

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN BIOGRAPHICAL AND DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Early school leavers (ESL) are defined as 18-24 years old persons without qualification at upper secondary level who are not participating in education or training. During the last years, they have gradually become a target group of EU and Austrian education and labour market policies. Attention at ESL as an issue of social research has increased during the last years with a focus on quantities, reasons, consequences and solutions along with sociology of education's interest on social inequalities and their reproduction. The aim of my research is to approach ESL outside of a problem and solution framework, seeking not to pre-suppose but to reconstruct the meaning of ESL for young people who match the definition. Still I take the problem-framing of the phenomenon into account and make it an issue of my research. Hence I address ESL in a very open qualitative perspective via biographical analysis and I investigate ESL as discourse. The purpose of my study is thus to combine both a biographical and a discourse-analytical perspective on early school leaving. These objectives can be distinguished into a twofold set of research questions: Related to the biographical approach, I ask how early school leavers appropriate ESL-discourse along 'lifelong biographical work'. Which elements of the discourse/s do they select? In what different ways do they refer to the relevant discourse/s? Related to the discourse approach, I ask how ESL-discourse/s structure biographies of early school leavers. In what kind are early school leavers constructed *as* subjects of policies? How are self-perceptions *as* early school leavers constructed?

In combining biographical analyses and discourse analyses I in both cases apply a methodological approach based in sociology of knowledge. Regarding the analysis of biographical-narrative interviews I use Gabriele Rosenthal's 'biographical case reconstruction', a hermeneutic-reconstructive approach composed of five different analytical steps. The dialectics of experiences and narratives on experiences are taken into account and their relatedness is used as basic principle for the interpretation of biographies. During the first analytical steps, both perspectives are systematically separated in order to reconstruct the sequential configuration of the experienced life-story as well as the sequential configuration of the narrated life-story and in the end to relate both perspectives to each other. Regarding

the analysis of policy documents related to ESL I refer to Reiner Keller's sociology of knowledge program of discourse analysis. According to this approach discourses are perceived as constructions of reality and as institutionalized frameworks of knowledge and the potential of creative handling discourses is highlighted.

My first analyses show the complex 'problemness' in the biography of an early school leaver ('Robert'). In his problems structure both his experienced and his narrated life-story but their meanings are very complex and in part contradictory.

Questions of the threshold between legitimacy and guilt arise; they exceed the fact of school drop-out, and are related to wider societal knowledge about the have-to-be structure of problems. Robert represents a case of relating his biography to discourses on counselling – in applying the logic of problem solving via identifying triggers and sources, reflecting, and bettering. This finding can be connected to ongoing discourses of individualization and meritocracy shaping the understanding of responsibility, legitimacy, and guilt. Questions of guilt seem to be inherent in ESL discourse, but go beyond the fact of school failure.

Keywords: early school leaving, biographies, discourse, problem framing, legitimacy

Introduction

Early school leavers (ESL) are defined as 18-24 years old persons who do not have a qualification at upper secondary level and who are not participating in education or training. During the last years, they have gradually become a target group of EU and Austrian policies concerning education and the labour market. The share of early school leaving (ESL) in each EU member state is subject to yearly monitoring and a share of less than 10% has been agreed upon as common target (Europäische Kommission, 2010). Until the early 2000s the issue has been quite unnoticed but it continuously gained attention as a topic for social research. Research on ESL, school drop-out and 'risk groups' focus on quantities, reasons, consequences and solutions (Mascherini, M., et al., 2012; Nevala, Hawley, 2011; Steiner, Pessl, Bruneforth, 2016; Walther, Pohl, 2006) along with sociology of education's interest on social inequalities and their reproduction (eg. Bourdieu, Passeron, 1971; Solga, 2002). Given the pronounced inequalities in the probability to leave school early with far higher shares among young persons whose parents don't have higher qualifications themselves and among young persons from countries outside of the EU (Steiner, Pessl, Kulhanek, 2019) ESL is in fact an issue related to

social inequality and mechanisms of their reproduction in the education system. Still you could perceive the topic in a different perspective.

Objectives / Purpose of the study

The aim of my PHD study is to approach ESL outside of a problem and solution framework, seeking not to pre-suppose but to reconstruct the meaning of ESL for young people who match the definition. Early school leaving and school drop-out can have different meanings, be it as biographical turning point related to experiences of exclusion, be it as one of little relevance in the context of far more urgent issues (Steiner, Pessl, Kulhanek, 2019). At the same time though, I take the problem-framing of the phenomenon into account and make it an issue of my research. Hence I address ESL in a very open qualitative perspective via biographical analysis on the one hand. On the other hand I position ESL as discourse; speaking of discourse implies to take into account several discourses linked to ESL rather than to speak merely of a single ESL-discourse. The purpose of my study is to combine both the biographical and the discourse-analytical perspective on early school leaving.

These objectives can be distinguished into a twofold set of research questions: Related to the biographical approach, I ask how early school leavers appropriate ESL-discourse along 'lifelong biographical work'. Which elements of the discourse/s do they select? In what different ways do they refer to the relevant discourse/s and what might be the functions? Related to the discourse approach, I ask how ESL-discourse/s structure biographies of early school leavers. In what kind are early school leavers constructed *as* subjects of policies? How are self-perceptions *as* early school leavers constructed (are they?) and what comes to be the meaning of discourse/s?

Such an approach might add knowledge to the and meaning of policy responses aimed at youth that focus dominantly on individual failings whereas the debate on choice biographies vs. persisting social inequalities and opportunity structures shows the complexity of individualization and its societal meanings (Shildrick, Blackman, MacDonald, 2009).

Methodology

My approach to biographical analysis is based on Gabriele Rosenthal's 'biographical case reconstruction'. Thus biography is not perceived as objective thing (then was this event and then followed that event) but as socially meaningful frame constituting social reality and subjective worlds of experiences. The dialectics of experiences and narratives on experiences (eg. Schütz, 1967) are taken into account and their dialectic relatedness is used as basic principle for the interpretation of biographies. During the first analytical steps, both perspectives are systematically separated in order to

reconstruct the sequential configuration of the experienced life-story as well as the sequential configuration of the narrated life-story. It is not before the last stage of the analytical process that both perspectives are related to each other. In doing so the experienced life-story contributes to the understanding of the present perspective whereas this present perspective frames the look back at the experiences in the past. Rosenthal's analytical approach applies a hermeneutical-reconstructive methodology and is theoretically rooted in sociology of knowledge (Rosenthal, 1995, 2008).

In order to combine biographical analysis and discourse analysis one has to take into account the contradictions between a hermeneutic approach and discourse theory (Schäfer, Völter, 2005). That point has been amply discussed on a methodological level (eg. Völter et al., 2005) and approaches have been extended and successfully combined (Pohn-Weidinger, 2014). Related to the analysis of biographies, that means to take into account processes of subjectivation in biographies (Rosenthal, 2005; Schäfer, Völter, 2005) rather than to pre-suppose an essential biographical subject. In my case this idea is applied when I ask about different ways of *subjectivation* of young persons *as early school leavers*. Related to the analysis of discourses, Reiner Keller (2005) in order to interconnect discourse theory and hermeneutical approaches has introduced the sociology of knowledge program of discourse analysis. According to this approach discourses as perceived as constructions of reality and as institutionalized frameworks of knowledge and the potential of creative handling discourses is highlighted. A sociology of knowledge approach on discourses is reflected when I ask how early school leavers *appropriate* ESL-discourses.

In terms of my concrete material I draw on the interpretation of narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze, 1983) with young persons who match the ESL-definition and on the analysis of policy papers addressed at ESL on the EU and the Austrian level. Hence I select the policy discourse for my study. Rosenthal's biographical approach is based on the reconstruction of single cases following the logic of theoretical generalization which implies to reconstruct the *structure* of single cases, based on the extensive interpretation of a few biographical interviews (3 to 4 cases). This is realized via analysis of biographical data, text- and thematic field analysis, reconstruction of experienced life-story, sequence analysis and comparison between experienced and narrated life-stories together with some more interpretations applying Rosenthal's method of 'global analysis' (approx. 10 cases) that can be called a faster process of interpretation, still applying the basic principles of hermeneutics and the separation of the experienced and the narrated life-stories (Rosenthal, 2008). The process of selecting interviews for the more fundamental and the global analyses is realized

according to the logic of theoretical sampling (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). During that process I will conduct the analyses of policy papers following Keller's methodology which implies an interpretative, reconstructive approach. The findings of this step will guide the theoretical sampling of the interviews to be included for the next interpretations as the aim of the study on a methodological level is to construct different types of relatedness of biographies and discourses.

Results / Findings

The findings to be presented in the conference are rooted in several already completed analyses of three biographical interviews from 2015 and 2018 with 'Robert', the first case. Further analyses are still in process. In Robert's case problems structure both his experienced and his narrated life-story but their meanings are very complex and in part contradictory. Analysis of biographical data shows that during primary school Robert 'fulfilled' school related expectations despite 'difficult' experiences outside school. The final school drop-out event during the first year of his school career after lower secondary school did not have the meaning of a turning point in his experienced life-story. A turning-point occurred earlier in form of his development of risk-taking habitus outside school that gradually reached the domain of school.

Based on text- and thematic field analysis and sequence analyses two present perspectives on 'his problems' were distinguished. According to Robert's first present perspective, his problems started with losing a very important person. They have identifiable reasons, clear responsibilities and are open to solution via identifying and clearing up. This perspective on problems as linear and teleological doesn't match his past experiences, as problems have been experienced as overwhelming. Due to the second present perspective, school problems are integrated into a wider process of his developing mental illness. This perspective matches the experience that ESL is not a central problem. It is neither understandable as kind of a school problem but part of mental problems.

Robert's perception of his life-story is structured by questions on legitimacy and guilt. The follow-up interview was framed by 'things are looking up', connected to the fact of being employed as apprentice and seemingly realized solutions. Again, apprenticeship cannot be considered a biographical turning-point. It has the meaning of being employed, hence fulfilling societal expectations: Employment is the approved alternative to leisure/doing nothing and it is expected from young adults. Besides, things *have to* be looking up, neither remain static, nor going downwards.

Discussion

The case shows the complex ‘problemness’ in the biography of an early school leaver. Questions of the threshold between legitimacy and guilt arise, they exceed the fact of school drop-out, and are related to wider societal knowledge about the have-to-be structure of problems. Robert represents a case of relating his biography to discourses on counselling – in applying the logic of problem solving via identifying triggers and sources, reflecting, and bettering. This finding can be connected to ongoing discourses of individualization and meritocracy shaping the understanding of responsibility, legitimacy, and guilt (Shildrick, Blackman, MacDonald, 2009). Questions of guilt seem to be inherent in ESL discourse, but go beyond the fact of school failure.

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