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educational practice in Germany between racism and far-right ideologies

Annett Gräfe-Geusch

Researching educational responses to far-right youth mobilization and ideologies has so far focused mainly on informal education spaces. We thus know little about how and why teachers seek to respond to these issues in their classrooms in formal education. This is despite the fact that far-right mobilization and attitudes are rising in Germany and are having a political impact. In this article I present data from an 18-month ethnographic study in Berlin's secondary schools, arguing that it is not only important to understand how teachers conceptualize the problem in their student body but also how teachers seek to address these issues. Through this knowledge, we will be able to better understand and systematically respond to far-right ideologies in classrooms.

Keywords: Education Practice, Far-Right Ideology, Preventing Violent Extremism, racism, teachers

Preventing Violent Extremism in Germany

Over the past decade, Western democratic societies experienced an increase in far-right mobilization that in some cases turned violent (Koehler, 2016). In Germany 2019 and 2020 saw far-right violence in terror attacks on a Synagogue, the murder of a local politician, and a deadly attack on ethnic minorities in Hanau. Responding to the increased visibility of far-right violence and populist right-wing mobilization Saxony's first minister declared far-right extremism to be the biggest threat to democracy (mxw, November 3, 2020). These developments sparked calls for increased efforts to prevent far-right extremism and radicalization in public schools. International frameworks from the Council of Europe (2016) or from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2016) established strong policy models to prevent violent extremism through education (PVE-E; Christodoulou & Szakács, 2018; Jackson, 2008). The German National Government (2016) dedicated formal public education as an important area of preventing far-right violence and extremism. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States [Kultusministerkonferenz] (KMK), the main coordinating body for education policy in Germany, also issued multiple resolutions for public education to address racism and diversity (KMK, 1996/2013, 2003, 2015, 2009/2018).

In academic research, the field of Preventing Violent Extremism through Education (PVE-E) made many contributions to a better understanding of how education contributes to prevention work (Davies, 2018; Waller, 2020). Empirical research examines informal education settings (Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2017) or engages with teaching about the atrocities of the historical far right through Holocaust education (e.g. Meseth & Proske, 2015; Oeser, 2019; Ortloff, 2015; Vitale & Clothey, 2019). We know much less about how formal education engages with the far rights´ contemporary manifestations (Christodoulou & Szakács, 2018; Lakhani & James, 2021; Pels & de

Ruyter, 2012).

The following paper thus makes two distinct arguments: First, we need to better understand whom teachers classify to be far right and why. Second, we need to understand how teachers seek to intervene. These arguments are based on data from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in ethics classrooms in Berlin's secondary schools including interviews, participant observations, and policy and curriculum analysis (Graefe-Geusch, 2020a). The fieldwork took place during the long summer of migration, thus capturing an important moment in far-right mobilization in Germany (Gessler & Hunger, 2024).

Researching Far-Right Ideologies and Education Practices

The far right*1* is defined by the belief that "some groups are superior to others" combining authoritarianism and nativism (Gattinara, 2020, p. 316). While it is not a monolithic movement, ethnic exclusion, expressed through racism, antisemitism, and anti-Islamic sentiments is often considered a defining category (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018). It is further underlined through anti-state and authoritarian views. In recent years far-right narratives have also been mainstreamed, finding their way into public rhetoric (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2020), increasing far-right sentiments in Germany's population (Zick et al., 2019; Zick et al., 2023), and widespread anti-government, anti-Semitic, anti-diversity public mobilization during the Covid-19 pandemic (Virchow & Häusler, 2020). Recent European parliament elections also saw strong voter turnout for far-right parties in Germany with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) receiving the second-highest number of votes following the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Remarkably, with young voters, the AfD received 16% of the votes, posing a significant increase compared to the last election (Pfeifer, June 10, 2024). This increases the visibility of these groups, possibly leading to an increase in mobilization, recruitment, and violence, (Abbas & Awan, 2015; Rees et al., 2019) enhanced by deep-set economic and social inequality (Weisskircher, 2020).

Research on German youth engagement with extremist groups showed the complex relationship youths might have with far-right and possibly violent groups, symbols, and brands (Graefe-Geusch & Miller-Idriss, 2019; Miller-Idriss & Graefe-Geusch, 2020; Miller-Idriss & Graefe-Geusch, 2024; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Mudde, 2014). Throughout adolescence and early adulthood, young people may move in and out of extremist spaces, causing their sense of belonging to remain fluid. While rising incidents of far-right ideology being voiced in classrooms (Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa), May 2, 2019; Pauli, July 16, 2023) may indicate the mainstreaming of this ideology it is not necessarily indicative of actual levels of radicalization or engagement in violence. However, the increasing visibility of far-right ideology through public protests may make the far right more attractive to youth (Miller-Idriss, 2018). Research thus calls for interventions to target the emerging adults in and around the far right (Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2018, 2020) tasking education broadly to build resilience against far-right ideology whether students are actively engaged in its ideology or not. Yet very little research addresses preventing far-right extremism in formal education in Germany (Christodoulou & Szakács, 2018) and elsewhere (exception: Lakhani & James, 2021). Instead, research focuses on out-of-school and informal settings, where interventions interact directly with youth already part of the scene (Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2017); although this is slowly changing (Hinz et al., 2023).

Who is Far-Right?

In predominantly white German school contexts, the teachers in my sample oftentimes mainly focused on one specific aspect of far-right ideologies: racism and/or xenophobia.

As one of the teachers in my sample explains:

> Our students here in Marzahn-Hellersdorf [Northeastern district, known at the time for little ethno-religious diversity] have the problem that they have almost no contact to foreign cultures and that… so to say, racism is still a really big issue here, I think. (Frau Wels, Interview May 27, 2016)

Teachers seeing racism as the main problem in the student body was a common argument within the interviews with teachers in schools with predominantly white ethnically German student bodies. However, they rarely pointed to the far right specifically. Instead, they alluded to it by referencing for example current events:

> Well they live in Berlin here, there is cultural diversity everywhere. That means for my teaching that I don't want to create children that stand in front of a bus and yell "We are the people [Volk]"… (Herr Klausen, Interview March 9, 2016)

In this passage, Herr Klausen references an incident near Dresden on February 18th, 2016, where inhabitants of a small town blocked the path of a bus transporting refugees to a refugee shelter in town chanting "We are the people" [Wir sind das Volk] and anti-immigrant slogans (dpa, February 20, 2016). This incident was attributed to and later mobilized by far-right advocates. So although Herr Klausen is not specifically naming the far right here, he alludes to his students being in danger of espousing these attitudes.

Other teachers may discuss the far right but only hypothetically or through referencing the experience of other teachers:

> So I have not experienced this myself, but I have heard it from one of the teaching trainees [Referendar*in]. There were comments from students that were extremely far-right [extrem rechtsextremistisch] […] They [the teaching trainee] discussed the issue with their headmaster, and it appeared that the parents of especially this student were real members of the far right [wirklich Rechtsextremisten]. So this does exist. (Frau Mayer, Interview April 26, 2016)

Frau Mayer discusses this while describing how the topic of refugees was taught in both her own classes and in the classes of the teaching trainees she was advising. While she does directly name the far right as an issue here, she only does so by referring to someone else's students.

What these descriptions have in common is that besides mentioning racism and anti-immigration attitudes teachers rarely referred to other characteristics of far-right ideology – like authoritarianism or anti-constitutional attitudes[2] – or name the far right as an underlying problem directly, at least

when teachers were discussing their own students. This reluctance to name the problem might in turn create difficulties addressing the issue in a systematic and coordinated way, as the next section shows.[3]

How do German Teachers Seek to Address the Far Right in Teaching Practice?

While the previous sections showed the importance of understanding how teachers identify and conceptualize the problem of far-right attitudes in their students, next I will describe why it is important to also understand their responses in educational practice. As Waller (2020) shows there are several possible educational responses. In Berlin, teachers in my sample mainly used two approaches – facilitating contact and strengthening critical thinking skills – in their classrooms with little coherence or agreement between them on which approach might be best.

Interventions that facilitate contact seek to "change the way students engage with each other" (Waller, 2020, p.2) so that "children will be permanently more open-minded about 'others', and indeed vaccinated and resistant to the disease of prejudice and stereotyping" (Davies, 2018, p. 13). Davies (2018) also argues, that interventions based on the assumption of positive effects through intergroup contact are not new and have been implemented into practice for decades.[4]

Interventions targeting students' reasoning seek to improve critical thinking skills. They address student knowledge mainly targeting areas like citizenship values, knowledge of human rights, and history (Waller, 2020, p. 2).[5] The underlying idea is that by strengthening students' knowledge and democratic values, they will be better able to resist far-right violence and radicalization as they are offered "non-violent alternatives of activism and civic participation" (Waller, 2020, p. 6). These interventions are thus based on the assumption that this will create resilience against the often "simple, black-and-white and all-or-nothing perceptions of the world" espoused by violent extremists and populists by strengthening the student's ability to critically analyze arguments (Waller, 2020, p.7).

Herr Klausen tried to counter racist and anti-immigrant attitudes predominantly by creating opportunities for students to engage with the "Other". He for example deliberately seated a refugee girl in his class next to a student whose parent had uttered anti-refugee sentiments in his presence. In addition, he used field trips to facilitate intergroup contact:

> Well, the children here [in Treptow-Koepenick] for example also have a problem with going to Neukoelln [very diverse district in central southern Berlin] because here there are hardly any people with a migration background. Now we just went to Kreuzberg [another very diverse district in central Berlin] recently and then they all rolled their eyes and thought "Where am I here?" (Herr Klausen, Interview March 9, 2016)

To him this was a learning opportunity to engage in questions like "how can they deal with these live experiences in an ethically correct way?". The diversity in his class and field trips to more diverse places in Berlin thus served as ways of exposure and constructive learning. While this may work in some instances, it of course also bears significant risks, in this case particularly for the refugee girl potentially exposed to her classroom neighbour's possibly harmful attitudes. As research from the UK shows, simply creating contact does not necessarily combat racism or xenophobia (Cockburn, 2007).[6] In addition, contact is always "mediated and embedded in particular historical and

geographical contexts of power relations between and within social groups" (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011, p. 721). This is especially problematic if these contexts reproduce racialized categories of diversity that reinforce white supremacy (Auernheimer, 2005; Fylkesnes, 2019; Gogolin, 2008).

While other teachers were not against creating opportunities for intergroup interactions in certain settings, they relied on interventions that sought to increase the critical thinking skills of their students. As Frau Wels states:

> Ethics is just much more than… right… then this fact about intercultural understanding. In classes that are really mixed, I can totally see it, that you say ethics is especially great for this […] And now we have a platform to create a dialogue together. But at our school, this doesn't fit because they all have the same opinions, they are all coming from them same… well really most of them are from the same cultural heritage. […] Ethics is not there to create a dialogue between all different cultures, because we just don't have them… And […] my focus in ethics is more on argumentation and reasoning (Frau Wels, Interview May 27, 2016)

Frau Wels, an early career teacher at a non-diverse school in Berlin's Northeast, reflected here on a question related to ethics potential for facilitating peaceful conviviality. The setting she taught in was comparable to that of Herr Klausen, however, in her opinion teaching intercultural understanding by creating contact was not possible in her classroom. For her students, whom she perceived as coming from the same cultural heritage – ethnic German growing up in former East Berlin with parents mostly shaped by their East German past – ethics was supposed to facilitate critical thinking skills.

Some teachers, however, were openly critical of the effectiveness of an intervention addressing critical thinking skills:

> Well, a thing, where I am so to say…regularly overwhelmed [überfordert] I have to say, is when I observe everyday racism [Alltagsrassismus] in class that I don't really know what I should do against it. I can of course choose this cognitive reflective approach, but I always have the feeling that you should be trained completely differently didactically and pedagogically. And I am not trained at all, and neither are other ethics teachers. (Frau Janka, Interview December 4, 2015)

Earlier in the interview, Frau Janka had described that many of her students – and some of the teaching staff at her school – displayed underlying racism against "those who have always been affected" – those "with headscarves and black hair who have little money" (Frau Janka, Interview December 4, 2015). However, she described that an approach focused on critical thinking may be insufficient to combat racism in ethics. Most importantly, she addresses the need to provide better training for teachers to prepare them for combating issues like racism and far-right attitudes in their classrooms.

Teaching Practice and Education Research

As my data shows, teachers in Berlin in most cases did not name far-right ideologies as a possible problem for their students directly but rather alluded to the far right or referred to the problem as racism and/or xenophobia thus mixing two related but not fully superposable issues. They mainly used two approaches to addressing far-right and racist attitudes in their classroom: creating intergroup interactions and strengthening critical thinking skills. They also did not agree on which one might be best suited to counter these issues. Some even expressed dissatisfaction with teacher education in general, as it did not adequately prepare them to handle these issues. In Berlin's schools, there is thus no systematic approach towards countering far-right attitudes. Instead, responses were left to teacher's discrepancies with little agreement between them on what might be best. While teachers have every right to choose an approach that they deem as the best fit for their specific classroom, this also means that an increasingly important issue in German education is not addressed systematically. What should become clear from the data discussed above is that there is no single best approach. For the longest time responding to far-right attitudes in youth was left to non-formal education spaces targeting only those already in the scene. What the data above shows, however, is that far-right attitudes and racism are widespread in German classrooms even if teachers only allude to far-right ideologies as an underlying problem.

In education research and practice there are many different possible interventions to racism and far-right attitudes. They range from interventions to counter or prevent extremism through education as described by Waller (2020) and Davies (2018) but may also include anti-racist education (e.g. Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Lynch et al., 2017). In Germany, educators may even draw on the expertise of the field of critical migration pedagogy (e.g. Mecheril, 2016) or include a postmigrant framework in educational practice (Foroutan, 2019; Yurdakul, 2024). There are many possible ways to address the challenges laid out here, however, as researchers and educators we need to have honest and thorough discussions about them. These discussions work best if they are based on evidence. Education research thus needs to derive insight on two interrelated issues: (1.) how do teachers conceptualize the problem and (2.) how do they currently seek to address it? Through this understanding, we will be better able to create targeted and systematic responses in education.

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Annett Gräfe-Geusch

Annett Gräfe-Geusch is a postdoctoral researcher at the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM e.V.). Her research focuses on (migration-driven) diversity, discrimination, racism, and organizational change. She is currently working on a mixed methods research project examining diversification within German public administration. She is the recipient of the 2021 Elisabeth Sherman Swing Award of the Comparative and International Education Society and the 2021 Best Paper Award of the Violence and Radicalization Research Network of the Council for European Studies. Her dissertation on diversity in Berlin's ethics teaching received the NYU Steinhardt's Outstanding Dissertation Award 2020 honorable mention. She has published on Global Citizenship Education and with Cynthia Miller-Idriss on Far-Right Youth Identity. Her latest publication with Cynthia Miller-Idriss is entitled "Fitting in, Standing Out: Far-Right Youth Style and Commercialization in Germany". She has also co-authored the report "Wie kommt Vielfalt ins Amt?" with Hannah Arnu and Sabrina Zajak.

1. For this paper, I chose the term "far right" as an umbrella term to include the radical right and the extreme right (Gattinara, 2020, p. 317). However, it should be mentioned that there is a wide variety of terms used in research on this topic. In addition, there is no consensus on how to adequately measure far-right attitudes and belonging (Blee & Latif, 2021; Mayer, 2020).
2. In fact, this was only the case in one of the 38 interviews with teachers in my sample. This is in stark contrast to how these kinds of attitudes were discussed in reference to Muslim students. With them, authoritarianism and anti-democratic views were seen as the main issue to be addressed (Graefe-Geusch, 2020a).
3. In addition, we see a mixing up of two different albeit related problems for education. That is addressing racism on the one hand and targeting far-right mobilization and radicalization on the other. As recent research by the Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung shows, racism itself is a widespread problem in Germany (DeZIM, 2022) and an underlying structural factor in the German education system and teacher education (Bostancı et al., 2022; Doğmuş, 2022; Fereidooni, 2016; Gogolin, 2008; Gomolla, 2002).
4. However, long term evidence for successfully abating conflict and violence or reducing hate and stereotypes is often missing (Davies, 2018; Waller, 2020) and bear the potential for unintended negative outcomes (Graefe-Geusch, 2020b; Jaffe-Walter, 2017). Studies with far-right youth in England, for example, showed that inter-groups contact, and knowledge of diversity is not enough to prevent racist views (Cockburn, 2007).
5. In Germany historical knowledge of the far right mainly falls into Holocaust education, which in Germany is an independent field of study that has received plenty of research attention (e.g. Meseth & Proske, 2015; Ortloff, 2015; Vitale & Clothey, 2019).
6. Based on the assumption that the creation of in-groups ("us") and out-groups ("them") contributes to stereotyping and intergroup conflicts (e.g. Dovidio & Banfield, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1970), research has hypothesized that under specific conditions conflicts may be countered by various forms of intergroup contact – contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Diversity studies found positive effects of contact in urban neighborhoods (Schönwälder et al., 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Others argue that increased contact with out-groups may have negative effects – generally referred to as threat theory (Jackmann & Crane, 1986). Empirical data on whether contact (positive outcome) or threat (negative outcome) theory holds true are mixed and inconclusive (Laurence, 2014).