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Vignette 2

When the global comes crashing in – A chance for GCE? Reflections on teaching refugees in ethics instruction in Berlin

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Abstract

Based on an ethnographic study in Berlin's secondary school ethics classrooms, the author presents two scenarios that describe how teachers responded to and were challenged by the large influx of refugees that arrived in Germany during the summer and fall of 2015. Specifically, the narratives show how a male teacher's effort to engage his students in a positive exchange with refugee students was challenged by the constant criticism of refugee students by another teacher. The second portrayal describes how a female teacher, in reflecting on her engagement with refugee students and her regular ethics classes, came over the course of an interview to see (religious) diversity as an important aspect with which to engage students in her teaching. Overall, these two examples show how students' experiences of learning about diversity, citizenship, and the global depended considerably on whether or not teachers saw diversity as an opportunity for learning or something requiring discipline; in other words, whether a global geopolitical crisis was treated as an opportunity or a catastrophe.

Encountering refugees in Berlin's schools

When I started the fieldwork for my ethnographic study² the ramifications of the large influx of refugees that had arrived in Germany and Berlin during the summer and fall of 2015 were palpable everywhere. Media coverage was dominated by images of overcrowded and underfunded refugee camps at the EU's southern borders, and of large groups making the dangerous passage north across the Mediterranean. Across Europe anti-refugee sentiments flared in populations and among the political elite; borders were closed and policed again. In Berlin, the influx of refugees

produced a bureaucratic crisis. Media publications documented the catastrophic conditions around Berlin's registration administration (cf. Kögel, 2015; Mächler, 2015; Pearson, 2015). What went unpublished was the profound uncertainty but also the immense opportunities for learning that this global geo-political crisis brought into Berlin's school buildings and classrooms.

Below I provide two different accounts of how ethics teachers in Berlin responded to and were challenged by the demands and opportunities during this time. I will recount my observations of (1) a project between refugee and German students and (2) a conversation with an ethics teacher who taught ethics in a 'welcome class' – Berlin's formal structure to house new arrivals in the school system.³ Both of the teachers I discuss below – Herr Lock and Frau Wels – were at a similar point in their careers; they were young and close to finishing or had just finished their teacher training. Their ambitions for the subject echoed the official goal for ethics instruction as stated in Berlin's school law as a subject meant to foster students' engagement with "*the fundamental cultural and ethical problems of individual life and societal cohabitation* as well as different moral and spiritual explanations" (SEYS, 2004 emphasis added). As Herr Lock said at the beginning of our interview:

And I was also enthusiastic about ethics as a school subject. Because it makes sense that especially in Berlin where so many people with different backgrounds come together we do not separate according to religious faith in order to talk about morals and values.⁴

And Frau Wels stated that:

The goal of ethics is to prepare students to survive in our world. And that is more important today than it was 50 years ago ... a world is not a country or a town where you stay but you have to also be able to communicate and get along with each other across cultures.⁵

In other words, both teachers saw ethics as a way to engage with diversity and to prepare their students for life in an interconnected heterogeneous world.⁶ Both of these accounts provide insights into the challenges and chances that (forced) migration provided to schools in Germany. They are examples of how teachers engaged with questions of nation, belonging, and the global in a subject designed to foster peaceful conviviality by engaging with cultural and religious diversity in a global city. However, how this actually happened in their classrooms was fundamentally different.

Embracing opportunities and bringing difference together

Herr Lock was a young teacher finishing his last year of student teacher-training (*Referendariat*). He greeted me enthusiastically and guided me into a spacious, modern school building. We walked to a classroom near the school's second stairway. On the way Herr Lock briefly reminded me of the context of the class project I was

about to observe. He had brought together his eighth-grade ethics class with one of the welcome classes accommodated at the school. Students had designed posters in groups of six (three German students and three refugee students). These posters visually depicted proverbs that existed in German and Arabic and were displayed in the spacious stairway of the school's main building for a two-week exhibition.

Students were congregating in front of the classroom when we arrived. Two other teachers were also waiting there: one of them young, in her late 20s, the other probably in her 40s. Both of them were introduced to me as the teachers of the welcome class. The excitement of the students was palpable in their chatter and continuous movements. The ethics class had decorated their classroom for a joint celebration after all posters had been viewed. There were napkins laid out on each table, plastic cups, drinks, and cookies were ready and waiting for the students to return to the classroom.

The lesson started in the stairway. The teachers explained in German that each student could elect a poster other than their own as their favorite. After everyone had had a chance to view each poster, they would have a vote on the best poster in the classroom. While the ethics students and some of the refugee students entered the exhibition, a few of the refugees stayed behind asking their teachers to repeat the instructions. The younger female teacher from the welcome class patiently and quietly explained again in Arabic; the older teacher said to a student requesting Urdu that she did not speak Urdu, but that the student was able to speak German and thus, the assumption was, I presumed, should have understood. For the most part students from both classes remained separate, split into small groups, walking around and chatting excitedly in German and Arabic with their friends. During the time spent in the stairway the older of the two welcome class teachers reprimanded her students, especially the male students, constantly: "Take out your gum," "Take off your baseball cap," she would yell through the stairway.

After about 20 minutes the teachers started to tell students to move back into the classroom. Everyone sat down with their friends, separated into ethics and refugee students. Herr Lock explained that his students had prepared juice and cookies and everyone was to take a cup, walk around the room and learn each other's names. The older of the two teachers from the welcome class quickly added in a loud voice that each student should only have one cookie. Students reluctantly got up and briefly said hello to the people they did not know around them. Quickly everyone sat down again and the ethics students started to drink, eat, play, and chat excitedly at their tables. The refugee students also talked to each other. The refugee girls sat close together and whispered into each other's ears. Once in a while they would start giggling.

The teachers started the voting process. Each student was to come to the front and draw a line under the poster number they thought best. Multiple ethics students got up at the same time to cast their vote. Due to the lack of space the German students in the back of the room could not come to the front and simply shouted their number to others in the front. In the welcome class it was predominantly the boys who came to cast their votes. The girls stayed behind at their tables. After a short while the girls started whispering numbers into the boys' ears. The boys would then vote for them. The whole process was chaotic and after the same refugee boy came to the front multiple times, the older of the teachers from the welcome class started yelling at him to sit down and let the girls come and vote for themselves. The practice of sending the boy, however, continued for two more votes. At that point the older female teacher told her students they were done voting. Everyone quieted down and Herr Lock started to count the votes. The older female teacher then announced loudly that there had been a lot of cheating: "Well not everyone but ours cheated."

Despite the fact that both groups had used classmates to vote for others, only the students of the welcome class were reprimanded for this action – reinforcing a narrative that saw new arrivals and immigrants as deviant in the German context.

Confronting educators' positionality and beliefs

Frau Wels was a young woman who taught English, philosophy and ethics at a high track school in Berlin's North East and had just finished her student teacher training (*Referendariat*). Frau Wels was enthusiastic about the subjects she taught. She had always loved philosophy, she explained, and could not imagine teaching anything else. She talked about her idealism and trying to "change the world a little bit at a time"⁷ by practicing critical thinking with her students. She described her students as very homogeneous: "They all come from, well, the vast majority comes from the same cultural environment ... were socialized in similar ways ... they come from, so to speak, a GDR-influenced parentage."⁸ One of the potentially biggest problems she saw for her students was that they were not in contact with foreign cultures and were thus developing racist attitudes. Frau Wels paralleled her own upbringing with that of her students and described how it had influenced her worldview:

I come from, well... I was born in the former GDR and it was for the most part not religious and I also grew up completely without religion well having very little to do with it. ... I am still not religious today and I am rather critical about religion from a philosophical perspective.⁹

She then went on to say that religion (although required in the curriculum) has so far not played a role in her teaching. Religion, however, was a major factor in how Frau Wels related to her students. The perceived unity with most of her students due to

their shared cultural heritage – which I felt expressed so palpably in her description of herself and her students – stood in stark contrast to Frau Wels’ experience with other students as this description of the last test on freedom in her class shows:

I have a student from Bavaria. She has been with us for a year and a half now and is Catholic. ... The text I gave them was about how human beings are not free because they are determined by so many social factors that they cannot free themselves from. And in her essay this student wrote as her argument that she herself had witnessed how Jesus... how did she write it... how Jesus freed a person from the package of social influences ... she really meant a concrete person that she knew ... and by saving this person he [Jesus] had given them freedom. And that was her argument and I really did not know what to write in response. ... well to me this was strange, of course, simply extremely hard to comprehend.¹⁰

Her struggle with how to deal with this kind of argument was evident as she continued to describe her bafflement when faced with an argument that was not part of her “field of experience” (*Erfahrungsbereich*) and that completely “contradicted [her] point of view.”¹¹

At least as great was Frau Wels’ struggle with the views of the students in the welcome class she taught:

I have only been doing it for half a year and in the beginning I had a lot of respect; there was a little bit of fear of this task. ... I was incredibly afraid to [talk about] critical topics like freedom and moral values. Well a lot is... well it is difficult... to talk about.¹²

She then talked about what she had taught in this class instead. At some point she had asked them (in response to a fictitious moral quandary) to find examples for predicaments which they had encountered themselves:

And there I got goosebumps for the first time, because the student, of course, did not say ‘my parents got divorced. Should I stay with mom or dad?’ ... instead they said: ‘I am in Syria, there is war in my country, should I leave my family behind to come to Germany or should I stay there and stay with my family’. And these are ... these are their moral quandaries ... Well that really... [it] totally opened my eyes and shocked me because I had always recoiled from it, for exactly this reason, because what they have experienced is all so terrible. ... And now we could also talk about critical topics [specifically freedom...]. I had to approach this slowly and they did too and now it is a totally fascinating topic, and what I now do with them, for example, is to bring in their own stories.¹³

She then describes her aim for the welcome class specifically to learn about tolerance and non-discrimination of people who look different: “The students [are] themselves from other countries but in some cases incredibly nationalistic.”¹⁴ This stood in contrast to her earlier statement dismissing the ethics goal of teaching intercultural contact and understanding to her German students despite her perception that xenophobia might be a big problem for them:

Ethics is just much more than... right... than this fact about intercultural understanding. ... Ethics is not there to create a dialog between all different cultures, because we just don’t

have them [in her classrooms] ... And I have already said that my focus in ethics... is more on argumentation and reasoning.¹⁵

Over the course of the interview and after talking about her welcome class students she started to reconsider this position and expand an approach of intercultural exposure to her German students as well. After I asked her whether religion was an important topic for ethics classes (as the curriculum suggested) – a point she had dismissed earlier – she said:

Yes, I am thinking about it now, I am just developing this thought. But in theory, my main concern is that they [German students] should be just as tolerant of people that believe certain things due to their faith as towards people that follow principlism or utilitarianism ... Because when one looks at another person's religion, a lot of prejudice and fear can develop. And that's what one should work on dismantling.¹⁶

Although she chose to use 'one' (*'man'* in German) instead of a personal signifier here to think through the importance of dismantling prejudice based on religious identity, this passage still showed a progression in her thinking. Over the course of the interview, Frau Wels had opened up to the possibility for a more critical engagement with various types of diversity in her ethics classrooms.

Encountering opportunities and problems for GCE – Reflections

The uncertainties, challenges, and opportunities that the large influx of refugees created for Berlin's education system are captured in the perceptions and attitudes that these two teachers had toward teaching diversity and national belonging. Whereas Herr Lock sought to productively engage students to think about diversity, Frau Wels was far more skeptical of the role of ethics to manage diversity. Yet both teachers' perspectives were challenged when confronted by the realities of a diverse classroom. Whereas Herr Lock wanted to foster dialogue across difference, the way that the lesson actually took place may have accidentally reinforced negative stereotypes owing to the constant reprimands and accusations from one of the welcome class teachers. This may have undermined the purpose that Herr Lock had for his class. In Frau Wels' case the prolonged engagement with the refugee class seemed to have almost overcome her fears and discomfort regarding (religious) difference over time. In the course of her reflections on her teaching practices and beliefs during the interview her discomfort regarding engagement with religious diversity in her non-refugee classes seemed to lessen.

At the same time, Frau Wels and the teacher of the welcome class in Herr Lock's classroom constructed refugee students as in need of reform and the teachers' task as supporting a transformation toward 'behaving appropriately' in the German context. In this way they reinforced rigid constructions of nation and the need to belong *to* a

dominant group identity or power structure (i.e. ethnic Germans). Students' experiences of learning about diversity, citizenship, and the global thus depended considerably on their teachers' willingness to include differences and whether or not they saw diversity as an opportunity or something to be feared. In addition, my data showed that there were strong institutional barriers in the logics underlying teachers' professionalization towards including teaching about diversity in ethics emphasizing the fact that what we encounter in these vignettes is more than the personal preferences of teachers (cf. Graefe-Geusch, 2020).¹⁷

The influx of refugees brought considerable opportunities for teachers to engage with and reflect on diversity, global geo-political events, and the markers of belonging. The ways in which both teachers described above navigated this in their classrooms shed light on how global and national power structures may create disparities in how schools facilitate positive engagement with diversity in the context of global citizenship education.

Notes

1. New York University, New York, ag3728@nyu.edu; Consultant for the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, American University, Washington DC. This research was funded by the Steinhart Doctoral Student Scholarship, The Shearwater Foundation, and New York University's Global Research Initiative Fellowship in Berlin, Germany. Data analysis and writing were supported by the Georg Eckert Institute Research Fellowship. I also thank the participants of the Georg Arnhold Summer School 2019 for their valuable input.
2. The data presented here were part of my dissertation research project. In my dissertation I analyzed how ethics teachers in Berlin's secondary schools engaged with and taught about ethnic and religious diversity (cf. Graefe-Geusch, 2020).
3. 'Welcome classes' accommodate new arrivals in Berlin's school system. They focus on German language acquisition before students are integrated into regular classes. In the 2015/2016 school year welcome classes were created all around Berlin, expanding the already existing capacities, to cater for the influx of refugees. This meant that even schools that had not previously housed a welcome class on site now had at least one.
4. „Und ich war aber auch begeistert von dem Schulfach Ethik. Weil ich das, gerade in Berlin vor dem Hintergrund, dass so viele Menschen mit so unterschiedlichem Hintergrund zusammenkommen, für sinnvoll halte, dass nicht man noch Konfessionsgruppen getrennt miteinander über Werte redet.“ The general practice in Germany is that ethics/philosophy function as replacement subjects for those students opting out of confessional religious instruction. That is, in most federal states students are separated according to their faith. In this quote, Herr Lock is referring to this type of organization in other federal states, saying that the way Berlin does it is having advantages for students.
5. „Also, die Ziele des Ethikunterrichtes sind die Schüler oder die Kinder darauf vorzubereiten in unserer Welt zu überleben. Und das ist heute wichtiger als noch vor 50 Jahren, ... eine Welt ist ja nicht ein Land oder eine Stadt, wo man bleibt, sondern man muss auch in der Lage sein über Kulturen hinweg miteinander zu kommunizieren und klarzukommen.“

6. Cf. Yemini, Tibbitts and Goren (2019), Banks (2009), Pashby (2015) and Gaudelli (2016) for discussions of the connection between diversity, immigration, multicultural education and GCE.
7. „Die Welt im Kleinen zu verändern.“ The interview was conducted in German. All passages were translated by the author. Original German is provided in the footnotes.
8. „Die kommen ja alle aus dem-, also, wirklich, die allermeisten kommen aus demselben Kulturkreis. ... wurden ähnlich sozialisiert, sind hier noch sozusagen meistens die-, noch sozusagen DDR- geprägten Familien“.
9. „Ich komme aus, also, ich bin noch in-, in der ehemaligen DDR geboren und die war ja größtenteils nicht religiös und bin auch sozusagen völlig areligiös aufgewachsen, also, hatte damit wenig zu tun. ... bis heute, also, ich bin nicht religiös. Und bin auch eher kritisch gegenüber Religion, einfach sozusagen aus so einer philosophischen Grundperspektive heraus.“
10. „Ich habe eine Schülerin, die kommt aus Bayern. Die ist jetzt seit anderthalb Jahren bei uns und ist katholisch ... in dem Text ging es darum, dass der Mensch unfrei ist, weil er eben sozusagen von sozialen Faktoren determiniert ist. Und sich nicht wirklich freimachen kann. Und die Schülerin hat geschrieben und sagt als Argument, dass sie selber Augenzeugin war, wie Jesus-, wie hat sie geschrieben, wie Jesus einen Menschen oder den Menschen, also, sie meinte wirklich einen konkreten Menschen, den sie kannte, sozusagen von diesen Päckchen der sozialen Einflüsse ... befreit hat und den Menschen dadurch, indem er ihn erlöst hat von bestimmten Sachen, Freiheit geschenkt hat. Und das war auch ihre Argumentation und da wusste ich gar nicht, was ich aufschreiben sollte. ... also, für mich war es merkwürdig, natürlich einfach unheimlich schwer nachzuvollziehen.“
11. „Widerspricht einfach sozusagen meiner Auffassung.“
12. „Ich mache das jetzt auch erst seit einem halben Jahr und habe am Anfang wirklich Respekt so ein bisschen Angst vor der Aufgabe gehabt. ... Ich hatte unheimlich Angst, kritische Themen wie Freiheit oder auch Werte, also, also, vieles ist-, es ist schwierig, also, anzusprechen.“
13. „Und da hatte ich das erste Mal irgendwie Gänsehaut, weil die Schüler dann natürlich nicht gesagt haben, ja, meine Eltern haben sich scheiden-, jetzt Mama oder Papa? [...]sondern die sagen halt ich bin in Syrien, mein Land ist Krieg, lasse ich meine Familie zurück, um selber nach Deutschland zu kommen oder bleibe ich da und bleibe bei meiner Familie. Und das sind-, das sind deren Dilemma Situation ... Also, das hat mich so total-, mir auch so die Augen geöffnet und mich schockiert, weil ich ja davor selber auch so zurückgeschreckt habe, genau diesen Gründen, weil es halt so schlimm ist, was die erlebt haben. ... und jetzt ... könnte man auch über-, über die kritischen Themen eher reden. ... ich mich da rantasten musste und sie auch und das ist ein total spannendes Thema, was ich jetzt aber zum Beispiel mit denen machen kann, so ihre eigenen Geschichten auch reintragen.“
14. „Ich sehe es gerade in der Willkommensklasse noch mehr als Aufgabe, denen sozusagen unsere Grundwerte, also, zu vermitteln, in Anführungsstrichen, denen zu zeigen, was wir-, was uns hier wichtig ist, denn-. (I: Mit bei uns meinst Du-?) Mit bei uns meine ich jetzt Deutschland. Und zum Beispiel die, also, wirklich demokratische Grundwerte. Gleichstellung von Mann und Frau, sozusagen Ablehnung von Diskriminierung von Leuten, die anders aussehen. Zwar-, zwar sind, also, sind die Schüler selber aus anderen Ländern aber teilweise hoch nationalistisch“
15. „Ethik ist ja auch viel mehr als, genau, gerade dieser Fakt mit der kulturellen Verständigung. ... der Ethikunterricht ist nicht da, um mit den verschiedenen existierenden Kulturen in Dialog

- zu treten, weil es die ja gar nicht gibt bei uns. und ich habe ja auch gesagt, mein Fokus im Ethikunterricht-, [ist] mehr so auf dem Argumentieren und Begründen.“
16. „Ja, ich überlege gerade, also, ich entwickle gerade so erst diesen Gedanken. Aber im Prinzip, mir geht es darum die sollen sozusagen Menschen gegenüber, die bestimmte Sachen glauben oder meinen aufgrund ihres Glaubens sollen sie-, denen sollen sie genauso tolerant gegenüber-treten wie Menschen, die sozusagen Prinzipienethiker sind oder Utilitaristen sind. ... weil wir manchen Menschen sozusagen ihre Religion ansehen, entstehen sehr, sehr viele Vorurteile und Ängste. Und die müsste man schon auch abbauen.“
 17. In order to increase professionalism teachers were actively engaged in reducing or eliminating teaching about diversity in ethics and favored theoretical and philosophical content.

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