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Teachers' professional attitudes toward Muslim religious norms: studying the organizational context of moral position-taking

Abstract

Many studies to date have shown how teachers disadvantage Muslim students due to unconscious bias. Much less is known about how teachers' attitudes are influenced by the organizational context of their schools. I aim to contribute to filling this research gap by analyzing interviews with teachers at high schools with a large share of Muslim students. I show how my interview partners were forced to position themselves according to the religious norms of their students and the secularized Christian norms that are often taken for granted in the German school system. My interview partners adopted various ethical perspectives. However, their positioning was always ambivalent and linked to both recognizing their students' backgrounds and distancing themselves from this.

Keywords: Religious diversity; pedagogical attitudes; teacher professionalization; Documentary Method

Professionelle pädagogische Haltungen zu muslimischen religiösen Normen: Moralische Positionierungen im organisationalen Kontext der Schule

Zahlreiche Studien haben in der Vergangenheit gezeigt, wie Lehrpersonen Schülerinnen und Schüler aufgrund habitualisierter antimuslimischer Stereotype benachteiligen. Weit weniger Wissen besteht dagegen zum Einfluss des organisationalen Kontextes der Schule auf den Umgang mit religiöser Diversität. Im vorliegenden Beitrag nähere ich mich diesem Themenkomplex über Interviews mit Lehrpersonen aus Schulen mit einem hohen Anteil muslimischer Schülerinnen und Schüler. Ich zeige, wie der Zugzwang entsteht, sich sowohl zu muslimischen Normen der Schüler:innen zu positionieren, als auch zu christlich-säkularen Normen, die im deutschen Schulsystem oft als selbstverständlich angenommen werden. Die von mir befragten Lehrkräfte nahmen dabei verschiedene ethische Perspektiven ein. Immer jedoch war ihre Positionierung ambivalent und sowohl mit Anerkennung des lebensweltlichen Hintergrundes der Schüler:innen als auch mit Abgrenzungen davon verbunden.

Schlagwörter: Religiöse Vielfalt; Pädagogische Haltung; Professionalisierung; Dokumentarische Methode

1 Introduction

Religious norms in schools have been a matter of conflict in Europe for centuries. Historical conflicts concerned the division between Catholic, secular, and Protestant norms (Ravitch 1974). The current discourse in Germany often concerns the disadvantages of Muslim students, as teachers often either do not take their religious background into account or they disparage it (Arani et al. 2021; Karakaşoğlu 2010). This often stems from a lack of adequate training and not reflecting properly on stereotypes (Nohl 2021; Doğmuş et al. 2016; Karakaşoğlu 2010).

However, teachers' professional attitudes toward Muslim religious norms are also shaped by the organizational context they work in. Schools are symbolic orders that influence the professional attitudes of individual teachers as they provide recognition to certain behaviors and devalue others (Humrich 2022; Helsper 2008). Moreover, structural compulsions in the school system may prevent teachers from providing equal opportunities to all students.

In the present paper, I ask: What guiding orientations do teachers develop toward Muslim religious norms? How do these relate to their schools' organizational context? I draw on the method of referencing interpretations (Mensching 2020) as well as the cultural sociology of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in order to address these questions. My case studies focus on schools with a high share of Muslim students, where there are often struggles for recognition of Muslim religious practices and the diversity of beliefs (Karakayali & zur Nieden 2020).

In Section 2, I describe the current state of research on teacher attitudes and organizational influences. Then I explain the research methods used for my empirical study of religious norms in Section 3. Next, I present the results of my analysis in Section 4. I do so by means of three key case studies representing three different attitudes. In my conclusion (Section 5), I reflect on the challenges for teachers that emerge from the organizational context of their work. Due to the organizational setting of the school, teachers need to position themselves toward their students' and colleagues' norms as well as the institutionalized norms reflected by organizational structures and routines. They face risks such as lacking shared systems of meaning and experiencing frustration and distress while students are at risk of being devalued or experiencing discrimination. More research should be devoted to the challenges of position-taking and practitioners should recognize that this is all part and parcel of teaching responsibilities.

2 Teachers' professional habitus in the school context

There is a wide consensus among scholars that teachers' work is based on implicit, unexamined knowledge. This can include norms and values they take for granted and impart to their students (Karakışoğlu 2021: 9-10), their individual perceptions and interpretations of their students' actions, and their own particular focus of attention (Risänen et al. 2016). Teachers frequently have to rely on implicit knowledge due to the circumstances of their work environment: they normally have to make ad hoc decisions in interactions with students without time for reflection (ibid.). Many scholars strive to grasp these orientations using the Bourdieuan concept of habitus: From this perspective, teachers have habitualized dispositions for action that are implicit and expressed through intuitions, feelings, and tastes (Kramer & Pallesen 2019; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann 2019; Helsper 2008).

Teachers in Germany often have unexamined biases against Muslim religious norms, which puts Muslim students at risk of being disadvantaged. For example, many teachers see students wearing headscarves as less engaged in school (Karakışoğlu 2021: 14-15). Many cultural practices in German schools have a Christian background, but