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HONGYAN CHEN

Dynamics in Circle Rituals

Daily Life at a German
Reform Pedagogic School

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Abstract

School is a reservoir of rituals. In and through ritual, the school culture has been transmitted, constructed and reconstructed. The morning *circle* is a ritual performance in which institutional conduct and the personal lives and relationships between students and teacher are intertwined. Historically, using the form of a *circle* to initiate daily pedagogic activity can be traced to the Reform Pedagogy (Reformpädagogik) which advocated the *Beginning of New Education*. Currently, the circle as an organized form has been widely accepted and come to prevail in German schools, especially in pre-school and primary schools. As I will later show, *a ritual without (or detached from) belief* can be observed.

Therefore, it seems that questioning *how* the framework of *oriented practice* which informs the staging and performance of the morning circle can be understood is much more urgent than revealing *what* belief might underly it. To this end, consideration of the *performative* and *ludic* aspects of the morning circle promises to further our understanding. Adopting the concept of performativity for our purposes, we propose to elucidate upon three dimensions of the morning circle: historical, contextualized, and bodily oriented. With regard to the ludic aspect of the morning circle, a *playlike world* is invoked in which the teacher and students *pretend* to co-present and create thereby another *reality*, while an obligation to play, play together and stay in play is manifested through a metacommunicative frame. All such staging and performing of performativity and ludic moments can only be realized and legitimated by virtue of *bodily movement (gesture, mimesis)* and *speech act(s)*.

The strength of the morning circle lies in its inherent form. On one hand, by *closing* the circle, the boundary of inclusive and exclusive is defined, so that certain persons are included *within*, whereas others are excluded. On the other hand, the *de-centered or a-centric* character of the circle enables every individual who is at the *periphery* to participate and create the present scene. In light of this, a *we* community or a place of *belonging* is temporarily established regardless of the social status of each individual (in our case, the teacher-students community is emphasized).

Other features of the morning circle can be discerned by scrutinizing the performing process. *In* the circle, each individual not only knows that he/she is observed, but also sees how he/she is observed by others – so much so that he/she is obliged to join in as a front stage performer. Practice reinforc-

es social rules (order), personal disposition (power) and interaction (relationship) with minimal generation of conflict.

1. Introduction

Dabei zeigt sich, dass der Kreis nicht nur von außen dem Menschen gegenübertritt, sondern dass er bereits urbildhaft im Innern seiner Seele verankert ist.

(Lurker 1981)

All thinking begins with seeing; not necessarily through the eye, but with some basic formulation of sense perception, in the peculiar idiom of sight, hearing, or touch, normally of all the senses together [...] For all thinking is conceptual, and conception begins with the comprehension of Gestalt.

(Langer 1957)

This research is, above all, on the interaction rituals of teachers with their students in a physically unified *circle community* in which what has been *concealed* is more than what has been *seen*. The major topics that will be referred to in this study have emerged from empirical fieldwork at an inner city school that works with *reform pedagogy*¹ in Berlin, Germany. In this primary school, circle rituals and circle-like forms are ubiquitous in daily school life. For instance, every Monday morning the school day begins with a *morning circle*, every Friday it ends with a *dismissal circle*, during lessons a *learning circle* is often quickly formed, conflict is also expected to be resolved in a *circle discussion*, even the teachers' meetings are conducted in circle forms, and so forth. In brief, such circles and circle-like forms are the most frequently used practice form by teachers and students. To a great extent the *circle* represents the profile of the school image. While the thematic content of each morning circle may vary considerably, the manner in which it is transmitted is similar. From the perspective of anthropological study on ritual, this feature of *repetition* offers a window through which certain distinguishing characteristics of school culture can be observed. In addition, we argue that a study of *circle rituals* is important for current research in education in at least the following three points: firstly, in terms of its physical organization, the circle overcomes the disadvantage of the traditional *instruction* model in which the teacher plays the dominant role in the whole class. In the circle, conversations among students play a central role, enabling the *peer group learning culture* as well as the teacher-student interac-

1 Here, the term *reform pedagogy* is the translation of the German word *Reformpädagogik*. The term is applied accordingly in the following passage.

tion culture that occurs in a formal classroom setting. Secondly, circle rituals often occur when there is a transition from one status to another, enabling us to observe the interaction rituals as a *dynamic system*. Thirdly, in the circle every student not only *knows* he/she is observed by others, but also *sees* and *experiences* how he/she is observed. In this aspect, the performance of the individual as a *self-presentation process* can be perceived and further analyzed.

1.1 The Morning Circle in Academic Discussion

The circle has long been recognized as a universal activity form. For children, no other shape is as familiar as the circle. For instance, sketches by small children often feature the primary shape of the circle, as do the ringed forms in which children play and dance (Heinzel 2001; Lurker 1981). It is therefore unsurprising that scholars consider the circle to be an archetype of human beings, and more specifically, an archetype of deity (Jung 1969), an archetype of self (Jung 1969) or an archetype of mind (Lurker 1981).

In education, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the circle was discovered, acknowledged and adopted as an organizational form in a school context (Heinzel 2001; Purmann 2001). To a great extent, the adaptation of the circle as a structure for instruction is closely related to the initiation of reform pedagogy in Europe. This occurred at a time when all Europeans were hoping for the establishment of a new system, when people were longing to construct a new future (Nohl 1935). To keep up with the developments of modernization and dramatic cultural changes (Nohl/Bollnow 1970), new knowledge about children was required for education. With the slogan *children-centered (vom Kinde aus)*, Petersen (1930, 1946, 1969), the reform leaders changed the schooling rhythm, re-arranged curricula into weekly plans, established peer-coaching among teachers and devised cross-grade learning methods. All these changes took place within the context of *a century for children* and were features of the nascent reform pedagogy. Not only did pedagogic theory experience a dramatic transformation, but the didactics and methodologies of school practice were also totally revised.

Peter Petersen was preeminent among those to seriously and explicitly advocate adopting the circle as a form of classroom organization. He was also one of the pioneers who actively used the circle in actual school life. Petersen distinguished four essential elements that he considered to be basic components of learning: conversation, play, work, and celebration. For him,

the round-circle is the most basic and best form to foster these four elements (Petersen 1969). The circle, he demonstrates, brings individuals together, encourages every individual to participate, and enables everyone in the circle to hear and *to be heard* by one another. At the same time, in the circle the distance between teacher and students is diminished, which enables the teacher to join in the children's lives. In this way, it *frees* both teacher and students from their traditional inequality of status, making possible the establishment of a form of *solidarity learning* community (Gemeinschaft). Thus, proposes Petersen, using the circle in the context of schools is a symbolic move away from traditional models of education, and towards a new type of education (Petersen 1937). Further, he draws attention to the *disciplinary* aspect of circle practice. He argues that, in the circle, its members not only have the right to express themselves, discuss and make decisions, but are also obliged to take responsibility for the order in/of the circle, so that a harmonic communal life (Zusammenleben) can be realized (Petersen 1969).

According to this vision, a series of specific circles were developed in Jena-plan schools, such as the morning circle, Monday circle, end-of-week circle, reading circle and breakfast circle. At the same time, across a range of European countries, the circle as a form of organizational structuring was advocated by other reform pedagogy proponents such as Berthold Otto (1912), Célestin Freinet (1979) and Ilse Rother (1955).²

Nowadays, the use of circle rituals is not limited to reform pedagogy schools (Purmann 2001), but also extensively practiced in other German schools, especially in kindergartens, pre-schools, and primary schools (Heinzel 2001). According to Friedrike Heinzel, who in 2001 analyzed the instruction frameworks of different subjects across Germany, in almost all states the circle has taken a significant position in daily school life at different levels: not only in policy but also in practice (Heinzel 2001: 54). At a practical level, Heinzel's statistic analysis found that more than 96.7% of teachers thought it very important or important to use the circle in daily instruction (ibid.: 127). Further, Heinzel (ibid.: 117) lists 84 different types of circles that are currently widely used in German schools, including the *farewell circle*, *birthday celebration circle*, *Monday morning circle* and *dance circle*. In short, the *circle* as a formal organizational form has become ubiquitous in the daily rhythm of German schools (ibid.: 51).

2 For more details on the concepts underlying the development of the morning circle see Purmann 2001: 53-62.

Among these circles, the morning circle emerges as the one of the most popular forms practiced in schools (Heinzel 2001; Purmann 2001). It is argued that the morning circle is an *engaging* way to start each day (or week), that it builds a strong sense of *community* and sets children up for success socially and academically. It helps students to quickly transition from family life to school life and bridges (achieving a balance between) their individual and social lives. The framework of the circle is relatively flexible, energetic, and creative; equal and democratic; safe and inclusive – so much so that a magic circle both for individual and social life appears archetypal.

Nevertheless, in many cases, German scholars' attention to the issue of the morning circle in academic discourse has primarily focused on the content (Purmann 2001; Röhner 1998), function (Heinzel 2001) or efficacy of the morning circle. More specifically, scholars have often limited their discussion to the possible improvements in speaking skills or grasp of language capability to be gained through the morning circle, resulting in the substitution of the conversation or storytelling circle (*Kreisgespräch* or *Erzählkreis*) for the morning circle (Heinzel 2001). In the present study, however, we argue that verbal language is not the sole medium of school interactions. Instead, they always coincide with bodily movement, gesture signs, and facial expressions. In addition, the essential meaning of the morning circle cannot be grasped if we consider it as a mere tool towards achieving a certain aim. Hence, we would like to focus on the structure of the circle and the interactive processes that it fosters. In this respect, questioning *how teacher-students can be conceived of as a community, and how that community generates meaning*, are the core aspects of this research project. The above points, therefore, necessitate an investigation into the daily *practice life* of a school.

1.2 Ritual as the Framework of Circle Analysis

In contemporary academic discourse, practice has been focused upon by scholars of diverse disciplines.³ An analysis of practice by means of language-rule and body performance has made a decisive contribution to mov-

3 In the field of philosophy, Wittgenstein, for instance, is known for his prominent “rule-following” contribution on language practice discussion; within sociology, Pierre Bourdieu’s work interrogates the “logic of practice”; while in anthropology, practice has been a central theme since the 1980s.

ing theory beyond the plight of dualisms and dichotomies. More specifically, in terms of practice the intersection of external demands and internal predisposition are emphasized and perennial issues such as subjectivity, embodiment, meaning, and normativity can be re-interpreted in their own rights. Therefore, it follows that the notion of practice is generally recognized as a *good place to start* (Bell 1992; Grimes 2014) and recognition of the *practice turn* (Schatzki 2006) seems indispensable in current academic discussions.

In fact, *practice* is used interchangeably with a large family of terms.⁴ Ritual is one of the most prominent here. Ritual practice can be characterized as something ongoing that is both shaped by and shapes its practitioners, usually happening in public, and is constituted by the *performance of repeatable patterns*. Thus, the whole practice process relies heavily on dramatic ritual performance, which plays an important role in the creation, preservation, transformation and transfer of culture (Wulf 2013a: 179). The same applies to practice in a school context. For instance, no one is surprised by the ritualistic nature of school practice in the following situations: every new semester, the school begins with a ritual opening ceremony and the principal usually makes a ritual speech; every Monday morning begins with the ritual raising of the national flag and singing of the anthem; every day the teacher initiates each new lesson with a ritual greeting and dismisses it with a specific manner of speech. Other, less regular rituals include students' birthday celebrations, students' parties when they pass an important exam or finally graduate – even though they know that they will confront similar teachers, classmates and exams at their next school which they will enter day after day, year after year, teachers encounter the repetition of the same problems as they affect different children. All in all, it becomes clear that school practice is a rich reservoir of rituals⁵ and that the expressive culture of the school is mainly transmitted through ritual and ritualization (Bernstein 1971).

4 Stephen Turner has drawn attention to this with respect to philosophy and the humanities. He identified the terms tradition, tacit knowledge, *weltanschauung*, paradigm, ideology, framework, and presupposition as being closely linked to the notion of practice. For more details see Turner 2013.

5 Peter McLaren (1993) has observed that schools are rich with rituals. He categorizes ritual into: macro ritual, micro ritual, rituals of revitalization, rituals of intensification, and rituals of resistance.

Nevertheless, the practice of ritual⁶ has rarely been discussed in recent educational discourse. Briefly, there are three possible explanations for this: firstly, since the study of ritual has long been associated with anthropological fieldwork, it has often been assumed that it relates only to religion and symbol analysis and is incompatible and perhaps even unacceptable in the field of education. Secondly, over the years, ritual has been viewed as a practical and efficient strategy, especially as a political instrument,⁷ to unite the ideas of a community and constrain the freedom of each individual. This has led to neglect or even deny the potential of ritual to create, shape and transform social life (Wulf 2013a; Zirfas/Wulf 2001). Thirdly, because of an emphasis on sociolinguistic and symbolic interactionism, early ethnographic research in education was mostly concerned with language, or so-called discourse analysis and symbolic interaction (Bernstein 1977; Erickson 1986; Spindler 1982), so that the more *obviously visible bodily* ritual patterns were often taken for granted.

However, as studies of ritual in anthropology and sociology gained impact, the subject gradually rose to the prominent position it has held in the field of education since the late 1980s. There was a profound interest in focusing on the significance of ritual for the secular aspects of human social life. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim expanded upon the notion of secular ritual. As a positivist, Durkheim was concerned more with the present than with the past, namely “the actual reality which is near to us and which consequently is capable of affecting our ideas and our acts” (1965: 1).⁸ Durkheim considered religion to be a good starting point from which to

6 Unlike in academic field discourse, use of the term “ritual” is generally accepted in everyday speech. As Grimes (2014) argues, “people attending a fiesta know the word [ritual ... and] use the word often and you will be flagged as an outsider or an academic. Some say, oh, yes we have rituals in the cathedral, but in the cathedral they talk about liturgy or celebration” (p. 185). Similar to the statement of Grimes, in the school field context it is hardly heard that anyone uses the term “ritual” directly; instead of ritual, people are more likely to talk about birthday *celebrations*, summer *festivals*, or a school *ceremony*.

7 For further arguments see Wulf 2013a: 215ff. As to the negative aspects of ritual, he argues that, in the German context, the emancipative movement of the 1968 generation came to associate rituals with the rigidity and violence of National Socialism.

8 In his *The elementary forms of religious life* (1947), Durkheim claims that “Sociology raises other problems than history or ethnography [...] like every positive science, it has as its object the explanation of some actual reality which is near to us, and which consequently is capable of affecting our ideas and our acts” (p. 13). Moreover, Durkheim’s starting point rests on religion; for him, the reli-