

Intersectionality and Dis/ability – A Relationship Determination From a History Education Perspective

Doing Difference as an Initial Consideration

As part of the piloting of the Explanatory Videos 2.0 project, student assistants conducted a workshop in two 6th grade classes at a Tyrolean secondary school, which was accompanied by lesson observation.¹ One of the classes was an integrated class with four learners who had special educational needs due to various disabilities. This included a girl with Down's syndrome, who was supported by the class history teacher throughout the three-hour workshop and was therefore hardly integrated into the learning process but rather excluded from it. Although this small field study is very fragmentary and the situation observed may have arisen as a result of the chosen research setting, it is still possible to draw some initial reflections on how to deal with difference in institutionalised learning contexts. Among other things, it shows how the education system itself contributes to ›doing difference‹,² in this case, the social construction of categories of difference such as disability. This clearly shows that »schools produce inequality and reproduce social inequalities in the process«.³ It is precisely the »school policy legitimisation concept« of handling special educational needs that is criticised, as this can itself be seen as a category of difference⁴ causing the problems it tries to solve. When the focus is on the student, gender and age categories such as girl and child can be assigned in addition to disability, but this also involves a reduction in complexity as these attributions are based on binary constructions. Furthermore, nothing is known about her sexual orientation, social background, religion or nationality. Nevertheless, it is clear that various (difference) attributions become visible, or are possible, and must be considered in an intersectional manner.

1 A standard and a competence-orientated video were produced as part of the Explanatory Videos 2.0 research project. In the pilot study, the question of how students rate these two versions was investigated. See Brait/Krösche 2024.

2 West/Fenstermaker 1995.

3 Lindmeier 2019, 31.

4 Lindmeier 2019, 15. The attribution of special educational needs is considered as discriminatory and inhibits participation. See More et al. 2020, 163.

Intersectionality is a multifaceted concept, and feminist intersectionality research as well as gender and queer studies have made a decisive contribution to the development of the theory in recent years.⁵ In addition, intersectionality has emerged as a cross-sectional category for analysing cultural and social relationships in the humanities, cultural and social sciences⁶ and is used in educational research, disability studies, special education and inclusive education, as well as individual subject education.⁷ Although its relevance has long been recognised,⁸ reference to the concept on the part of history education has so far been marginal in theoretical and empirical terms. For this reason, this work focuses on a theoretical approach to intersectional perspectives in research on history education with special consideration of the category of difference dis/ability.

Intersectionality – Historical and Theoretical Background

Very different concepts and perspectives such as diversity, heterogeneity and differentiation, intercultural learning and subject orientation⁹ need to be taken into account in the context of inclusive history education research.¹⁰ It is necessary to leave behind the »internal view« of history education, as Sebastian Barsch has formulated it, in the discussion of the concept of gender¹¹ to make room for more interdisciplinarity and inclusive approaches from gender studies, queer studies, disability studies, as well as special education and inclusive education. Despite its theoretical interest, intersectionality is another concept that has received little attention in the discourse on history education, although Christoph Kühberger, among others, has noted its added value for theory, empiricism and practice.¹² He argues that intersectional references manifest themselves both in the »individual historical consciousness of learners and teachers« and »in the historical-cultural products of society«, which also affects history teaching.¹³

An intersectional perspective brings into focus the multidimensionality and complexity of inequality and power relations,¹⁴ making it possible to look at interconnected axes of social inequality: that is, the interactions and overlaps between categories of inequality. In educational contexts such as history classes, social (inequality) relations are reproduced in a microcosm, so that processes of inclusion and exclusion, standardisation and normalisation determine what happens in the classroom. Both teachers and students therefore operate in

5 Lutz et al. 2010.

6 Kallenberg et al. 2013.

7 Bramberger et al. 2017.

8 Lücke 2017; Lücke/Messerschmidt 2020; Kühberger 2016; Brüning 2015.

9 In the German language discourse, subject orientation refers to the focus on the learning subject, i.e. on the respective students and their specific needs.

10 These are the keywords in the dictionary of history education. See Mayer et al. 2022.

11 Barsch 2016, 183.

12 Kühberger 2016.

13 Kühberger 2016.

14 Lutz et al. 2010, 11.

a field of tension between emancipation – that is, the possible overcoming of existing conditions – and paternalism, or the confirmation of traditional relationships.¹⁵ Learners not only bring a variety of preconditions to the (history) classroom, but they are also in a permanent process of identity formation.¹⁶ Accordingly, school diversity cannot be captured by rigid categories considered in isolation. In view of these dynamics, the intersectionality approach, by virtue of its openness, appears to be qualified as a research perspective for describing and analysing inclusive historical learning processes. This is because its strength lies in »constantly remaining sensitive to new possible omissions, denominations and exclusions«, as Helma Lutz, María Teresa Herrera Vivar and Linda Supik argue.¹⁷

At the same time, the genesis of the concept of intersectionality is much more complex than the iconic reference to the metaphor of the crossroads, coined by US legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, would suggest.¹⁸ Although Crenshaw was a major inspiration, the historical roots of this concept go back to the 19th century. In the US-American context, Black feminism and critical race theory, particularly the Combahee River Collective Statement from 1977,¹⁹ played a decisive role.²⁰ Different disciplinary and political-activism contexts also need to be included in the intersectionality discourse. In the context of the German-language reception of Crenshaw's work, the concept of intersectionality has been strongly deformed by reduction and pluralisation. Following Edward Said, Lucy N. Chebout therefore classifies intersectionality as a ›travelling theory‹ and calls for a comprehensive re-reading of Crenshaw.²¹

At the same time, the theoretical debate sparked criticism of the linear nature of the crossroads metaphor, and thus of the concept of intersectionality itself, as it implies that previously isolated categories of difference only come together at an intersection. This is an additive or one-dimensional perspective of social differences, which therefore cannot *de facto* be overcome.²² In its place, an interdependence approach has emerged as an alternative concept to capture the complexity of social inequality²³ by focusing more strongly on the interactions and interdependencies between different categories. However, the relationship between the concepts of intersectionality and interdependence is a nuanced one. An integral perspective on social categories, which was developed in an interdisciplinary project, has attracted much attention.²⁴ However, its use of the term interdependence is based on a view that categories of difference have a distinct core. In a holistic perspective on interdependencies, Katharina Walgenbach has introduced the concept of interdependent

15 Riegel 2016, 7.

16 Hellmuth et al. 2021, 5.

17 Lutz et al. 2010, 13.

18 Crenshaw 1989.

19 This statement addressed the intertwining of different forms of oppression, which was then further differentiated in the course of the 1980s.

20 Krösche/Harders 2024; Kerner 2009, 345–359.

21 Chebout 2011; see also Knapp 2005; Mefebue et al. 2022.

22 Walgenbach 2005, 48.

23 On the genesis of the interdependent perspective, see Rommelspacher 2006.

24 Walgenbach et al. 2007; Dietze et al. 2007.

categories, according to which relations of inequality are inherent in a particular category, such as gender or disability. In other words, categories are heterogeneous and structured by other categories. In this conceptualization, intersectionality functions as a generic term or framework of orientation to which interdependent categories are subordinated.²⁵ To return to the initial example, the student in the history lesson must (at least) be viewed as a disabled girl, and not in the sense of isolated categories as a girl plus disability, but as an interweaving of categories girl and disabled, both of which are relevant to inequality. In this way, multiple discriminations in the context of history lessons are adequately brought into view from an intersectional perspective. However, the dilemma of reproducing categories of difference in the classroom remains and cannot be resolved.

Intersectional issues are also concerned with the mechanisms of power and domination behind the practices of differentiation. Social systems are characterised by structures of domination and power that influence all levels of social life and lead to social inequalities and processes of exclusion.²⁶ Accordingly, power and domination relations also structure the school as a social institution, which exercises, according to Rudolf Leiprecht and Helma Lutz, a »normalising power«.²⁷ They also stress that these social differences are constructions embedded in historical-social processes.²⁸ This concern with the interrelationships of power and domination distinguishes (educational) intersectionality from heterogeneity and diversity.²⁹ While heterogeneity, diversity and intersectionality are related concepts that deal with relations of difference, they are based on different strands of discourse, which means that they cannot be used synonymously. Admittedly, these theoretical reflections are complicated by »conceptual indeterminacies«³⁰ and a »confusion of terms«.³¹ Nevertheless, these distinctions are crucial, and they have not yet been made clearly enough in the context of inclusive history education.³²

In didactic and educational discourse, heterogeneity is still closely linked to a deficit-oriented attitude and therefore typically has a negative connotation. Heterogeneity in the diagnosis of learning groups, for example, refers to the different challenges faced by students or to learning and achievement differences that have an impact on the design of lessons, particularly in history.³³ Starting from the »question of the disability-related heterogeneity«, Bernd Schönemann considers the problem of inclusive history teaching as still unresolved.³⁴

25 Walgenbach 2007; Walgenbach 2014; Walgenbach 2022.

26 On the connection between differences and power, see Kerner 2009.

27 Leiprecht/Lutz 2006, 218.

28 Leiprecht/Lutz 2006, 221–223.

29 Walgenbach 2014, 65–67.

30 Bührmann 2022, 35.

31 Walgenbach 2014, 7.

32 For their position on the concepts of heterogeneity, diversity and intersectionality, see Barsch et al. 2020b, in particular 19.

33 Brüning 2020; Schönemann 2022; Budde 2018.

34 Schönemann 2022, 115.

Even if inclusive learning can still be considered as a challenge for history education³⁵ and there are still some desiderata in inclusive history teaching research, this assessment does not reflect the current state of research. In addition to a slowly growing number of empirical approaches,³⁶ the German language *Handbook of Diversity in History Teaching*³⁷ is a prime example of this. Since social differences are understood as a natural given in the context of heterogeneity, the editors distance themselves from this term and focus instead on the concept of diversity. The additive consideration of categories of difference in the heterogeneity approach is also decisive for this decision.³⁸

More controversial is the examination of the relationship between diversity and intersectionality, which Andrea D. Bührmann and Iris Koall characterise as polarising.³⁹ From a gender studies perspective, this ambivalence is found in intersectionality being considered either a »bridging concept« or representing a »tension« between gender and diversity discourses.⁴⁰ From a domain-specific point of view, it seems obvious to assume that they represent two separate paradigms: Intersectionality is inextricably linked to reflections and analyses critical of power and authority, while diversity is more concerned with the recognition of social differences and the creation of equal opportunities.⁴¹ For a nuanced analysis of social inequalities, the historical roots of social differences must be taken into account, raising questions of continuity and change. An intersectional approach to teaching and learning history has the advantage of including the structural conditions of exclusion and oppression and overcoming one-dimensional perspectives. The relevance of the concept of intersectionality for the teaching of history also derives from the view in German-speaking countries of narrative competence as the main competence of historical learning. Accordingly, students should construct their own historical narratives by placing past events in a meaningful context and thereby deconstruct existing narratives. Since meaning is created in ways that differ from one individual to another, plural interpretations of the past are possible, leading to the characterization of historical learning »as a productive, self-willed appropriation of past realities«.⁴² This places the »learning subject with all its individual prerequisites, experiences and potentials«⁴³ at the centre of attention, which can only be done justice to if the multiple »subjective patterns of imagination and understanding«⁴⁴ are included in their entanglements and interactions, that is, in an intersectional perspective.

35 As being the title of Alavi/Lücke 2016.

36 See e.g. the empirical contributions in Musenberg et al. 2021 and Rein 2021.

37 *Handbuch Diversität im Geschichtsunterricht*, Barsch et al. 2020a.

38 Barsch et al. 2020b, 19.

39 Bührmann/Koall 2018, 3.

40 Smykalla/Vinz 2011, 11.

41 Smykalla/Vinz 2011, 11.

42 Lücke 2015, 200; Brüning/Grewe 2020.

43 Barsch 2020b, 9–10.

44 Bramann/Kühberger 2021, 314.

Dis/Ability – A Neglected Category of Difference

Intersectional questions deal with social constructions of difference and their underlying power structures. The concept of difference is ambiguous⁴⁵ and closely related to the concepts of otherness and alienness.⁴⁶ It refers to phenomena of social inequality and is embedded in the discourse on social justice and educational justice.⁴⁷ Social differences are used to construct »belonging, non-belonging and multiple belonging as well as [...] deviation, non-conformity and fragility«,⁴⁸ which means that »a category of difference such as disability or gender, in addition to the moment inherent in the individual, only emerges in social interaction«. ⁴⁹ In school and teaching practice, and therefore in history lessons, distinctions are made, categorised and differentiated.⁵⁰ This is a social practice in which the differentiations that are made need to be critically questioned as constructive practices.⁵¹ This creates a dilemma, because the process of recognising difference and critically questioning social categories manifests and ascribes their characteristics. Paul Mecheril and Andrea Vorrink explain this exemplarily from the perspective of the diversity approach:

»If, for example, pedagogy contributes to the recognition of people with disabilities, then this recognition practice confirms the powerful scheme that distinguishes between people with and without disabilities and produces this socially significant order of differences.«⁵²

The different treatment of the student with Down's syndrome in the history lesson described in the introduction is an example of the school's construction of difference dis/ability. At first glance, dis/ability appears as a binary difference between non-disabled and disabled, which corresponds to the bipolar hierarchical line of difference in the concept of »health« by Helma Lutz and Norbert Wenning.⁵³ It is doubtful whether this binary division is adequate to the complex socio-demographic conditions of a diverse society. Binary thinking is also incompatible with the interdependent categories approach, which addresses multidimensional experiences of inequality and assumes interdependencies within each category. Furthermore, the bipolar view of difference tends to focus interest on the »marked side of the distinction«, ⁵⁴ leaving the privileged side underexposed. Assigning a non-disabled/disabled

⁴⁵ Walgenbach 2014, 18.

⁴⁶ Ricken/Balzer 2007, 57.

⁴⁷ Lindmeier 2019, 26.

⁴⁸ Ricken/Balzer 2007, 57.

⁴⁹ Meyer/Lindmeier 2020, 58.

⁵⁰ Rabenstein et al. 2024, 13.

⁵¹ Lindmeier 2019, 30.

⁵² Mecheril/Vorrink 2017, 60.

⁵³ Lutz/Wenning 2001; Leiprecht/Lutz 2006, 219–220.

⁵⁴ Bührmann 2022, 39.

dichotomy to the term ›health‹ corresponds to a medical approach to disability. In contrast, following disability studies, the use of dis/ability emphasizes the »effect of social attributions of meaning«⁵⁵ and includes the structural power relations and practices that contribute to the construction of difference. The now established dis/ability notation and its variants refer to the interrelationship between disability and non-disability as well as the need to analyse associated notions of normality, instead of reproducing the social mark as alterity.⁵⁶

The discussion around the concept of non-disability/disability is an example of how controversial the selection, weighting, ordering and naming of categories of difference are in intersectionality research. Although gender, class and race are considered to make up the concept's basic categories, there is constant discussion of expanding the triad, a development that is particularly necessary in the context of historical learning processes.⁵⁷ Overall, the selection of relevant social categories for intersectional analyses is characterised by a tension between openness and arbitrariness.⁵⁸ Openness allows categories of difference to be selected or developed according to empirical research questions, rather than defined in advance, or adapted to changing orders of difference and power structures.⁵⁹ At the same time, each selection is accompanied by the exclusion and marginalisation of other categories, which weakens the analytical potential of intersectionality, especially when the category of race is not included.⁶⁰ Intersectionality research also reaches its limits when multidimensional relations of inequality are viewed from the perspective of a ›master category‹, for example, in historical education studies the focus on the category of gender.⁶¹

In the context of current intersectional debates,⁶² the use of dis/ability as an independent category is controversial and as a result has been neglected.⁶³ However, there is evidence of a revived interest in its use. Christian Lindmeier has recently argued that »disability« should be considered an intersectional category,⁶⁴ and Katharina Walgenbach has referenced it in her concept of interdependent categories.⁶⁵ The advantage of viewing dis/ability as an interdependent category rather than a bipolar relationship also seems obvious from an educational research perspective, as this does not soften the core categories of race, class and gender that are central to theorising or extend the triad to include dis/ability as part of a fourth category of ›body‹ or ›health‹. In disability studies, the intertwining of dis/ability and gender in particular has been the subject of intersectional approaches and research for some time.⁶⁶ In

55 Dietze et al. 2007, 18.

56 Waldschmidt/Karim 2022, 4.

57 See the list of difference categories in Barsch 2020b, 10.

58 Dederich 2014.

59 Abay et al. 2024, 27.

60 Deflers/Muschalek 2022, 8.

61 Kühberger 2016; Konrad 2018.

62 Amirpur 2016, 84.

63 Walgenbach 2007, 55; Walgenbach 2022, 164; Raab 2007, 128.

64 Lindmeier 2023.

65 Walgenbach 2022, 168.

66 Jacob et al. 2010.

the course of a growing awareness of current social challenges such as refugee and migration movements, the interactions and overlaps between disability, migration and religion are also increasingly coming into focus.⁶⁷ However, seeing dis/ability as an interdependent category – that is, as heterogeneous in itself – means above all that relations of inequality are already inherent and created in the category itself. This can be clearly seen in the genesis of the concept of disability, which goes hand in hand with biologicistic, racist and sexist devaluations.⁶⁸

Intersectional History Education – Approach to Identifying a Subject

The category dis/ability for intersectional perspectives in historical education research is undoubtedly relevant, as this category of difference is central to teaching and learning processes in history education. School is integrated into the social system at large, with social differences being constantly (re)produced in school learning processes such as history teaching. This has implications for the educational opportunities provided to students and their school performance. Moreover, historical learning is not only diverse in terms of the students, as teachers also bring their different socio-cultural backgrounds to the classroom, and subject-specific content can be selected and treated taking into account social diversity or multidimensional attributions of difference. Accordingly, diversity-sensitive history lessons consider diversity as a resource and are based on the individual abilities, skills and ideas of the students.⁶⁹

Against this background, it seems beneficial to anchor intersectionality more firmly in historical education research as a theoretical concept and analytical dimension, while remaining open to the flexible adaptation and re-accentuation of categories of difference in the context of social change processes. This would mean introducing and using social differences in a research-led way. At the same time, a central task of history education is to focus on the significance of gender, class and especially race in historical teaching and learning processes. Unfortunately, the disability category still receives too little attention.

Intersectional perspectives question the connection between multidimensional attributions of difference in relation to power and domination. For example, Ina Kerner derives interdependent epistemic, institutional and personal dimensions from Michel Foucault's analysis of power in her consideration of racism and sexism.⁷⁰ When using intersectional approaches in the teaching of history, different interpenetrating levels need to be taken into account. The institutional or structural level frames forms of inclusion and exclusion, while the individual level is central to the role of both students and teachers in practices of inclusion and exclusion. At the organizational level, it is also necessary to critically analyse the socio-cultural positioning of both the actors in the school system and (German-language) history education in particular.

⁶⁷ Konz/Schröter 2022.

⁶⁸ Hofer 2024, 131.

⁶⁹ Barsch 2023.

⁷⁰ Kerner 2009.

Their effects on history curricula and teaching and learning materials, and thus on the selection or focus of topics, should also be considered along intersectional lines. For all three levels, the aim is to break through one-dimensional perspectives and focus on the interrelationship of different categories of difference and their significance for historical thinking as well as their influence on historical narratives. The relevance of the intersectionality concept for history education research results from: »the interweaving of social inequalities, the close connection between academic analysis and socio-political practice as well as the emphasis on emancipatory action«.⁷¹ These insights of the intersectionality approach have not yet been sufficiently taken into account in historical education research. However, a promising approach is taken by Annette Kuhn, who sees critical historical thinking as a central task of history teaching and links intersectionality with approaches to emancipatory history education.⁷² This approach takes a social perspective that focuses on social inequalities and the need to critically analyse these in the past and present.

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⁷¹ Degele 2019, 344.

⁷² Kuhn 1974.

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