

Racial integration in schools in Italy and in Germany: A small study with surprising results

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Abstract

A master thesis of a psychology student from Sapienza University Rome has focused on comparing racial integration in school classes in Italy and Germany. Integration has been operationalized through sociometry. The study has been conducted with 9-to-11 old children in spring 2013 at a primary school in Rome and an integrated comprehensive school in the Land of Hessen / the Frankfurt area. The results translated into a picture of segregation in the German school, into a picture of integration, instead, in Italy. The results are in line with the OECD results (PISA), but neither significant, nor methodically unimpeachable. They are reported because they merit further consideration and serve as a template to explain and discuss differences between Italy and Germany. German psychology tends to be politically ‘abstinent’ – and risks missing the boat, the boat of the many refugees arriving in Europe. In order to integrate or even include them in a not too distant future, psychological intervention would be necessary.

Keywords: racial integration; Germany; Italy; school; psychology.

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Groterath, A. (2014). Racial integration in schools in Italy and in Germany: A small study with surprising results. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 2, 122-130. doi: 10.14645/RPC.2014.2.502

Introduction

The title of this article gives a German, the author inclusive, a chill, since mentioning 'race' (Rasse) is, with good reason, taboo in Germany. It is, nonetheless, the correct term in English to describe what Federica Agovino, the author of the Master thesis being reported on, has explored: the degree of integration of foreign national and/or migrant children, age 9 to 11, in school classes in the host countries Italy (Rome) and Germany (Frankfurt area). The terms 'integration' and 'inclusion' are still often used interchangeably. In the MA thesis as well as in this article, we speak about 'integration' for reasons of humility. We are aware that Germany and Italy as well as other European countries are still far from being societies where schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods are racially diverse, meaning societies where no one is confined to a segregated environment.

The MA thesis has been submitted to Sapienza University Rome in March 2014. The thesis was mentored by a German psychologist, the author of this article, and by an Italian psychologist, V. Langher from Sapienza University Rome. The student had no particular interest in Germany and an only rudimentary knowledge of German; but she wanted to work on a children issue and she wanted to be mentored by the author whose interests and experiences lie in international and intercultural fields (Groterath, 2011) and who is familiar with differences and commonalities between Italy and Germany (Groterath & Cesarano, 2011).

The study that has been conducted is limited; and its results cannot be considered representative. They shall be recorded nonetheless, because they are surprising. They could stimulate further research and should prompt action.

The Master thesis. Relational and communicative modes within the current multicultural school: A comparison between Italy and Germany

Methods and conduct

'Integration' has been operationalized through interaction and communication in the tradition of sociometry. Putting it simply, we expected to understand the degree of racial integration focusing our attention on peer interaction and communication and on the interaction between pupils and teacher: Would the children talk with each other regardless of their national origins? Would they be sitting and studying and learning together? Would everybody feel encouraged to put questions to the teacher? A group of children in a classroom is more than an aggregation of individuals. The group has a structure; there are sub-groups and cliques. How would these patterns show themselves in Italy and Germany?

It is superfluous to mention that the student had no means to conduct this research other than her own capacities. The study was not even embedded in a larger research project. But it is worth mentioning that operationalizing racial integration through sociometry has a long tradition. The term 'sociometry' has been coined by Moreno already in the 1930ies (Moreno, 1934); and during the 1930's, sociometric assessment and research on racial integration was very popular in the United States. Moreno himself was interested in how immigrants to the US adapted to their new environment and how they became accepted by the local citizens. This debate has been fuelled again in the 1960ies by the *Coleman Report*, which resulted in the USA in the implementation of "desegregation busing systems" (Sherman, 2014).

How about the situation in Europe and particularly in Germany and Italy today?

German schools hesitate to make use of sociometric tools or to interfere in relationships among pupils. Sociometry or similar tools are rather used as an action / intervention tool by committed individual teachers as for example Wittinger (Wittinger, 2011), and the outcome of such sociometric action research is used for reflection with the pupils or further didactic activities of this one individual teacher. In Italy, instead, it is considered a valuable and structural tool to explore and possibly re-organise the integration in a school class. It has been proposed as such even by Graziella Favaro, member of the National Commission on Intercultural Education of the Ministry of Education and "one of the most famous education scholars for school inclusion of foreign students in Italy" (Luatti., 2011, p. 8). 15 years ago, Favaro had developed, together with Luatti, the Notebook of Integration, a sort of operational diary for teachers that considers among other factors the interaction and relationships of pupils in class and in the leisure time as a dimension of integration,

measurable also – in some versions of the Notebook – by sociograms. The Notebook, highly successful in Italy and adaptable to different contexts has been further elaborated meanwhile (cf. *ibid.*) and also passed a European “exam”: Luatti’s quotation above is taken from a report about a Comenius project funded by the European Commission. The – now – Portfolio of Integration has been tested in and adapted to other European countries and Turkey, though unfortunately not in or to Germany.

Agovino has chosen the Notebook used by the Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia from 2011 (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2011) as a grid to register her observations on interactive and communicative behaviour in school classes. In the Italian school she could prepare sociograms, asking the pupils two respectively four questions:

Whom would you (or not) ask for help with your school assignments?
With whom would you (or not) like to play after school?

To receive permission for carrying out sociometric research and drawing up sociograms in Germany would have been difficult and time-consuming. In Germany, the student had to rely exclusively on her observation and documentation capacities.

The study was conducted in April 2013 in an elementary school in Rome, based in a densely populated urban district of about 127.000 inhabitants. In 2010 the ratio of foreigners or foreign-born citizens in this district amounted to about 10 % compared to an average of 12 % in the whole city. The major immigrant groups were Philippines, Romanians, Bangladeshis, Peruvians, Chinese and Polish. Federica Agovino focused on two classes with children aged 9-1. Observation was possible not only in the classroom, but also in a theatre lab, in the mensa/cafeteria, the courtyard and in the refectory.

The German part took place in June 2013. The school was an integrated, comprehensive school in a town of 30.000 inhabitants in the Frankfurt area with a foreign population of about 10 % which is less than what is common (17 %) in the Frankfurt area. When it comes to debates about migration and integration, Germany considers, not only statistically, the population ‘with a migration background’, ie those with a non-German nationality and those with German nationality, but foreign-born or with foreign-born parents, sometimes grand-parents. They amount to 23 % in the region up for debate. There are no numbers about the national groups available, but it can be supposed that the Turkish group is the biggest one as almost everywhere in the Frankfurt area.

Results

Italy

The class had 20 pupils; five out of these were foreign children: Three girls from the Philippines, Tunisia and Peru, two boys from Peru and Moldavia. There were always two teachers in the class, the specialist subject teacher and a support teacher. Italian children are used to inclusion with support teachers since 1977, ie long before the term ‘inclusion’ had been coined and become a key or buzz word. Federica registered that every foreign child was sitting together with an Italian child at the same desk. As we knew by an interview with an expert, an ‘integration teacher’, meaning a teacher with the particular function to coordinate and supervise the ethnic integration in the school, this was, “of course”, intentional. The children are not left to their own devices, but the teachers organise, and sometimes re-organise, how they are sitting together.

The sociograms

The questions have been quoted above. The children had the possibility to make three positive and three negative choices per question, but were not obliged or enforced to do so. The sociograms have been evaluated in a sociometric matrix and in several graphs that translated into a varied picture for both questions. The children distinguished clearly between personal attraction and the appreciation of school performance.

The leisure time question

The sociometric picture was very balanced, a picture without ‘Stars’ or ‘Isolates’ or ‘Ghosts’, meaning children that receive neither positive nor negative choices. The maximum number of positive choices was six – and the girl from Tunisia received these six, four from Italian, two from foreign children. Four children who were chosen only once; three out of these were Italian children. The picture was balanced also with

regards to ‘intercultural choices’, meaning that there were no subgroups ‘Italian’ vs. ‘non-Italian’. All Italian children choose at least one foreign fellow et vice versa: all foreign kids choose even two Italian fellows. 11 out of the 15 Italian kids rejected / choose negatively not even one of their classmates from abroad. The maximum number of negative choices went to two Italian children.

The school/learning question:

With regard to the learning question, there was even a ‘Star’ in the class, the boy from Moldavia who received 16 positive choices, followed by the girl from the Philippines with 11. Nobody wanted to ask the Tunisian girl for help, who was the most popular playmate.

From a German point of view, this is indeed, very astonishing.

The results of the sociograms are confirmed by the observation protocol, which shall not be referred in detail. Some examples might be sufficient (cfr. Agovino, 2014).

History class:

Peruvian girl: Intervenes in the conversation, mainly to ask for the meaning of single words. The more the talk goes on, the more she tries to understand the words and asks her mates and the teacher for help. If she is asked a question directly she answers only if she is encouraged to do so. But if the teacher asks the whole class, she would answer, with a slow voice and shyly.

Theatre lab:

Philippine girl: Has difficulties to speak initially, but is getting then more relaxed, motivated by the compliments she receives.

Maths:

The Peruvian boy ... is very concentrated when the teacher is explaining. He tries to help his mate who has a dyscalculia. But instead of helping her with the tasks, he plays with her.

That is Italy. The results indicate a good grade of integration; and they are less surprising for who know the results of the PISA studies. In terms of fairness, there is much evidence that Italy is a country that distributes educational outcome equitably: “Italy shows above OECD average equity in education outcomes with 10 % of the variation in student performance in mathematics attributable to differences in students’ socioeconomic status” (OECD, n.d., p. 5). The OECD-average is 15 % (ibid.).

Germany

In Germany, Federica Agovino has observed two classes, a “5A“ and a “5B“, during the English lessons. Each class had 27 students. Federica was surprised by how the students with a ‘migration background’ were distributed over the classes:

5 A: 7 students; 4 Italian, 1 Spanish, 1 Russian, 1 Afghan.

5 B: 11 students; 10 Turkish, 1 Indian.

She has tried to find out which criteria counted for this distribution, but she could not find out – and supposed, as the author of this article supposes, that she had pointed to a weak spot with her questioning: this distribution and particularly the large group of Turkish students in only one class reeks of institutional segregation. Much to her surprise, Federica also realised that in both classes the children with a migration background were sitting together without any German neighbour (Agovino, 2014).

It is clear from Federica’s minutes that the children with a migration background were talking a lot with / among each other. It is possible that she has noticed the more or less continuous chatting because she did not understand what the children said. But it is also possible that the children were really talking a lot while the teacher was speaking – only one teacher in Germany where ‘inclusion’ is being introduced only recently and has not yet been accepted by everybody and everywhere.

The 5 A: Analysing her minutes, Agovino noted a difficulty of the foreign children to integrate (Agovino, 2014). Except for the Afghan girl, none of the children participated, for example, in a theatre activity during the English lessons: “Does not participate; does not participate; plays with her neighbour” is noted in the minutes. Evidently there is a closed subgroup of Italian kids that does not participate at all. It is noted for the

other foreign children that they are “alone”, “diligent”, “concentrated”, but that they do not say anything or only little.

The 5 B: For this class, the class with the many Turkish children, a part of the minutes shall be reported that can be seen as illustrative. Ak. is the Indian boy. The other children, Turkish or of Turkish origin, are named as M for male and F for female. Agovino describes the behaviour of the children during an English lesson.

Minutes from the 5 B

M: Is lost in his thoughts. He raises his hand to ask something. Stands then up, always asking. Then he begins to talk with A. (m).

F: Is talking with her neighbour (f) and the children sitting in front of her. She separates often from the others and seems to be lost in her own thoughts.

F: Is talking with her neighbour and the children in front of her. She often raises her hand to answer questions of the teacher. If she does not understand, she gets up and walks to the teacher asking her for explanations.

M: He participates responding to the questions of the teacher. He talks with his neighbour and with the girls sitting behind him.

M: He answers if he is being asked directly. He bothers the girls sitting behind him, trying to talk to them. Talks a lot with his neighbour.

M: Raises his hand to answer. Talks with his neighbour after having copied something from the blackboard.

F: She does not answer when being asked what she believes would be the grade she will receive. Talks with her neighbours from time to time, but raises her hand to answer when the teacher puts questions.

M: Raises his hand and says something. When the teacher distributes the assignments, he works on them, but with little interest.

M: Is happy about the grade he receives and participates. When working on the assignments, he asks first the Indian boy, then his neighbour, then the girls behind him and finally the teacher for help.

Ak: He is not satisfied with the grade he receives. He participates very actively, raises his hand to respond to questions more than three times. While working on the assignments, he asks his neighbour for help.

Federica Agovino has been confronted with the phenomenon of segregation in these classes. She did not know this from Italian schools, her own school being inclusive, and felt depressed. She was particularly surprised that nobody in this school, meaning none of the teachers, showed interest in her observations and the results of this observation. You have this segregation in the whole city. We live with that since a long time; it is part of our everyday life, and we do not even note it anymore. The Turkish community self-sorts itself. – That was the comment of one of the teachers; and he was surprised to hear that the phenomenon occurred also in the class without any Turkish pupil.

Comparing Italy and Germany

The results of this small MA research project are, as said already, neither representative, nor are they methodologically incontestable. Notwithstanding, they call for reflection, as they can be read as a confirmation of the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) mentioned above. It could be wise to study the Italian model and to reflect about adaptation possibilities in Germany. This would require an effort not only by individual schools or teachers, but a political one or better, 16 political efforts: Germany is made up of 16 states that are not only independent in cultural and educational matters but also not really interested in synthesizing their policies and efforts. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Educational and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz) that should ensure agreements of supra-regional importance is under pressure and has agreed about some common rules, particularly regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities. But the issue of racial integration or segregation in school has not yet been tackled.

It must also be doubted whether efforts such as introducing the Notebook of Integration or establishing the function of a teacher in charge of integration, as common in many Italian schools, can make a big change. Germany discusses the phenomenon of segregation scientifically almost exclusively in terms of sociology and social policy. ‘Residential segregation’ or ‘Segregation in the social space’ are the topics of concern; and

solutions are sought mainly in large community programmes for districts and neighbourhoods with ‘major development needs’ or social flashpoints. The solutions are sought, but not yet in sight, possibly because these programmes focus ‘the case’, meaning the problem area or neighbourhood, and neglect some context variables. These context variables look differently in Germany from what they look like in Italy and they are worth being considered.

Hypotheses on context variables

The first variable might be called ‘communication and interaction needs’. The Federal Republic of Germany has recruited “guest workers” at the material time, 50 to 60 years ago for the big factories. They were needed in industrial production processes on assembly lines in the times of the ‘German economic miracle’. Interaction and communication were not desired or not even permitted. It was not necessary that these guest workers communicated much with the locals – neither for them, nor for the locals. They were expected to return to their home countries; and the national groups stayed among themselves. This went on for almost 20 years without surprising or disturbing anybody; and from a psychological point of view it cannot surprise today that there is substantial ethnic segregation across both workplaces and residential locations and that the extent of segregation has been relatively stable over the last 30 years (Glitz, 2014) – and that ethnic minority workers are segregated not only from native workers but also from workers of other ethnic groups.

Italy had fewer big factories; and in the 50ths and 60ths it has recruited its own *terroni*, people from the poorer South, for the factories of the North. 60 % of the migrants from abroad who flooded into the country during the 90’s of the last century also went to the North; but only 39 % of all migrants that were registered officially in 2010 were workers or skilled workers or machine operators. 37,7 % are/were working in households or as cleaning workers or as assistants for elderly people or children and also in tourism (Istituto nazionale di statistica, 2011). And these are by the majority jobs that require communication and interaction, also if not chiefly with local people. Isolation or segregation is neither useful, nor required, on the contrary.

Another context variable that is rarely considered in German discussions on segregation and integration or even inclusion is the fact that Germany has a constitutional law on state-church-relations that could contribute to segregation phenomena. The law is not a state-religion law, but it privileges the two – in Germany – largest Christian churches (catholic and evangelical-protestant) that have more rights and independence than other religions and also other Christian churches.

What does that mean concretely? According to the principle of subsidiarity, Germany leaves a large part of social and health services and also of educational services, particularly the early childhood care and education, to the Third Sector, which is made up of Welfare Organisations. By far biggest of these organisations are the catholic Caritas and the protestant Diakonie. Belonging to the Churches, they are recognised and accepted as ‘Tendenzbetriebe’, which means ‘ideological enterprises’. Such enterprises are exempted from the obligation of anti-discrimination with regards to religion by a restrictive clause, the so-called confessional clause (Konfessionsklausel), §9 AGG. It is at least possible, that this is one of the reasons why non-Christian migrant parents hesitate to entrust such organisations with the education of their small children. In Hessen, the German Land where Frankfurt is located, still in 2012 the children from migrant families were strongly underrepresented in services for early childhood education (Hessisches Ministerium der Justiz, für Integration und Europa, 2013). Particularly in smaller cities, entire cohorts of children move to primary school together, coming out of such services. And it cannot surprise that these predominantly German cohorts have a strong feeling of belonging to each other and tend to reject others if they are not encouraged to include these others.

At this background, it is even more astonishing that none of the numerous studies on educational participation and attainment even considers this factor. Phenomena of segregation and exclusion are often explained and sometimes even justified with recourse to religion. But such recourse or discourse points on the Muslim background of many migrant families and the influence of madrasas and mosques, but never on the combination or confusion of State and Church or Religion on the German side. Catholic Italy has got the Vatican only lately out of its governmental system, but seemingly with more success.

The contribution of psychology and clinical psychology to inclusion in Germany

As said above, Agovino concentrated on integration and could not discuss inclusion, even though her comment on the conditions for successful integration could be valid also for successful inclusion:

Integration does not mean assimilation; it does not mean that I accept the other because she/he is as I am. Integration means to be together with all what is different. But this being together is not a formal or mechanical act; it is a sharing; it means sharing experiences, events and efforts that bring about sense and meaning. The school must take up the differences, let them exist, not suppress them. It is not enough to accept a foreign child in a class, if there is no relationship between what he or she does and what the other do. Integration is achieved if living together and a mutual learning process are possible. (Agovino, 2014).

The contribution of psychology to the knowledge about inclusion and of clinical psychology to inclusion-related problems in Germany is still modest. At present there is ‘much ado’ about inclusion in schools, in the media and in school psychology; but this ‘ado’ is mainly related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in school classes. That is new. Germany has an education system that emphasizes selectivity and that has left the education of children who are different for a long time to a well-functioning special education system. The country or better the federal states are currently under pressure, under UN pressure due to the UN Disability Right Convention, but also under OECD and EU pressure. The German Commission for UNESCO stated at its 71st session in Berlin in June 2011:

In contrast to a great number of its European neighbours, Germany has a considerable need to catch up on the development towards an inclusive education system. Moreover, there are large differences among the federal states. So far laws and regulations as well as the educational practice in schools led to quotas of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools between 7% and 45%. Barriers have to be rapidly removed and the necessary structures for an inclusive education system be established so that inclusion can be realized in all fields of education” (Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission e.V., 2011).

The country is catching up, and school psychology tries to find new orientations in the (indeed, rapid and not always and everywhere well-prepared) changes that are currently implemented. But, as said, the focus is on children with physical and mental disabilities and those with behavioural problems. The children with a migrant background are left aside in this discussion.

The probably most comprehensive overview of how German psychology takes up the issue of inclusion, can be found in a report of the Professional Association of German Psychologists from 2013 (Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen, 2013). The Association had invited scientists and professionals in 2012 to discuss the challenges posed by the ‘forced inclusion’ and published their contributions in this report. Recourse on psychological theories or empirical findings is rare in these contributions. As can be understood, psychologists are still reluctant to take up the issue. Balz, a Professor of Psychology at a confessional (evangelical) University of Applied Sciences, warns against using ‘inclusion’ as a buzz word – and certifies psychologists what he calls “political abstinence behaviour” (Balz, 2013). Such political abstinence behaviour could be the reason why German psychology still looked quite unprepared to deal with the challenges posed by inclusion policies in 2012/13. It should be mentioned, however, that the Professional Association of German Psychologists has published an interview with the author of this article where she refers and discusses the results of Agovino’s Master thesis (Groterath, Interview, 2014) and has set up an intersectional task force on inclusion in 2013 that does not only concentrate on disability issues, but includes racial/ethnic aspects.

I would like to finish this chapter on the contribution of psychology and the whole article with an excursus.

Excursus on professional challenges and duties for psychologists – in a nearer future

Özden Bademci is a Turkish psychologist, now a faculty member of Maltepe University Istanbul, Department of Psychology, and the director of SOYAÇ, an application and research centre for children living and working on the street founded by her (cfr. Özdemir, 2012). She has completed a four-year Psychoanalytic and Observational masters’ programme at the Tavistock Clinic in London in 2002 with a thesis titled as “The Story of a Baby Born into a Refugee Family as Seen Through Two Years of Infant Observation” that has never been published, but could be of outstanding importance today – for clinical and school and other psychologists who decide to give up political abstinence and to involve in working actively

with those we call 'refugees' or in a near future migrants. Özden Bademci did her infant observation with a refugee family from Turkey on a weekly basis for two years, as required in her MA studies.

They had not been back to Turkey since they arrived in London nine years ago. They didn't speak English at all. The family's life was one of considerable deprivation and obvious financial hardship. They lived on social security. It felt like they were living in a bubble unable to cope with each other and the foreign culture in which they lived.

The baby was their second child. Mother was highly irritable, intrusive and showing a great deal of anger and hostility to the baby.

During my observation I became more aware of how the refugee condition affected many facets of the family's life from the most tangible external objects to a wide spectrum of psychological dimension. I observed distress in the parents, which led to irritability, anger, depression, withdrawal and exhaustion which impeded their capacity for childcare. The parents were unable to support one another. They couldn't respond to their children's needs. Although the baby was quite alert and responsive for the first six months, he eventually shut himself down under the impact of the rejection (Bademci, 2002, p. 3).

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