

2 Maladjusted Youth as Sand in the Gears?

Depending on the degree program, when I begin working with students of special education or inclusive education newly arrived at university, I read them a very specific story. It is a true story about something I experienced years ago as a public school teacher before I changed to the university full time. At the time, I was classroom teacher in a specialized school for children with emotional, social and behavioral difficulties and went on a one-week school trip, by train, that took us halfway across Germany, from the middle western part of the country up into the high north, a distance of about 650 km, right up to the Danish border. What follows below is an expanded version of the story that was published in abbreviated form at the time by a German newspaper and in a pedagogical journal (for a very short version see Broecker 2018).

The effectiveness of storytelling for getting a point across to people, for instance through »teaching stories« (Simmons 2006) or »scientific storytelling« (Gallagher 2011; Luna 2013; Petit et al., 2011) of course are already known. We can draw on approaches and studies that employ »storytelling as a pedagogical tool« (Abrahamson 1998) or deploy storytelling in work with students »to promote knowledge construction and learning« (Wiessner and Pfahl, 2007) especially in the area of higher education (e.g., Wallace and Gravells, 2010), teacher education (e.g., Grauer 2013, 2016) or school development (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2018).

The story »Incident on a Train« invariably moves the university students in a certain way. After the reading, usually a short silence reigns. However, then a lively discussion kicks off. It clearly reveals that this story not only calls on the emotions, but also mobilizes critical thinking on the subject of inclusion in school and society. The subject of inclusion in all its complexity suddenly becomes something real, specific, and tangible. It enables the students to identify the complicated mix of inclusionary and exclusionary forces at work in our German or European or Western-oriented society, to name it, to question it and to develop a perspective for deeper involvement in the subject, and think about the own attitudes, values and principles concerning the subject of inclusion, while being in a teacher education program (e.g., Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Clarke and Drudy, 2006; Croll and Moses, 2000; Lawson et al., 2006; Moran 2007; Pecek and Macura-Milovanovic, 2012; Reynolds and Brown, 2010; Silverman 2007; Takala et al., 2012; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2003).

Before we proceed with reading the story, I want first to set the stage with three things, so that especially an international readership will have the necessary background for integrating that which took place. First: In Germany, as in many other countries, you can buy first class and second class train tickets. First class not only offers more comfort but also costs 50 percent more. Occasionally, it is also possible to book first class for a group at a price that beats the regular second class fare. Second: Westerland, the principal town on Sylt, is located in the island's midsection, right on the North Sea and can be reached directly by train that practically runs through the Wadden Sea over the »Hindenburgdamm« causeway that was built during the Weimar Republic. Third: By virtue of its location in the extreme northwest of Germany on the Atlantic, Sylt Island has an especially salubrious open ocean climate. This is why spa tourism developed there as early as the 19th century. The breathtakingly beautiful beaches and dunes attracted artists and intellectuals, but particularly the very well-to-do. Kampen on Sylt, with its picturesque thatch roofed houses, boasts Germany's highest-priced real estate. The boutiques there offer women's handbags or jackets for sale that would cost an elementary school teacher her entire month's salary. For the

wealthy and the jet set, Sylt is an investment and status symbol. People from Germany's socially deprived areas could never in their lives hope to set foot on this marvelous island on their own. However, there is another Sylt and other ways of getting there. Several former military barracks located in the island's southern part were converted into school camps and youth hostels after World War II. That made it possible for large numbers of children and youth to come to Sylt regardless of their parents' sociocultural or socioeconomic situation, by going there on experiential pedagogy projects or school trips. So it was also for the group of nine- and ten-year old boys from a special school for children with emotional, social and behavioral difficulties at the center of our story.

This is not about the year when the only option for a train trip to Sylt I had left due to time constraints was to book a block of first class seats, because my colleague, who had joined me with his class, had needed so much time to get the money together that his girls and boys owed and when we then faced a situation on the return trip from Westerland to Cologne wherein society's well-heeled and pensioned sat in our seats in car 13, because car 14 had a problem with its electronics and so was off limits. First class, it seemed, was these ladies' and gentlemen's due, simply because, unlike us, they *were* first class. At first glance, it looked we seemed to be nothing more than social free-loaders, but fortunately we had valid tickets and demonstrable seat reservations. And so it came about that these kids from society's margin did wind up riding first class through Germany, in April of 2004, once I had negotiated emphatically with the well-heeled folks sitting in our seats, insisting that my students in fact got their seats – in first class. However, the story I really intended to tell dates back to sometime before that, to May of 1993. It, too, involves a class trip to Sylt, to Hörnum, to be exact, that picturesque town on the island's southern tip, where, if you clamber up the tallest dunes, you can see the ocean on both sides of the forty kilometers-long island – the foam-capped Atlantic to the west and the calmer Wadden Sea to the east. Some odd experiences transpired during the train trip there.

The smooth functioning of our railroads may be regarded as a symbol for reliability and well-planned forward progress. The train as emblem of social normality, functionality and productivity – however, only so long as no individuals board the train that are already sand in the gears and that can disrupt a train’s steady progress or delay the train travelers from their business. Nonetheless, there are children and youth in this society that, by reason of their challenging behavior, are referred to special schools mostly because for deficits in emotional attachment and lack of an appropriate, supportive upbringing and education. There, with the help of a special pedagogy, they are to be brought back – reeducated, really – to the right way. After my colleague and I had attempted various influencing and fostering measures, with the involvement of the immediate school environment, on behalf of this band of *rascals*, a term I use humorously here, arrived the high point of the teaching program at that time: a one-week class trip to Sylt.

Our intent was for these kids, socialized by cell phone and computer, to be exposed to new experiences and insights in the fresh North Sea air, during group hikes along the beach and mudflats, on a boat trip to Hallig Hooe and the trotting of carriage horses on the Hallig. So it was that we found ourselves with that *unruly* troop of nine- and ten-year old boys once again riding on a train from Gummersbach in North Rhine Westphalia through Cologne to Westerland, in North Frisia, Schleswig-Holstein. They were ten in number this time, boys from a special school for children with emotional, social and behavioral difficulties. Each of them was like handling three of them when it came to rendering necessary supervision, care and attention. We took over several adjoining compartments. The month was May. It was a warm, sunny day full of anticipation for the beach life, North Sea air and fish rolls. Naturally, there was no way of keeping the boys in the compartments for more than half an hour. They obviously felt confined and within minutes already the first conflicts and squabbles started. They wanted out into the corridor. We put them off until later. They tried again and kept at it relentlessly. Finally, we let them out of the compartments. There simply was no other way. The boys ran up and down the car’s corridor. Then some of them

opened the windows. We closed the windows again and pointed out the potential dangers.

Soon after, I don't know how, the first few boys escaped into the neighboring open seating car. My colleague went in one direction and I myself in the other, to corral the boys again, while the social education teacher held down the fort outside the compartments. Breathing harder by the minute, I hurried through the corridors of the fully booked cars. Toward the front, I glimpsed a blond boy who belonged to our group; then he was gone. I ran a gauntlet of travel bags and sneakers that stuck out into the corridors. The glass doors hissed shut behind me. The trek through the cars seemed to me to take an eternity. Just before I reached the front of the train, it started to slow down. We entered the Bremen train station. The doors opened and out ran some of my students down the train platform toward the middle of the train; maybe they were looking for the Bremen Town Musicians? Was this then the result of the fairy tale projects that we had done in class? One of the boys cheekily stuck out his tongue at me through the train window. Then he took off, running along the train platform. A fun game. Hopefully, they would get back on the train in time, it pounded in my head. I longed for this day to end and wished myself into the counselor's room of the school hostel (»Fünf-Städte-Heim«), there to find solace in conversation with Mrs. Moll, a colleague from Cologne, over a cold Frisian beer. Mrs. Moll traveled to Hörnum with her classes every year around this time. All right, back the whole way. People began to notice me and regard me part sympathetically, part with annoyance and disquiet. Then, after a refreshment cart blocked my way and I somehow had managed to squeeze past it, out of breath I finally arrived back at the three compartments where I had started my futile chase after the students. In the meantime, the social education teacher had done a good job and gotten about half the runaways back into the compartments. Lastly, we corralled the remainder in the open seating car next to ours.

When the train had ground to a halt in Bremen, I made my way quickly along the platform toward the front to the engine and then systematically combed back through the train, to keep the boys from having

any chance of escaping again. I happened straight onto a melee. One of the boys had jostled an elegantly-dressed woman having coffee. Her dress was covered with brown spots. Suddenly, there was a huge hue and cry, because an older man was pulling at the boy and cursing at him. I excused myself for the boy's behavior, pressed some Euros into the woman's hand for getting the dress cleaned, mumbled something about special children by way of more excuses and pushed the little group ahead of me and out of that car. It seemed to me that the entire train, regardless whether it was in first class or second class, had by now become affected by our ruckus-causing presence and was suffering because of it. My stress level kept rising. As the responsible classroom teacher, didn't I have to do a better job of keeping them in check? Was it a mistake after all to take troubled children like this on such a long trip? Instead of an eight hour train ride, perhaps I should have just taken them on a ten minute bus ride to the nearest youth hostel. I simply could not expect this well-set, well-heeled crowd, heading for their snug vacation houses, vacation apartments and hotel rooms in Westerland, Kampen or Keitum, to put up with something like this. On the other hand: Weren't we all somehow responsible for this young generation that, in some respects, had gone *off the track*? Could these people sitting here in the train, representing the larger society, simply avoid any responsibility? Could they just delegate it all to us special educators and social educators? Should they have peace and relaxation, at the cost of our energies being used up and having our nerves ruined? They wanted to travel, live, and lead a pleasant life. And us? Did we really deserve to be *side-tracked*? I read it in their accusing faces: »How could you travel with *these* children on *this* route to *this* destination?« Venomous looks castigated me. »Sylt, including the way to get there, belongs to *us*. Please stay home where you belong, in *your* socially deprived areas.«

No! Resentment suddenly welled up in me: »You are co-responsible for the social and cultural change process whose results and consequences I unfortunately have made it my job to suffer. From now on, feel free to experience some of the effects of your own politic or impolitic behavior, your lack of social engagement! I've had it with trying to

shield you!« At a party recently a lawyer's wife had said to me, with a mixture of pity and incomprehension and a smug smile on her pursed lips, »Why on earth would you sacrifice yourself like that?«, as I was telling her about my work as special education teacher.

Fortunately, by now all boys were seated in the three compartments again. With the glass doors shut, both my colleagues and I stood in the corridor and assessed the situation. The sun shone brightly. We were drawing nearer to Hamburg. The train was barreling along. I listened to the loud, rhythmic clatter of the wheels. Satisfied, I looked in on the compartments in turn. To cheer them up, I had treated the boys to a round of Cokes. Lost in thought, they were sipping from the cans. I was glad that quiet had been restored. Only, it turned out to be a deceptive peace. In one of the compartments, the students had pulled down the orange colored sun shade. What I had failed to notice was that the window behind it had been pulled down all the way to the lowest stop. The train was hurtling along at top speed through the plain south of the Elbe.

Then, in an instant, it happened: The sun shade in that compartment was torn out the window, flapping wildly a few times and then the metal rod inserted at its bottom suddenly stabbed like a dagger from outside back in through the window panes doubled-up one behind the other. The rod remained firmly stuck in the glass. All around the puncture the glass was splintering. I immediately tore open the door. A warm blast of wind hit my face. Small glass fragments threatened to come loose from the Ping-Pong paddle-sized fracture. I pushed the boys out into the corridor as quickly as I could and locked the compartment door to prevent any harm to the children from flying glass splinters. I ventured in search of the conductor, to whom I described the situation. The uniformed man reacted with extreme irritation, even anger: »Can't you properly supervise your students?« We were nearly in Hamburg. The train had slowed and was already on the bridge across the Elbe. So, then the conductor phoned the chief conductor who decided to uncouple the car with the damaged window on safety grounds. This was done at the Hamburg-Dammtor train station. The passengers were told to detrain from the damaged car and to find another seat somewhere else on the train. The

voices in the corridor and by the exits sounded angry. Suitcases were heaved about. Complaints rose about the lack of seats. Outside, on the station platform, furious looks came my way, mostly from men and women 55 years old and over, an embarrassing, reproachful and sometimes downright aggressive atmosphere. Finally, all of our charges were accommodated again in an open seat car at the tail end of the train. Thirty minutes behind schedule, the Intercity resumed its journey north. The students were nervous and agitated. My colleagues and I had our hands full trying to calm them down and to stabilize their behavior.

Suddenly, an incensed man rushed up to me, demanded my address and claimed damages for the train delay from me. It had caused him to miss an important business appointment in Westerland that, supposedly, involved millions. We had spoiled it for him. He would not stand for it. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I thought about my professional liability insurance. If worst came to worst... The other passengers in the open seating car listened intently. I didn't know how to react right away. I had just let myself fall exhausted into my new seat. Finally, stammering, I replied that it had not been my decision after all to uncouple the car because of the window damage. Of course, I also regretted the train's delay, but that was the chief conductor's decision. Snorting with rage, the man planted himself by my seat and repeated his demand.

But then the mood in the car, where many of the other relocated passengers had found seats, seemed to change. Suddenly, a group of women was standing in the aisle in support of me. »Look, can't you see what kind of work these young people are doing here? How would you like to be the one to do it? Come on, now! Do you really want to do this? What's this nonsense about millions? Stop it already. We've had it with your arrogant rudeness!« they went after the man. »Get lost, why don't you!« a woman called out to my accuser from further back. »The people from the special school have enough on their hands taking care of these kids!«

Irritated, the man who had harassed me mumbled something to himself, looked around nervously and finally went away. I was very grateful

for the moral support that suddenly came my way from the fellow travelers, especially that group of women, all of them fiftyish. These women also gave us practical help by talking in a friendly way with the boys, paying attention and being considerate to them, responding to them and from time to time asking them how they were doing. This helped calm the boys down, and they started to relax. So, in this way, my colleagues and I received active support in looking after the students during the last segment from Hamburg-Dammtor to Westerland, which took the train another three hours. A pleasant warm feeling filled me. I started to relax, too. There was after all something like solidarity among this group of people rattling along on the rails, a common sense of responsibility. We were not alone. I also heard nothing more from the railroad (»Deutsche Bahn«) regarding this incident. Someone familiar with insurance matters told me that the railroad had largely replaced the metal rods inserted at the bottom of sun shades with plastic ones. Apparently, the metal rods had long been considered safety hazards. Late that evening in the counselors' room of the school camp in Hörnum, I told Mrs. Moll the whole story. As expected and hoped she, too, was there again. »That is why I always take the train with my classes«, she said, »because it gets me in touch with society.« I allowed myself a Frisian Pilsener. It had a nice, tangy taste.

The following are possible discussion questions for the students immediately following the story being told: Wherein resides the importance of this class trip for the children? What is the class teacher's experience and that of his two companions? What presumably is the perspective of the fellow passengers overall? What principles and societal forces does this businessman's behavior stand for? How would you advise the teacher to handle the businessman's demands? What significance did the behavior of the group of women toward the story's end have? What principles and societal forces do the women's actions represent? How would you personally have handled each of the situations? Was it a smart pedagogical decision to make such a long distance train trip with these students? Were the educational goals and the path embarked on in reasonable proportion? Later, as a teacher yourself, would you go on such a

class trip with children with emotional, social and behavioral development needs? Was the problem aggravated by a student group coming from a separative school, which meant that *every* single boy had special emotional, social and behavioral needs and *no* children *without* such needs were along who might have served as role models or at least played a balancing role? What else spoke to you personally in the story? What else moved you? What does all this say about the current society and its relationship to the young generation? Do the narrated events contain a deeper truth or message? What conclusions can be drawn? In your view, how does all this apply to your studies now and later to your professional actions?

In the next stage, the story can be linked to the inclusion-theoretical discourse, because in this »incident on a train« the inclusive and exclusive forces of society are on display (cf. Woodward and Kohli, 2001). In the form of this real-life story from the educational workaday we receive a specific and emotionally-affecting description of »the dichotomy between in and out« (ibid., p. 2) as well as a description of the state of »how individuals are integrated into the social whole« (ibid., p. 4). These children are »both in and out of their society« (ibid., p. 9), »inclusion and exclusion are... in various ways intertwined« (ibid., p. 10). Further possible reference points for the academic discourse with the students are »equity in the social system« (Melucci 2001, p. 73), »education, citizenship and social justice« (e.g., Biesta et al., 2009; Birdwell et al., 2013; Mayo et al., 2009; McMurray and Niens, 2012; Tomlinson 2013), and »including students with behavioral difficulties in general education settings« (e.g., Goodman and Burton, 2010; MacFarlane and Marks Wolfson, 2013; Shearman 2003; Simpson 2004). »Social class« obviously has »effects on people's life chances« (Scott 2001, p. 143). The previous class trip episode also to Sylt that precedes the actual story (in which the teacher booked first class exclusively, but the children's places were at first taken away from them by the *actual* first class due to a technical problem in the next car) speaks volumes here.

How can educators contribute to »tackling inequality and exclusion« through »active citizenship and participation« (Machado and Vilroxx,

2001)? In this way, the connection between »education, equality and social cohesion« (Green et al., 2006) comes into focus, and with it »the role of education in promoting social cohesion« (ibid., p. 9), the question of »how education contributes toward civic engagement« (ibid., p. 19) and that we obviously require a »common sense of citizenship and values« (ibid., p. 30) if we are to foster social cohesion. These attitudes and values, which are what matters in all this, can be made concrete by an »ethics of belonging, care and obligation« (Macartney 2012) as well as by solidarity (Melucci 2001, pp. 74-77). The group of courageous and engaged women in the story demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of these action-guiding values for the creation of social cohesion by way of »community involvement« (Soresi et al., 2011). These women are always the sympathetic figures, the torchbearers of hope for a better social future, when discussing this story with university students.

My observations in university-level educational institutions and feedback from students indicate that seminars that are introduced and whose content is structured with this story have a particularly lasting effect on the students. It is exactly such an emotionally touching and affecting story from real educational life that can motivate students to explore the subject matter's complexity. Even many years later, students still have a lively recollection of the story »Incident on a Train«. It seems that they carry the events in this story with them as internal images. It is as if the future teachers have internalized those parts of this story that have potential for advancing social inclusion and social cohesion as an action model. It seems as if coming to terms with this story boosts the motivation for individual pedagogical engagement for more »social cohesion« and that this story helps students in special education as well as inclusive education to clarify even further their own action-oriented values in the sense of an »ethics of belonging and care« (Macartney 2012) and an »ethics of connectedness« (Frick and Frick, 2010).



Figure 2.1

Incident on a train (photo: Angelika Schmachtenberg)



Figure 2.2

Shown here is the »Fünf-Städte-Heim«, a school-camp in Hörnum, located on the southern tip of the island of Sylt in the North Sea, between the foam-capped Atlantic Ocean to the west and the calmer Wadden Sea to the east. It was a place of special experiences, discoveries and encounters with school classes from other parts of Germany. The older parts of the buildings with their heavy wooden doors and wood floors date back to the Third Reich when troops were stationed here.



Figures 2.3.-2.5

Teacher and students encounter each other in new and different ways in a unique landscape such as the one the Atlantic Ocean and the Wadden Sea offer here by the island of Sylt. Flying kites, digging canals with shovels, damming up water, we route and reroute it, only to realize that the movement of tides, the counter play of ebb and flood obey higher laws beyond man's power to modify. Rainer Lüders (Fig. 2.4) led generations of children and youth by the Wadden Sea and on the southern end of Sylt, including some of my own classes from alternative schools for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. This teacher was an expert teller of tales and seaman's yarns. Holding out the prospect, say, of finding weapons dating from World War Two in the tidal flats, he motivated youngsters that scarcely ever walked any distance to set out on long hikes.



Figures 2.6 and 2.7

Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties experience the Wadden Sea biosphere with all their senses. Coming by ship from Sylt, they dock at Hallig Hooge and ride on horse-drawn carts to the individual dwelling mounds, rocked by the horses' slow trot along the way. The boys picture how the inhabitants of Hallig Hooge would bring themselves and their livestock to safety on the raised dwelling mounds and in their houses before an approaching storm tide. The boys would hang on the wagon driver's every word as he told the tale (Fig. 2.6).

Students sit in the little church in Keitum on Sylt during a class trip. It is about making contact with spiritual spheres in a raw landscape dominated by ocean and the wind. The children of contemporary society react in quite different ways to such a place. While the boy at left front in the picture retreats into himself and realizes that this church (in Keitum) from the late Middle Ages is a place for contemplation, the student in the middle of the church nave takes bodily possession of the place. In this second case, the pedagogic distance to be covered is considerably longer (Fig. 2.7)