POLICY BRIEF

Education Policy in Germany and the Challenge of Migration

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Since in 2003 the PISA-survey revealed significantly low school achievements of students with a migration background in Germany the question of school education is dominating the integration debate. Public debate has focused on the importance of German language acquisition and the responsibility of migrant parents to supervise their children's education, as well as on network-building on a local level. These proposed strategies appear as remedies for the education and integration crisis, but in fact overlooking its complexity. A second strand of debate revolves around classes with a high percentage of migrant children respectively children from Muslim families. Schools with high numbers of migrant students[2] are primarily to be found in socially underprivileged urban regions, resulting form social and ethnic spatial segregation processes. Although certain difficulties in these schools, such as low German language skills and missing social or communicative competences among pupils are not 'migrant' specific, in the debate focus is laid on the alleged unwillingness or incapability to integrate among families with a migration background or even more so with a Muslim background. In this context, conflicts with Muslim families and claims of individual Muslims or of Islamic organisations regarding education are often generally perceived as a threat of democratic or Christian norms and values. Third, on a broader level the selective effects of the

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[2] We use the term 'migrant student' as a synonym for 'student with a migration history', meaning that they, or one or both of their parents of the first or second generation, had migrated to Germany.

German multi-track school system and the necessity of a decisive school reform is discussed. Within the context of international competition for human capital the main objective regarding school development is to foster individual school performances and to make better use of human resources, including migrant students.

Not neglecting the crucial aspect of underachievement among migrant students the study's central concern was how migration and cultural or religious diversity is perceived in educational policies and schools in Germany.

The acceptance of migration and cultural diversity as integral part of German society, finally announced by the government, has posed a challenge on the conception of the 'German nation'. For decades, within the dominant discourse the demarcations of a 'German identity', of inclusion/exclusion and belonging had been assumed as being clear-cut and the 'German nation' as culturally and religiously homogenous. As the education of future democratic citizens is a mission of public schools their role with respect to the transmission of ideas of national identity and national 'political culture' is tremendous. School laws, educational policy papers, curricula and textbooks do not only have an impact but also school rules, everyday behaviour, and rituals, constituting a certain classroom and school culture which reflect dominant perceptions of 'normality', belonging and 'otherness'. Schools bear a central social responsibility coping with the reality of multiple, ambiguous and shifting cultural and religious identities in society.

Schools alone cannot cope with this task. Integration related education policy is a complex system consisting of various policy fields and levels. It is embedded into the general discourses on school reform and development, on integration of migrants and their children, on the socioeconomic marginalisation processes, as well as on the issue of Islam. It interacts with integration measures and urban policies. Concrete school policies again encompass several areas, such as the general school system, class sizes and the teacher-pupils ratio, teacher appointment policies, teacher training, curricula and teaching methods, definition of quality standards, the school and class-room culture and every-life in schools, the networking of schools in the neighbourhood, the communication between educators and parents as well as parents' involvement in school issues.

Education policy makers have various options to respond to the challenge of migration and the increase of cultural and religious diversity. One response is to impose the dominant culture onto all students. This assimilationist approach may differ: Either the educational system provides support to adapt to the new language and culture, or the adaptation is simply expected from the migrants. In Germany the infrastructure in this respect has been quite poor over decades but quite recently the improvement of German language teaching methods has been put on the agenda.

Another educational approach is to accept or cherish cultural/religious difference. The approach of cultural difference may either be a result of an exclusionary policy as it was the case in Germany in the past when 'foreigners' classes' were implemented following the view that pupils would return to the countries of (their parents') origin and not belong to German society. In the traditional intercultural or multicultural approach different cultures are perceived as equal and cultural diversity as enriching. This approach of 'goodwill' often contributed to a reification of cultural and religious stereotypes and fostered boundaries instead of integrating students of different cultural affiliations. Cases when educators only refer to migrant students as 'experts' on their (or their parents') home country may exemplify this form of ascription. Moreover, this approach does not sufficiently respond to the challenges of conflicting customs, norms and values of various cultures and of the ambiguity between collective and individual rights.

Reflexive intercultural education aims to overcome assimilationist and simple multiculturalist approaches. It perceives 'culture' as not homogenous, but variously shaped, not static but dynamic and hybrid. It aims at identifying processes where 'culture' is used to legitimise power or inequality. Reflexive intercultural education therefore questions general pedagogy and asks which norms or normality is applied in education, and enables to reflect on cultural or social disparities from different viewpoints and on individual perceptions and behaviour in a multicultural context.

The questions how to integrate conflicting values of cultures and how to evaluate rights of groups vs. individual rights have become a major issue related to the global debate on 'Islam' and 'Western culture'. These questions are also increasingly negotiated in the context of school education. Our study shows that the discourse on schools and Islam is both, an indicator of existing problems in the accommodation of cultural/religious diversity and also

the result of codifications of other phenomena, like social or gender disparities, individual or youth conflicts, as ‘cultural’ and ‘Islamic’.

Thus, the point is that education policy in a culturally diverse society has at least two complex; often conflicting tasks: to accept and accommodate cultural/religious diversity and to try to detect the genuine, often multiple reasons of certain conflicts and by this to deconstruct the discourse on migrants, especially on Muslims.

Our study is based on a review of policy papers, interviews with policy makers and experts of schools, migrant organisations and school administration, as well as on secondary literature. It showed that on the level of school laws and policy papers there is a general notion to accept cultural diversity (esp. the recommendations of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder – Kultusministerkonferenz*, 1996). Nevertheless, these objectives are far from being implemented, for instance in quality standards, curricula and textbooks, teacher training and appointment. On the level of school practices we observed different ways of meeting the challenge of cultural diversity. Some educators are simply overburdened, some do not want to meet this challenge and react openly Islam phobic. Others stress the impact of social segregation and discrimination on schools and education. By this, they disagree with dominant perceptions and aim not to ‘culturalise’ social phenomena. On the other hand some of these educators seem to disregard culturally specific needs and their own latent stereotypes. Another group faces cultural diversity in a cherishing way but, though well-intentioned, in the end reduce students with a migration background to this very attribute. Finally, there are certain individual initiatives and pilot schemes which reflect cultural boundaries and similarities and apply principles of reflexive intercultural education, often in cooperation with migrant organisations, social pedagogues, and psychologists.

On the basis of our study the following three main sets of policy relevant considerations are put forward for discussion:

A. Generally, we would suggest a school reform which is not only guided by the idea to increase human capital. Instead, one leading principle should be to guarantee good school education to all children, irrespective of their social, ethnic or legal background or other attributes. Consequently, this approach involves:

First, equal access to schooling irrespective of legal status has to be guaranteed (including provision of getting to school; e.g. refugees living in camps). In focus here are children without legal residence and children of asylum seekers with a limited residence permit (toleration/*Duldung*). Their legal status hinders any long-term perspective. As the students may be deported immediately, they do not see real future perspectives in engaging in education. Educators and potential employers often share this view which contributes to the low chances of educational and socioeconomic integration of these students.

Second, on a general level of school reform we would support the suggestions already pointed out by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Vernor Muñoz, (2007) and others to abolish the multi-track school system as it over proportionally affects migrant students. Initiatives to only abolish the *Hauptschule* but keeping a two-track system do not seem appropriate to really overcome these discriminatory effects. Instead pilot schemes such as Community Schools of integrated teaching of students of different competence levels promise more positive effects, as examples of Scandinavian countries prove. However, a precondition of the success of such schools is a reform of teaching methods and a reduction of teacher's workload, easily achieved by smaller learning groups.

Third, as long as in urban areas social and ethnic segregation takes place, schools situated in socially underprivileged neighbourhoods have to cope with additional tasks, such as low German language competence and a broad variety of first language skills among pupils in one class, cultural diversity, and often low social competences. Schools in these areas bear the additional task that they often have to teach competences, which children of wealthier families may learn at home or in extra private lessons. In order to offer good education to children in these neighbourhoods schools need additional support in comparison to schools in middle class areas.

This form of 'positive action' in favour of students and their families in socially underprivileged neighbourhoods would include the reduction of class sizes, increase of the numbers of teachers, co-teaching by two teachers in one class, implementation of whole-day schools in order to offer qualified supervision in afternoon hours. Smaller classes as well as a more appropriate teacher-pupil ratio accompanied by revised teaching methods and contents could radically change classroom culture, conflict management and school performances in these neighbourhoods. Ideally, such schools could even gain new attractiveness to middle-

class families, who today tend to move out of these ‘problematic’ districts. Social and ethnic segregation spatial processes also may even be reversed. In fact, in this sense school policies may contribute to a re-evaluation of underprivileged neighbourhoods and hence be a part of urban policies.

Interlinked with this approach, on the level of urban policies socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods would need support in improving their infrastructure and job opportunities. On a broader social level the reduction of labour market discrimination of people with a migration background is necessary. Real job opportunities may raise the motivation of students to strive for good graduations.

B. A second strand of a school reform refers to the contents and methods of teaching. We would plead for a consequent implementation of a reflexive intercultural education, as it already has been partly recommended by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* in 1996. This regards various areas, such as teacher training, appointment and supervising of teachers, curricula, teaching methods and contents. Intercultural competence could enable educators and students (and also policy makers) to deal with specific cultural or religious needs, demands or conflicts in a more appropriate way.

Therefore, we would suggest:

- Compulsory teacher training in German as a second language, in reflexive intercultural learning and multilingual learning. Teacher training should include practical experience in schools in order to qualify to reflect intercultural teaching methods. Advanced teacher training for professionals in reflexive intercultural and multilingual learning. Schools should implement supervision as a measure of teachers’ support, to encourage (self-)reflection. The cooperation between educational sciences and schools should be increased in order to develop intercultural methods and contents in theory and in practice.
- As recommended in the National Integration Plan (2007) the proportion of teachers with a migration background should be increased. But their field of responsibility should not be reduced to native language teaching or to schools with a high proportion of migrant students, but to teaching in all subjects and schools. Teachers with a migrant background may serve as role models for migrant students, but also reflect the

multicultural reality of society to all students. They may provide bridges between students, parents and the school. Nevertheless, one should be aware of the limits of this assignment of tasks, and migrant teachers should not be reduced to the role of mediators.

- The revision of curricula, textbooks and other teaching material according to reflexive interculturalism.
- Support of German language skills according to individual needs, throughout all the grades of (pre-)schooling, covering all subjects. The attribute 'non-German native language' is not a sufficient category to evaluate the individual need of special German language support. Correspondingly, financial and methodological support for (pre-)school educators is necessary. At the same time, increased offers of bi- or multilingual schooling are necessary, not only including 'high ranking' European languages, but also languages of migrant families, such as Turkish, Arabic, and Russian.

C. Third, with respect to everyday life of schools, especially of those with a high 'conflict potential' caused by complex factors, such as social deprivation, legal insecure status of families, unsolved cultural or religious suspense between groups or encapsulation of groups, lack of social and communicative competence, both the orientation to the neighbourhood and local networking as well as the implementation of a democratic and reflexive school culture is of immense importance.

Regarding the individual school organisation this implies:

- Development of a school policy by the headmaster/educators with guiding principles according to reflexive interculturalism. Commitment to these principles, implementation of means to support the realisation of these principles (e.g. supervision, see above), but also implementation of sanctions in case of fundamental infringement.
- Development of a common school and classroom culture pro-actively shared by educators, students and parents (mutual respect, education to (self-)reflection, democracy learning, conflict management etc.); culture of sensitivity and respect of cultural/religious distinctive features, similarities and changes.
- Support of parents in their engagement with their children's education and the school (facilitation of communication by bilingual and -cultural educators and social workers,

discussion groups, offer of German language lessons to parents at school, cooperation with (migrant) parents' organisations).

- Equal communication with students who e.g. claim to not participate in school activities because of religious reasons, development of a culture of respect and empathy which includes detecting possible other reasons, such as economic constraints, legal residence restrictions (in the case of refugees), or pressure of parents. Flexible offers of support, solutions, e.g. social workers of same cultural background to accompany school outings.
- Accommodation of different cultural/religious claims like religious instructions, religious holidays, dietary rules, dress codes etc. as a matter of course. Development of a communicative culture in order to depoliticise these issues.
- Opening of the institution, networking with parents, families, organisations in the neighbourhood and city, including Islamic organisations. An open-minded discussion and cooperation especially with migrants' and Muslim organisations has to be learnt and put into practice.