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**(Un)Doing Gender as an integral principle of
education: Language – Politics – Performance**

LEADING INSTITUTIONS

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Investigating everyday gender normalcy in schools

The project “(Un)Doing Gender as an Integral Principle of Education“ set out to investigate the construction and shaping of gender relations as they are negotiated in everyday action and interaction at school. In what ways are the traditional concepts of gender roles handed down, reproduced or undermined? How do students deal and cope with the conditions of power?

During a six-week-period of observing the interaction in the classrooms, gender normalcy as produced in gender talks, gender performance and politics was monitored with a focus on three German classes. Surprising processes could already be seen during this phase, for example the continuous gender specific dominance in relation to speech power and presence.

The female students dominated in the happenings of two classes; in the other class the male students were dominant. While the female dominated classes showed strength on the discursive level, the male dominated class showed strength in the area of performance.

The findings of discontinuity of classroom normalities seem particularly instructive as the ruptures delineated between performance and speech. Veronika Zangl has stated “while students will often view Doing Gender as passé on a discourse level, they will display incredibly traditional strategies on the performance level of Doing Gender.“ One class was continuously critical in its reoccurring discussions of gender-equal language and described it as bothersome and unimportant. In the same class sociologist Paul Scheibelhofer noticed, “how sensitively students used their language and how carefully they avoided reproducing gender enactments by not using PC language.” These examples demonstrate the complex interaction levels on which the tensions of gender normality are produced.

Action Research offers new opportunities

In the second phase of the project students discussed how gender relations were generally rehearsed and practiced every day and how they could be shaped in new ways. They questioned the processes of doing and undoing gender and tried out their newly found ideas in performances which gave them further inspiration. In due course the whole context of hierarchical structures at school, the highly influential role of the media and the language of youth cultures were revealed. When they analyzed the hidden implications of abusive language used unintentionally in everyday contexts (“Das ist schwul!” = *This is gay/queer*) or the reproduction of clichés, they landed themselves in highly controversial discussions. Characteristic classroom situations (including recess) were put “on stage” by imitating classroom normality so that gender constructions could be seen and experienced. The students engaged in role playing and role reversals with great enthusiasm; in parodist gender performances the students seized the opportunity to modify or leave behind their usual behaviour by going beyond the boundaries of ‘normality’ and fathoming out the potential for change.



Epistemological approach generates new thinking

In February the project team planned and organized a ‘research and study week’ at the University of Vienna to make the students familiar with the fields of cultural studies, literature and linguistics, and social sciences. The students enrolled in a mini study program of lectures on language, performance and politics, and workshops and classes focusing on research work, field studies, epistemological writing, and gender aspects. The program covered gender constructions that had already been widely discussed and performed in the three classes at school as well as a wide range of new aspects.

Language: e.g. gender-equal language, concepts of sexual normality in dictionaries.

Performance: e.g. male/female performance on stage and in movies, “queer” contexts in theory and in subversive action.

Politics: e.g. legal aspects, male counseling, gender constructions, body concepts, and questions of morals.

Roman Jobstmann, German teacher at GRG Rahlgasse, reported: “Many students were surprised by the sheer dimension and complexity of how the subject has been accepted outside of the educational setting.” The students think that the project week has made them more sensitive in regard to the topic in general and that it has also boosted their awareness of language and interaction; they also may have shed the fear of entering the academic world. One student stated that “we really enjoyed this week of university. It even helped some of us to decide upon a major.”

The project week also had an impact by changing the every day school life as the teachers integrated gender questions into their German lessons. Claudia Kreutel, German teacher at IBC Hetzendorf, thought that “we of course continued covering the topic at school and watched the film “Mein Leben in Rosarot” (Ma vie en rose). We discussed why homosexuality is a subject exclusively for adults: gay marriage, adoption, etc. but never seen from the child’s perspective: growing up as a homosexual! Also, we are currently reading “Talisman” by Nestroy and everyone thinks the text is pretty sexist.”

Currently the researchers and the students are working together on an electronic tool called “Gender Planet” to allow other classes to participate in the fun and the new findings of the project. This electronic tool will work on an interactive level by utilizing a particular didactic concept and a set of methods as well as texts of topical interest, questions, and various aspects of (Un)Doing Gender.





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