

## **Schools Experienced as Zones of Alienation and/or Resonance: Consequences for (Dis)Advantaged Students, Their Relationship to Learning and Their Educational Pathways**

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### *Project Description*

School alienation, with the observation of an often even increasingly negative relationship towards school and learning in the course of educational pathways, is a highly relevant albeit understudied area of interest. Simultaneously, two particular contributions have just recently lent new momentum to the discussion: on the one hand the empirical work by Hascher and Hadjar (e.g. 2018), mainly in the field of educational psychology and quantitative methodology; on the other hand, the theoretical developments by Rosa (e.g. 2020) with his sociologically-oriented elaborations on alienation and resonance, emphasising the relationship aspect of learning in terms of complex alienation-resonance dynamics between teacher, student and content. Both of these contributions raise highly relevant questions on students' relationship to learning, thus on a core concern of education, and, associated, on the question of what education in postmodern society is and can be. The contributions, however, have hitherto left a large research gap, while additionally, the area of interest has not yet been empirically examined consulting Rosa's new conceptual propositions. More specifically, we do not know how the interplay of alienation and resonance is experienced by different students, particularly regarding differences in socioeconomic conditions as well as precarised belongings in the migration context. While these factors have been shown to affect educational success in terms of achievements or diplomas, it remains unclear how they influence the relationship to learning as it evolves – and possibly changes – over time (Mantel et al., 2025).

We aim to contribute with qualitative-hermeneutic research, which we consider ideal as it allows to meet the subject's complexity with an initial openness, reconstructing students' and teachers' perspectives, identifying meaningfully interconnected aspects and gaining a deep understanding of what has not yet been investigated:

- *In what ways are schools experienced as zones of alienation and/or resonance regarding students' relationship to learning?*
- *How are these experiences shaping or being shaped by different students' educational pathways up to the age of 18?*

We approach these questions with three different foci, each dealing with high complexity, each thus requiring specific attention, expertise and methodology:

**Part A** focuses on the connection with socioeconomic conditions: *Are these experiences connected with students' differing socioeconomic conditions, and if so, in what ways?*

This part thus seeks to understand how lower or higher socioeconomic status are connected to the experience of school alienation and/or resonance – including the relationship to learning – and what leads to change in these experiences. In order to meet these complexities and to identify meaningful interrelations in the respondents' accounts, a biographic-hermeneutic approach is most suitable.

*Data generation* shall be performed through the well-established and sophisticated method of biographic-narrative interviews according to Schütze (1983, cf. also Rosenthal, 2018, pp. 133–147), typically containing three parts: an initial part in which the life story is unfolded, a second part with ‘immanently’ oriented questions (‘immanenter Nachfrageteil’) in which already mentioned issues are further developed, and a third part with ‘exmanently’ oriented questions (‘exmanenter Nachfrageteil’) in which new issues are brought into the conversation. This interview technique allows for thematic elaborations, such as the relationship to learning as well as social conditions (detailed in Mantel, 2017, pp. 109–146).

*Sample, sampling and field access:* The sample shall comprise young adults who are 18 years old. We have decided on the age of 18 because on the one hand, the respondents will be old enough to look back on an educational trajectory while, on the other, they will still be young enough to provide insight on current institutional conditions. We have asked three particular schools in the canton of Zug to support us in our field access and have received approval from the three directors to provide contact to the schools’ former or recent students. These three schools are ideal for our purpose, as they mirror the strong, wide contrasts in the canton of Zug with its high proportion of migrants with tertiary education (24%, compared to 10% in the canton of Bern and 16% in Switzerland, according to the Federal Statistical Office BfS, data from 2022), often referred to as ‘expatriates’, many of whom have a high socioeconomic status. Simultaneously, people with low socioeconomic status can also be found (15% have no post-compulsory education, of which 8.6% have a migration history, according to BfS, data from 2022). These wide contrasts in the canton – and also in the three schools – enable us to scrutinise different aspects and intersectional intertwinings regarding status and migration.

With this initial field access, we have a promising basis for the process of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1998 [1967]). We will start with six students from each school with varying combinations of low/middle/high status and non-/migration histories. Based on these 18 cases, we will identify additional minimally and maximally contrasting aspects and search for further respondents accordingly. We expect to find these further respondents beyond the three schools through a snowball strategy that has often proved to be highly effective. If we seek, for instance, another respondent with low socioeconomic status and a lot of frustration associated with school, we expect to find such a person through the networks of the former respondents. Regarding the sampling process in part A, we expect to be searching for additional respondents with different socioeconomic conditions, while gender may also play an important role; however, this can only be defined through the analyses in a step-by-step process. This process of theoretical sampling shall finally lead to ‘theoretical saturation’, which – according to our experience – should be reached with about 20 to 30 respondents (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, pp. 231–237).

*Data analysis:* The research question of part A seeks to find the interrelatedness between individual experiences and social conditions, and one particular analysis methodology is most suitable and even specialised for this endeavour, namely Bohnsack’s (2010, 2013, 2014) documentary method. Not only does it allow for the elaborate reconstruction of respondents’ experiences, including what is said implicitly, thus going beyond and relativising responses on the level of self-report and socially desirable statements, it also facilitates the identification of ‘socio-genetic typologies’ (‘soziogenetische Typenbildung’) that reconstruct the link between the particular typical structure of experience and the social field to which it meaningfully relates. Using this methodology with data from biographic interviews has the particular strength of facilitating the reconstruction of an individual’s dealing with past experiences in an interplay with social fields. It is not a reconstruction of events as they occurred in the past, but a reconstruction of how an individual’s ‘becoming’ is meaningfully connected to past experiences and social conditions, which is precisely what we desire to know more about, zooming in on

experiences of alienation and/or resonance and the relationship to learning (for a detailed discussion on the relationship between the ‘time of narration’ and the ‘narrated time’ and its methodological implications, please refer to Mantel, 2017, pp. 121–131). While these reconstructions of the ‘becoming’ and the ways of dealing with past experiences as well as their connections to social fields requires a long analysis process with many reflection loops and moments of intersubjective validation, e.g. through group interpretation workshops, they lead to precisely the kind of generalisable findings we strive for in this part A.

**Part B** sheds light on questions of belonging in the context of ‘migrantisation’: *Focusing on students who experience processes of ‘migrantisation’, how are such processes connected to experiencing schools as zones of alienation and/or resonance?*

In this part, our focus is on those students who experience processes of being ‘migrantised’ and the question of how these processes are intertwined with the experience of school alienation and/or resonance, including the relationship to learning. A qualitative-biographic approach is foreseen for this part.

**Part C** addresses the teachers’ role: *(a) How do students construct their different teachers’ roles in the dynamics of experiencing school in terms of alienation and/or resonance? (b) In what ways do they see these teachers as influencing their educational pathways? (c) Regarding those teachers who are seen to have had a particularly positive influence despite difficult circumstances, what was experienced as particularly positive and in what ways?*

This third part investigates the teachers’ role, as teachers have been found to be highly influential regarding questions of school alienation, and there is much to suggest – based on conceptual considerations as well as ethnographic explorations – that their significance is even further enhanced in the context of low socioeconomic conditions and precarised belongings, both with regard to desirable and undesirable effects on the alienation-resonance dynamics and therefore on students’ relationship with learning (Mantel, Wetzel & Rosen, 2025). However, as outlined above, empirical evidence has yet to be found. Such evidence is not only pivotal for scientific reasons, but forms an important hinge to the practical fields. Gaining a deeper understanding of the teachers’ role in these processes will allow us to address these issues more effectively in teacher education.

*Data generation* shall initially be conducted as in parts A and B, although with thematic elaborations on teachers’ roles in the biographic accounts. As this part C aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the collaboration and relationship between students and teachers regarding the experiences of alienation and/or resonance over time, we follow Rosenthal’s (2009) advice as she is a methodological expert for such research questions and designs. She states that to gain a deep understanding of a relationship that will be theorisable and therefore generalisable (through extrapolating meaningful connections that lead to theorising statements), it is important to focus on few contrasting cases and devote special attention to the contextualisation of the individual perspectives, including additional data generation for these contextualisation purposes (Rosenthal, 2009, p. 49). In our case, the main data comes from the biographical narratives, but additional data is needed to understand the teachers’ perspectives. According to Rosenthal (2009), there is a certain danger that additional data is instrumentalised to merely verify findings from the biographic analyses, but actually requires special attention and methodology, for instance by means of ethnographic data generation and analyses (pp. 46-53). We consider this triangulating approach to be highly promising, however only rewarding if it is canalised into one of the most interesting aspects, which is focusing on teachers who are seen to have had a particularly *positive* influence despite the students’ difficult circumstances and – more specifically – focusing on those aspects

that have been experienced as particularly supportive by the interview respondents – be they, for instance, particular ways of designing lessons or a particular kind of teacher-student relationship. We therefore plan to add data by capturing the teachers' views and actions through ethnographic participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews (Breidenstein et al., 2020). Approaching those seen as having had a *positive* influence has an additional ethical advantage, as we do not want to put our respondents in a position of having to 'betray' former teachers whom they experienced negatively by naming them; conversely, asking for contact with teachers they experienced positively seems justifiable and acceptable to us.

*Sample, sampling and field access* regarding the *biographic-narrative interviews* shall be as in parts A and B. We expect all the data from parts A and B will also be useable for this part, while about four to seven additional interviews will be needed to elaborate on students with particularly difficult circumstances and on the teachers' roles in these trajectories. The possibility to use data from parts A and B allows for a well-reflected choice of contrasting cases. Additionally, this close collaboration among the researchers working with the same corpus of data will facilitate the intersubjective validity of the analyses. Regarding the *ethnographic part*, we plan to identify four or five teachers from different respondents' biographic accounts, that have been shown to have had a particularly positive influence, and to accompany them ethnographically in their daily school life for about one month each. We will choose teachers who have been the respondents' teachers relatively recently, preferably in the time span of one to five years before the interview.

*Data analysis:* This part is mainly oriented on in-depth analyses and the description of four to five contrasting cases through a hermeneutic process, according to Rosenthal (1995, 2009, 2011, 2018). The additional ethnographic data (interview transcripts, observation protocols, contextual information and methodological and theoretical reflections, gained through an iterative-cyclical flow of data generating, analysing and theorising, cf. Breidenstein et al., 2020, pp. 51, 125–201; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, pp. 69–75) will add to the reflection and contextualisation of the results and the theorising statements (for the complexity and benefits of triangulating biographic and ethnographic data, cf. Köttig, 2009; Dausien & Kelle, 2009). The ethnographic data shall not be used in an instrumentalising way to verify findings from the biographic analyses (Rosenthal, 2009, p. 46-53) but follow its own logic by developing a 'synthetic condensation', turning a 'rich description' into a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1987), going beyond the analysis of specific situations by dismantling meaningful interconnections and structures (Thomas, 2019, pp. 116–119). Bringing these insights into a conversation with the findings from the biographic interviews will lead to theorising statements about the ways teachers are able to be influential within the complex dynamics of alienation and resonance and about the aspects that were experienced particularly positively by the students as well as why these aspects turned out to be significant over time and in the context of difficult circumstances.

### *Broader Impact*

Experiences of long-term alienation in students' relationship to learning are not only undesirable experiences in general, they have particularly detrimental consequences in our times, as education and a positive relationship to learning are critical to meet our circumstances of accelerated change with its need for continuous adaptation, both vocationally as well as in private life. Alienation is the experience of a lack of connection, of an impression that the learning process 'has nothing to do with me', 'does not speak to me' that there is no process of hearing and responding involving learners in a meaningful way. It is not the same concept as underachievement or school failure, as even overperformers may experience long-

term alienation in their relationship to learning, while socioeconomically deprivileging conditions and/or experiences of migrantisation may also play a role. The interplay of alienation and resonance is a view on education and learning that is crucial, has not yet received enough attention and needs to be addressed.

While the above describes the need from students' perspectives, there is also a need expressed by practitioners in schools. Teaching students who are experienced as unmotivated as well as teaching in the context of deprivileging socioeconomic conditions and/or migrantisation is often felt to be difficult, stressful and sometimes frustrating. Research shows that these frustrations often go hand-in-hand with unnoticed stereotyping and a lack of knowledge and professionalism.

With this research project, we aim to meet these knowledge gaps in a particularly promising way grounded in the conviction and experience that the better the processes are understood, the better the professional (re)action can be. While we aim at gaining a thorough understanding ourselves, we also strive to communicate our knowledge in a user-friendly way. We know that the development of a 'better understanding,' proves limited when knowledge remains abstract, but we can overcome this limitation in at least two ways:

First, by referring to concrete stories: Our particular research approach with biographical accounts and ethnographic observations will allow us to tell very concrete stories that invite readers or listeners to take the perspective of students experiencing, feeling and living with processes of alienation and/or resonance while also explaining the interrelatedness with the social conditions and the potential that lies in the teacher's role. Therefore, we expect to offer support to teachers not only through the content but also in the way we present the content through stories. This appears to be particularly promising against the background that most teachers have neither lower class nor migrantisation experience and may find it easier to develop an idea for different living conditions if they can approach them through concrete – and for those in Central Switzerland even local – examples and stories.

Second, by offering positive perspectives: All too often, the approaches and materials in teacher education regarding issues like disadvantage, socioeconomically deprivileged conditions or migrantisation not only remain abstract, but also have a moralising tone to them that discourages practitioners. Additionally, they are often limited to descriptions of negative issues such as bias, discrimination or stereotyping, while leaving a gap in providing a positive orientation or horizon. They often describe the undesirable while lacking vocabulary and ideas for the desirable. We believe that the concept of alienation and resonance as it is proposed by Rosa and further developed by ourselves, can be highly encouraging and inspiring to find a positive pedagogical orientation.

Overall, we expect this research to have a great impact, mainly by supporting teachers in their ability to facilitate students' resonant relationships to learning, taking into consideration and meeting their different socioeconomic conditions and/or experiences of migrantisation. Additionally, we expect to initiate and participate in discussions about the core meaning of 'Bildung' and its implications for school development, suggesting the perspective of alienation and resonance to be a crucial way of looking at educational achievement which is often reduced to 'success' in terms of higher-better-faster-more, but rarely in terms of a resonant relationship to learning.

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