

Forghani-Arani, Neda

Lived experience of teaching displaced teachers. A postcolonial reading of positions, voices and representations

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Inklusion von Lehrkräften nach der Flucht

Über universitäre Ausbildung zum
beruflichen Wiedereinstieg

Gertraud Kremsner
Michelle Proyer
Gottfried Biewer
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„Allen Personen gewidmet, die geflüchtet sind, sich derzeit auf der Flucht befinden oder noch flüchten werden.“

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Abbildung Umschlagseite 1: Marwa Sarah (Österreich/Syrien) – Black Hole

The painful fact for a refugee or a foreigner is that you will be always looking for a place to belong to, and you will never find it again you will become a foreigner everywhere you go, slowly you will change and do not fit anywhere. and there will always be a black hole. black hole.

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Neda Forghani-Arani

Lived Experience of Teaching Displaced Teachers: A Postcolonial Reading of Positions, Voices and Representations

The following contribution is purposely somewhat out of place! Aim and purpose of this section of the book is to provide analytic readings of the members of the academic team of the Certificate Course for Teachers with Forced Migration Background at the University of Vienna of their own approaches, experiences, challenges and learnings in the course of the training program. I chose to offer a postcolonial reading of my engagement in the course, although I am not well versed in postcolonial theories. I chose to write in English although the book is mainly written in German. I chose to pose uncomfortable questions although I have no intentions to antagonize. And it sounds as if I take a normative stance, although I am only inviting to read a shared experience through a lens, which might help us see what might otherwise remain unspeakable. That makes for a peculiar contribution; bear with me.

A ‘critical incident’ called for a critical reading: I exchanged a few words with Jomard as he stepped down from the stage after the podium discussion on “Reducing Barriers and Using Resources – Perspectives for Education in the Context of Displacement and Migration”. Jomard was invited to represent the perspective of the participants of the Certificate Course on the podium. Other podium speakers were members of the academia, representatives of public service, and civil society initiatives. I approached Jomard and commented on the importance of his contribution. Visibly ambivalent he asked, “really?” He was not convinced! Reflecting on his own podium contribution he obviously felt he should have said more, and should have said other things. He was saying, “I can not speak at length”, and “I tend to get emotional”. He added that it was not only a question of German language proficiency. “I can actually discuss things and argue at length, also in German” he said. But, apparently, not in this case.

Jomard's words kept lingering with me. As a participant spectator of the podium discussion I was already disrupted by what I would have described as an asymmetry of positions, voices and representations on the podium. The composition of the experts on the podium was explicable – but not coherent. Four podium discussants represented professional expertise and elaborated on desiderata of reducing barriers and using acknowledged resources of displaced and immigrant populations. They would understandably speak of and about the displaced and the immigrants. Jomard's was to represent the one spoken about, spoken to, and spoken of. Whereas the expertise of the four other discussants was grounded in their academic and/or professional knowledge and profile, Jomard's expertise in this constellation consisted of his subjectivity as the recipient of support measures. He was invited to represent the must-be-acknowledged potential contribution of 'displaced teachers' for the school here.

Seeking words to articulate this experience, and concepts that would help in making sense of what left me with a sense of aporia, I started on an inquiry. The unsettling experience had to do with voices and representations. It also had to do with the lopsidedness of a conversation between providers and recipients. And something was wrong with the aftertaste of the unquestionably well-intended words of acknowledgement of the potential and value of refugees, and of the required appreciation and sensitivity in working with a "traumatized" population. My sketchy knowledge of postcolonial studies served as a point of departure in the search for a language to articulate, and proved to be helpful.

The following explorative inquiry begins with a brief description of the context, followed by an outline of the theoretical and methodological framework. A number of concepts put forward by postcolonial scholars will then serve as a lens to read, reflect, and analyze lived experience, as "tools-for-thinking" not as "description-of-truth" (Andreotti 2011, 7).

Postcolonial theory, specifically Vanessa Andreotti's *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education* (2011) shapes the theoretical framework of this chapter. The methodological framework can be characterized as Researching Lived Experience for an Action-Sensitive Pedagogy (Van Manen 1990) or a Phenomenology of Practice (Van Manen 2014) which refers to lived experience research and writing that "reflects *on* and *in* practice, and prepares for practice" (Van Manen 2014, 15; original emphasis).

As part of the academic staff I had a teaching role in the course and was responsible for the module on classroom teaching. My choice of contents for the module was guided by the assumption that similar to the required German

language proficiency, course participants would also need a common conceptual framework and pedagogical language to participate as full-fledged professionals in the Austrian school system. Conscious of the varied forms and scope of pedagogical training of the participants from their earlier professionalization processes, my motive was to provide a space where they could begin to translate theories and practices between their previous and their anticipated teaching contexts, and work with concepts and terminologies compatible and comprehensible to their prospective field of practice.

Andreotti's *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education* (2011) offers an overview of a discursive strand of postcolonial theory and its operationalization in educational research and practice. From this perspective, a main aspiration of postcolonial studies is to open "the possibility of theorizing a non-coercive relationship or dialogue with the excluded 'Other' of Western humanism" (Gandhi 1998, 39) and to create conditions for "thinking our way through, and therefore, out of the historical imbalances and cultural inequalities produced by the colonial encounter" (Gandhi 1998, 176). The aim of such theorization is not to delegitimize or discard Western humanism and the legacy of European Enlightenment, but to engage with limitations they impose in an attempt to transform and pluralize epistemologies from within (cf. Andreotti 2011).

One way of opening these possibilities is to examine the way dominant Western epistemologies relate to difference. The investment of Western conceptions of humanism and of European Enlightenment in universal consensus through rational thought in regard to conceptualizations of human nature, progress, and justice produces – from a postcolonial perspective – opportunities for relationships and dialogue with and about difference that are always "structured, from the very beginning, in favor of certain outcomes" (Chakrabarty 1995, 757). The ethnocentric privilege of Western rationality and of dialectical thought – as a taken for granted mode of engagement and reasoning – establish specific parameters of validity and recognition of what can be known and how this is to be communicated. Valid knowledge and reasoning are from the very onset defined in terms of Western epistemologies. Other forms of thinking, knowing, being and communicating can be acknowledged, but exist as "Other" modes, which systematically fail to make intelligible contributions in Western-led and structured sites of conversation. As a result, difference either falls too short, or it is domesticated and made similar in order to be accommodated as a colorful and exotic added flavor to the dominant epistemology within the boundaries of the predefined rules of validation (cf. Andreotti 2011).

Reflecting on the critical incident, I would ask if the “Other’s” lived experience of not having said enough, not having said the right things (and the sensed inaptness of getting emotional) on the podium, was conceivably a case of the ethnocentric privilege of Western rationality – as the pre-defined mode of engagement and reasoning – in the Western-led and structured site of conversation at a university event. Both what was known, and how this was communicated by the “Other” in the Western-led space, felt out of place for the “Other”.

Spivak’s influential work *Can the subaltern speak* (1988) speaks to the critical incident. She focuses on examinations of the representations of the “Third World” subaltern, the positioning of migrants in the metropolis, and the role of education in relation to the encounter with the subaltern (cf. Andreotti 2011). In her work, subalternity is defined as a space of difference where “discursive regimes locate/imprison the body or voice of the marginalized” (Schur 2002, 457). Spivak (1988) shows that attempts to speak for the subaltern, to enable the subaltern to speak, or even to listen to the subaltern can very easily end up silencing the subaltern.

Reading the critical incident through Spivak’s lens, I wonder if the well-intentioned practice of inviting a representative of the so-called “teachers with forced migration background”, next to expert positions of Western academia, public service and civil society, reveals an attempt to enable the subaltern to speak, and to listen to the subaltern, which ended up silencing the subaltern.

Spivak pointedly suggests that progressive intellectuals who benevolently intervene to support the subaltern in the struggle for greater recognition and rights, end up reproducing the same power relations that they seek to put an end to. I wonder how the experts’ comments on the podium highlighting the value of the immigrants and refugees – underpinned by statistics on the impressive level of education of recent Syrian refugees, and by moving examples of released potential (e.g. of a girl-child from Afghanistan) – show up, when perceived through a postcolonial reading tool.

Spivak’s suspicions of the benevolence of Western engagements in the name of the marginalized has led her to conclude that “whether organized by a liberal-humanist vision, or by the anti-humanism of Foucault and Gilles Deleuze (...) such interventions characteristically embody the same kind of vision as that which informs the imperialist narratives promising redemption to the colonized subject” (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 77). Supporting the subaltern is often a reaffirmation of the social Darwinism implicit in “development” in which “help” is framed as “the burden of the fittest” (Spivak 2004, 57).

This hegemony of the Western/Enlightenment humanist epistemology is the central target of postcolonial critiques in their attempt to open possibilities of the emergence of non-coercive “ethical solidarities” (Andreotti 2011, 2). The emphasis is on how a local perspective, namely the European or Western epistemology, came to occupy a position where it could project itself as universally valid for all, with “the power to define and make definitions stick” (Baumann 1991, 9). To move beyond coercion, postcolonialism calls for a solidarity enacted as an ethical imperative toward the “Other” (cf. Spivak 2004) starting with an understanding of ethnocentric epistemic arrogance. Such ethical solidarities challenge the normative hegemony of a singular epistemology (Western rationality) to enable the emergence of a kind of dialogue where all “knowledge is perceived as situated, partial, and provisional” (Andreotti 2011, 3). The focus is not on undoing ethnocentrism but on opening the possibility of “contextual, ongoing co-construction of meaning” (Andreotti 2011, 3) in spite of ethnocentrism¹.

Reflecting my own positioning in the course, I ask myself how I am complicit in the reproduction of forms of hegemonic power, as I engage in the professional re-socialization of immigrants whom we define – with definitions that stick (cf. Baumann 1991) – as “displaced teachers” in ‘our’ (European/Western) conceptualizations of schooling, teaching and instruction, professionalism, pedagogy, diversity, inclusion, integration, and much more. With the unsettling questions that show up as we employ the postcolonial lens, I ask myself of the implications of such insights as we go about the task of engaging with the course next time around. Spivak conceptualizes an education “to come” (Spivak 2004, 526), which builds on a habit of democratic civility and an ethical imperative of responsibility, answerability or accountability *to* the Other and not *for* the Other (cf. Andreotti 2011), and argues for a deconstructive negotiation from within. Rather than a simple rejection of Western cultural institutions, values, positions and practices, she advocates that people should engage in a persistent critique of hegemonic discourses and representations, as they inhabit them. This would imply that critically conscious of our privileged positions, we continue to aspire to offer educational opportunities to establish more nuanced relationships with the ‘Other’; relationships of solidarity, rather than gestures of “charity, benevolence, or arrogant ‘progressive’ triumphalism” (Andreotti 2011, 8). This would mean

¹ While ethnocentric practice is by no means exclusive to the Western perspective, the severe uneven distribution of control over the establishment of laws and institutions, and the distribution of wealth and labor on a global scale puts Western ethnocentric hegemony in a different category from other partly coercive ethnocentrism.

“working against the grain of our interests and prejudices by contesting the authority of the academy and knowledge centers at the same time that we continue to participate in them and to deploy that authority as teachers, researchers, administrators and theorists” (Beverly 1999, 31).

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