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Addressing political extremism through education: reflections from case-study research

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This paper examines approaches being taken by the public school system in Germany to address the problem of the radical right among youth, using Berlin as an example.¹ The author discusses efforts to address the radical right through the education system on both the level of the city and within individual schools, drawing on examples from case-study research in a vocational school for construction trades. The research conducted for this paper included classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students. At the time that this volume went to press, all student and teachers interviews have been completed, but only half have been transcribed. This account, therefore, is based primarily on classroom and school observations. Because analysis of this research is ongoing, the findings reported in this paper remain tentative and should be viewed as a starting point to generate discussion and further analysis.

Introduction

Right-wing extremism has risen sharply in Germany over the past year.² Throughout the autumn of 2000 and the winter of 2001, German politicians, educators, and grassroots organisations have struggled to comprehend both the consequences of and possible remedies for the violence. Heated debates in the German parliament and in the media have pointed fingers at former East German socialisation, at high unemployment rates, at the activities of right-wing political parties, at the lack of after-school alternatives for German young people, and at the school system, for not adequately teaching the history of Nazi Germany or of the former East Germany. Proposed solutions range from revoking drivers' licences for active neo-Nazi party members to a constitutional amendment outlawing one of the most prominent right-wing parties, the National Party of Germany (NPD).

The student body in the school described in this paper is a challenging one for teachers who wish to address issues of national identity or the radical right in their classrooms. The school provides vocational training for about 2700 students, who are mostly male, aged about 16-20, and training to be masons, roofers, concrete-workers, scaffold-builders, and drafters.³ Job prospects in the construction field have declined rapidly in Germany over

¹ It is worth noting that strategies to address the problem of the radical right are also being developed outside of the public education system, involving institutions and organizations such as the police, social agencies, youth organisations, and others.

² See "Zahl rechtsextremistische Straftaten drastisch angestiegen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 March 2001; "Gewaltbereitschaft von Rechtsextremisten wächst," *Berliner Zeitung*, 30 March 2001; "Bundeswehr: Mehr rechtsextreme Delikte" and "Die Gewaltbereitschaft in Deutschland nimmt zu," both in *Der Tagesspiegel*, 11 March 2001. There is still some uncertainty, however, as to whether the acts have actually increased in number or are rather simply being counted more accurately.

³ Some students attend the school for their theoretical instruction only, receiving practical training in the workplace, while other students attend the school full-time.

the past decade, and remain dismal. The majority of students in the school will have little chance of obtaining employment in their field upon graduation. Teachers openly discuss the problem of the radical right in the school, although the actual number of students who belong to radical right groups is difficult to estimate.⁴ At least part of this difficulty results from the fact that defining the 'radical right' is itself a difficult task, since the population that teachers feel they need to reach is certainly not limited to students who are active members of right-wing extremist groups. For the purposes of this paper, I include among the 'radical right' both students who are active members of right-wing extremist groups and students who express right-wing, nationalistic, or xenophobic views in classroom discussions but may not be active members of groups. In the school described in this paper, students with radical right views or memberships are a presence in most classrooms, and in some classrooms they represent the majority view among their classmates.

Data and methods

The data on teacher practice described in this paper were gathered during the 2000-01 school year, at a vocational school for construction trades in Berlin. I spent several intensive weeks during this period at the school, observing classrooms, attending faculty meetings, reviewing textbooks and curricular materials, and interviewing students and teachers. I also reviewed school data and information on school programmes, met with school and departmental administrators, and spent time talking informally with students and teachers. At the school, I observed nine teachers in 27 double-block civics (*Sozialkunde*) and German classes, totaling 54 hours of classroom observation.⁵ I conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with each teacher as soon as possible after finishing my last observation in their classroom.

The contemporary radical right and The Vocational School for Construction Trades

Nearly two-thirds of German youths receive their post-secondary education and training through the vocational system, training for over 350 professions, either as apprentices in the 'dual system' of part-time work and part-time schooling, or through full-time school-based training. Vocational school students in the dual system, who are usually aged 16-20, generally spend part of their week training on-site at the workplace, and attend vocational school for theoretical and academic education, including civic education classes. Due in part to Germany's history, civics instruction represents a much higher proportion of the vocational school curriculum than it generally does in other countries. Civics instruction (*Sozialkunde*) for second and third-year masons, roofers, and concrete-workers in Berlin, for example, represents 25% of their total academic instruction, and is the only non-technical subject required during those two years. Vocational schools are forced to confront the issue of the radical right more often than academic or

⁴ The 'markers' that can help to identify members of the radical right often change and/or students may decide to dress differently in the school setting, making it difficult for teachers to recognise students who belong to radical right groups.

⁵ This research was conducted as part of a larger project, which included over 160 hours of classroom observations with 25 teachers in three vocational schools in Berlin, from January 2000-August 2001.

comprehensive schools. Schnabel and Goldschmidt (1997) report that vocational school apprentices exhibit much stronger anti-foreigner beliefs than their peers in academic high schools.

I selected the school for construction trades as a case-study because of the unique challenges posed by the decline in the construction field in Berlin in general, as well as the confluence of issues in Berlin that add a degree of complexity to the issue of national identity within the urban setting. The labour market for construction workers in Berlin is especially difficult. Estimates range from 26,000-40,000 German construction workers currently unemployed in Berlin alone.⁶ Construction apprentices also exhibit some of the highest anti-foreigner sentiments of all apprentices, which Schnabel and Goldschmidt (1997) attribute to lower professional identification among manual labourers.

City-wide and school-based efforts through the education system

Efforts sponsored by the city and by at least one local non-profit agency to address the problem of the radical right in the school system have focused on two main areas: how to recognise radical right-wing students (*recognition*), and how to effectively argue against statements and assertions posed by such students (*argumentation*).

Recognition and Argumentation

Recognition is one central focus of teacher and city-wide efforts to address the problem of the radical right in schools. Teachers are struggling to understand better just how significant the problem is in their schools and classrooms. At the school described in this paper, local police in Berlin conducted a workshop for teachers during the spring of 2001, a central goal of which was to help teachers learn how better to recognise right-wing students in their school and classrooms. Recognition can be a real challenge for teachers, since youth often change the symbols, tattoos or clothing, or other identifying characteristics as old symbols become forbidden. Teachers can send students home from school if they display symbols that are legally forbidden, such as a swastika, but in order to do this, they need to understand which symbols are forbidden and which are not, and whether additional restrictions ought to be imposed at the school level. At an April, 2001 civics faculty meeting, teachers engaged in a lengthy debate about whether to recommend that the school ban ‘bomber jackets’ and heavy black boots (*Springerstiefel*), both of which symbolize right-wing membership among youth.

Argumentation is also a central focus of the resource materials and training offered for teachers by central school authorities and the police.⁷ The intention is to help teachers develop effective responses to statements and claims made by right-wing students. This can be an especially important aspect of classroom work, so that teachers can correct misinformation or misrepresentations put forth by right-wing students. Many of the counter-arguments provided for teachers offer facts and data that can be used to counter

⁶ “Jeder Fünfte verlor seinen Job: Baunachfrage geringer.” *Berliner Zeitung* Nr. 245, Oct. 20, 2000, p. 37; “Berlins Schattenwirtschaft blüht: Bauwirtschaft und Handwerk sind besonders betroffen.” *Berliner Zeitung* Nr. 212, Sept. 11, 2000, p. 37.

⁷ See, e.g., Goether et al (1999).

misinformation about immigrants, asylum-seekers, the European Union, or unemployment.

Teachers at the school described in this paper have not yet reached a consensus on how best to address the problem of the radical right in their classrooms. Opinions were divided on the efficacy of focusing on recognition and argumentation. Some strongly felt that a ban on right-wing symbols and clothing would be an important symbolic step for the school. Others argued that teachers need to focus less on the symbols and arguments and more on the psychological background of these students. “Otherwise, I’m just a cosmetician, not a doctor,” one teacher explained at a faculty meeting, saying, “We need to talk *with* the students.” The workshop for teachers run by the local police (which focused on recognition and argumentation) had mixed reactions: while some teachers felt supported and were happy to have more information about how to recognise and respond to right-wing students, others bemoaned the lack of a pedagogical approach. “It wasn’t really a workshop for educators,” one teacher explained to me, pointing out that it didn’t help him work out what to do in the classroom with these students.

Curriculum

The formal state and school curriculum does not provide much assistance to teachers who wish to address the topic of the radical right in their classrooms. Every 3-4 years, the state of Berlin renews the recommended curriculum framework for civics in vocational schools. This framework leaves schools with a great deal of flexibility on how they address topics such as the radical right or xenophobia. This flexibility is not always viewed positively by teachers or the general public. Teachers “are often left alone with the growing problem of radical-right political attitudes among students,” a local newspaper in Berlin explained in December 2000.⁸ The curriculum framework for social studies for vocational school students recommends that school curriculum include 20 hours (over a 3-4-year period) of instruction on Nazi Germany and its consequences, part of which includes a discussion of neo-Nazism and the radical right. Xenophobia is also mentioned as a topic that might be included in discussions of human rights or immigration.⁹ Each school revises its own curriculum plan based on the state’s recommendations. The curriculum plan in the school described in this paper left teachers with tremendous flexibility. The plan consists of a one-page sheet with a list of topics to be covered in each of six semesters, along with a recommended number of hours to be spent on each topic.

In other words, although both the state curriculum and the school curriculum I examined recommend that teachers spend some time dealing with the issue of neo-Nazism and the radical right, neither provides any guidelines for how teachers ought to go about this task. Despite this, I found that teachers were integrating the topic into their lessons. The following section details some of the approaches I observed as teachers addressed the radical right and national identity in their lessons.

⁸ “Im Sozialkunde-Lehrplan fehlt das Thema ‘Rechtsextremismus.’” *Berliner Zeitung* Nr. 287, 8 December 2000, page 22.

⁹ *Rahmenplan für Unterricht und Erziehung in der Berliner Schule: Berufsschule/Berufsfachschule, Fächer Sozialkunde, Wirtschafts- und Sozialkunde. Gültig ab Schuljahr 1999/2000.* Senatsverwaltung für Schule, Jugend und Sport, Berlin.

Teacher practice in civics classroom

I found that teachers were integrating these issues into a variety of different lessons, even when the focus of the lesson was not specifically related to issues of national identity or the radical right. Most teachers' efforts centred around an attempt to 'deconstruct' or 'devalue' national identity in the German context, through the use of rational argument or logic. I observed five different approaches to doing this.

Teachers emphasized the historical absence of a German 'nation' and the primacy of regional identity until very recent times.

This is where the ideology of the German state begins...

-Mr. Meyer¹⁰, Civics teacher, autumn 2000

Teachers frequently made use of historical and social facts to assert an 'ideology of the German state. Several teachers pointed out that until the mid 1800s, Germany could never be categorised as a state or an empire, and emphasised the primacy of regional identity vis-à-vis anything that might have been called 'German-ness.' As one teacher explained, "before 1871, one could never be called a German - the concept that one could be a German just didn't exist ... Today, those people who talk about a German consciousness, they don't know what they're talking about." In the same discussion, this teacher argued that the concept of the German 'fatherland' is a myth based on a misunderstanding of history and an invented ideology, and pointed out that the notion of 'fatherland' is non-existent in many other industrialized nations. Another teacher told students that one couldn't call Germany 'Germany' until the Kaiser's Republic. Until then, only regions existed, not a country: "Before then, there was no Germany—there was Sachseny, there was Prussia ... but you couldn't call Germany 'Germany' before 1871 or so."

Teachers pointed out that Germans are themselves the product of centuries of inter-European inter-marriage, immigration, and migration, and showed how the German constitution supports foreigners.

We are all foreigners ourselves, really

-Mr. Mueller, Civics teacher, autumn 2000

Several teachers pointed out to their classes during the course of discussions about German history or current events that Germans today are the product of centuries of inter-European intermarriage through widespread migration, such as migrations of Huguenots from France or workers from Sweden and other border countries. One teacher pointed out that the influx of guest workers from Turkey in Germany during the post-WW II period was actually part of a pattern of immigration from other countries that had always taken place in periods when Germany needed working men. Other teachers reminded students that in Germany, the rights present in the 'Basic Law' are "for everyone living within Germany's borders, not just for Germans."

¹⁰ All names have been changed.

Teachers argued that the continued population decline in Germany means that Germany 'needs' foreigners as laborers and to support future retirees.

Germans are not reproducing enough.

-Herr Mueller, Civics teacher, autumn 2000

Several teachers linked the current discussion about retirement in Germany to the issue of immigration, pointing out that due to the low birth-rate of (ethnic) Germans, millions of non-Germans will continue to be needed as part of the German workforce in order to keep the population at 80 million and support future retirees. Current political debates about needed reforms in retirement policy were a frequent subject of discussion in the civics classrooms I observed, although not all of the teachers made the link between the need to reform retirement and the need to have increased numbers of foreign workers.

Teachers redirected blame for problems often associated with foreigners, pointing out that Germans are often at fault.

Those [people] with very short hair say that it [the problem of black market labour] is the fault of the foreigners, but it's not their fault, it's the fault of the employers, who have set up the system.

-Mr. Hertelmann, Civics teacher, autumn 2000

This teacher emphasised that the problem of black market labour results from German employers, who profit from the system. Prejudice against foreigners, in other words, is based in this case on problems that often originate with Germans.

One teacher pointed out the consequences and potential repercussions for Germany if a radical right-wing party came to power.

If the NPD came to power ...Germany would become poorer and poorer ... Through the activities of these people [the radical right-wing], millions of Deutschmarks have been lost in the state of Brandenburg, for example. No one wants to invest there. What would happen in Germany? Daimler-Benz would go bankrupt.

-Herr Mueller, Civics teacher, autumn 2000

This teacher focused on the potential consequences - an economic disaster for the country, because other countries would boycott German goods or products, and because tourism would decrease.

Other approaches in teacher practice

Although teachers as a rule emphasised the kinds of rational approaches described above in their efforts to address the issue of the radical right, both in discussions about their goals and in their classroom practices, there were a few notable exceptions. Two teachers directly confronted the issue of the radical right in its contemporary setting, encouraging students to discuss their own feelings and personal attachments to the German nation or other political identities. One of these teachers used worksheets to encourage students to reflect on their own identity, on how they felt about Europe and European identity, and engaged the class in hands-on, simulated activities designed to open a discussion of prejudice, xenophobia, and stereotypes. Another teacher used my presence (as a foreigner who "looks" German and who had not been introduced to the class) in the classroom

as a way of ‘tricking’ the students into a discussion about foreignness, stereotypes, and xenophobia. In addition, two teachers used hypothetical situations to encourage class discussions about contemporary issues, including discussions of what students would themselves do in a situation involving neo-Nazis. Both hypothetical situations led to lengthy and engaged discussions about the issue of the radical right and xenophobia in Germany and in Berlin.

Conclusion

The public school system’s initial response to the growing problem of the radical right among German youth, as illustrated by the data in this case-study, appears to be a focus on better recognising radical right youth in the school system and developing more effective teacher responses to arguments put forth by right-wing students. Neither the efforts made by the state through training and curriculum development, nor approaches by most teachers in their classroom practice, have directly addressed students’ emotional or psychological attachments to their national identity. Since much of the theoretical literature on national identity indicates that it is indeed an emotional and psychological attachment, approaches that deal more directly with students’ feelings about the nation, xenophobia, racism, or the sense in which they feel threatened by the rapid changes in German society might be more effective at addressing the radical right.¹¹ While argumentation is important in order to correct misinformation or misperceptions that many students have about immigrants, asylum-seekers, or the European Union (among others), the roots of the problem go much deeper and need to be addressed in the classroom as well.

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¹¹ See, e.g., Anderson (1991); Berezin (1999).