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Title of extract: **Multilingual Children in Monolingual Centres**

Name of Author: **Sikcan, S.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable): **Children in Europe Issue 12 (2007)**

Publisher: **Children in Scotland**

Pages scanned: **15 - 17**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Plentyndod Cynnar: Safbwyntiau Rhyngwladol /Early Childhood: International Perspectives EAEC6012-C**

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Date authorised: 05.04.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint



Monolingual early childhood centres can contribute to social exclusion in Germany. Serap Şikcan describes how language-friendly learning environments support the language skills of all children

Multilingual children in monolingual centres

All children have the potential to learn to speak when they are born. They want to communicate – with words, looks, expressions, touches. They seek linguistic sustenance from the adults that surround them. Although all children have this built-in language capability, language development in migrant children is one of the most frequent problems raised in German political discussions on education. The lack of German language skills among migrant children often paves the way for failure at school. Today, early childhood services are under immense pressure to counterbalance the so-called language deficit of these children.

New approaches to promote the development of German language skills among children with a migrant background and in poor social circumstances appear every day. Early childhood workers can easily lose sight of the overall situation as they struggle to find an approach that suits them. Unfortunately, not all support programmes relate to children's individual contexts and their current interests and knowledge, and therefore have little effect.

Multilingual children — monolingual centres

Many migrant children live with several languages. Many see their multilingualism as an important skill, and enjoy learning and speaking several languages. Here an eight-year-old boy

replies to the question 'what is your favourite language?'

Turkish. I'm learning German. If I also learn French and English, one of those could be my favourite language. But there's not much difference between German and Turkish. I like German too; I haven't got a problem with it ... We sing in German at school. But we listen to Turkish music at home. I understand everything in German and Turkish. It isn't a problem for me.

Most immigrant parents embrace their children's multilingualism. They see the family language(s) as an important tool enabling them and their children to understand each other; while recognising German is the shared language in kindergarten and school. By

"The limits of my language(s) limit my access to the world"

Ludwig Wittgenstein

contrast, these services mostly follow a rigid model of monolingualism. Multilingualism is commonly assumed to ask too much from a child intellectually, and monolingualism is considered the norm. So although up to 80 per cent of children attending some early childhood centres are multilingual, their language experiences are not reflected in daily routines, physical environment conversations or staff structures.



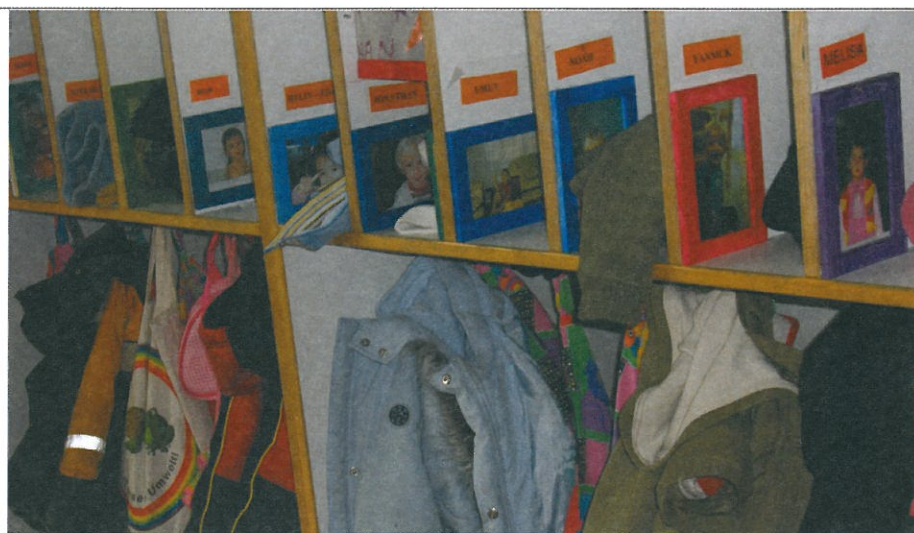
"My family" – Families are welcome in the kindergarten and put on display

Most of the staff are positive about multilingualism. But they cannot incorporate the various languages spoken by the children into their work: monolingual educators in multilingual groups find the task of fostering linguistic skills, including teaching German to all children, just too much for them. They feel under pressure knowing that a lack of German language skills is often the reason for underachievement at school and that parents expect them to teach German, aware of its importance for their children's future. But initial training only marginally touches multilingual approaches, so educators know little about how a multilingual child develops language skills.

The monolingualism of the early childhood centre shows itself clearly when professionals define multilingual children as "speechless", or having "language problems" – when the real issue is a lack of German language skills. Lacking these skills does not mean that a child cannot speak: she can communicate in her first language. But when the monolingual development of children growing up with just one language is used as a yardstick, multilingual children are at a disadvantage.

Multilingualism versus monolingualism

Although parents embrace multilingualism while early childhood centres generally take a monolingual stance, this has not led to conflicts. Parents usually support the consensus of a monolingual society and make no demands for multilingual support. Belonging to a minority group, they do not expect their demands to be heard or implemented. They accept that German is more important than any of their first languages, for providing access to key resources such as a career. Some immigrant parents even take their children out of centres where most children have a migrant background. For many children, cultivating their first language remains a private affair. Where parents do not



Children's identities are made visible through the use of their pictures and names on pigeon holes and coat hooks

systematically ensure the development of first language skills, these go into decline.

Multilingualism undervalued

Children feeling competent and confident in their language(s), frequently lose this feeling when they go to an early childhood centre, where they are unable to communicate "properly" with the educators and the other children. Many children then experience exclusion and discrimination, experiences that remain unseen and unheard in many monolingual centres, as in this example:

When talking about his name, the little five-year-old said, distressed: "They're always saying 'Febi Baby, Febi Baby' to me ... Then I hit them!" His friend, who sits next to him, backs him up: "Yes, I do that too! They say 'Uga Uga Ugar' to me! Then I hit them and we fight!" Upon enquiry, it turned out that both boys had Turkish names that were both pronounced and written incorrectly at the centre. These altered names give rise to ridicule and teasing. Vehbi and Uğur are making a stand in their own way, but they end up antagonising the group ... The teacher is completely unaware of the boys' concerns. She also does not know how their names are pronounced or what they mean. Vehbi's parents have not pointed out that his name is pronounced "Veckbi" and that it means "gift"; they even call him "Febi" in the centre. And Uğur's

parents have not explained that his name means "Luck/good omen" or that the accent over the g is pronounced as a voiceless glottal H. Maybe they hadn't been asked by anyone either.

Effects of monolingualism

What effects do monolingual early childhood centres have on multilingual children? They start to feel insecure and cannot actively participate in the learning processes. They have little opportunity to display their acquired linguistic skills or to develop them further. Many ask themselves at an early stage whether they are allowed to use both languages or whether they have to opt for only one. They experience not only a devaluation of their family language(s) but also of their identity.

They perceive at an early age that languages are valued differently and the hierarchies between languages and the people that speak them. Children with valued first languages, e.g. English or French, are almost automatically deemed capable of learning German; children whose first language has a low status, e.g. Persian or Arabic, are categorised as problematic language learners. Children speaking the majority language also receive the message that languages are valued differently. They experience their language receiving greater acknowledgement and that this applies to them as speakers of this language. This can lead to the development of a feeling of superiority in majority children and of inferiority in migrant children, which is damaging for



Greetings from the children are displayed in several languages

Educators begin by reflecting their own relationship and experiences with languages: Which languages do I come into contact with? Which languages do I associate with pleasant and unpleasant experiences? This reflection can make educators more sensitive to the children's experiences. Next they ask themselves: Which languages are spoken by the children in my centre? Where in the centre can you see all the languages that the children speak with their families? Do the children encounter different types of writing and symbols? Which media are used in the centre? Can children find books for example in the language they speak at home? Educators then set themselves the objective of including all languages spoken by the children in their group in their pedagogical practice.

How can they do this? By making the diverse languages audible, for example by the use of multilingual welcomes, songs, games, stories, audio cassettes and CDs. And by making language diversity visible, for example with: name tags; with multilingual signs, birthday calendars, parent notice boards, invitations, newspapers, magazines, picture books, and play materials that include different types of writing; and the presence of different written symbols.

Obviously, educators cannot learn every language spoken by the children, but by making these languages visible and audible, every child will find acknowledgement and recognition of his group and self-identity (goal 1 in the anti-bias approach for working with children) and will feel that they and their families are welcome in the centre. This increases their self-confidence. On this basis of respect and recognition, children take the next step: encountering other languages and types of writing, thus broadening their horizons (goal 2). If children have faith in themselves and feel comfortable with

diversity, they can begin to reflect critically about what is fair and unfair, about prejudices and injustice (goal 3). The anti-bias approach invites all children to recognise inequity and to fight it together (goal 4).

Supporting linguistic education

Parents are the experts that support their children's language development at home. Educators have the expertise to promote language development in the early childhood centre. To fully support children, both parties depend on the knowledge and the assistance of each other. Teachers can invite parents to help set up multilingual educational resources, for example:

- creating a multilingual children's library
- talking to the children about the meaning of their names
- reading children's books in their first language
- recording multilingual audio cassettes with the voices of family members
- playing multilingual games with children
- recounting stories from their lives

In return, educators can make suggestions to parents on how to support the linguistic development of their children at home, e.g. by reading to them, having conversations before going to bed.

If boys and girls can establish a connection between their home and centre cultures, if they experience attachment figures devoted to them, who are interested in their observations and interpretations of the world and who provide them with materials and conversation to feed their thirst for knowledge – then children will more easily access educational processes. Parents can strengthen the roots of their children's language skills; centres can let them flower! ■

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everyone. It can lead all children to the conclusion that monolingualism is normal while multilingualism is not.

A language-friendly learning environment

Having a mix of languages in an early childhood centre does not automatically mean that all children learn German or get to know each other better. This only happens when educators give children the chance to actively experience the multilingual contexts in which the children grow up. To consciously promote and encourage language skill development, educators need to know more about how monolingual and multilingual children acquire and develop language competencies. Monolingual workers will need to make a special effort to observe, document and support multilingual development in children.

Kinderwelten is part of the Institut für den Situationsansatz/Internationale Akademie (Institute for the Contextual Approach/International Academy) at the Free University of Berlin. It is a project operating throughout Germany to promote anti-bias education in kindergartens and other centres (www.kinderwelten.net). This work includes activities that help educators develop a practice that values and respects the multiple languages of children and that makes these languages visible in their institutions.