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Handbook: Lessons for girls and boys*

With thanks to Detlef Pech for the many important conversations on issues of gender

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B 4) "An Old Hat?" - Thoughts on Biographical Projects with Female Migrant Students

To my colleague Thea Holleck for her 50th birthday

Preliminary Remarks

“Discrimination is not an issue for me! I am not excluding anyone - I am treating everybody the same way. And I mean, if they want to live here, they have to adapt to the situation.”—These are some of the defensive responses I get when I attempt to raise awareness among my colleagues of the particular situation migrant students find themselves in.

Who then is the intended audience for the following thoughts? Who might have an interest in them? Who, in the hectic everyday life at school, can deal with such questions? Who has the time for them even if they wanted to address them?

Can we regard the topic for these and other questions as “an old hat” or “yesterday’s news”?

I would like to discuss the subject precisely for that reason. My motivation for this article is my conviction that only a very conscious “non-equalization” provides an opportunity to counteract the discrimination and disadvantageous treatment of migrant students in standard schools in Germany.

The experiences, which I gained teaching migrant students during the past ten years, confirm that: the frequency and similarity of the problems does not dilute the power of the individual stories which are marked by traumatic flight experiences of the refugees, the separation of families, and being uprooted from familiar settings. These aspects must be studied and observed individually; only then guidance and support can be effective.

I will discuss the biographies of young people who experienced life in their country of origin from which they were generally forced to leave. I will not address the situation of youngsters from families of the second and third generation who were born in Germany but still live to a certain extent “in between the cultures”—albeit with a different background of socialization.

I am going to write about my teaching experiences with transfer students, girls or young women, from areas of war and crises who, usually involuntarily, were swept into German schools for family or political reasons, or as the children of ethnic German immigrants. These students arrive in our schools after they have just been torn out of their familiar social and cultural contexts. They come here, hoping for a secure future, personal acceptance and a life that is back in order again.

In the following I would like to introduce the modules of a seminar concept I developed for the career and life planning of migrant students to be introduced during their last years before attending one of the secondary schools in Germany.¹

¹ Translator’s note: The German school system differs significantly from the American one. In general all students attend primary school (*Grundschule*) for four years (in some federal states six) starting at the age of six. Secondary schools are divided in four types and are chosen based on a student’s abilities which are determined by teacher recommendations: the *Gymnasium* (high school) includes the most gifted children and prepares students for university studies; the *Realschule* has

Contexts

1. School and choice of profession

Why the focus on female migrant students? Of course, boys also have difficulty finding their position in our society; however, they can establish themselves here and elsewhere utilizing their masculinity, which serves as a ticket for freedom and movement, a focus to the outer world, and access to professional careers that are often denied to young women from foreign countries—and in particular to those with an Islamic background.

For the girls and young women from Eastern European and Southern countries the challenge to be accepted is bigger than for their male counterparts, as their communities and German every-day life is rather male oriented.

It happens too often that foreign girls who seek to comply with the expectations of their culture of origin and due to frustrations caused by the schools or the lack of role model choose the “lesser evil.” Against better knowledge and opposing wishes, they choose popular career paths such as medical assistant, hairdresser and retail saleswoman. Remarkably, these career choices are similar to those of their German “sisters”.²

Very often these girls are under a lot of pressure and are afraid to fail. However, the parents' expectations for the academic career of their daughter are often not realistic, i.e., they have not been matched to the performances of the girls in school and their ability to speak German. In coordination with the parents, teachers and, of course, the students in question, extraordinary measures can help to compensate for deficits, as the following example illustrates:

Friends of the School, non-profit association³

Application to finance a German course for M., class 10f.

Dear Madame, Dear Sir, Dear Colleagues:

M. is an Afghan who has been living with her family in Germany for about three years. Since then she has been attending the ... school. Out of her own impulse she is attending additional German courses that exceed the regular lessons. Her performance in the sciences and in English is so outstanding that M. received an offer to attend the *Gymnasium*.⁴

She is highly motivated and is learning eagerly. Since she has a keen perception, she quickly learns about new subjects and comprehends them analytically. The long years of her flight for fear of

a broader range of emphasis for intermediary students; the *Hauptschule* prepares pupils for vocational education, and the *Gesamtschule*, or comprehensive school, combines the three approaches.

² Hunger, Uwe: Perspectives for action when integrating young migrants during their training and in their profession (Handlungsperspektiven für die Integration junger MigrantInnen in Ausbildung und Beruf) - presentation at the Evangelischen Akademie Arnoldshain - Conference 'Training, Further Education – Integration' (“Ausbilden-Weiterbilden-Integrieren”) in the series 'Perspectives in societies of immigration' (“Perspektiven der Einwanderungsgesellschaft”) 3-4/4/2001

³ Kröll, Dorothea: internal letter from May 2000

⁴ Cf. a.a.O., note 1.

reprisals from the Taliban prevented her from attending school regularly in either Afghanistan or the Iran where her family initially migrated. Since M. is an Asian student who has been living in Germany only for a brief period of time, she often lacks important information on the meaning of text passages that refer to particular political-cultural events in Germany or Europe. M. has a good knowledge of German grammar. She is a brave speaker who continuously expands her vocabulary. If she wants to succeed at a higher level school, however, she needs support in gaining stylistic eloquence and complete grammatical correctness. M. would like to have an opportunity to speak German during the school holidays. It is crucial for her to extend her verbal competence through regular communicative practice. We (the teachers) believe that a disruption of multiple weeks during the summer break can harm her ability to master the linguistic requirements in the 11th grade.

After researching the “market” in Kassel extensively, we found the opportunity to enroll M. as a transfer student in a German course for advanced students, offered by the Association for Vocational, Language and Leisure-time Training, for the period until the beginning of the next school year.

The director of the school agreed to a reduced fee for the course of 400,- DM/month. Due to the pressure to make a decision quickly it was impossible to find an external sponsor. The family will bear the travel costs.

I am applying for the assumption of the costs of ca. 700.- DM for M.'s participation in the language course GB of the Association for Vocational, Language and Leisure-time Training for the period between the beginning of June until the end of July 2000. I appreciate your prompt reply! Kind regards⁵

Once the migrated girls have gained ground in our school system, their graduation certificates have much better grades than those of the boys—similar to their German “sisters”. Just like these girls, they continue their training in less qualifying professions and furthermore, in contrast to the German girls, in a much more limited spectrum of vocations.⁶

2. Trust and the acquisition of a second language

- Who are you?
- Where are you from?
- Why and in what manner have you come here?
- What are your (secret) desires?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

⁴ The teachers supported this application and the association Friends of the school approved it. Now, M. is enrolled at the Gymnasium and is happy about her decision despite the hard work. In addition, a letter of the responsible coordinator (responsible for the transfer from grade 10 of a junior high in an integrated comprehensive school to class 11 of the Gymnasium) and a conversation with the class teacher prior to the change of schools prepared this teacher for the specific issue. He attentively supports her.

⁵ Granato, Mona: Young women transferring from school to vocational training (Junge Frauen beim Übergang Zwischen Schule und Ausbildung), in: ... BiBR (Ed.): Young people in training and profession - results, publications and materials from the BiBB (Jugendliche in Ausbildung und Beruf- Ergebnisse, Veröffentlichungen und Materialien aus dem BiBB) August 2000 – Unpublished manuscript, pp. 92f.

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- Who plays an important role in your life?

These are the questions I use to create a contact with the students. We discuss the use of creative tools—e.g., using a personal Polaroid picture, a journey with a finger on a map along the route from the place of home somewhere far way to the current residence; recreating the journey or escape path with a drawing (“Where were the dangerous, dark, as well as the exciting, easier passages of this path?”); voicing the ambivalences during the attempt to feel at home (“Where do you feel at home?”); detecting emotional attachments using sociograms (“Who do you feel close to—here and elsewhere?”).

During these periods of the class I am also willing to share personal information about myself—thus creating an atmosphere of trust and the willingness to be open. When forming the base for a willingness to learn and building a motivation to learn the language it is crucial to listen and to be interested in the story of the other.

One of the pedagogical insights I've gained from teaching additional language lessons is that people who are thrown into our schools will learn the language of their new environment when they are acknowledged as individuals, accepted as being different and when they recognize a positive meaning in their being in Germany. This insight might be especially important for young people who are undergoing a period of change because of puberty which often results in a significant crisis of identity. In comparison to younger children whose psychological system of reference is rather the family than the peers, these teenagers seek recognition outside of the family. How rarely, however, do they receive it from peers the same age and from adults!

3. Self-assurance and life planning

Another step of integration support in the school is biography work in a broad sense. The idea is to direct the girls to their life-story and to make it vivid before their inner eye.

As an example for the methods used I describe the introduction phase in my own words and the words of participants: *After some warm-up games we sat down on the floor together and talked about the many pictures that we had brought. These were photographs from the time when we were babies. They also depicted how we grew older. Every girl was asked to say something about the pictures. Then we picked up the cards that had personal characteristics printed on them and attributed these to the individual girls. We glued the pictures on a poster and wrote our assessments underneath.*

The final allocation of characteristics helped the girls to gain a clearer image of themselves after sharing the story of their development, family structure, relationship to father, mother and siblings, and—crucial for war refugees—of their experiences during emigration. *It was important to share the whole life story ... what happened in between and how we are feeling now.*

The great significance of the opportunity to talk in depth is confirmed by the fact that everybody showed a very high level of concentration during this phase, which lasted longer than two hours.

Searching for what the literature calls the ‘rupture of puberty,’ we came to conclude that the girls regard the changes in their life style from the time of menarche not as a rupture but as a natural step of development. They explained new behaviors with the hardships of a long day in school as well as the performance requirements (they put on themselves) and the compliance with the role expectancy of their family (which for the girls goes without saying). *“You don’t think that much about your childhood. I’ve noticed that some aspects of my personality have changed. I liked that. I wouldn’t have noticed that without the exercise.” “I felt like an eight-year-old. I put myself back into the past. It was totally real.”*

Seminar modules “My family and I”⁷ and “I—before and now”⁸

Advice and Monitoring: Key issues of success

Once the biographical aspects have been worked through, the next step must be to inform the young people and their parents about the school and education system and to provide information on the possibilities of school careers in coordinated, successive steps—even if the daughter does not immediately take the path towards the high school degree (*Abitur*) as the parents might expect.

- Where is your space in your family and among your friends, within school?
- What are your ideas about your professional and personal future, what do your parents and your teachers think?
- How do your ideas differ from those of your parents, siblings, and your community?

These questions are crucial for the young women with respect to their conscious decisions regarding their career and life choices. These decisions are easier for graduates from resettling families from Eastern European countries. For them, a job and the professional equalization of women are not an issue. Rather, for them the problem is that they don’t influence their school and career path actively themselves because of the experience that in their country of origin, the question of the future was not a matter of personal commitment but controlled from the outside. This background has fatal repercussions for a hard-working, intelligent young woman whose deficit is not a lack of knowledge or willingness to work but language barriers and the ignorance of the mechanism to plan the school career, choose a profession and have a career.

Studies by the social scientist Uwe Hunger from Münster confirm that the decisive factors for the education failures of foreign students are the kind of school degree they pursue and their gender,

⁶ Krajczyk, Rosemarie/Kröll, Dorothea: ‘Before we knew it, it was time to leave again - practice-oriented work with young female migrants’ (“Bevor wir uns versahen, war es wieder Zeit zu gehen - Praxisorientierte Arbeit mit jungen Migrantinnen”) in *iza - Journal for Migration and Social Work*. Volume 2/1997 ‘Foreign women - strange women?’ (“Fremde Frauen-Fremde Frauen?”), p.43

⁷ Kröll, Dorothea: ‘This was the first time that I talked so much about myself’ (“Das war das erste Mal, daß ich so viel von mir erzählt habe”) - A weekend with foreign girls. In: “Schulleben” - *Journal of the Offene Schule Waldau*, Volume 18/1993, p.16.

in addition to factors such as duration of residence, nationality, area, educational level of the parents, among others.⁹

"We were able to receive career guidance from a teacher (Mrs. H. from the E.-K.-Schule – a vocational school). Every girl was able to sit down with her individually and ask questions. I think not just me but also all the other girls liked the consultancy because we could ask questions one-on-one. Now we have a better idea of our professional options and some things became so much clearer. I can just speak for myself when I say that it was extremely useful for me to talk to Mrs. H. ... After the weekend seminar Mrs. H. came to the school one more time to offer career consultancy for the remaining girls." **Seminar module "My life at 25 - Individual school career consultancy"**¹⁰

Difficulties while developing the professional career have to be addressed. In this regard, it is a relief for the girls when positive role models share concrete experiences—e.g. via reports or through effective conversations with adult migrant women.

An accident? - Addendum

I was about to send my article on its digital journey to the editor when I accidentally ran into H. on the street. Eight years ago, H. participated in the first weekend seminar for foreign girls in the 9th and 10th grade. She vividly remembers both days—details and the atmosphere—for instance that the participants excitedly put on make-up, dressed up in costumes and were even willing to go on the street in their disguise. I was excited to hear what she had to say about her own career path and that of her fellow participants: she had eagerly wanted to become a nurse, completed both her vocational diploma (*Fachabitur*) and her training as a kindergarten teacher ("Quite a challenging and hard job."). Now she is pursuing new plans: Earn some money and go to California to study or work. She is looking for a change, new challenges, some distance from the influence of the Afghan community and for more tolerance in the interactions between locals and migrants. H. seems very content with her development. She gives the impression of being energetic, curious and ready for the future. She describes herself as a woman who has become self-confident, gained the ability to defend her position in a discussion, fought for her freedom and earned her parents' trust. H. reports about the other seminar participants of the same age:

- W. moved with her parents to Toronto when she was in 11th grade; she finished school there and is attending university now;
- So., B. and N. are all at university and study law, medicine and business in Göttingen, Cologne and Kassel; Sa. and M. completed the vocational diploma;

⁸ Hunger, Uwe, a.a.O. Compare also: Endres, Gerhard I. Waiting lists are useless for young people - Without vocational training or education. For the first time we have current data / What is needed: Cooperation („Warteschleifen bringen den Jugendlichen nichts - Ohne Lehre und Ausbildung: erstmals liegen aktuelle Daten vor / Gefragt: Kooperation") in: "Frankfurter Rundschau", 9/2/1999. No. 203, p.6

⁹ Bingul, Eda, Seda and Vildan: Second weekend seminar for foreign girls (Zweites Wochenend-Seminar für ausländische Mädchen): in "Malwida - Journal for girls at the Offene Schule Waldau" No. 1/1994, p.7

Thoughts on biographical projects with female migrant students

- M. completed the vocational diploma with a major in “Design” and began her training as an optometrist afterwards;
- S. works with senior citizens and V. is a nurse at a children’s hospital;
- Se. is currently on maternity leave from her job as a dental assistant; G. has completed her training at VW

Some of them are married, a few of them have children, and others are single.

How exciting it would be to get them all around a table and to find out to what extent the biography-work contributed to their developments and careers.

(Information about the seminar conception and questions to the author please send with the keyword “Old Hat” to dorokroell@web.de)

(Translation by Ulrike Nichols)