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Racism-Critical Pedagogy for Teachers and Multipliers in the Education Sector

Two Practical Examples from School Lessons

1. The Origins of Racism

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According to Essed (1992, 375), racism is at once “an ideology, a structure and a process whereby specific groups of people, on the basis of actual or ascribed biological or cultural characteristics, are seen as belonging to essentially different and inferior ‘races’ or ethnicities. These differences subsequently serve to explain why members of these groups should be deprived of access to material and non-material resources.” Racism is in no sense an anthropological constant, since the ‘races’ (white, yellow, red and black), constitutive for so-called ‘scientific racism’, were an invention of the Enlightenment period. The Enlightenment was not only the epoch of the declaration of universal human rights and the establishment of principles of freedom, equality and sorority/fraternity, but also the epoch in which people of the African continent were colonized and enslaved by white Europeans (cf. Hentges 1999). What needs to be stated is that there are no human races and that it was racism that invented ‘race’, in order to legitimise the colonisation of Africans by white Europeans (cf. Mosse 2006).

While biological racism constructs itself on the supposedly inherent superiority and inferiority of racial groups, cultural racism assumes the existence of superior and inferior cultures, and also that certain cultures are irreconcilable with others (cf. Balibar 1992 and 2002). In this context, ‘culture’ includes actual or ascribed religious faith, the language(s) spoken in a particular society, as well as nationality.

2. What is the Critique of Racism?

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A critical approach to racism “attends to how, in which circumstances, and with what consequences the self-understandings and behaviours of individuals, groups, institutions and structures are mediated by racism and reinforce it”, and is furthermore aimed at “examining derogatory, disciplinary and violent discrimination on the basis of racial constructions, attempting to weaken these, and revealing alternative distinctions,” as Mecheril and Melter put it (2010, 172). Indispensable to this project is a criticism of the social conditions whereby human beings are racialised (distinguished according to the above-mentioned racial categories) and racism-relevant forms of anthropological knowledge are (re-)produced.

The critique of racism proceeds from the assumption that racism is a structural characteristic of our society, and thus no individual and no institution can declare itself entirely free of racism. No racism-free spaces exist, because every person in the German Federal Republic (BRD), irrespective of their social background, their intelligence, or their intention to be non-racist, possesses and (re-)produces racism-relevant knowledge (cf. Scherschel 2006, Melter 2006). This applies both to people who are perceived as white Germans (cf. van den Broek 1993, Di Angelo 2018) and to people of colour who either are Muslims or are simply assumed to be so (cf. Mirzai 2017, N’Diaye 2010). Some Germans of colour experience everyday racism while at the same time possessing and applying racism-relevant structures of knowledge to the organisation of their own lives. Nor should it be forgotten that Muslim countries enslaved people in Africa even before white Europeans began colonising African countries (cf. Mirzai/

Montana/Lovejoy 2009). The colonial expansionism practiced by Christian Europe differed from that of the Muslim states both in Europe and the Middle East in the following way: the former deployed racial constructions as a legitimating basis, while the latter discriminated on the basis of religious affiliation, and used this to justify genocide against non-Muslim African people.

This history results in an ethical challenge for all people who wish to take action against racism: to continually grapple with the racist aspects of their own socialisation and the bodies of racist knowledge that are endemic in our society, in order to set in train a process of deconstruction. Racism always plays a role when people encounter one another, and racism is detrimental to the integrity and mental health of all people (*cf. Wollrad 2011, Yeboah 2017*).

3. Racism Critique as a (Professional) Skill



In the context of school education, racism-critical pedagogy aims to achieve the following things:

- a) That pupils are able to recognise issues relevant to racism in images, texts and speeches.
- b) That pupils obtain a racism-critical competence, in order to be able to recognise, call out, and argue against inhumane opinions.
- c) That pupils understand the role played by constructions of difference, both in the past and in the present, by pursuing the following question: when, how and to what ends are some human beings made into 'different' or 'foreign' entities, and what impacts does this have on them as well as on the whole of society?

These objectives for racism-critical pedagogy impose complex demands on teachers as well as peers and multipliers in the education sector, because they have to regard the critique of racism as a standard professional competence, and already begin to discuss racism during their studies or professional training (*cf. Fereidooni 2019, Emiroglu, Fereidooni et al. 2019*).

Both prospective and fully-trained teachers as well as peers and multipliers have to reassess their own bodies of knowledge from a racism-critical perspective, so that they are able to convey such knowledge of racism-relevant structures to their pupils or participants, and empower the latter to oppose racism (*Massumi and Fereidooni 2017, Simon and Fereidooni 2018*).

Teacher education, as well as the training of peers/multipliers, must provide opportunities for racism-critical reflection, so that the stratification of the markers used in racialisation or cultural othering can be made conscious and start being deconstructed. Sensitisation to the racist aspects of socialisation can act as a spur towards the racism-critical transformation of thinking patterns and behaviour. Teachers, peers and multipliers ought to ask themselves the following question: What does racism have to do with my own life?

Only a sensitive reflection upon one's own life circumstances and everyday realities can create the basis for developing a respectful, responsive attitude to the problems of racism—in relation to oneself, other peers and multipliers, colleagues, superiors, pupils and parents.

This expansion of racism-critical competence also requires taking experiences of racism seriously that peers, pupils and parents, as well as colleagues and superiors of colour had; it also means creating spaces of possibility for pupils so that they develop languages and strategies for calling out racism and taking action against it (cf. Scharathow 2014 and 2017). Racism-related issues in schools are often downplayed and trivialised; one reason for this is to be sought in the broader context of the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD). “[A]ctions [and] connotations that ... could be relevant to racism” (Weiß 2013, 81) continue to be difficult to describe, discuss, and designate as such, due to the BRD’s self-understanding as a post-nationalist state—since 1945, at least officially, racism no longer exists (cf. Messerschmidt 2011). The task of an anti-racist classroom pedagogy would be to break through this tabooing of the subject and to extend the competences of learners in a racism-critical direction.

4. Discussion: Racism (Critique) in Schools



In the following, I would like to elaborate on two situations which I experienced during six years’ work teaching German, Politics/Economy and Social Science at a Gymnasium in the Ruhr area. It is not my intention to denounce the students involved as being racists. My concern is rather to present the ways in which racism is endemic to school education and pedagogical materials, and that educators as well as peers and multipliers in the educational field need to be aware of this in order to react to it in a proportionate, professional manner.



SITUATION 1

Political Studies in the 7th Class

In this group, I was asking each of my pupils in turn to give a five-minute presentation to the class about a current news story at the beginning of the next lesson. Using this method, I wanted to encourage my pupils to regularly watch news, to put what they were seeing into an overall political context via the lesson topic and the subsequent class discussion and to acquire a variety of perspectives on it. Subsequently, I wanted them to keep these in mind while attempting to develop a justifiable perspective from which to make political judgements, one which would be commensurate with their own everyday reality as well as the needs of society as a whole.

Furthermore, this approach allowed me to bring current events into classroom. Themes and topics from the curriculum would appear on the news in the most up-to-date guise, and this provided my pupils with more impressive subjects of instruction than their partially outdated textbooks. In addition, this method is learner-centred, since the respective pupils could select the news items themselves. As time went on, they made use of criteria to decide which news items were worthy of attention in the context of their Politics/Economy class, and which topics might be of interest to a restricted circle of people but which did not possess the criteria of political problems, urgency and uncertainty (cf. Gagel 1988, cited in Reinhardt 2018, 99)¹, and therefore found no place in the lessons.

I will now present a situation from this setting, since it shows the implicit racist

¹ Both criteria of political problems were defined by Gagel (1988, 44, cited in Reinhardt 2018, 99) as follows: →
“1. Urgency: the social problem →

aspects in supposedly ‘normal’, everyday teaching circumstances that on the surface have nothing to do with racism.

One of the pupils, Leonard², gave a report about apple plantations in Moldavia which are no longer being harvested, since numerous workers who were previously in charge of them are emigrating, because the country is one of the poorest in Europe. The eleven-year-old continued his presentation by saying that he finds it “a shame” that the apples are now “rotting in the fields” and that the people “don’t get any apples”. In his opinion, “the apples should be sent to Africa, because the people there have nothing to eat.” His four-minute report came to an end at this point; now it was time for questions. His fellow pupils wanted to know where Moldavia is, why it is among the poorest states in Europe, and where its people are emigrating to. After all the questions were answered, I asked Leonard to return to his seat. I now had two possibilities for the continuation of the lesson: a) Go on with the planned lesson content; but I decided against this, opting instead for b) by posing my 32 pupils the following question: What enters your minds when you think about Africa? They all considered this question briefly before responding with their various ideas about Africa. This little survey of my eleven- to twelve-year-old pupils produced the following result: the Pyramids are the most positive thing about Africa; otherwise, for my pupils Africa was associated with the following: AIDS, poverty, drought, famine, wars, clay huts and dusty streets. After this free association exercise was completed, we reviewed what the pupils had come up with, and they noticed that they held a very one-sided notion of Africa. According to the pupils, the images of Africa in their heads are negative; and barely a single pupil had come out with a positive association. This prompted one female pupil to ask: “Why do we think like this about Africa?” We took this initial question as an opportunity to reflect on possible origins for the ideas of Africa that carry around in our heads. As a result of this, we then decided to analyse the children’s books and textbooks that the pupils were reading. We spent several months working on these books and were able to establish that in some of the children’s books, Africa is connected with the various associations that the pupils had raised during the survey. Thus, they were able to draw a connection between representations of Africa in their children’s books, and their own very one-sided ideas about Africa.

That this is not coincidental but systematic has been pointed out by Marmer and Sow (2015), as well as Mätschke (2017, 259), among others. The latter developed a system of categories that school students can use to analyse representations of Africa, African people, and people who are perceived as African. In his research, Mätschke established that Black people are represented in children’s books in the following ways:

- As animalistic, savages, or cannibals
- As servants: in a passive, obsequious role, with which they are satisfied
- Denigration of religious and spiritual practices: e.g., using fetishes or invoking spirits
- Depreciation of bodily appearance: disproportional body shapes, represented by oversized lips or eyes, or large, white teeth
- Primitively dressed: barefoot, wearing loincloths or grass skirts, with large rings, clubs, spears or shields
- Infantilised: child-like or fantastical language, helpless and moody, naive, clumsy and innocent, not acting rationally, unreflexively emotional, mostly acting as a group

designates something intolerable; it becomes a political problem once its urgency is recognised, and political actors are thereby compelled to move. 2. Uncertainty: new kinds of solutions are required The uncertainty is [twofold – S. R.]: it is not only uncertain whether a suggested solution is correct, but also whether the correct solution can be implemented politically”.

2 The pupil’s name has been altered for reasons of anonymity.

- De-civilisation: pre-industrial, simple tools and no technology, no creative or inventive roles, poverty and hunger, no industry or infrastructure
- Exoticised: nature is the centre of life, often involving wild animals, wilderness or jungle, village structures or stone houses, sexual permissiveness, palm trees and the ocean
- Without history: no cultural-historical identity or achievements, no interactions with other countries or populations
- White supremacy: active and often saviour roles played by whites, dependency, important decisions come from outside, whites are discoverers, researchers, missionaries, doctors, managers and/or technicians
- Antisocial behaviour: egotistical, scheming, undiplomatic, only able to think in terms of immediate gratification
- Criminality: unpredictably violent, tendency to consume or traffic drugs, gangster mythos, delinquency as a cultural trait
- Social danger: transmission of diseases, sexualised violence, dysfunctional marriages between blacks and whites, proclamation of segregation

These categories reappear across many children's books and school textbooks, and thus these media (re-)produce a specific "racist knowledge", whose origins date back to colonial times. Of course, there are droughts in Africa, and people do die due to AIDS, of starvation, and in wars; but the African continent and the lives that are lived there, are much larger and more complex than our image of them. Our images of Africa, propagated in children's books and school textbooks among other places, are fantasies passed down over centuries, and which were constructed by the white, Christian European colonisers as well as the Muslim colonisers from the Middle East, in order to represent Africa as uncivilised, and thereby to justify colonial exploitation.

The teaching objective could be oriented around the concept of unlearning colonial and racism-relevant bodies of knowledge (cf. *Castro Varela and Heinemann 2016*).

Apart from attending to the racist aspect of images of Africa, classroom engagement with precolonial Africa could provide a learning opportunity for both pupils and teachers (cf. Diop 1987), so as to engage with Africa not only in relation to the history of colonialism, but rather to highlight the social achievements of African states prior to the Maafa³.



SITUATION 2

German Lesson in the 8th Class

The second situation relevant to issues of racism arose in a German lesson in the 8th Class on the topic of arguments. I split my 32 pupils into groups of five and requested that they perform a role-play in which children had to convince their parents that they should receive more pocket money.

After the presentation of the task, one of the groups of pupils approached me and said the following: "Mr. Fereidooni, we're going to role-play a Turkish family." I immediately knew where this was heading, since I was familiar with my pupils' everyday reality attending a private Catholic gymnasium in Münsterland. I was well aware that few or even none of them had any kind of contact with the people who they were referring to as "Turks". Proportionally, children of colour and/or Black children in the

3 "Maafa ... comes from the Kiswahili [and] means 'catastrophe, great tragedy, terrible event', and designates the complex, interdependent mixture of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, invasion, oppression, dehumanisation and exploitation ... Maafa and African/Black Holocaust are ... used synonymously ..." (Ofuately-Alazard 2011, 594).

school were something around one in a thousand; among the teachers, too, I was the sole person of colour. When the pupils told me that they were going to role-play a “Turkish” family, I knew that they would have to make use of their racism-relevant imaginings about families of colour, because situations of real contact were absent from their lives.

And so it went: when the group’s turn came, they introduced their presentation as follows: “We’re a Turkish family. The parents can’t speak German, so we’re going to speak Turkish now”. The two imaginary parents presented the following argument: “Mate, me no give you money, ‘cos me no work. You go yourself work. Me no money, understand.” The whole class was able to take a rich imaginative journey through the racialising fantasy-world of 12- to 13-year-old school pupils, who had exactly no contact with people of “Turkish” background, and yet thought of themselves as knowing exactly what such people are like. Racism does not operate with facts, but rather with fantasies, which are stored as knowledge so as to systematise one’s own everyday reality and self-image in terms of what is ‘other’ and what is ‘familiar’. These pupils had no point of contact whatsoever with the people they were designating as “Turkish”, and yet every member of the group knew exactly how to act, on the basis of stored-up images of supposedly “Turkish” people, and went on reproducing these internalised images.

After the group had concluded their theatrical performance, as their teacher I had the following options in terms of how to react:

- Scandalise/moralise: I could have told my pupils that I was very disappointed with them because they were all racists.
- Not react/ignore the racism of the situation: I could have simply remained silent about the racism of their performance, and instead concentrated on their arguments, in accordance with the topic of the lesson.
- Draw attention to the racist fantasies of the pupils, in a non-moralising, non-scandalising manner: I decided to apply this third approach, which I would now like to describe.

I thanked the group for their performance, then asked the rest of the class to give them some feedback. One female pupil raised her hand and said the following: “I find what you did a bit strange. Didn’t you say the parents couldn’t speak any German? Okay, so they were speaking Turkish. But then why did you make it so that the parents spoke Turkish with an accent, and also made mistakes? Isn’t Turkish supposed to be their mother tongue? Or not?”

This statement was the starting point for a group discussion and a reflection on the pupils’ imaginings. We were concerned with the following question: “Where do your images of people whom you consider to be ‘Turkish’ come from?” In the lessons which followed, we examined the sites for the production of racist images in the pupils’ heads and discovered that many of their ideas originated in the media, conversations with friends or family, as well as children’s books, young adult literature and school textbooks. This racialised estrangement of human beings was approached without moralising or using victim-perpetrator language, and also without pointing fingers at anybody. Moralising tends to have the result that opportunities to learn from racism-relevant knowledge are not taken up, because pupils feel uncomfortable and mentally shut themselves off from the lesson. Addressing racist situations in a racism-critical

manner is not about guilt, but responsibility; namely about assuming responsibility for one's own social positionality in relation to structures of inequality that have intersectional effects. It is important to view and address racism as only one of many structural inequalities that are operative in our society. Our social reality is also influenced by other structural inequalities, such as sexism, classism, bodyism, ageism, ableism and heteronormativity, and therefore the theme of structural privilege has to be presented in its full complexity.

As a heterosexual cis man who earns comparatively well, is a civil servant, has no chronic diseases and has the opportunity to make his voice heard in society because of his status as a professor, I am privileged in many respects. Recognising my privileged status, apart from the structural inequalities based on racism, helps me in not merely viewing white people as perpetrators, and not using the critique of racism as a weapon against them in order to exact submission. Rather, I am of the opinion that all people should concern themselves with racism, because every person is affected by it; although this occurs in qualitatively different ways, every person should be asking themselves: what does racism have to do with my own life?

People who have experienced racism themselves, too, should reflect on whether and to what extent they have internalised racism and other forms of structural inequality. Only by dealing with racism together, as a whole society, from an egalitarian perspective and in a respectful and sensitive manner, can an individual and structural sensitisation take place.

From a young age, racism taught me that I am less valuable than white Germans, while children perceived as white Germans learned that they are worth more than people who look like me. Both POC and Black children as well as white children were therefore harmed in the course of their socialisation. While POC and Black children were taught to view themselves as of inferior worth, white children learned to consider themselves superior to others. Thus POCs, Blacks and white children all learned and internalised fantasies about themselves and about other members of society. Wherever people encounter one another in our society, structural inequalities play a role. No space is racism-, sexism-, classism-, heterosexism-free. Encounters with others are distorted by images of inferiority and/or superiority. In order to encounter oneself as a real person, to unlearn the internalised images about "the others", it is necessary to sensitively and seriously addressing individual processes of socialisation, internalised knowledges, and social systematics that work to maintain structures of inequality.

If one is socialised into being POC, being Black—which also means that experiences of racism (alongside other de-/privileging experiences in connection with structural inequalities) are a part of the particular person's lived reality, and that opportunities for empowerment have to be looked for and taken up, in order to ensure their psychological and physical integrity in a society that is structured by racism—then to the same extent one is socialised into being white, a process which is accompanied by a certain blindness to racism, an ignorance of its total social as well as individual reality. In the everyday reality of whiteness, growing up apparently 'normal' with racist bodies of knowledge is not problematised; it is actually believed that all people are equal and that everyone finds their place in society according to their individual efforts.

Both modes of thinking obscure others' lived realities. People of colour and Black people imagine that white people are perpetrators, while white people take the view that POCs and Black people are always complaining about issues that are not even real.

A way out of this everyday reality, which is marked among other things by internalised racism, could be to bring attention to diverse life experiences and experiences of socialisation, in a way that does not lead to laying blame or mutual suspicion, so as to be able to listen to one another—not in order to contradict others' ideas or write them off as false, but rather to learn from one another and set out on a collective path towards becoming aware of racism. All people are victims of racism, otherwise racism would not function. To change this situation is the collective task of people of colour, Blacks, and white people.

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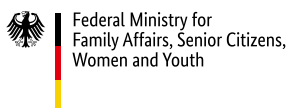
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