It seems to be taken for granted that school has to assess and to sort pupils, because it is assumed that this is the school system’s function in society. School has to sort each following generation, and to assign young people to positions and career paths according to their performance. The critique of this idea (or: ideology) is well known: school selection of pupils is not “fair,” even according to aspects of performance and achievement, as has been shown empirically many times, and as PISA shows as well. Furthermore it is not very plausible that the everyday test in school, the whole stream of marks pupils get in just one year –can be understood or explained by any “societal function” of school. The underlying presumption of our research project is that the daily practice of pupil assessment in school has gone independent, meaning it relies mainly on itself. The routines and highly ritualised practices of pupil assessment develop their own dynamics and they produce their own significance and importance (Breidenstein 2006).

The structure of the paper:
1. Some remarks on the research project and the methods
2. A close analysis of an extract from our fieldnotes on a situation of oral examination
3. Some summarizing comments on the problem of legitimizing school marks

1. The research project and the methods
Our research project is based on the tradition of a sociological critique of the “ideology” of performance assessment. There it is emphasized that achievement assessment always occurs in social contexts and is attached to social relations and processes of social control. This course of research is aimed especially at a critique of the “myth” of the possibility of ‘objective’ assessment of achievements (Filer & Pollard 2000: 8 sqq; cf. Filer 2000). We explore the practices of pupil assessment themselves: The performance of giving and receiving grades in the everyday interaction of teachers and pupils, the procedures and the rituals which are connected to pupil assessment – and the production of meaning and importance in these practices. Our theoretical commitment is what Schatzki and others (2001) call the “Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory.” This theoretical approach identifies social
practices within the core of the social itself. The concrete practice which consists of a “nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996: 89) becomes the object of investigation. What is to be explored is the implicit and habitualized knowledge of the participants which is included in the practices. Insofar as this knowledge is tacit knowledge (“knowing how”), we have to refer to methods of observation. We record and write down the situated practices themselves, because we cannot hope that participants would be able to explain to us how they do it, for instance in an interview. We have to rely on participant observation and ethnography (cf. Hammersley/ Atkinson 1995; Emerson/Fretz/Shaw 1995).

The research design is quite simple. Field research took place in two contrasting classes in a Grammar school and a secondary school with low achieving students from 2005 to 2009. We conducted several phases of participant observation in 5th, 6th and 7th grade. The research design was oriented to theoretical sampling in Grounded Theory methodology (cf. Strauss 1987). This means that the evaluation of data between the field phases determined the strategies of observation for each following phase. The analysis consisted of coding in the way of Grounded Theory and of turn-by-turn analysis of selected sequences of classroom discourse.

In the line of this presentation I will show you a very small extract from our fieldnotes which documents a very ordinary situation of an examination. I shall follow the development of this situation with the famous question in mind, which Clifford Geertz says to be the starting point of any ethnographic research: „What the hell is going on here?“

2. A situation of oral examination

At first we look at a situation of an oral examination, which is aiming at the production of a mark – a single mark that shall be part of the final grade and the school report. Practices of this kind cross the daily routine of lessons in German schools abundantly. Oral examination, check of the homework, tests, written exercises, presentations, presentation of group work, assessments, assessed audition in music lessons, performance tests in physical education and all the rest of it. Pupils in the schools that we observed weekly “get” about ten marks or even more. As far as that is concerned the following situation is very common and coined by routine. I introduce a situation from the Grammar school, at the beginning of a biology lesson in the end of September and in the beginning of the fifth class, recorded by Michael Meier:
Rebekka said that she learnt it, Mrs Stern sums up: “so, tell us!” Rebekka is standing in front of the class at the blackboard, she keeps humming and hawing, her voice is low and I can't understand anything, sitting in the back, still spacy and tired. Rebekka gives low and halting answers to the teacher's questions. “Until which moment we talk about copulation?” - “Ejaculation.” - “How do the fishes find each other? How do they recognize that they are sexually receptive?” - “tail fins”

I don't want to go into detail too much but point out some things: What the teacher called “telling” (“erzählen”) is not telling at all. The point is to give the right key words, while the correctness not even is explicitly labelled but only through asking the next question, through progressing the practice. There are no explanations attending the named terms, the clarification of facts does not seem to be important but only the pure testing of knowledge. Therefore we can guess that it is rather an oral examination which takes place in front of the classmates' audience. Let us see how the procedure moves on:

“Why do they lay so many eggs?” - “Because so many are eaten.” - “And why else?” - Rebekka doesn't know another reason. Thessa raises her hand and it's her turn: “Because the eggs are not fertilised.” Another pupil is given his turn: “Because the water flows and the sperm don't reach them.” - “Right”, summarizes Mrs. Stern, “the water is moving all the time and many eggs break adrift”.

When Rebekka’s knowledge is exhausted, other pupils are allowed to add additional facts. Obviously this is not only a single pupil assessment, but in the meantime the situation serves as a collective repetition of the covered topics. Since the test serves as a repetiton for the whole class, as many reasons as possible must be named for the large amount of fish eggs. But this way Rebekka becomes aware of all the facts she did not know and which one could have known.

Then Mrs Stern turns back to little Rebekka: “What does belong to the vertebrates? “ - “Birds, fish, mammals”, Rebekka replies correctly. „Okay”, Mrs Stern takes back herself, but not without asking the class: “Do you want to squeeze her out? Two more questions!? ”

After the knowledge about reproduction in fish has been completed, the teacher finally comes back to her examinee and after another question she hands her over to her classmates to be
“squeezed out”. What is this about? A modern form of torture? Is Rebekka handed over to a sadistic audience for ultimate deconstruction and destruction? Anyway, this turning point, which appears to be so sudden to the outsider, for the participants doesn’t require further explanation. Everyone seems to know, what is meant by “squeezing out” (“ausquetschen”). But how does the audience of peers react? Does it take the role intended for it?

At first no one raises his hand, but then two arms are lifted.

The situation is precarious for Rebekka’s peers: On the one hand, they probably sympathize for her and feel solidarity at least in so far as they know that they could always find themselves in the same situation. On the other hand, the procedure must go on, the ritual must be performed. The teacher’s question, whether the classmates “want” was a rhetorical one. The fellow pupils must take the role intended for them in the framework of this procedure, which is obviously known to all the persons participating. How can this dilemma be solved?

It is Friedemann’s turn: “Why don’t fish survive on the land? “ Rebekka replies, that fish have gills, which do not allow them to breath on the land, thus at the air. Mrs. Stern asks, whether Friedemann is satisfied with the answer. – “Yes.”

Another pupil is allowed to ask a question, which Rebekka answers correctly, too. “So”, the teacher summarizes Rebekka’s performance,” the beginning, the reproduction in fish has not been that good, but the additional questions were answered in a differentiated way. Which mark would you give yourself? “

Thus Rebekka’s classmates are clever enough to ask questions that she can answer without any problems. In this case the solidarity of the pupils consists in fulfilling the role of the examiner in a way that does not cause the examinee any difficulties. The teacher evaluates the quality of the performance, but instead of telling the mark, she asks the examinee. Another surprising turning point! Although the question was formulated in conditional terms, Rebekka is put into the situation of assessing herself – in public in front of an audience of her classmates. That’s a tricky situation, for what is Rebekka supposed to answer? If she names a good mark, she will probably assess herself too good, which is not only embarrassing but is accompanied by disappointment. If on the other hand she names a bad mark she has collaborated in creating her own bad result – because it is clear from the conditional form (“would you give”) that it is not truly Rebekka who gives the mark. How shall Rebekka act?
Rebekka stumbles. “I do have a mark here!” the teacher claims. Rebekka is still quiet.

Rebekka in fact appears to be paralysed. Her situation is only made worse by the teacher’s claim that the mark is already fixed. So this is kind of a second examination. After the knowledge check it is now Rebekka’s ability to assess herself that is tested, but as described above the girl finds herself between Scylla and Charybdis. Rebekka is now completely incapable of acting and shifts into a kind of “playing possum” thus waiting until the situation is over. Hence it is the teacher’s turn to resolve the situation.

“Okay then, who is class representative? Carmen! Which mark would you give Rebekka, entirely objectively?”

The teacher cannot avoid letting go of Rebekka, but insists on including pupils into the process of finding the grade. So she comes up with the class representative, this being another surprising turn, since the function of a class representative normally does not mean giving marks to classmates or cooperating in grading. The class representative is the only pupil with a prominent function, and through this sole fact she is obviously predisposed to step into the breech in order to save the teacher’s method. Although doing this the teacher maneuvers Carmen into a position that is equally dilemmatic as the one that has just been described for Rebekka. For reasons of solidarity it is not possible to name a bad mark, and Mrs. Stern blocks the temptation of giving a good mark by her asking for “objectivity”. Thus Carmen is pledged to neutrality, which she is structurally not capable of and which is not compatible with the function of a class representative.

Carmen hesitantly says that she would give Rebekka a Two.

Carmen’s hesitation is only understandable and the mark which she finally decides upon seems to be the only option that makes sense. In Germany the marks go from One (the best mark) to Six (the worst mark). A Three would be a rather disappointing result in an oral examination, which Carmen doesn’t want to propose for her classmate. A One though would for sure require a good reason, which does not seem to be realistic facing Rebekka’s a bit poor performance. Carmen may hope that the Two matches Mrs. Stern’s rather positive summarizing characterization of Rebekka’s performance.
“That’s what I have got as well.” To Rebekka: “Sit down. “

This is the salvation from a tormenting ritual. Carmen is lucky (or was clever enough), the teacher confirms the proposed mark and Rebekka is finally set free of her unlucky situation standing alone in front of the class. The grading has been completed.

3. The problem of legitimizing school marks

The process, which in the slow-motion of detailed analysis seems to be so tormenting and almost unbearable, only takes a few minutes in the real time of every day classes. It can be assumed that the episode rather does not raise any questions for the participants – such scenes too obviously belong to every day life in teaching and learning. But from the point of an external observer we can ask how the teacher’s strange and apparently twisted ways of action are to explain?

Firstly, we noticed the hybrid function of the pupil-teacher-conversation: performance assessment and repetition of covered topics. According to the function of performance assessment, the knowledge of a single pupil must be revealed and presented. The performance must be attributed to a concrete person. That’s why Rebekka is asked to stand in front of the class and is questioned exclusively. On the other hand, in this situation at the beginning of the biology lesson the recently covered material is to be repeated. That’s why the classmates are questioned about all the facts Rebekka is unable to name. But this way Rebekka is confronted with all the facts she did not know. This repetition of the latest subject matters is designed in a multifunctional way: it is a repetition for everybody and it produces an oral mark. The price of this design is that the knowledge in question has to be processed in terms of examination knowledge, in terms of a knowledge that has been reduced to key concepts, which allows the evaluation and the counting of correct and false answers.

But let’s proceed. Why does the teacher virtually obsessively try to include the pupils into the process of grading? Why this inclusion that can be characterized rather as a pseudo-participation, because the mark is already fixed, the teacher already “has it”. We have often come across similar practices of pseudo-participation of pupils in grading. They seem to carry a systematic meaning for the every day life of performance assessment. One could assume a pedagogical motive for this ritual of “self assessment”: the aim to educate the pupils toward a realistic assessment of the own performance. But why in public, in front of the class and why, in our example, does the class representative have to step in when Rebekka does not say
anything? – Here we can assume another and completely different function of this practice: This is about the concerned persons’ acknowledgment of the teacher’s judgment. Those who are assessed are to guarantee the assessment by confirming in public that they have come to the same result. In this case, the matching with the teacher’s assessment means the acknowledgment of the judgment as objective and just. Since in our situation there was no way of obtaining this acknowledgment from Rebekka herself, Carmen as class representative had to guarantee and approve of the judgment in public.

Thus we have reached a basic problem of every day practice of performance assessment in schools: the problem of legitimizing the given marks. Marks at school can be neither “objective” nor “just”. The participants themselves know (sometimes intuitively, sometimes explicitly) about the multifarious limitations of the objectivity of grades. The practice of grading, on the other hand, demands that the idea of grades’ “objectivity” is maintained nevertheless, in order that they count to a certain extent as “just”. The practices of pupils’ performance assessment seem to serve maintaining the concept of the objectivity of grades at all costs.

Another widely found and stable result of our observations seems to be connected to the legitimacy of grades as well: the complete discharging of the teacher from the responsibility for the grades. The pupils are made fully responsible for the assessed performance. We have not observed a single scene, where a teacher has taken into consideration, that his or her teaching might be responsible for the disappointing performance of pupils.

It is mainly at the secondary school, that has to deal with a negatively selected set of pupils, that a suspicion occurs that the pupils are not able to or do not want to bring the achievements demanded by the school. At the Grammar school, at least at the beginning, examinations are designed in a way that leads to the pupil’s success (and Rebecca’s examination with her Two was an example for this). In the meantime, at the secondary school failure is produced systematically, most of all by handing over the entire responsibility for disappointing results to the pupils, their laziness, their lack of discipline, their stupidity, or their surroundings. In this school performance assessment is tightly connected to the issues of maintaining or achieving discipline and to trying to regulate behavior (see Zaborowski/Breidenstein 2010). This leads to bad marks right from the start. Thus at secondary schools the issue of legitimizing (bad) marks results in defamation and discouragement of a great part of the pupils.

But this in another story to be told another time!
References