

Interview Ullrich Bauer

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Ullrich Bauer is Professor of Socialization Research and has been at the Faculty of Education at Bielefeld University since 2014 and has been Vice Dean and Dean there from 2016 to 2021. His professional profile was formed in sociology, educational sciences, and public health. Previous professorial positions include the Faculty of

Education at the University of Duisburg, where he founded the Center for Prevention and Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence (ZPI) and headed the Institute for Education. He was a junior professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Bielefeld and represented the subject of social medicine at the University of Siegen. His works are based on the areas of socialization and inequality.

1. In Brazil we have important problems in relation to childhood and youth. You founded a Centre for Prevention and Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence (ZPI). How was it and the work of this center? Tell us a little about

the challenges of dealing with these phases of life with such unique demands.

Prof. Ullrich: Childhood and adolescence are usually given only minor consideration in scientific research. This is surprising. Recent research shows that

childhood and adolescence can be seen as kind of prime time within the life course. They represent a time in which a lot happens, and the most social influences are absorbed. The fact that childhood and adolescence are given so little consideration has to do with the development of the scientific disciplines. In the natural sciences, children and adolescents are almost completely absent, while the humanities have an adultistic bias. Thus, children and adolescents remain the subject on the periphery. It is often placed where practical knowledge is taught. We can see this in a whole series of examples. One example is the poor pay for people who work with children and young people. With our center and our research activities, we are counteracting all of these trends.

2. You head an Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Health Skills (IZGK), tell us a little about the research developed in this center. If one of our young Brazilian readers is interested in developing research at this center, what are the paths?

Prof. Ullrich: That is fairly simple. We are very open to different research topics. The international health literacy research is very dynamic. Our center looks at the

entire life course and is therefore open to different topics and approaches. The research that my colleagues and I bring in is, of course, almost always focused on childhood and adolescence. In doing so, we look at different aspects. For example, mental health, organizational structures of health literacy, curriculum development, development of instruments to measure or to improve health literacy. Furthermore, there are or important issues of linkage with the education sector or the impact of social inequalities. We have a very international focus and welcome any research contact. This of course works as always bottom up: with an email, a phone call or a meeting. We are lucky that in our institution we don't have to run after research funds. This of course makes us very open to open and innovative collaborations.

3. It is interesting to know that your work focuses on areas such as socialization and inequality. Especially in relation to inequality we need a lot of research and action to confront it in Brazil. Tell us a little about your research in these areas, from a country, Germany, that doesn't seem to live with such extreme inequalities as we do in Brazil.

Prof. Ullrich: I very much understand this question. But we have to keep in mind:

globally, of course, all these affluent societies are also unequal societies. In recent decades in particular, we have seen a very strong redistribution. In economic terms it is a redistribution from the bottom to the top. The main consequence of this is that the gaps between social positions are widening. In other words, the gap between rich and poor is also widening in rich societies. Of course, we also have societies worldwide in which poverty levels are decreasing and the gaps between rich and poor are narrowing. Especially in countries with a very low level of wealth. But in Brazil, for example, we have a very solid imbalance between rich and poor and a very stable form of reproduction of inequalities. Of course, this is more dramatic because here we are talking about absolute poverty as well. In contrast in societies like Germany, phenomena of relative poverty are more significant. So what we are talking about here are the gaps between top and bottom and experiences of relative deprivation. Surprisingly, however, these also have a very large effect on people's life chances. Relative deprivation is even a very significant factor for health. For example, the average life expectancy in poor societies like Cuba today is still as long as in affluent societies like the United States. Of course, this is connected to two very distinct forms of

life chances distribution in both societies. In addition, we need to ask how social inequalities are reproduced. There are some factors related to lifestyles and mentalities. But far more significant are the underlying social structures in societies that reproduce this system of social inequality. These include tax laws, the inheritance of property, welfare regimes, structures of social and urban segregation, educational systems, institutional racism, and the opportunities for upward mobility. Globally, we have a very wide range of different inequality regimes here. But of course we also have powerful trends: such as the ongoing neoliberal offensive, which for three decades now has been aimed at dismantling not only the welfare state, but also still solidarity-based action. Here we as scholars have a lot to do, and the gap between us and social movements has become far too wide. Part of this is that we need to learn much more from the issues that are being raised in the social movements. This ranges from the climate movement to the social movements in South America. We observe with concern that such issues are hardly dealt with on the front stage. They are only debated on the backstage. On the front stage, research takes place that is politically wanted and publicly funded. This makes us dependent and reduces

our ability to be practically impactful as scientists. You realize that you are touching a very large issue with your question. As scientists, we have a duty here to look at social interdependencies that are responsible for the emergence of social inequalities. Especially as socialization researchers. It is not enough just to work on the assumption that educational success would have to be increased in order for global inequalities to decrease. This is short-term thinking. In fact, I think it is ideological and unethical. Like physicians, we have a duty to get to the bottom of the causes of problems. Merely addressing the symptoms is dangerous and contradicts the scientific expertise with which we must penetrate public discourse. And, of course, in the area of policy and governance.

4. You also work with issues that have been important in Brazil related to education and health. We have experienced an intense process of scientific misinformation in the country, especially in the Covid-19 pandemic, with repercussions on vaccination campaigns and the use of innocuous medicines, for example. What are your perceptions about this phenomenon? How has it occurred in Germany and what are the ways to confront it?

Prof. Ullrich: In Germany, the situation is somewhat different. Misinformation on the part of the state, as was the case in other countries, did not play a major role here. Nevertheless, the large amount of information and the inhomogeneity of the news caused a great deal of uncertainty among the population. In addition, there was the major issue that a strong wave of opponents against COVID-19 vaccinations had arisen in Germany in particular. Here, the existence of the virus was doubted and later the Corona policy of the government was torpedoed with rhetorical attacks. This led to many confrontations, shook up the political landscape and also claimed human lives in the confrontations. To this day, demonstrations are taking place in opposition to the Corona regulations. This is despite the fact that the German Corona policy has been consistently very moderate in terms of restricting public life. This phenomenon is perhaps still similar in the United States. It is very different from the fact that governments themselves have been involved in spreading misinformation. But that is also just one component in the trajectory that has taken some states through the Corona Crisis. We have found that a great number of elements have influenced the way in which Corona has been addressed by the state and the way in which the

population has reacted to the measures. Meanwhile, in most Western countries, we have also seen what we call a social gradient of compliance. Whereas Corona was the so-called Ebola of the rich at the beginning, the groups most affected today are those with few economic, cultural and social resources. This is a major problem because it also affects the health-related life chances of the less privileged. In some countries, this leads to dramatic conditions that are countered by the state with laissez-faire. Of course, we all suffer from the fact that the expertise that is called upon in public discourse is primarily medical. Almost completely missing is a public health perspective that also takes into account how risks are distributed and how the rollback of measures would have to be planned so that the side effects of the quarantine regulations do not affect the population even more than the actual pandemic. Again, of course, we are looking particularly at children and adolescents, who will be exposed to almost unmanageable consequences as a result of the pandemic. This is truly a test of global crisis regulation that we will have to look back on for a long time to learn.

5. You have worked your way through three German universities in different positions, but always in education. In your

opinion, and from this privileged position, what are the main challenges for education in the world and in Germany?

Prof. Ullrich: The answer here is, of course, quite clear: a new generation must be prepared for how problems of global scope can be solved in the future. This has a whole range of consequences. First of all, we need to agree on the content that will be used in the education system. Second, all we do will take place in times where traditional forms of learning are being supplemented by digital ones. But talking about content means a lot more. What do young people need to learn in order to become capable of acting in globalized societies? What do they need to know so that societies can exist sustainably? Alongside the question of climate justice, there are other questions of justice. We also talk about a form of social sustainability, and we have to take into account that all these sustainability requirements are globally interconnected. What works in one society can have very significant negative consequences in another. The problems of the world economic system and the unequal distribution of wealth show this clearly. We need to train teachers in the education system to prepare young people for global demand. But we also need to transform the education systems so that education is no longer just a

means to prepare for the workforce, but instead gives rise to the potential for autonomy. To accomplish these tasks, we need a social consensus. It needs forces at all levels to work together on this. Today we also know that this can only be done in a participatory way. Nor can we decide over the minds of young people. This kind of commitment that is necessary can be seen almost nowhere today. That's precisely why universities and other privileged institutions in the field of education must begin to pioneer it.

6. Continuing the theme of the previous question, we have readers who are interested in doing research, masters, and doctorates, in the field of education. Tell us about the themes that should dominate this field in the coming decades.

Prof. Ullrich: This is actually about the subjects that I have just explained. However, this was not intended as a pre-decision for research topics. We stand for a research tradition in which the research topics are developed by the scientists themselves. Of course, that also applies here. A research question must prove itself in scientific discourse. It must be able to be connected and relate to this scientific discourse. There is no fixed stock of knowledge. Everyone benefits from

every new provocation. It is therefore very difficult to answer your question so concretely. What is desired is what can prove itself in the analytical debate.

7. In Brazil, higher education, especially private higher education, has experienced (even before the pandemic period) an important movement of growth in distance learning, especially in teacher training. Has this happened in Germany? What is your view on this kind of education in general and in teacher training?

Prof. Ullrich: This is always a question that makes us smile. Among developed countries there is no other one that is less digitized than Germany. This is even more pronounced in the area of education. In the area of learning at schools, but also in the training of teachers, we were more or less unfamiliar with digital media. This is precisely why the pandemic was such a challenge for the German education system. Now that awareness has been raised, we are learning from other countries. That's why I would like to put the question the other way around. But in general, of course, we can only benefit from the mix of traditional, analog and digital media. We can close many gaps that are created by the fact that we can't reach all groups or all content by analog

tools. The digital world is the reality of today and tomorrow and of course, we have to refer to it. But we must also not forget that education and learning have a core in the long-term and intensive engagement with a subject. In that case, a book that is read in its entirety is perhaps more significant than a lecture with fancy tools used.

8. Taking the theme of the previous question, you work with teacher training, what are the main challenges you find in your Faculty of Education for the continuity of a quality training of these professionals? Brazil has great demands in this area, and we have great difficulty in attracting young people to become teachers. How does that happen in Germany? Is the teaching profession attractive?

Prof. Ullrich: Germany has very good working conditions for teachers. Teachers are appointed to the civil service and are mostly civil servants for their entire lifetime. This means a good social security and a very good income. There is only a gradual difference between the incomes of teachers and professors, and therefore it is not particularly difficult to attract qualified teachers to work in schools. The problem, on the other hand, is that for many years the calculations of demand

have not been correct. In Germany, for example, there has been a high demand for teachers for several years. Therefore, there is little to choose from and the selection of the best does not work very well. In many regions, therefore, newcomers from other professions are being recruited as teachers. This has become a major problem and means a great deal of uncertainty about the quality of the professional work. Universities are also under pressure to produce graduates. We hope that we can change this in the next few years. Then structures must be created that make it possible again to demand pedagogical and didactic competencies at a high level and also to train them with the appropriate personnel at universities.

9. You have managed to publish at a high level, articles, books and projects. Many Brazilian researchers find it difficult to achieve this goal. Give us tips to achieve this standard of academic publication.

Prof. Ullrich: Of course, I can only speak for the situation in Germany and my experiences there. For us as young scientists, it was very important to do research, build networks and publish in our first language, German, and of course also in English. The accessibility to the scientific market must be given, although

I know that this is not true for all regions of the world. In particular, it is of course very difficult to get noticed in the humanities if you are not from an English-speaking country. In this respect, it was a bit easier for me because many of my career steps have taken place in Public Health and this discipline is strongly science-based and international research networks are the rule and not an exception. Of course, we also have to fight against an overall low perception of the social sciences and humanities in public discourses. Only a few manage to be publicly noticed. Therefore, I can of course only recommend that international networks are sought as early as possible and that any inhibitions to cooperate and publish in English are reduced as early as possible.

10. Many of our readers are interested in going down the international research path and perhaps continuing their studies at a European university. Should any of them be interested in the topics you investigate, what are the characteristics you want in a mentee? What skills should they develop? Have you already worked with Brazilians? What is your impression?

Prof. Ullrich: Yes, of course, and I have the best experience in cooperating with

scientists from Brazil. Also with young scientists in different career steps. Of course, it is not easy to generalize here either. But for me personally, I can say that interest, motivation and intensity are decisive. I myself have been able to make a virtue out of necessity, and the mix in different disciplines and topics that I can work on do not specify any particular precondition that young scientists have to bring with them in order to cooperate with us in Bielefeld. Our team is interdisciplinary, from medicine to cultural studies, we have all disciplines represented. The very amalgam of the collective work is interest and motivation. Scientists who are interested in collaborating only have to show previous work and indicate interest with a topic that can be connected to the working group. The rest will develop in communicating and in an exchange of perspectives.