

Tim Zosel, MA

PhD candidate at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

Education: All pupils are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Classical political philosophy tends to miss the fact that contemporary society is unequally structured and that inequality permanently runs through the social body. Instead, political philosophers frequently strive for an ideal system that rather works on a drawing board, but has only little reference to the status quo of individuals and society. However, “the political” understood in the wider sense of the word addresses all affairs of the common good and should therefore equally integrate all members of society.

It is widely acknowledged that educational institutions like schools are actively reproducing social inequality by mechanisms that link educational success with children’s social origins. Especially in Germany, children from underprivileged homes with uneducated parents will most likely end up in a similar situation. The results of OECD’s PISA study show that the socio-economic and partly the socio-ethnic divides in some countries determine which schools children attend and which careers they are able to pursue. But why are schools not yet able to overcome social inequalities and not yet successful in making students more equal citizens?

According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, schools tend to reproduce social inequality and teachers as social actors are highly contributing to this. They obtain powerful positions in which they decide what is brought forward in class, and what is (de-)valued. Not only in the pedagogical process, but also in evaluating pupils and their outputs teachers are institutional gatekeepers with a considerable decision-making leeway (Struck 2001 & Hollstein 2008). In my PhD project I focus on civic education teachers since their social origins and plural habitus determine the relations with their students and the way politics are discussed in class.

Habitus-hermeneutical research following Bourdieu, Michael Vester, and Helmut Bremer has not only focused on social and cultural backgrounds, but shown that interpretational social-moral and classificatory patterns, i.e. certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, have their homes in certain milieus. Of course, teachers are social subjects, too, and thus not detached from their social homes. Their patterns find the way into pedagogical communication and consequently affect students in many different ways and consequences.

Against this background, it seems promising to shed light on how the discussion about political affairs or the promotion of democratic attitudes in class depend on civics teachers. The pedagogical implication could be that a general claim for more civic education misses its mark since the philosophical and political question is left out, who is excluded, in which manner, and why. What could be useful for a more egalitarian society and especially suppressed and discriminated people instead, is a political and social philosophy that aims at “donner la parole aux gens sans paroles” (giving the word to people without words) (Bourdieu 1977 quoted in Wacquant 2004) and at informing civic education in such a way.

Hence, social inequality should be a starting point in philosophical and moral thoughts for a “better life” that would probably benefit from including a reflexive moment for the teachers and the philosophers themselves and their own positions in social space characterized by certain conditions of living, thinking, and working. If committed properly, it means to sincerely enable education in being a real equalizer “in an otherwise unjust society” (Mills & Gale 2010: 13) by analyzing its contribution to the reproduction of inequality.

Contact details

Tim Zosel, MA
University of Duisburg-Essen
Faculty of Educational Sciences
Berliner Platz 6-8
45127 Essen, Germany
Office A.06.10

Phone +49 201 183-6269
E-mail tim.zosel@uni-due.de
Web http://www.uni-due.de/biwi/politische-bildung/en_zosel