

Introduction

The human person is a storyteller. He or she is picking up stories around him/her, is reconstructing and re-appropriating them in an ongoing new and irreplaceable 'own' story. This narrative dimension of human existence (from the Latin 'existere' which means 'to stand out' or 'to stand apart') makes every person unique but at the same time paradoxically connected to others. We 'share' our 'otherness' with 'each other'. Being at home in one's life story and respectfully dealing with the stories of others are complementary tasks of human existence. This double task has been described and defined in the history of humankind as a philosophical problem. It has also been in many ways the sparkling momentum for imaginative work and reflection in arts and religions, when dealing with mystery, undefined relatedness, human vulnerability and holistic longing for wholeness and transcendence.

The master narratives of religions and non-religious beliefs or worldviews have been providing people with words, rituals, practices and symbols to understand their own stories, those of their fellow human beings and the strange connection of the two. They created a cultural capital – stories of openness – for the ongoing processes of the human search for meaning. Some stories offer hope in a way that God himself relates to this search. Sometimes these stories also happened to be less successful when they exclusively and dominantly defined what the 'official' or 'true' meaning of life, of the human storyteller and even of God should be.

Narrative identity formation

Education is a fundamental human right. It belongs to the very centre of human dignity to be able to explore, to compare and to appropriate meaningful stories in one's own life story. Especially in an age of

growing globalisation children and young people are at risk. Do they have the full opportunities to become the narrator of their own story? Critical cultural studies refer to the loss of space for storytelling, because market and media are taking over. Children and young people often seem to be mute and inarticulate, because their own voice has been silenced by the speech of popular culture. The dynamic of life however is strong. It is always 'in search of new storytellers' (Paul Ricoeur). Children and young people are exploring new ways to deal resiliently with that complexity. It is the central task of the modern society to support its children as much as possible in their identity building – in the complex tension of participation and differentiation (Kammeyer 2012).

Education at school can help young people to explore their own voice, to compare it with other voices and to appropriate it in a personal way. Education can offer analytical frameworks, broader thoughts and action patterns to understand and to foster one's own identity. It can help young people to become better storytellers. Religious education is the specific school subject that focuses on religious and non-religious beliefs that are available as 'stories of openness' to support this identity formation. In Europe this field has been developed in many ways. A consensus however exists on the idea that learning *about* and learning *from* religion and non-religious belief should be the two main goals of this subject. Children and young people should be aware of the multifaceted phenomenon of religion in society and culture, and they should learn what the content of religious and non-religious worldviews precisely includes and how one can communicate this appropriately in daily life. Religious education fosters therefore understanding and solidarity between people of different backgrounds. And religious communities themselves can become aware of the intrinsic diversity within their own boundaries.

Inclusive identity formation

In this book we argue that every education should be in the end inclusive, or better should be inclusive from the very beginning! Every human being should have the chance (in juridical terms: the right) to explore, to compare and to appropriate ideas on human existence. Nobody should be and can be excluded from this dimension of human dignity. Because learning implies this social dimension of identity formation, classrooms should be as inclusive as possible, although this is always difficult to put into practice. Inclusion is always a process and an aim at the horizon. The school can become a learning environment in which children and young people learn not to exclude others because of differences, but to include them thanks to their differences. This idea has been promulgated on a global scale in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008).

When we consciously opt in this book for an inclusive perspective on education in general and religious education specifically, we want to give the reader an insight in the state of the art and want to show the different positions in this discourse – in the field of tension between educating children inclusively and honouring at the same time their diversity. In doing so, we believe that we will not only broaden but also deepen the personal process of identity building. The otherness of the other but also his/her vulnerability can become radical learning experiences because they are actually present in the classroom, included in the learning environment. Working inclusively in religious education opens the space for a more holistic approach to human life. Difficult questions are not evaded but addressed and storytelling-in-vulnerability itself becomes the content of the learning process. Children and young people then not only learn *about and from*, but also *in and through* the viewpoints (religious or not) of others. In the midst of a variety of positions, they are invited “to re-define” and “to re-

dignify” themselves (Roebben 2013, 164) as thoughtful and precious human beings.

Different voices included in this book

The body of research on religions and worldviews in the context of education is growing, but in the specific field of inclusive religious education we are aware that a strong discourse community is lacking. Scholars and reflective practitioners are scattered all over the world and are working independently on the topic. We brought some of them together in this book, based on the conviction that this series of essays can be a catalyst for a broadened and deepened academic reflection in the field. The book is part of the so called “Inter-FiRE” Project – International Forum for Inclusive Religious Education – which was developed in 2010-2013 at the University of Dortmund (Roebben, Kammeyer, Burggraf & Hanneken 2013).

We are aware of the fact that the material is in itself heterogeneous. Different positions are represented in the chapters. The extreme positions are well-known, but our authors are always nuanced – navigating between an overemphasis on inclusion and harmony (which can lead to assimilation and a lack of educational support) at the one hand and an overemphasis on personal differences seen as ‘special needs’ and even ‘disabilities’ at the other hand. As editors of this volume we consider interactions between different human beings as a relevant condition of inclusion, which then means that both ‘needs’ and ‘gifts’ are to be determined more specifically for every human being in educational processes. In the first essay of this book Bert Roebben is offering an insight precisely on how this experience of difference is deeply interwoven with our experiences of living together (in society) and learning together (in school) and should be seen as a didactical, pedagogical and theological opportunity for future education. Anita Müller-Friese is offering a counter story and is warning us to be seriously

aware of all the exclusive acts in society and schools towards people in disadvantaged situations.

The second part of the book offers promising theological perspectives on the shift from exclusive to inclusive action. Amos Yong develops a model of hospitality for all people in the church, a church that ought to be guided by a vision that involves ministry not only to people with disabilities but also with them. Joyce Mercer reflects on how spirituality is reshaped when children with ADHS diagnosis are attending to God, gathered with others in the church. Franz Feiner deals with a theological interpretation of inclusive work in Austrian schools and religious education classes and is presenting empirical findings in this respect.

The third part of the book focuses on the concrete classroom and on the mutual exchange of 'abilities and vulner-abilities' of all children in that classroom. Katharina Kammeyer deals with the re-appropriation and re-framing of biblical texts by students through their personal biographies. She gives an example of a 15-year-old girl writing about Psalm 121 and her experiences with exclusion and inclusion. Hartmut Rupp develops the idea of resilience in the religious education classroom and invites children to dare to follow the call of their lives. Wolfhard Schweiker offers the reader an example of how the method of 'Godly Play' (Jerome W. Berryman) can be understood inclusively. His essay can be seen as a comprehensive look into the whole discussion of the book. Stefan Anderssohn explores a biographical way of understanding more inclusively the structural-genetic development of children and develops therefore a theoretical framework. Dzintra Ilisko offers a perspective of sustainability as 'habitus' for a new common learning environment, but also points to the complexity of this approach in the Latvian school system. And finally Kathrin Hanneken presents data from an empirical study on German common classroom experiences of people with and without special needs.

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