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Racism and the Image of Africa in German Schools and Textbooks

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Abstract: Poverty, violence and underdevelopment are the prevailing images of Africa in German history and geography textbooks. Pre-colonial African history, African culture and philosophy are not covered by Eurocentric curricula. Classic and modern western literature is interspersed with stereotypes about African people; these stereotypes often pass uncommented by the teachers. As one of the results, students of African descent and their parents commonly experience racism in schools expressed by the fellow students and teachers. The students of African descent are labelled naturally “lazy”, “wild” and “needy”; they are rather expected to excel in sports and music than in science and philosophy, and are undervalued accordingly. In a longitudinal case study, the main project investigates the relationship between the portrayal of Africa in educational context and these racial prejudices. The project anticipates to revise textbooks and curriculum in this regard, to create new un-biased teaching materials on Africa and to test them in real school lessons. The current paper presents the results of an empirical pilot study conducted with 10-17 year old students in a Hamburg school on their image of Africa. The survey showed that the interviewed students see Africa predominantly as an “exotic” and/or hopeless and violent place; this view is consistent with the one presented in their textbooks. Alongside with these racial stereotypes, students’ answers contained names of their classmates of African descent.

Keywords: Africa, Racism, Education, Textbooks and Images, Ethnic Minorities

Introduction

SCHOOLS CARRY IDEAS and values into the society, at the same time reflecting those values found in the wider society. Thus schools “play a key role in the production and reproduction of power and social inequality” (Graham and Robinson, 2004).

Racial prejudices in textbooks and curricula, and prejudices expressed by school teachers are thus to be understood as both – they reflect and reproduce the societal level of racism, at the same time producing and/or magnifying racial prejudices of students. It has been supposed that it is the students who carry these prejudices out of school and into the society.

But what happens within the schools? Which marginalized groups are mainly affected by some of the racist features of 21st century education in German schools? Are there direct causalities between the content taught in schools and the existing racial prejudice against these groups?

One of the groups affected by racism in the educational context are the students of African descent. We define people of African descent as all those people living in Germany who are being associated with Africa by their physical appearance independent of their origin. We are aware of the sensibility of this definition since it does not necessarily correspond to the self-definition of the members of the target group. One of the leading German black movement groups, the ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany) uses "People of African Descent" for their self-definition (ISD Hamburg, 2010). However, the target group is very heterogeneous in terms of origin, societal and legal status and self-identification, reaching from people with a white German parent raised and socialized in a white German community over people of African-American or Afro-Caribbean descent to the first and second generation immigrants from various African countries. Hence a uniform self-definition does not exist (Massingue, 2004). In the context of our research, however, we choose the definition by others of the target group rather than a self-definition, which is in line with the scope of our study. Much of the research on integrating minority groups into the German educational system is based on interculturalism (Gogolin et al., 2001; Lanfranchi, 2002; Rösch, 2003) and multilingualism (Gogolin und Neumann, 1997; Kuhs und Steinig, 1998; Baur, 2001; Gogolin und Neumann, 2009). These concepts are not applicable to the heterogeneous group of students of African descent. In fact, many of them are socialized solely in Germany and it is only their physical appearance that distinguishes them from the majority (Ogunoye et al., 1986; Massingue, 2004; Sow, 2008). The situation of this particular group in Germany is well described by Wright (2003).

Psychologically and sociologically speaking, the main project has a particular interest in the sense of theories of attitude change and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Insko, 1967; Zimbardo and Leippe, 1991; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1999; Vaidis and Halimi-Falkowicz, 2007) and anticipates testing them in spaces and sites where the fieldwork will take place. Following attitude research racist prejudices are composed of a cognitive, an emotive and a conative components. The cognitive component refers to the assumed knowledge about the group against which the prejudices are expressed. The emotive component describes the emotional level while the conative component stands for behavioural disposition, e.g. intention to do harm (Lüddecke, 2007).

Our hypothesis is that portraying Africa from a colonial and Hegelian perspective (Seukwa, 2007) in teaching materials significantly contributes to the cognitive component of racial prejudice against students of African descent. The project will perform content analysis of the German textbooks in order to track down the foundations of cognitive, emotional and conative racism. We want to show that behind the explicitly professed anti-racist system another system is concealed, albeit sometimes unconsciously and unintentionally, which serves as a vehicle of racist ideology and prejudice. This content analysis will aim to describe all categories used to assess and analyse these differences as well as theories used to explain them in order to detect distortions capable of alimending a racist conception of Africa and its descendants. The object of study – textbooks – is composed of messages (text passages), interviews conducted, collected ethnographic notes etc. The study will analyse any portion of a text that includes either a description of Africa in categories, or a statement explaining differences between human groups and/or the relationship between them. The study will focus on all the writings somehow related to the racist ideology, following criteria which will have to be defined along the research process based on its findings and which cannot

be precisely named beforehand. This methodology falls outside any formal predefined framework wanting to retain its essentially heuristic character.

The presentation of Africa in German textbooks and curricula has been critically analyzed since the 1970s (Diestel, 1978; Guggeis, 1992; Sollinger, 1994; Poenicke 1994). Similar racist image of Africa can also be found in all German media and in literature. This presentation strategy can be traced back to the colonial era when dehumanisation of African people served to justify the colonisation of their continent (Fremdgen, 1984; Bechhaus-Gerst, 2006; Borries, 1986; Arndt, 2001). According to newer studies these colonial perspectives are still persistent in German schools albeit in a more subtle way (Poenicke, 2001, 2003 und 2008; Pingel, 2001; Kerber, 2005; Jünger, 2007). History for example is being taught from a Eurocentric perspective, African history seems to begin with the “discovery” by the Europeans (Poenicke, 2008). The organisational forms of pre-colonial African societies are either not taught, or are only briefly mentioned in the context of colonisation (Poenicke, 2003). German colonial crimes are either omitted, or the colonised societies are presented as if they were on the lower stage of the historical evolution (Kerber, 2005). Some textbooks even suggest that colonialism was for Africa’s own advantage (Poenicke, 2003). The portrayal of modern day Africa is dominated by poverty and catastrophes (Arndt, 2001). Existing approaches to introduce unbiased knowledge on Africa in schools (“global learning”) reproduce the same subtle racial prejudice they are trying to correct, do not examine the roots of the bias, employ the same Eurocentric views and neglect the African perspective, as described by Oprong’ Spenner (2008).

German students’ image of Africa and Africans was found to be consistent with this presentation. Most of the interviewed students ascribed hunger, war and loss to the experiences of their African peers, as reported by Reichart-Burikukiye (2001) in her study on students’ image of Africa. Many interviewed students see themselves as intellectually and materially superior to their African peers. This can also lead to serious self-doubts among the students of African descent although this is not always the case. A similar enquiry by Schmidt-Wulffen (1998) found that in the interviewed students’ perception there is a subtle causal relationship between poverty and skin colour. Both findings show that the interviewed students’ view on Africa is predominantly racist.

The contribution of school education to this view vs. that of mass media, family and other relevant funds of knowledge has yet to be established. We will study different social spaces of adolescent youth in Hamburg in relation to their portrayal of Africa. A particular attention will be paid to the home fund of knowledge and its interaction with school (Morje at al., 2004). However, the school is the only social space, which can be subject to change. Therefore the main objective of the study is to investigate whether applying a newly created unbiased portrayal of Africa in teaching materials is a reasonable intervention, and to what degree can this intervention contribute to the change of students’ attitude towards Africa and their peers of African descent including a careful analysis of possible pitfalls.

This article reports the findings of a pilot study, conducted prior to the project¹. The pilot study sought to investigate following questions:

1. Can we replicate earlier findings on students’ image of Africa?
2. Do the students associate their classmates of African descent with “Africa”?

¹ in 2004-2005 within a school project

3. Does education have the potential to correct students' view on Africa?

Empirical Case Study

We have conducted an empirical case study at a Gymnasium in Hamburg (equivalent to a grammar school in the UK). Hamburg, a city with the second largest port in Europe, has played an important role in German colonial history. Hamburg is also historically known to be the city with the largest African Diaspora community and the highest rate of increase of the African population since 1960's (Hopkins, 1999).

Hamburg's public educational system entails the selection of students after four years of primary school according to their performance and conduct to join a Gymnasium, the school leading to the university-entrance diploma. Hence the Gymnasium is a school with high performing students and a relatively demanding academic curriculum. The sample group consisted of students from the Years 5, 7, 9 and 10 (ages 10 to 17). The students "with migration history"² presented various backgrounds and nationalities, as in nearly every school in Hamburg. Rather unusual for that particular school is the fact that the migrant students are "well mixed", and presented a whole variety of countries of origin, from all over Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. The average number of students of African descent in the class was 1.2 (ca 4.6%), with one class without any student from this group (Year 5), two classes with one (Year 9 and 10) and one with three students (Year 7) (Table 1). Typically, any other minority group was presented with one to two students per class. The percentage of young (under 25) people with "migration history" in Hamburg has reached 42% in 2005 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2005). Considering that the migrant population is on average younger than the native population (ibid.), we can assume that with 50% students with migration history the studied school lies well within the average. All 5 students of African descent were born and raised in Germany, in three of five cases one of the parents was born and raised in Germany as well. While two of five maintained some kind of contact to Africa, by visiting their extended family in their respective countries, or/and by being visited by the family, others didn't maintain any contact to an African country and were socialised exclusively in Germany. All students of African descent held the German citizenship and were German native speakers.

Textbooks

As this is an on-going project, a systematic revision of textbooks and other teaching materials has not yet been carried out. However, we have selected at random two textbooks used by the school, Deutschbuch, Cornelsen 2001, p. 69 and Geographie 4, Schroedel, 2005, p. 152, in order to illustrate the Eurocentric and colonial portrayal of Africa³. More examples can be found in Arndt (2004) and Poenicke (2003 and 2008).

The extraction from the German Grammar Book (Figure 1) broaches the issue of "*exotic*" and "*strange*", both in the text and the illustration. The "*discovery of strange people*" by the Europeans clearly demonstrates the Eurocentric approach. The second sentence leaves no

² People with migration history are defined here as people who migrated to Germany themselves, or one or both of their parents or even grandparents, independent of their nationality and the legal status. We use this definition from Statistisches Bundesamt (2005) in order to remain consistent in our statistics.

³ Translated by E. Marmer

doubt where it was that the “strange people have been discovered” bringing Africa into play. But do the students really associate this obviously comic figure portraying strange people in “Africa” with their classmates of African descent?

The quote from the Geography book reads as follows (highlighted by the authors):

“The Whites are coming

For a long time Africa remained the *dark undiscovered continent*. In antiquity, Northern Africa was a part of the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, it was the Arabs who had been trading all the way to Sudan and the Niger region and who have occasionally passed some news to Europe...”

The “*undiscovered continent*”, like in the example above, reveals the Eurocentric approach in history teaching. Rather than *strange* and *exotic*, the term “*dark*” (German: *dunkel*) is used, which connotes *gloomy*, *obscure*, *untrustworthy*, *sinister*, *frightening* and *hopeless* in German language (<http://synonyme.woxikon.de>).

Methodology

We sought to identify the connotations students at different levels made when hearing the word “Africa”. In order to do that we asked students to write down up to five words that first came to their minds when hearing the word. The free association method originates from psychology and can be applied in sociological research to investigate “taboo” topics (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008).

The questionnaire was administered by the researchers in respective classrooms and the answers were immediately collected. The presence rate differed from class to class, and was 91% on average. All students who were present filled the questionnaire (Table 1). The sample group consisted of 98 students ages 10 to 17.

Table 1: Total Number of Students, Students of African Descent, and Participants in Each Year

Year	5 (ages 10-11)	7 (12-14)	9 (14-16)	10 (15-17)
Tot. # students	29	30	26	23
# students of African descent	0	3	1	1
% students of African descent	0	10	3.8	4.3
# participants	27	26	24	21

The classes were selected at random (among 4 parallel classes for Years 5 to 10) except for the Year 9. This particular class was selected based on pre-existing information obtained from face-to-face interviews with students of African descent. We were told that in this Year 9 class, a student of African descent, A., was very aware of her heritage and the distorted portrayal of Africa in Europe. She had been active in educating her classmates, commenting on racist contents in textbooks and racist comments expressed by her teachers and classmates,

whether direct or subtle. Since A. had been in the class for over four years at the moment of the enquiry, we were interested to see if we can find any impact she might have had on the answers of her classmates.

Preliminary Findings

The responses were grouped into six categories: *Afro-romantic*, *Afro-pessimistic*, *Information*, *Ignorance*, *Skin Colour and Classmates*, and categorical analysis has been performed by each class (Figure 2).

We can clearly distinguish two main categories from the students' answers: the *Afro-romantic* (Seukwa, 2008) and the *Afro-pessimistic*. The first type is restricted to exotic wildlife, beautiful landscapes and carefree life and represents an idealised natural world (for example "Sun", "Wild Animals", "Music" and "Nice People"), while the second is defined by agony and deprivation (for example "War", "Draught", "Starvation" and "AIDS"). This finding is consistent with the results obtained by Reichart-Burikukiye (2001). Combined, these categories made out 73% of answers in Year 5, 68% in Year 7, 52% in Year 9 and 71% in Year 10. The percentage remains nearly constant and doesn't significantly vary with age (Figure 2). The fraction in Year 9 is significantly lower as compared to other Years.

We call the next category *Information*, and here we count all the answers that contain some "real" information, let it be geographical location, historical, cultural or political events, places or names, or other kind of data, for example "Ghana", "Nelson Mandela", "Apartheid" and "Unfair distribution between UK, France and Germany". The last mentioned response (Year 9) was the only one referring to colonialism. "Slavery" was mentioned twice in Year 5. This category shows two clear trends – first of all, there is a significant increase of information with age. While in the Years 5 and 7 only 10% of answers contained some information, the number reaches 23% in Year 10. Most of responses in this category in Year 10 refer to apartheid and recent South African history. Also in this category, Year 9 stands out with 43% of answers.

Some of the interviewed students see Africa as one single country with one single culture, reduced to dancing and drums, and one single "African" language. The diversity of the second largest world continent is not a part of this image. The category *Ignorance* summarises answers, which clearly indicate that the students have absolute lack of information of any kind, or provide evidently wrong information, for example, "big country". This category is relatively small in this educational level. Surprising is the lack of age trend, and absence of these answers in both Years, 7 (the class with highest number of students of African descent) and 9.

We called the next category *Skin Colour*. It consists of answers like "different skin colour", "dark people", "black" and "dark skin" etc. The percentage of responses in this category declines with age.

The last category, *Classmates*, summarises names of classmates of African descent. Clearly, no names have been mentioned in Year 5. Year 7 with three students of African descent has the highest response here (6%), while Years 9 and 10 with one student have 3% and 4% respectively.

Conclusions

The study presented here serves as a pilot for the comprehensive longitudinal case study aiming to understand the relationship between the portrayal of Africa in German teaching materials and racism in German schools against students of African descent. Hence all conclusions should be seen as preliminary.

We found about 70% of the answers in all classes except Year 9 to be dominated by Afro-romantic and Afro-pessimistic views. This finding corresponds well with the portrayal of Africa in German teaching materials (Arnd, 2001; Poenicke 2001 and 2003).

There is no clear age trend in this stereotyped image of Africa. However, we find two pronounced age trends: the content of information in the answers increases with age, and the mention of skin colour decreases respectively. We suppose that the former is a result of education. For example, the answers from Year 10 in this category are dominated by information on the apartheid and South African history, a topic that had been taught in Year 10 History lessons. Despite this obvious gain in information, “Africa” seems to remain the exotic and suffering continent even for this age group. About the mention of skin colour we can only speculate that either the concept of colour loses importance with older children, or that they are more aware of what is politically correct and what is a taboo.

Along with these stereotypes, the names of students of African descent have been mentioned. In fact, except of “Nelson Mandela”, the only names mentioned in the survey are those of the respective students of African descent, suggesting a causal relationship for some students between their image of Africa and the perception of this minority group.

A very significant finding was the particularity of the answers from the Year 9 students, with the girl of African descent, A. who had been continuously and openly contesting racism in classroom. The Year 9 students have the lowest rate of stereotyped images. The rate of information is significantly higher in this class, nearly double as much as given by students one year above. This result gives us a clear hint that education can be an effective measure in combating racial prejudices.

In summary, the study shows that some students associate their classmates of African descent with “Africa”, that most of the students’ image of Africa is consistent with the racist colonial portrayal found in textbooks and the mass media, and that contesting this portrayal with information, like in case of student A. (Year 9), does have a significant impact on this perception.


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Figures

Zusatzregel	Beispiele
Ineinander verschachtelte Nebensätze werden gegeneinander durch Kommas abgegrenzt.	<i>Das Buch ist spannend, weil es von einer Expedition handelt, bei der ein fremdes Volk entdeckt wurde.</i>
	<i>Ein Kind geht in die Bibliothek, um ein Buch auszuleihen, das von Afrika handelt.</i>



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Figure 1: The left column explains a grammatical rule, while the right column presents example sentences: “Examples: The exciting book is about an expedition during which strange people were discovered. A child goes to the library to borrow a book about Africa.”

Deutschbuch, Cornelsen 2001, p. 69

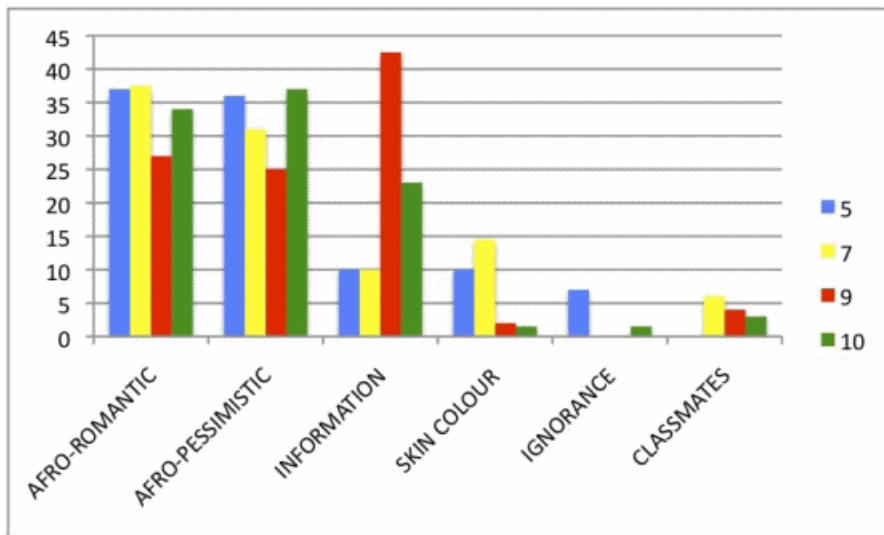


Figure 2: Categories per Class in %

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