

In the context of the National Conference of Free Alternative Schools of Germany I offered a workshop under the title:

“Unambiguously ambiguous

Ritualisations in school – identifying, naming, reflecting. A critical investigation.”

The announcement of the workshop in the program of the conference read:

“The fundamental critique of ritual in school and education during the 1970’s in the FRG was followed by a debate on their inclusion in pedagogical practice. Latest since the 1990’s rituals are seen in Germany as a pedagogical resource. In Free Schools conceptual references on rituals can be found, too.

We will identify practical examples of rituals in everyday school life. I will provide an overview on research on rituals in school. The concept of ritualisation instead of ritual as a tool for better understanding of ritual dynamic will also be mentioned.”

28 people attended the workshop. Due to the nature of the conference all participants came from a background of a Free School. Most of the participants were teachers, but a small number of parents were present, too.

As an introduction I explained the purpose of the workshop, namely theory-work with the aim to look at concepts of ritual/ritualisation as analytic tools for practical intervention in schools. Together with a briefing on expectations of participants this clarified the course of the workshop and in fact allowed one person to withdraw from the workshop before entering into the actual work process.

Then we started the workshop with a round in which I asked every participant to name one activity from their own school practice which they would classify as a ritual. It was specifically requested not yet to explain why one would see the respective activity as a ritual. For each suggestion made by a participant a quick check with the group was done, i. e. it was asked if the suggestion would be seen by others as ritual, too. In most cases agreement was unanimous, and where it was not, there were at least some who did so for each of the suggestions.

All suggestions were noted on a Flip-Chart and a list of activities emerged all of which were seen by at least some participants as a ritual. The list contained (in no specific order):

- Children’s assembly
- Name plates for presence/absence
- End of day circle
- First day at school
- Forest day
- School leavers’ ceremony
- Morning circle
- Tidying up
- Staff meeting
- Mediation
- Christmas

Halloween
Yard cleaning duty
Mealtime: Gong/Lining-up
Cleaning up duty after meals
Saying grace
Girls day – Boys day
Stone/Feather-round (say something heavy as a stone, say something light as a feather)
Issuing of Certificates
School trip
Minute silence
Welcome address
Birthday
Jury/Trial
Solstice celebrations
Soundbowl (an acoustic instrument of similar nature as a small gong used by the teacher to get attention of the group)
Breakfast
Talking stick (in a group setting only the person in possession of the stick is allowed to speak)
Singing together
Sand glass
Reading to the group
Good-night-stories (when on school trips)
Reading night
Vocabulary check

It took us less than ten minutes to collect the list of suggestions.

In a second step we tried to identify characteristics of rituals. This was done in the format of a discussion in which participants elaborated on their arguments and referred to each other. The main aspects as ensued in the discussion stated that

- rituals have to do with form
- rituals have to do with emotion
- rituals are cyclical, they are repeated at set times
- rituals have a meaning
- rituals convey a meaning
- rituals have a religious character
- rituals have to do with trust
- rituals are trigger activities, they initiate something
- rituals divide means and ends
- rituals have habitual character
- rituals are methodical, they follow set patterns
- rituals have symbolic character
- in rituals symbols are used
- rituals make visible, they are expressive
- the activity alone is not yet ritual

The discussion on ritual characteristics expanded for longer than I had envisaged. I stopped the discussion after 45 minutes. It was accepted by the group that obviously there is a large set of

characteristics of activities that all are associated with ritual in the minds of various people. A member of the group put this into the term of 'arbitrariness.'

In a next step I presented a collection of activities that were deemed to be ritual in interviews with teachers of Free Schools and teachers of Mainstream Schools which I undertook. 14 teachers of Free Schools were interviewed and 12 teachers of Mainstream Schools. Before entering in a discussion about the list as presented I made clear that the collection does not claim heavy statistical weight but rather it has the character of a snapshot, a glance more than a full view. The activities were listed:

A) Activities that were mentioned more than once in either for the two settings		
	How often mentioned for Free Schools	How often mentioned for Mainstream Schools
Circle-Situations (morning-circle, end-of-day-circle etc.) <i>In some cases one person mentioned different 'circles'</i>	18 (13 out of 14)	16 (12 out of 12)
School Assembly/Class-council	9	4
Celebrations	8	6
First day of school	6	2
Meals (Breakfast/Lunch)	5	3
Particular curricular Activities (e. g. reading time, swimming lessons)	5	3
Birthday	4	3
Farewell celebration for school leavers	4	1
Transition primary to secondary section in same school	3	0
School trips	3	0
Tidying up (Classrooms, Yard)	2	4
Everyday routines in lessons (e.g. diary entries, presentations)	1	6
Nonverbal communication (e.g. 'sound-bowl', raising hand to get silence in class, rainstick)	0	7
Symbolic gratification/punishment (stickers, smileys, 'traffic light'-classroom-management-system)	0	6
Welcome formulas	0	5
Lining up after break-time	0	4
Project-week	0	2

B) Activities that were mentioned only once for either setting	
Free Schools	Mainstream Schools
open stage, afternoon nap, overnight stay in school, brushing teeth, juridical committee, writing of reports, staff meeting, meeting with school inspector, check of attendance, boys/girls-day	daily plan discussion, presentation of certificates, school mass, dance performance, booklet for messages to parents, anti-violence-committee, homework-check, reading night, staff conference, check of attendance

In the discussion the most prominent observation concerned the absence of entries for Free Schools in those areas that are concerned with nonverbal communication, gratification/punishment, welcome

formulas and lining-up after break-time. This was explained by the conceptual difference between Free Schools and Mainstream Schools in their understanding of interpersonal relationships and the resulting differing concepts of roles within schools. In general the traditional role of the teacher as the authority-figure is abandoned in Free Schools and children are not subjected to procedures of obedience. Also symbolic gratification/punishment runs counter to the concept of learning that informs the practice of most Free Schools.

The entries are based on self-assessment. The underlying source was not concerned with the question whether or not certain activities happen in a school, but rather with statements of teachers of their perception of particular activities as rituals. This leaves room for the assumption that certain activities may yet happen in the other school type, or may happen more often in one of the school types without the teachers actually perceiving them as ritual.

This and the small number of interview-partners were noted as factors for cautiousness. The participants in the workshop still found that the area of interpersonal relationships seems to be the area in which Mainstream Schools are actually different to Free Schools, while in many other aspects there seems to be little difference.

Some participants were surprised to see that the other entries gave little evidence of major differences between the two types of school, most remarkably noted in the similarity of entries for circle-time.

It was completely out of the realm of the workshop to decide on the factual 'truth' of the impressions of difference or similarities of Free Schools and Mainstream Schools. It was however clear that the comparison of the two school types is a matter of huge interest particularly for those people who are working (or organizing) in Free Schools. Their very reason of existence at the end of the day is based on the assumption that they are different to Mainstream Schools.

After a short break I presented a collection of aspects that are focused on in research on rituals in school. For this purpose I had prepared a sheet on the flip chart on which I had written the key-words:

- Communication (symbolic, gestures, nonverbal)
- Structure (time, space, roles, behavior)
- Actors / Spectators
- Contradictions (express – deal with)
- Norms / Values / Order
- Ritual Knowledge
- Legitimacy / Acceptance / Conviction
- Ritual Experts
- Ritual as Indicators
- Non-reflexivity
- Performativity
- Symbolicism

To each of the key-words I gave a brief summary on the way how it is referred to in studies on rituals in school. It became clear that there is no such thing as 'the theory of rituals' – not in general, and

also not as rituals in school – but merely a collection of various approaches that are overlapping, yet focusing on different aspects and assessing these aspects differently.

Next I drew attention on the attempts made in research to classify rituals.

I pointed out the dimension of scale as one way to classify, hence come to a typology of rituals (small – big/low – high/everyday – ceremony/micro – macro).

I also explained how typologies of rituals are tried on the basis of function: Bernstein's idea of consensual – differential functions as opposed to each other; Wellendorf's take on this as both integrated in each ritual; Gehrke's three functions as status, conflict soothing, crisis control (transition); Wulf's classification as rites of passage, rites of inauguration, calendar rituals, rituals of intensification, rituals of rebellion, interaction rituals.

Eventually I tried to shift the question asked of rituals in school away from their characteristics and functions.

I argued from the basis that ritual is always a social activity, i. e. one that includes more than one person. As a social activity rituals depend on the actors in the activity to participate. The interests of the actors entering into the activity however can not be assumed to be in unison. Therefore as a basic assumption, for social life to happen a negotiation of the various interests has to take place. On this thought I introduced Catherine Bell's suggestion to look at the way how in society such negotiations happen in a historic manner as a development in which "social control via coercive strategies demanding personal presence and explicit conflict begin to shift to social control via ownership of the means by which 'reality' is articulated for cognitive endorsement by all."

I took up the notion of ownership and asked the question who actually owns the rituals that are enacted in school.

After a short period of confusion it was possible for the participants to take up the question. We then looked at the list of rituals that was made up at the very start of the workshop and we tried to identify ownership for them. It soon became clear that most of the rituals were owned by the adults. We briefly discussed this exemplary on the 'morning circle' – it was clear to everyone in the room that without adult intervention morning circle would sooner rather than later vanish from everyday practice in the schools (Free schools, that is).

It was also mentioned that there are rituals that are not owned by the adult involved, although the adult guarantees for its enacting, s/he may do so without actually being 'in ownership', as in: there are rules and regulations from 'outside' or 'above' that demand the adult to 'do' this ritual. Examples referred to were taken from Mainstream Schools, like e. g. the presentation of certificates at the end of the year.

Unfortunately time ran out at exactly this stage of our discussion. It would have been quite interesting to go further down the line of this thought, try to see if it was possible to identify rituals that are owned by children, or else in joint ownership.

So, we had to leave it at this. Thus I could not bring up the notion of 'strategic intervention in negotiations of power-relations' either.

What I can say is that the idea to think of ritual as 'owned' by somebody made its way into the minds of people as a question that obviously triggered uncertainty. With this as a result I was rather satisfied. It guarantees for further thought.