by seeing (De Certeau, 1980/1988, p. 88). Accordingly, perfect for this is the circle over which the educators and in which all participants are visible and observable to each other. Precisely by dominating places through seeing, strategies can create certain types of acting and can force them upon ‘those ruled,’ as the material presented here showed, for example by the normed practicing of the organized course of games or by being forced to participate consistently in the dance project. In both settings, the strategy of the professionals is based on their ways of disciplining, with the goal of staging both the material and the symbolic circle “according to the norms.”
A ‘tactic’, on the other hand, is for De Certeau characterized by both the lack of a proper (a spatial or institutional localization) and the lack of power (De Certeau, 1980/1988, p. 89f). Accordingly, tactics themselves are not able to produce any types of acting; all they are able to do is to tactically exploit, manipulate, and remodel (p. 78) the strategically enforced types of acting. Thus, tactics may be read as successful tricks of the ‘weak’ within an order established by the ‘strong’ (p. 92), the former scoring a coup through skillfully exploiting time and waiting for a favorable situation (p. 90). In this sense, both at the kindergarten and in the dance project attempts to evade may be interpreted as tactical action.

7. References


