


Chapter 11

Modeling Equity in Science Education: German Street Schools’ Approach to Rightful Presence

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ABSTRACT

In Germany, students experiencing homelessness drop out of school six times as often as their peers. This graduation gap can be explained by their experiences of marginalization and exclusion in educational spaces. Many youths go on to obtain high school diplomas at street schools, which focus their approach on the educational needs of these young people and thus portray alternatives to regular schools. Studies prove that these street schools are successful - both from a general educational and a science education perspective - and consequently promote educational equity. We conducted interviews with school leaders and science educators of street schools to investigate their approach to science education. We used the Rightful Presence framework to identify how their practices promote equity within science education. The findings thus portray how their take on science education does not further exclude the youth but rather redesigns science education in a way that it becomes socio-politically and personally relevant to them.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-5342-5.ch011

INTRODUCTION

We once had a young person who was very difficult, very aggressive. [...] But after a long time, we gained his trust. I think it was actually because he did well on his schoolwork, and we praised him. Sometimes it's so straightforward. Then one day, he had no place to stay. We allowed him to sleep here on the sofa. And then he had the feeling that he was accepted here and opened up a bit. Slowly, it became clear what was going on with him. So, we helped him a lot. Once his circumstances became more stable, he was able to come more often. And slowly, he was more and more open to working on the subject material. When he opened up, it became clear how intelligent he is, which we had always suspected. He was kicked out of school in the seventh grade as being uneducable. [...] A disastrous school career. But he realized that he is able to study and that someone listens to him. In the end, he got a very good degree. I think he took physics as an examination subject. And he really blossomed in physics, because suddenly he was able to live up to his potential. [...] That made a difference for this person. That he had a sense of achievement here – even in subjects where beforehand, he didn't think it would have been possible. He then finished his high school diploma with us and got good grades. From time to time, he still comes by, visits us and tells us how he is doing.

And I am convinced that our school has really helped him. (L9, 57)

The youth referenced in this quote attended a unique second-chance education establishment for youth experiencing homelessness in Germany, a so-called “street school”. After his “disastrous school career” which entails multiple negative experiences, he enrolled in this street school, where despite the challenges of his ongoing housing instability, excelled, and discovered that he enjoys physics. This youth's experience raises questions about how his trajectory may have been different if his regular schooling¹ had supported him differently. Would his regular schooling have been described as a “disastrous school career” and would he have been viewed as “aggressive”? What would it have taken for his science teachers to perceive him as intelligent and interested in physics? And why are street school leaders convinced that “all schools should be like our school?” (L3, 46).

Little is known about the school careers of children and youth experiencing homelessness in Germany (Fischer et al., 2023). However, the few existing studies show that their time in school is shaped by a variety of negative and sometimes traumatic experiences and inadequate support (Mücher, 2020). In light of their marginalizing experiences, it is hardly surprising that 29% of all students experiencing homelessness in Germany leave school without a high-school diploma – a rate almost six times higher than the rate of their peers (Hoch, 2016; Lotties, 2024). Similar graduation gaps are also evident in the United States (Ingram et al., 2017; Kull et al., 2019). The much more extensive US research literature furthermore points out that students

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