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discrimination by teachers against students: sensemaking in light of a reporting obligation

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In the German city of Munich, there is an obligation to report incidents of discrimination in schools to a public complaints office since 2022. Against this background, the present study analyzes how teachers make sense of situations in which their own or colleagues' actions could be considered discriminatory against students. We are interested in the individual and structural dimensions that define teachers' sensemaking (e.g., biographical experiences or existing hierarchies). Interviews with teachers (N=6) were analyzed using Kruse's data analysis procedure (Integratives Basisverfahren). The results show that the interviewees often perceived discrimination ambiguously. Three areas of tension regarding reporting behavior emerge: 1) the need for a clear case of discrimination vs. a lack of consideration of the situational context, 2) the fear that admitting misconduct in school might have an impact on existing hierarchical relationships, and 3) the interdependence among teachers, students, and the complaints office when dealing with cases of discrimination.

Keywords: complaints, discrimination, emotional violence, sensemaking, teacher-student relationship

1. Introduction

Since February 2022, principals of 264 municipal schools in Munich are obligated to report when discrimination occurs in their schools. The corresponding contact is the city's complaints office (*Anlaufstelle bei Diskriminierung und rechtem Hass*) which encourages all school community members, such as teachers and students, to report cases of discrimination. In 2023, a total of 109 complaints were reported – double the number from the previous year (Fachstelle für Demokratie, 2023, 2024). Regarding data on discrimination, however, more reports do not necessarily imply more incidents because reporting behavior depends on various dimensions, which will be discussed below (El-Mafaalani et al., 2017; Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2024b, p. 36). Moreover, most cases of discrimination are likely unreported (ADAS LIFE e.V., 2021; Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2024b, p. 37).

In our research, we focus on specific forms of discrimination perpetrated by teachers against students: those done verbally or through mimicking gestures. Thereby, we seek to discern which conditions lead teachers to either report or not report discriminatory incidents in the school context. We are interested in the role of structural dimensions (e.g., schools' reporting obligation or hierarchical structures) and individual dimensions (e.g., teachers' biographical experiences). Thus, our article addresses two questions: 1) How do teachers make sense of situations that could be considered discriminatory against students? 2) Which individual and structural dimensions define teachers' sensemaking and their decision to (not) report to the complaints office? Analyzing

teachers' perspectives – especially their reflections on their own and their colleagues' behaviors – can provide insight into the extent to which they share information with their school principal and/or with the complaints office directly.

Data collected by the complaints office is necessary to determine the extent of discrimination and the impact of political anti-discrimination strategies. Examining reporting behavior is relevant for understanding which experiences of discrimination are (in)visible in existing studies (Ahyoud et al., 2018). Such an analysis can also offer suggestions for teachers' (further) training. Finally, understanding which structural and individual dimensions define reporting behavior will allow complaints offices, for example, to adapt their communication strategy or classify reporting data accordingly.

2. Making Sense of and Reporting Discrimination by Teachers Against Students

2.1 Sensemaking Approach

To explain how teachers deal with situations that may be discriminatory, we draw on Weick's (1985) sensemaking approach (see also Spillane et al., 2002): When it comes to making sense of ambiguous or ambivalent situations, sensemakers use their existing cognitive framework (e.g., their values, beliefs, routines, experiences, and previous knowledge). Accordingly, how situations are understood can vary from person to person. In our case, we are interested in how teachers make sense of ambiguous situations regarding discrimination and what individual and structural dimensions define these processes. Because we focus on instances of potential teacher discrimination against students, we must consider structural conditions such as the hierarchical relationship between these two groups (Helsper & Hummrich, 2014) and forms of institutional discrimination (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009).

2.2 Discrimination in Schools

Various studies make clear that discrimination and similar phenomena, such as *emotional violence* by teachers against students, take place in everyday school life (Baier et al., 2009; Gusfre et al., 2023; Karabulut, 2020; Krumm & Weiß, 2001; Nguyen, 2013; Prengel, 2019; Scharathow, 2017; Scharpf et al., 2023; Scherr, 2025). Regarding the definition of discrimination, we are guided by the rather broad definition of the Munich complaints office, which notes that discrimination occurs when a person is treated differently or devalued because of his or her (perceived) membership in a structurally discriminated group (Fachstelle für Demokratie, 2022; Referat für Bildung und Sport München, 2022, p. 4). The office considers several dimensions of discrimination, such as racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim racism, antiziganism, hostility towards refugees, homophobia, trans* hostility, sexism, classism, devaluation of homeless people, ableism, and ageism. The complaints office also describes different forms that discrimination can take, such as exclusion, taunting, insults, or physical assault.

By drawing from the literature on phenomena similar to discrimination, like *(emotional) violence* that teachers perpetrate against students (Piezunka 2023), we argue that sensemaking of potentially discriminatory situations can be challenging. Indeed, it might depend on how the teachers' intentions are perceived, how the harm it caused to the student(s) is assessed, and whether the teachers' behaviors can be pedagogically justified (Heinemann & Mecheril, 2023; Piezunka, 2023, Schrödter, 2007; Vorobej, 2019). In this regard, Piezunka and Richter (under review) developed four dimensions of making sense of *emotional violence*:

- epistemic, in the sense of perceptibility and addressability of *emotional violence* or discrimination;
- structural and cultural, e.g., social positioning as well as historical, cultural, and regional circumstances;
- relationship, i.e., the (perceived) relationship between teachers and students;
- personal, e.g., the sensemaker's previous history of recognition and violence.

The specifics of these four dimensions may be different for individual sensemakers; thus, individuals can make sense of the same situation in various ways.

2.3 Complaints Offices and Data Collection

Complaints offices represent a possible intervention to reduce incidents of discrimination (Bartel & Kalpaka, 2022, p. 30), as they can offer guidance to institutions and people who experience discrimination. This is especially important because teachers and school administrators often do not take students' complaints of such incidents seriously (Karakayalı et al., in press; see also Steiner & Karakayalı, 2024; Yegane, 2019). Another benefit of complaints offices is that they publish monitoring reports, which serve as relevant resources for educational policy and research, since other empirical data on discriminatory incidents in schools is limited (Baumann et al., 2018; Yegane et al., 2021). The Munich complaints office received 13 reports of discriminatory incidents by teachers against students in 2022 and 14 in 2023. Discrimination perpetrated by teachers accounts for approximately 35 percent of all reported incidents there (Fachstelle für Demokratie, 2023, 2024). At another complaints office based in Berlin, around 40 percent of the 289 reported incidents of discrimination between 2018 and 2020 were caused by teachers (ADAS LIFE e.V. 2021, pp. 14-16).

As previously mentioned, the reporting data only show an excerpt, as not every case is reported. Obstacles to reporting include a lack of knowledge about the right to non-discriminatory education, inadequate reporting structures at schools, and fear of negative consequences (ADAS LIFE e.V., 2021, pp. 11-12; Fachstelle für Demokratie, 2024, p. 32; Karakayalı et al., in press). Dependencies play a major role in this. As Karakayalı et al. (in press) note, some teachers fear potential retaliation if they report their colleagues for discrimination. Only one of the 14 reports to the Munich complaints office in 2023 came from affected students (Fachstelle für Demokratie, 2024), which might be explained by hierarchical relationships. El Mafaalani et al. (2017, p. 53) found that people with a higher level of education and better participation opportunities in society who experience racism report experiences of discrimination more frequently.

3. Empirical Design

To answer the research questions, we conducted six guided interviews with teachers from different schools in Munich (see Table 1). Two prospective principals are part of the sample. The interviews were conducted in German via video conference and lasted between 32 minutes and an hour and 14 minutes.

Table 1

Information on the Interviewees

	IP1	IP2	IP3	IP4	IP5	IP6

Ascribed gender	male	male	female	female	female	male
Age	40	34	30	56	47	41
Work experience since traineeship in years	11	3	4	32	8	12
School type	Middle school	Vocational high school	Grammar school	Elementary school	Middle school	Technical college for social work

Because public discourse portrays discrimination as a serious and sensitive issue, we assumed that teachers would be hesitant to reflect on their behavior and would only address clearly defined cases of discrimination. To enable the interviewees to refer to individual understandings and experiences and to prevent bias in the sample, the term discrimination was not mentioned at the beginning of the interview. Instead, we first referred to positive and negative interactions in teacher-student relationships, then boundary-crossings and *emotional violence*. Then, we asked our interviewees how they understand discrimination and inviting them to reflect on their behavior while in the role of a teacher.

The analysis method we employed is based on Kruse's (2014) data analysis procedure (*Integratives Basisverfahren*), which allows us to apply different analysis heuristics to the material. Due to a lack of personnel and time capacities, the abbreviation procedures named by Kruse (2014, p. 563) were used. We analyzed many interview passages together, but we also independently assigned text passages to specific categories based on the theoretical framework.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the study. It can be assumed that the sample is slightly biased, as teachers are presumably more likely to participate in a study on educational relationships if the topic is important to them. Additionally, our analysis focused on central themes that repeatedly emerged during the interviews. It is possible that other dimensions characterized the interviewees' sensemaking but were not made explicit in the interviews for various reasons, e.g., social desirability. Thus, we did not consider all possible dimensions in our analysis. Furthermore, it is the principals, not the teachers, who are obliged to report incidents of discrimination to the complaints office (Referat für Bildung und Sport München, 2022). Yet, no principals were part of the sample. However, principals depend on reports from teachers and other members of the school community. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to report cases.

4. Analysis

To structure our analysis, we apply the four dimensions by Piezunka and Richter (under review) mentioned above.

4.1 The Epistemic Dimension of Discrimination

Many interviewees had difficulty defining discrimination: "Well, I think that's also a bit of a vague term, of course" (IP4, line 544-545; see also IP1, line 423-424; IP3, line 399-400; IP5, line 234-235; IP6, line 341). They noted that individuals can have different understandings of situations; indeed, "perhaps parents and children see it differently than the teachers" (IP4, line 174;

see also IP1, line 421; IP1, line 431; IP2, line 451; IP3, line 291; IP3, line 255; IP4, line 563; IP6, line 789). The teachers' lack of clarity while trying to make sense of situations was also caused by their perceptions that students often did not dare to share their assessment of a situation (IP1, line 751; IP2, line 372).

The interviewees listed certain characteristics of emotional violence, which, we argue, can be applied to the phenomenon of discrimination. For example, the teachers distinguished among degrees of severity: "My God, not, not every form of emotional violence is, well, equally bad. It hurts to say it like that" (IP6, line 910). The interviewees explained that the frequency and/or duration of a teacher's behavior was important to consider (IP4, line 456; see also IP1, line 505; IP3, line 235; IP4, line 547; IP5, line 423, 786; IP6, line 917-918). Additionally, in contrast to German law, a teacher's intention seemed to be relevant for their understanding: "f-for the child it can be MUCH faster MUCH more transgressive, which the teacher may not have meant that way at all" (IP3, line 591). Furthermore, behavior may not be labeled emotionally violent, if the teacher shows regret directly afterward (IP1, line 787, IP5, line 791f.; IP3, line 437; IP2, line 355).

The interviewees were asked to point out the differences between emotional violence and discrimination. Several expressed that discrimination relates to certain social groups, e.g., members of the LGBTQI* community, racialized students, female students, students with mental health issues, people with ADHD or on the Autism spectrum (IP2, line 533-534; IP3, line 338; IP4, line 442-443; IP5, line 333; IP3, line 263), while emotional violence can affect the whole learning group (IP2, line 542-543; IP5, line 348-349). Emotional violence is, therefore, understood as a generic term, according to which discrimination is a form of emotional violence (IP1, line 475-476; IP4, line 440; IP6, line 412).

When talking about teachers who clearly discriminate, the interviewees appeared to frame them as "bad apples", in the sense that only a minority of teachers clearly discriminate against students (IP5, line 274; Int 2, line 401-402; IP6, line 917). Moreover, the interviewees established distance between the bad apples and themselves – noting, for example, that the interviewees experienced such teachers when they were students (IP3, line 238), or they emphasized that these teachers were not part of their close circle of colleagues (IP2, line 406-407; IP3, line 237).

4.2 The Structural and Cultural Dimension

Regarding the structural dimension, two central topics came up during the interviews: 1) the interviewees' attitude toward the complaints office and 2) how they describe the culture of communication in their schools.

Positioning towards the Munich Complaints Office

Despite the obligation to report cases of discrimination, the interviewees mentioned several reasons for not reporting: They revealed that teachers had different levels of knowledge about the complaints office. Two teachers (IP3; IP4) demonstrated a low degree of knowledge about the work of the complaints office. However, one teacher stated that their principal insisted that teachers tell all their students about the office and hang up posters advertising its function (IP2, line 470-479). Additionally, while teachers had differing opinions about the complaints office, many perceived it as a valuable tool for students (IP1, line 769; IP2, line 441; IP3, line 543; IP6, line 773). One interviewee noted how the office could help their school overcome existing hierarchical relationships among the teaching staff (IP6, line 767). Another interviewee explained that the office could improve relations between teachers and school administrators (IP6, line 841). However, some

interviewees feared that students might abuse their ability to report, asking "Who can prove that I didn't do that?" (IP1, line 768). Arguing that discriminatory situations should be clarified internally, one interviewee said, "Well, I certainly wouldn't report it" (IP4, line 464f).

Culture of Communication among the Teaching Staff

When teachers observe colleagues' misconduct, several dimensions determine how they deal with the situation: The decisive factors for the interviewees included how bad or severe the behavior was, the nature of their previous relationship with that teacher (IP2, line 529), and the extent to which a culture of either open communication (IP2, line 215) or silence (IP3, line 520) prevailed at their school. One teacher stated "I think some things are also ignored" (IP5, line 737), explaining that they might not report incidents because they did not want to be perceived as opposing the solidarity of their colleagues (IP5, line 738f). IP5 cited possible repercussions for reporting on their fellow teachers: "Maybe I'm also afraid of making myself unpopular. As colleagues, we are […], nevertheless, always together as a team. […] We are dependent on each other […] on the help (.) on the advice, […] on cooperation" (IP5, line 551-552). The fear, it seems, is that reporting may be viewed as breaking the group trust, which may lead other teachers to ostracize or "cancel" the teacher who broke ranks and reported one of their own. Therefore, existing dependencies as well as the existing culture of communication are important circumstances when dealing with colleagues' misconduct.

4.3 The Relational Dimension Between Teachers and Students

How certain social experiences are classified depends on existing relationships. Individual student-teacher relationships can be characterized by varying degrees of care and trust (IP1, line 79-80; IP6, line 451-452). From the interviewees' perspectives, what students formulate as expectations might differ based on age (IP2, line 792; IP5, line 185; IP6, line 34-35, 459; IP3, line 593), school type (IP2, line 24), refugee experience (IP5, line 111-118), previous academic successes or setbacks (IP5, line 640; IP6, line 54-55), and socio-economic status (IP6, line 130-132). It also plays a role that educational relationships are not static but can change over time (IP4, line 427; IP3, line 55-60, 92) – as does the sensemaking of situations.

Hierarchical Relationship Between Teachers and Students

The interviewees held different perceptions of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. For example, if a strong hierarchy is desirable or should be avoided. This seems to be related to their previous experiences and personal beliefs about the hierarchy as well as the status of the children (e.g., age, refugee status). Some interviewees understood the dynamic between teachers and students as a relationship of dependency (IP6, line 354; IP3, line 114; IP2, line 801-802) and noted the potential abuse of power on the part of the teacher (IP6, line 354). At the same time, some interviewees pointed out that the hierarchy is also questioned in practice – by parents with high socio-economic status (IP6, line 130-131), by colleagues (IP3, line 411), or by students who resist (IP3, line 40). Indeed, one teacher explained: "Today's children are not in danger of talking to adults in a very fearful way anyway. It's rather the opposite" (IP4, line 126-128). The interviewees' positions varied as to whether it was appropriate for students to question this hierarchical relationship, e.g., as a means to curb the abuse of power (IP6, line 134). Some interviewees appeared generally uncomfortable with this hierarchical relationship, because it can lead to conflicts with grading (IP2, line 802) and generate fear (IP1, line 248), or because a relationship at eye level is seen as more desirable (IP6, line 81). "This power imbalance: 'I'm the teacher, I grade you, I decide about your future. For me, that's already […] this point of conflict that then (..) causes FEAR, causes STRESS" (IP2, line 392; see also IP1, line 494).

Regarding the sensemaking of situations, discrimination can be understood as an abuse of power. However, if teachers do not perceive themselves as powerful, they may find it difficult to admit when they abuse their power by discriminating against students.

Student Behavior as a (Legitimate) Trigger

When making sense of situations, the interviewees also addressed students' behavior: "In difficult classes, that also plays a role" (IP5, line 368-369). That same teacher explained that sometimes students repeatedly provoke and challenge the teacher, but even in such circumstances, teachers should not be provoked by this. Yet, the interviewees acknowledged that some teachers respond by saying "certain expressions" (IP5, line 373; see also line 466-467; IP6, line 546). The interviews revealed that the degree of challenging behavior on the part of the students might legitimize the teacher's discriminatory actions (IP2, line 573). However, the interviewees disagreed on what constitutes challenging behavior, e.g., meeting the different needs of a heterogeneous learning group (IP4, line 485) or aggressive behavior (IP2, line 573f), and how to interpret such challenging behavior, e.g., as an inexcusable disturbance (IP4: 485) or as a cry for help that mandates the teacher to investigate the root cause (IP1, line 183-190).

4.4 The Personal Dimension

During the interviews, we asked the teachers if they regretted any behavior they displayed toward students. In this regard, two topics were central: perceiving their own misconduct and students' willingness to perceive teachers' needs.

Perceiving and Dealing with One's Own Misconduct

Regarding their own (potential) misconduct, some interviewees perceived themselves as people who do not (want to) commit emotional violence or discrimination. One teacher told us: "EMOTIONAL violence: I don't think I even know how I could exert it" (IP1, line 418-420). Another interviewee answered the question of whether she had ever regretted anything during her 32 years of service with a clear "no" (IP4, line 317). However, most of the interviewees admitted that they had probably inadvertently committed emotional violence or discrimination in the past (IP6, line 707-708; IP3, line 434; IP2, line 639; IP1, line 740-742). Through their words, interviewees seek to construct an image as reflexive for themselves who can admit their (potential) mistakes. Additionally, the interviews revealed the teachers' need to differentiate themselves from the bad apples described above (IP6, line 712).

I didn't OFFEND anyone. I wasn't quite there. Somehow, I don't think I crossed exactly that BOUNDARY that we talked about earlier, because um that is, of course, also a personal boundary, to which I say, I won't cross it, yes, I didn't cross it. But, in retrospect, as they say, well, but the REACTION, the way I scolded them, was perhaps a bit… no, it was too MUCH. (IP1, line 736-742; see also IP3, line 282; IP5, line 700-717)

Linguistically, this is reflected in long deliberations and signals of uncertainty. Furthermore, interviewees present their own misconduct as unintentional (IP6, line 713) rather than a *blatant faux pas* (IP6, line 282, see also IP5, line 740; IP1, line 740) – that it happened when they were overwhelmed (e.g. IP2, line 353) or it was the result of miscommunication (IP5, line 792; IP3, line 435; IP6, line 687).

Teachers' Needs as Legitimization

The interviewees expressed that they wished students would perceive their needs, e.g., that students

would articulate gratitude (IP2, line 15), show understanding for the (private and professional) challenges teachers face (IP2, line 792; IP3, line 18, 212), and for moments of exhaustion (IP3, line 211). One teacher stated: "If I'm busy with other things, for example, for family-related reasons [….] then (..) um, I can't really get involved with them sometimes […] Or I get annoyed more quickly or something" (IP3, line 213; see also IP2).

Regarding ambiguous situations, this suggests that if the relationship is basically good, students should not make sense of their teachers' behaviors as unethical, even if those behaviors would be considered unethical in other relationships or situations. As one teacher said: "I sometimes mess up, and the students forgive me" because the students are aware, "Hey, we actually know him, he's not like that" (IP6, line 708-709; see also IP5, line 787-788; IP5, line 418).

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that the interviewees perceived discrimination and similar phenomena as nebulous and sometimes difficult to identify. Thus, from a legal perspective, there is no clarity regarding situations that might be potentially discriminatory in everyday school life. Moreover, acknowledging this lack of clarity is part of understanding teachers' sensemaking of discrimination. We must consider how various individual and structural dimensions define teachers' sensemaking of a situation of potential discrimination. These dimensions include existing dependency in relationships, the severity and frequency of certain behavioral patterns, students' perceptions of teachers' actions, and teachers' perceptions of their own (potential) misconduct. These dimensions are likely to define whether or not a teacher decides to report an incident to the complaints office.

Regarding the analysis of the individual and structural dimensions, three areas of tension emerge:

a) Classification as discrimination vs. loss of contextual knowledge:

If the interviewees were willing to report to the complaints offices, they tended to report only clear and severe cases of discrimination. Many interviewees expressed fear that the fact of reporting to the complaints office implies that the context of the incident gets lost, e.g., the teacher's previous behavior, existing (good) relationships with students, reasonable causes for the teacher's behavior such as excessive demands or triggers on the part of the students. There are parallels here to the phenomenon of *commensuration* which Espeland and Stevens (1998) describe as how different experiences are transformed into a metric unit (e.g., rankings or grades) that is accompanied by a loss of contextual knowledge. However, it must be considered that the complaints office is not only a reporting office for discrimination, but it can act as an advisor for members of the school community in such moments of uncertainty.

b) Admitting "misconduct" as a (reflective) teacher in hierarchical relationships:

The analysis showed that the interviewed teachers did not intend to discriminate but did intend to distance themselves from bad apples. At the same time, many reflected on their behaviors and named actions that they would label as unethical or unjustified. It is clear that several dimensions are at play: their position at school and how they categorize these situations, e.g., their degree of severity. In this context, existing hierarchical relationships with the students also play a role in how (potential) misconduct is dealt with and what implications this has, e.g., one's willingness to admit misconduct to others. The interviewees noted an area of tension they felt between different expectations they had for themselves:

- admitting misconduct as a reflective teacher
- not wanting to discriminate
- maintaining a powerful position in the classroom

This is in line with research on the "black and white racial identity model" (Helms, 1990) and related concepts such as "white fragility" (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020) which argues that individuals struggle or resist to admit misconduct in the context of discrimination. Furthermore, references can be made to Winnicott's (1990) demand for action to reframe the expectation they have for themselves to not discriminate.

c) Relationships of dependency among teachers, students, and the complaints office:

By introducing the reporting obligation, the complaints office has become part of the Munich school system – a school-adjacent actor with its own interests and logic. Due to its relative newness, it is likely that this office has not yet achieved a high level of institutionalization so far. In principle, however, the interviews revealed the potential for the complaints office to upend existing hierarchical relationships in individual cases, especially by presenting students with opportunities to complain directly to them. In this context, teachers expressed the fear that students could also abuse this possibility (Daehlen, 2023; see also Haupt & Jann, in press). Moreover, the interviewees feared that internal clarifications of cases of discrimination could be made more difficult. At the same time it should be noted that teachers still have leeway: They can decide if they educate their students about the work of the complaints office, and how they deal with it when they are approached by the complaints office.

Complaints offices need teachers and other actors in schools who recognize that discrimination exists in schools and who are able to identify discrimination in practice. However, we identified certain structural and individual dimensions that tend to prevent discrimination from being reported. Further research is needed on the challenges of reporting considering different actors and the potential ways complaints offices can curb discrimination in schools.

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