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Science linking with School School linking with Science

Interim Report, August 31st 2009

Tricks of the Trade – Field Research with Pupils

LEADING INSTITUTION

Institute: Science Communications Research e.V.
Project leader: Dr. Veronika Wöhrer
Contact: veronika.woehrer@univie.ac.at

SCIENTIFIC CO-OPERATION PARTNERS

University of Vienna, Institute for European Ethnology
Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Institute for Education in the Arts
Institute for Organisational Development, Vienna

SCHOOL INVOLVED

KMS 8, Vienna



B.M.W.F^a

www.bmwf.gv.at

Austrian Federal Ministry of
Science and Research

Tricks of the Trade Field Research with Pupils

“What do you usually do about science?” – The project ‘Tricks of the Trade’ conducted by the Viennese research organisation Science Communications Research has been testing social scientific field research in schools since autumn 2008. Together with their teacher Dagmar Schulz twelve- and thirteen-year-old pupils from the Pfeilgasse Cooperative Secondary School are analysing their social environment in three small research projects on the themes of ‘Parks and Graffiti’, ‘Places of Love in School’ and ‘Young People and Chatting’. The research is being led by the sociologist Veronika Wöhrer.

The project ‘Tricks of the Trade. Field Research with Pupils’ has been working together with the Pfeilgasse Cooperative Secondary School. The goals of the project were twofold: on the one hand it was a question of investigating whether and how social research with young people from a Cooperative Secondary School can be carried out, and it was also about testing the applicability of participatory action research methods on the target group of young people. On the other hand, the work was also about collecting specific field data and analysing the links between the categories of gender, class and ethnicity in the field of communicating science to young people.

Between research and education

Therefore the roles of the social scientists overlapped during fieldwork: The young research team acted as conveyors of social science knowledge, as coaches in a social science research process and as sociological observers of the processes of research and of conveying knowledge.

In work with participatory action research methods it is necessary to listen to and to take into account the wishes, needs and expectations of the co-researchers – in this case the pupils. It is they who then decide on the research questions and to a large extent on the appropriate design. So instead of chalk-and-talk teaching and large group discussions in the 16-strong class (10 boys, 6 girls), we soon changed over to working in small groups on the three research themes. The research themes had emerged from a total of 35 ideas which the pupils had put into a ‘research questions box’ in the classroom and which had been developed further in individual interviews with the pupils. These interviews served three purposes: 1. They helped to find out which research interests the students had; 2. In this way, data on the social and family backgrounds of the pupils could be collected. 3. The pupils learned about interviewing methods from a practical perspective.



Interestingly, but hardly surprisingly for this age group, gender-segregated groups – a boys' group and two girls' groups – formed for the three themes 'Park and Graffiti', 'Places of Love in School' and 'Young People and Chatting'. The groups took up their research work at the beginning of the year and presented their ideas and observations at the end of the school year with small posters in school. For the team of social scientists data collection and analyses are done in a cyclic mode: While the extensive collection of data continued – there are already more than 50 hours of audio material and a multitude of minutes of meetings – the analysis and evaluation of the data was initiated in accordance with the principles of qualitative and participatory social research.

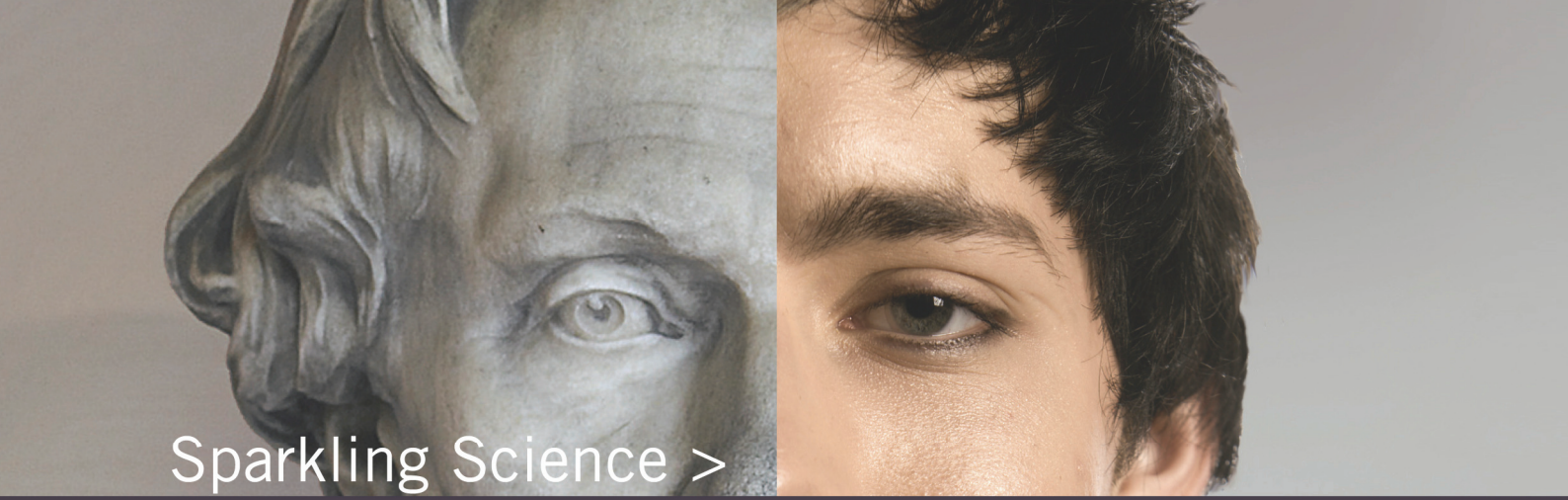
In this way findings, which are related to the work of conveying knowledge, were gained from the analyses as well as initial scientific hypotheses. Occasionally the two commingle – combinations of social pedagogics, group dynamics, community work and social research are not untypical in this field. The analyses carried out by now have led to hypotheses with regard to the work (of communicating knowledge) with the class; the research with the class and the small groups; the structures of the school; the class, peer groups and class structures as well as the relationship between the teacher and the class and between the social researchers and the class.

First you think it is very simple, love is simply love ...

But it is not simple to establish an associative and research-orientated attitude in an education system which is orientated towards conveying (factual) knowledge and in which testing and giving marks are everyday occurrences. "At the beginning we didn't really realise that establishing a culture of research needs spaces and conditions which are difficult to create in a school", said the social scientist Sabine Sölkner and her colleague Karin Schneider agreed: "As sociologists we are also interested in the general conditions within which education functions." For pupils it was new and confusing that at the end of a day of research – unlike in many other lessons – there were often new questions rather than answers. "First you think it is very simple, love is simply love. And then you notice that it is about more complicated things", said a pupil and "That was absolutely exhausting today. I've never worked so much in my life. I mean here in my head", commented another. The teacher, Dagmar Schulz, is also pleased "to be able to get to know the children from another perspective. In part you are working with completely different children from those you know in the usual lessons".

In their joint work, from which a radio programme on the theme of 'Why do Young People Chat' has been created for 'Students Radio' on the national current affairs station Ö1, gender and ethnicity have emerged as important distinctive features. This will also form one of three key research questions for the second project year. Alongside this, two other questions will be investigated: Where and how can 'participatory research with pupils' be successful? And: How is 'a background in which education has low priority' created within the interaction of school, family and research?





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