

the continuity of adhocracy: formal practices of segregated schooling of immigrant students as a mirror for German migration politics

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This article shows the historical continuities of segregated schooling of migrant children in Berlin from the 1960s to the present. My main argument is that segregated schooling can be understood as a result of an administrative denial of the fact of immigration. Instead of changing the system for the needs of a diverse student body, schools and school administrations develop instable adhoc regulatory practices of segregated schooling.

Keywords: history, migration, racism, school, segregation

Introduction

Ever since the summer of 2015, an increasing number of school-age children and youth for whom school is mandatory have arrived in Germany. Government officials decided to quickly integrate these minors into the education system (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2016) by – paradoxically – creating the segregated Preparatory Classes that one finds in all of Germany’s federal states, and in all types of schools (Massumi & Dewitz, 2015). These practices of formal segregation of immigrant students have a long tradition in Germany and – as this article argues – they reflect an understanding of migration as temporal, exceptional, unexpected and a challenge to society and its institutions. A historical perspective on the continuity of segregated schooling of migrant children in Berlin from the 1960s until now reveals that segregated schooling is characterized by informality and “adhocracy”² (Emmerich et al., 2016) and is accompanied by racist discourses. Segregated schooling offers an opportunity for schools and school administrations to avoid institutional changes that would be necessary to meet the needs of an immigrant society.

The Historical Predecessor – ‘Regular Foreigners’ Classes’

The practice of segregated schooling based on ‘foreign citizenship’ started in the 1960s during the period of foreign labour recruitment to West Germany. From 1955 until 1973 an estimated 14 million migrant workers came to Germany. They were not supposed to stay. After some years of (mostly industrial) work, the migrants were expected to leave again. The German government tried to avoid immigrants becoming residents. Nevertheless, during the 1960s an increasing number of migrant families arrived in Germany. The first institutional regulations concerning the school attendance of migrant students were made ten years after the first labour recruitment contract with Italy. In 1964, the Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) issued a directive that foreign children should generally be schooled together with German children and, if necessary, first learn German in separate classes (Puskeppeleit & Krüger-Potratz, 1999, pp. 41ff.).

Yet the proportion of foreign students in a regular class should not exceed one fifth. If this were the case, only at that point should classes be created for foreign children of the same nationality (see Engin, 2003, p. 21). This practice of segregation was solidified in Berlin in 1984 with the “Regulations on Teaching Foreign Children and Youth,” and in districts with a high proportion of migrants this led to a widely practiced system of teaching German and foreign children separately (Steinmüller, 1989). Moreover, in these ‘foreigner classes’ (*Ausländerregelklassen*) additional lessons were given to students in their first language, a move that was meant to facilitate a possible return to the countries of origin and a smooth reintegration into the local schools. But these classes still existed after labour recruitment was stopped in 1973, when it was clear that those who did not return to their countries of origin would stay. Separating the classes was initially justified by arguing that this would help to improve the students’ limited German skills (see Steinmüller, 1989, p. 140), but later it was also explained by pointing to the lower educational attainment of children considered ‘unwilling to learn’. The latter point was often made with direct reference to their ‘foreign’ culture as a deficiency, i.e. their parents were thought incapable of raising their children properly and uninterested in campaigning for a good education for their children. In addition, the teachers, it was often argued, were overwhelmed and not properly trained to adequately manage the situation (see Puskeppelit & Krüger-Potratz, 1999, pp. 12f.). For decades, school administration, schools, and teachers all claimed to be caught off guard by the large influx of foreign children and youth. Subsequently, they felt insufficiently prepared to educate them, and thus, professed to have no methods to cope with their presence (see Hopf, 1981, pp. 845, 860).

There has been little research done on ‘foreigner classes’ in Berlin, but early criticisms of this practice were voiced by immigrant associations, teachers, and school administrators. They argued that classroom segregation not only worsened educational opportunities, but was not a suitable approach to teaching a language, and that segregation was a discriminatory practice (Türkischer Elternverein in Berlin-Brandenburg, n.d.) In 1995, the Berlin Schooling Law was amended and terminated both the quota system and the ‘foreigner classes’ (see Engin, 2003, pp. 26ff.)

After the ‘Regular Foreigners’ Classes’

Until 2000, however, this did not transform the practice of separating classes (although the numbers of students in these classes declined noticeable (Brüggemann & Nikolai, 2016)): “the ‘foreigner classes’ were simply renamed ‘regular classes’ or ‘support classes’, without introducing new content,” or even redistributing the students (Engin, 2003, pp. 30ff). After the ‘foreigner classes’ were legally abolished in Berlin in 1995, a student’s nationality could no longer be used as the decisive factor in justifying separate classes; instead, the separation was justified by the ostensible need for language support for the newly categorized students with so called non-German language of origin (*nichtdeutsche Herkunftssprache*). Here, a paradigm shift took place at the administrative level. The basis for separating classes was no longer an ascriptive characteristic but rather a performance deficit (although often there was no language test. Teachers assumed that children would need extra German lessons just because they had, for example, Turkish names). This did not, however, change the fact that classes were still being segregated. Now it was simply a result of an otherwise legitimated institutional construction process. Yet the quota system persisted: if more than 25 percent of the children attending a regular class did not have sufficient German language skills to follow the lessons, a special support class could be set up (see Langenfeld, 2001, pp. 104f).

Starting in 2007, Berlin’s education policy no longer included separate classes: newcomer students were placed directly into the regular classes with additional German-learner classes of “study groups

for language development” (Thöne & Will, 2012). The direction of this educational policy in Berlin followed a long public discussion on migration, during which Germany acknowledged itself as a country of immigration. After years of severe political dispute, the citizenship law was changed from the principle of *jus sanguinis* (by which the right to citizenship is dependent on the nationality of one or both parents) to *jus soli* (by which the right to citizenship is determined solely by place of birth) and integration became the new paradigm. This shift took place during a period of comparatively low rates of immigration.

Just as with the ‘foreigner classes’, there have been few studies on ‘support classes’; indeed this gap in the research suggests that the topic of segregated lessons and schooling has not been taken seriously as a relevant aspect of education studies.

Preparatory Classes: Between Continuity and Adhocracy

However, when the number of immigrants rose again in 2011, Preparatory Classes were introduced, thus signifying a return to segregated classes. The introduction of Preparatory Classes in 2011 was defended by the fact that immigration from abroad increased to such an extent “that the existing ‘language support groups’ could not meet the demand” (Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft (SenBJW), 2014, p.1). In 2011, this concerned, in particular, migrant families from Romania and Bulgaria, who had benefited from the new freedom of movement as a result of the EU Eastern Enlargement in 2007. As was the case with the ‘regular foreigners’ classes’, the same rhetoric of overextension was evoked in setting up the Preparatory Classes: Berlin’s school authorities were caught unprepared and surprised by the large numbers of children and youth who had to be integrated into the school system, and they insisted there were not enough trained staff or developed concepts to handle the influx (see Thöne & Will, 2012).

Evident in the arguments to justify a reintroduction of separate classes, and much like in the case of the ‘regular foreigners’ classes’, was the problematization of migration. These classes were quickly discredited in the public eye as ‘Roma classes’. In this case again, the introduction of segregated classes was explained on the basis of insufficient German language skills. Moreover, these children were quickly labelled as problematic students, with delayed development and aggressive tendencies, the common belief being that they first needed to be schooled separately in order to “prepare them” socially for regular classes (see Bezirksamt Neukölln von Berlin, 2012, p. 9).

This development was not lost on anti-racist initiatives and Roma organizations that criticized these classes for their role in encouraging the further stigmatization of children from Romania and Bulgaria (Dettloff, 2013). Over the course of the next few years, the makeup of these Preparatory Classes diversified with respect to the children’s nationality. The number of Preparatory Classes rose sharply, and in December 2016 more than 12,000 students visited a Preparatory Class. In 2020 it was still more than 6000.

Berlin’s education law does not specify Preparatory Classes in detail, which means there is no established framework of rules or requirements for their actual design. Only non-binding recommendations are formulated, such as: the length of stay (transition to a mainstream class within maximum of two years), the obligation to document language development, limited class size (12 students per class), and the weekly number of hours (SenBJW, 2018). The only pedagogical objective of these classes is to “guarantee the successful transition into a regular class”³ (SenBJW, 2018, p. 12). As a result, schools are compelled to develop their own plan for how they organize

these classes.

One key finding of a study on Preparatory Classes (Karakayalı et al., 2017) was that for the most part, structural considerations and the entire organization of these classes, including content, was the responsibility of one teacher. There was almost no contact between the students of the Preparatory Classes and other students, either on the playground or in lessons like music or sports. Since there was no set curriculum for the Preparatory Classes, their content varied from school to school, and in some schools even from class to class. Every teacher decided individually on content, method and teaching materials. This in turn was influenced by the fact that many of the teachers interviewed did not hold education degrees and had no experience with the regular school operations. Many had never previously worked with children in a school context. There were also no fixed guidelines to decide when a child should have switched to a mainstream class. In fact, some teachers designed their own tests to assess whether a student had acquired the necessary skills to attend mainstream classes. Due to having separate (also spatially separated) Preparatory Classes, some teachers described being excluded from regular school procedures. While some interviewees raised doubts about the effectiveness of separate classes with regard to intensive German-language learning, many considered separate education to be appropriate given that new immigrant children and youth are believed to lack a certain level of cultural fit, a familiar argument heard in the 1960s/70s to justify segregation (Karakayalı & zur Nieden, 2017).

Summary and Outlook

The 2016 study of Preparatory Classes reveals the historical continuity in modes of crisis that have prompted segregated education in Berlin. In their current form, the parallels between the creation of the ‘regular foreigners’ classes’ in the 1970s/80s and the introduction of the Preparatory Classes in 2011 becomes clear: immigrant children are deemed unfit for regular, mainstream instruction on the basis of their language skills, or lack thereof, and their assumed inability to adapt culturally. Moreover, the overall design of Berlin’s Preparatory Classes is short-sighted in character and largely operates with no clear concept. Consequently, parallel structures are created instead of undertaking the structural reforms necessary to bring about change. The established practice of segregation shows how deeply schools are embedded in this historical continuity, despite Berlin’s experience with the ‘regular foreigners’ classes’, which certainly cannot be considered a model for success. This provisional character of the classes points to an understanding of migration not as a social and political reality to which schools must adapt, but as a marginal phenomenon, and one that ultimately does not concern educational policymakers. The administrative term for these classes is “welcome class” (Willkommensklasse, SenBJW, 2018, p. 9) which reflects an attitude that the school attendance of recently immigrated students is seen more as a friendly gesture than what it actually is: a legal right. The Preparatory Classes are widely regarded as a temporary ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of increased immigration. However, a cursory historical overview shows that these temporary solutions, even if they seem suitable in the historical moment, have been passed down and have become self-perpetuating. The fact that provisional solutions are even needed at all exposes an educational framework that is closed to the realities of a migration society.

Some schools in Berlin, however, have taken a different approach. They integrate new immigrant children directly into the regular classes with additional German lessons (Karakayalı & Heller, 2020). It is a telling sign that this approach is still not recommended in the Berlin Senate’s handbook. Although it does seem to point the way to a different approach to dealing with the various concerns mentioned here, this practice can only be a temporary solution insofar as it

depends largely on the commitment of individual school administrators. Without a profound change in the understanding of who really attends school combined with new funding opportunities, a change of practice will not find its way into educational and school development policies.

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1. This article is based on a collaborative work with Birgit zur Nieden, Çağrı Kahveci, Sophie Gross and Mareike Heller (see Karakayalı et al., 2017).
2. Adhocracy describes an organizational strategy that allows creative, flexible and temporary solutions for a problem due to a low level of standardization. These adhoc solutions often tend to become permanent (Mintzberg, 1979)
3. "Ziel ist immer die erfolgreiche Gewährleistung des Übergangs in eine Regelklasse."