

## Finding a Common Language – the Experiences of a School in Berlin

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### Abstract in English

Insufficient language skills are one explanation for the low educational achievements of many children from migrant families. In case of some of the minority communities living in Berlin, insufficient knowledge of the German language can be found even in case of the second and third generation. The problem is intensified by the concentration of migrants in certain parts of the city. Increasingly, there are public schools in which only a small minority of students are from German families. How should public schools ensure under these circumstances equal chances for children from migrant families? The practice presented in this case study, a voluntary agreement of teachers and the representatives of students and parents to communicate only in German while being at school, represents one possible approach, which stirred a lot of public debate.

### Abstract in italiano

Le insufficienti capacità linguistiche possono essere una delle cause dei bassi risultati scolastici di molti bambini provenienti da famiglie migranti. Nel caso di molte minoranze residenti a Berlino, la conoscenza insufficiente della lingua tedesca si riscontra anche nella seconda e terza generazione. Il problema è intensificato dalla concentrazione di migranti in alcune parti della città. Aumentano sempre più le scuole pubbliche in cui solo una piccola minoranza di studenti proviene da famiglie tedesche. In che modo le scuole pubbliche possono assicurare eguali opportunità ai bambini provenienti da famiglie immigrate? La pratica presentata in questo caso studio, un accordo volontario di insegnanti, rappresentanti degli studenti e genitori di comunicare solo in tedesco mentre sono a scuola, rappresenta un possibile approccio, che ha stimolato il dibattito pubblico.

*Some data necessary for database research*

**Area:** Education

**Kind-category of project:** Language policy

**Kind-category of actor:** School

**Country:** Germany

**Year:** 2005

**5 key-words:** Language skills, rule of conduct, school, minority languages, majority language

### Description of the project

Confronted with a steadily increasing share of children from migrant families and declining proficiency in the German language, the Herbert Hoover School in the “Mitte” (Centre) district of Berlin sought ways how to ensure that the students would learn sufficiently German. In February 2005, the school

← Naformátováno: Odrážky a číslování

council (a forum that includes teachers and representatives of students and parents) decided to ban the use of languages other than German on the school grounds.

### **When and how long: structure and steps of the project**

← - - - Naformátováno: Odrážky a číslování

The school decided upon the new “rule of conduct” on February 28, 2005. Even though the rule was heavily criticized by Turkish media and representatives of the Turkish minority for being discriminatory, the school decided to maintain its language policy. The school’s decision is supported by the city of Berlin’s department of education and the elected student representatives. In the beginning of 2006, this argument led to a large public debate that was widely reflected in the German media.

### **Place and context**

← - - - Naformátováno: Odrážky a číslování

“Wedding” is an old working-class neighbourhood in the northern part of former West Berlin. In prewar times known as “Red Wedding”, the district used to be a centre of the labour movement. In the post-war era, the district became the home of many migrants (especially from Turkey), who found employment in the industry of West Berlin. The economic situation changed quite fundamentally with the reunification of the city. Due to the cut of special subsidies, which were used before 1990 to stabilize the labour market, the process of rapid deindustrialization affected not only the city’s eastern part, but also the former West Berlin. As a result of these changes, former working class neighbourhoods like Wedding are increasingly characterised by high unemployment rates. This development is intensified by the phenomenon of selective migration. Both German families and better integrated migrant families leave the area, which is increasingly perceived as the home of those who are foreign and socially weak.

The developments in the neighbourhood are reflected by the changing composition of the student body in the Herbert Hoover School. In 1989, the percentage of foreign students was about thirty percent. Today, about 15 years later, 93 percent of the students are from migrant families. One reason for this is the changing ethnic composition of the neighbourhood, another is the concern of German parents living in the area for their children’s educational success. who often prefer to drive their children to schools in less multicultural neighbourhoods.

### **Target**

← - - - Naformátováno: Odrážky a číslování

Students attending the Herbert Hoover Realschule in Berlin

### **Methodology**

← - - - Naformátováno: Odrážky a číslování

The decision to ban the use of languages other than German on the school grounds should not be seen as an attempt to solve the “language problem” with repression. It seems more adequate to describe the practice as the symbolic setting of an aim - the learning of the German language - which is shared by

everyone in the school. Accordingly, teachers would not punish pupils who speak in another language than German during the school breaks. However, they would reprove them and tell them to speak only German while being in school.

### **Strengths**

The serious problems of many students from migrant families in the German education system tended to be overseen for a long time. One fact that supported this development has been the increasing concentration of these students in schools located in typical migrant neighbourhoods. Both a cause and a consequence of lacking integration, the insufficient knowledge of the German language is one of the factors that impede integration. In the opinion of some commentators, the integration problem has been further accelerated by the tendency within parts of the German public to rather not publicly address some of these problems to avoid stirring negative stereotypes on migrants. In the perspective of the author of this study, the Herbert Hoover School should be praised for its attempt to tackle a problem that seems to be sometimes conceived as being insolvable.

### **Critical points**

Unlike some of the school's critics, we do not see this measurement as an example of cultural repression yet rather as an attempt to agree in a participatory way on a common rule. It is, however, clear that the chosen practice concerns the sensitive issue of cultural identity. The policy is therefore prone to cause misunderstandings with minority representatives, which might conceive the practice as a danger towards their right to preserve their cultural identity. This perception might be supported by the fact that language policies in educational facilities were in the past often used in assimilatory language schemes. Therefore it is important to stress that the policy was jointly developed and accepted by teachers, parents and students. Hence maybe less the ban itself, but the participatory process which led to its issuing, seems exportable.

### **Conclusion: what is "exportable" in the project**

There have been many discussions, to what extent the policy of the school could be an example for other schools in Germany. From our perspective, the ban of other languages can only be seen as a positive example, if it is based on a participatory procedure, which expresses the will of the students and their parents.