



Bund der Freien
Waldorfschulen

Steiner/Waldorf Education in a Migration Society



14 Perspectives

Interculturality and educational equity

We live in a migration society. In today's Germany, for instance, more than 40 percent of children under the age of five have at least one parent who was born abroad, and thus have an official migration background.

The situation in schools today corresponds to this demographic. Particularly in urban areas, teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching children and young people who come from extremely heterogeneous homes in terms of social, linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Despite many efforts, it has not yet been possible to create equal educational opportunities for all. Children with a migration background from families with a low social status have significantly poorer chances of success. They are still significantly overrepresented in lower secondary schools (Hauptschulen) and middle schools (Realschulen), and underrepresented at the higher secondary schools (Gymnasien), and young people from this group are still twice as likely to leave the school system without any school diploma whatsoever compared to those of German origin.

This structural disadvantage initially went largely unnoticed in German Steiner/Waldorf schools. This is because traditionally their students come mainly from socially at least averagely situated, well-educated homes. Children and young people with a migration background from economically weak social classes are simply underrepresented. There are probably several reasons for this: the school fees that Waldorf schools have to charge due to insufficient state subsidies, the location of many schools in "better" neighborhoods, the cultural inhibition threshold (a conscious educational decision is needed to enroll children in a free school). However, this puts the Waldorf school movement itself at a disadvantage. The first Waldorf school was founded in a time of upheaval after the First World War, arising from the social-revolutionary three-part division of the social organism according to Steiner, created for the children of the workers and employees of the Stuttgart cigarette factory Waldorf-Astoria. As one of the first German com-





prehensive schools, it had the specific goal of standing up for equal opportunities in education.

In the meantime, various initiatives have been attempting to build on this founding impulse and to make the social-emancipatory potential of Waldorf education fruitful for the current educational scene. In Mannheim, Berlin and Dresden there are intercultural Waldorf Schools with numerous children and adolescents from educationally disadvantaged families of the most diverse ethnic and religious affiliations. In Dortmund the "Bunte Schule" offers homework supervision and recreational activities. In addition, there are intercultural Waldorf kindergartens – for example in Stuttgart, Mannheim, Hamburg and Kiel. In short, more and more representatives of Waldorf education are beginning to grasp its social dimensions in a new way and to translate its ideas for the migration society of the present.

Realizing the potential of Waldorf education

Waldorf educators who want to open their institution for children of other social classes and cultures or who want to found a new school should realize the potential that lies in Waldorf education to meet the need for social integration and intercultural encounters.

Waldorf schools offer an integrated course of education up to class 12. No grades are given, at least in the lower and middle classes. Children and adolescents have the opportunity to learn and develop without fear, without the threat of early selection; the major examinations take place at the end of the school period. On this basis, the health-promoting effect of Waldorf education can unfold, which is especially beneficial for children in heterogeneous classes. Here, the alternation of serious and cheerful, of intellectual and artistic, contemplative and active teaching phases, the rhythm of the daily routine, a healthy diet provided by common lunches, as well as sufficient exercise have a positive effect. Of great importance, moreover, is the



strong emphasis on artistic and practical craft subjects. A sound, a gesture, a movement can be grasped and imitated, even if initially there is still insufficient linguistic competence. The phenomenological style of teaching, combined with teaching in larger thematic blocks, is also helpful. It is not a matter of acquiring abstract theories and models, but rather of systematically practicing the skill of characterizing natural phenomena or personalities on the basis of observations or pictorial descriptions, and thus to arrive at vivid concepts. Finally, the daily contact with the class teacher is crucial – and not only for the classroom. The long-standing personal relationship creates trust and helps to find sensible solutions to learning difficulties.

In addition to these general features of Waldorf education, which create a good climate for social integration and intercultural encounters, there are some special features that are characteristic of socially-integrative intercultural Waldorf schools.



Special language support

All teachers of the intercultural Waldorf Schools set themselves the task of promoting the German language and, in an age-appropriate form, explicitly emphasizing the acquisition of German language skills in their lessons. Together they share the concern of appreciating the multilingualism of their pupils and investing the corresponding language skills and subject terminology in each subject.

However, advancing the German language in the main and subject lessons is not enough to support all children sufficiently in mastering the written language. For this reason, the Free Intercultural Waldorf School Mannheim has for many years offered *intensive language support through the subject "German as immersion language" (DaV) from classes one to eleven*. In the first two classes, the focus is on reviewing the language basics. Groups of vocabulary, sentence and grammar structures are developed first through choral and then through individual speaking, encouraging an adequate feeling for the language. From class three on, the targeted use of language analysis increasingly takes precedence. Using language games accompanied by movement and coordination exercises, the German language is broken down into its basic elements and brought back into the larger flowing context. The decisive step here is to transfer the linguistic structures, which were previously exclusively oral, into writing skills. In the following classes, different essay forms such as reports, protocols and discussions are systematically practiced. The DaV lessons are invaluable for establishing the self-confidence of the originally linguistically very insecure students with and without a migration background. The work represents the most important basis for the transition from being able to express oneself orally to the gradual mastery of the educational language, which is a fundamental condition for any success at school.





Lessons in the language of encounter

One contribution to mutual understanding across language and cultural barriers is the teaching of the subject "language of encounter". This takes place in the intercultural Waldorf Schools in Mannheim, Berlin and Dresden, in some cases in the course of block lessons and across classes up to class three.

Several language groups are offered: Turkish, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish and Polish. These classes do not primarily serve the purpose of language acquisition; rather, the students immerse themselves in the respective everyday culture through imitation with verses, songs, short stories and role-playing. Typical musical instruments are introduced, dances are practiced, festivities are prepared, and food is cooked and eaten together. There is no set curriculum, but the idea of encountering cultural diversity is the guiding principle for all activities. Often the students discover many commonalities despite the differences in their everyday lives and family backgrounds, and learn to experience such differences with an open mind.





Action-oriented project lessons

In an environment characterized by cramped living space, remoteness from nature, and urban living conditions that offers fewer and fewer opportunities to use the senses and discover the world through natural play, there is a great need for a targeted offer of play spaces where children can pursue practical activities.

This applies especially in the disadvantaged neighborhoods where the intercultural Waldorf schools are located. Here, action-oriented project lessons, which begin in the lower classes, can stimulate nature-based, season-oriented sensory and movement training. The primary goal of all educational activities is to connect children with as much cultural content as possible, which they may not be familiar with from home.

For example, a puppet show can be rehearsed whose story originates in Turkey, with the hand puppets having been made by the students themselves beforehand. For Mardi Gras, the students make Croatian or Polish fried cakes that differ only in shape and spices. Or they design and create parlor games based on African game ideas. The aim is for children and adolescents to experience as much of what the world has to offer as possible, and to create a global perspective for themselves.

“What’s important is not so much thinking up some scheme to promote the development of children, far from the ordinary concerns of the world, but rather to discover how to let children be human beings in the midst of the society they live in.”

RUDOLF STEINER

School as a living space

Later in the afternoon, students can participate in homework or after-school tutoring, or take part in a wide variety of study groups.

The longer time spent together serves social integration at the intercultural Waldorf Schools and is an alternative to a home where there might be a lack of stimulation, where the TV is sometimes on from morning to night, and hardly any meals are taken together as a family. The school should be a diversified and



developmentally supportive living space, where children and adolescents, parents, teachers, educators and people from the neighborhood meet in daily exchange. These tasks, which are based on an expanded understanding of education, clearly extend into fields of work traditionally occupied by socio-pedagogy, and are best accomplished by a multi-professional team; teachers, educators, social workers and psychologists will be more successful the better they work together.







Pleasure in cultural and religious diversity

This aspect is closely connected with another one: Waldorf education welcomes and takes pleasure in cultural and religious diversity. In this context, it is especially important to have a clear awareness that the element of Christianity in Waldorf education does not mean something confessional, but rather the attitude of "true love of man" (Rudolf Steiner)..

A Muslim, Jew, Hindu or Buddhist should feel just as at home at a Waldorf school as a Christian. This attitude requires inclusion of the annual festivals and traditions of different religions. Thus Ramadan and the Feast of Sacrifice, Hanukkah and Passover can find their place in the annual cycle just as naturally as Michaelmas, Advent and Easter.

Cultural and religious diversity can also easily find its way into the storytelling parts of the main lessons. There are beautiful collections of international fairy tales and oriental animal legends, wonderful stories of Mullah Nasrudin, and much more.

But even traditional narratives can also appear in a new light. For example, the life story of Francis of Assisi can have a powerful impact on multicultural classes: his love for the poor, his own chosen state of poverty, his humility and devotion, and his friendship with the Egyptian Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil represent motifs of a humanity that unites cultures.



Religious education for all

One task that Intercultural Waldorf Education continues to face is the development of a coherent concept for a "religious education for all".

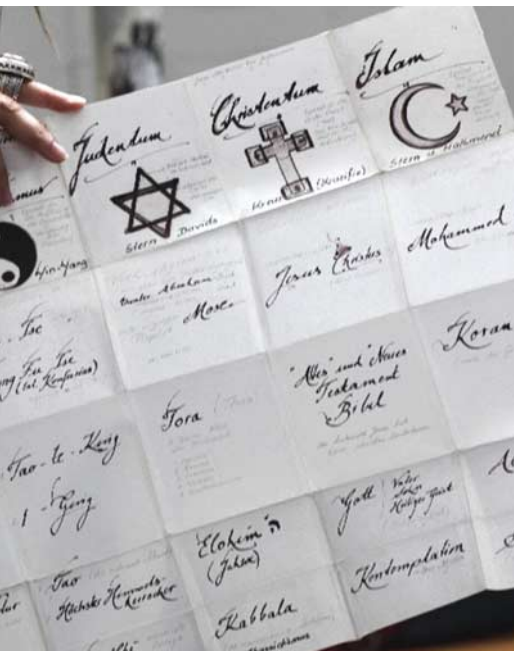
There is unanimity among the colleagues at the school that children and adolescents should not be separated, especially in the subject of religion. The important issue is to take up and nourish the universal spiritual disposition of young people, which lives in the forces of wonder, devotion and gratitude. In the lower classes, this will be done through fairy tales, stories, sayings and songs about plants, animals, nature and the stars, as well as legends about exemplary people, preferably from different religious sources. This encounter with religious diversity is also important for pupils in middle school. In the Intercultural Waldorf School Mannheim, for example, Jewish culture and religion are brought to life in class three through songs, dances and the celebration of Jewish festivals, in class four this happens in a similar way with Christianity, and in class five with Islam. Parallel to the start



of horticulture in class six, questions of the relationship to nature and a sustainable way of life can be examined, from class seven to ten the commitment to freedom and social justice as well as challenges posed by fate: illness, death, life crises and their overcoming. Biographies of people from different cultures and texts from diverse human religious traditions can be stimulating in this context. A systematic overview of world religions should be a topic in classes eleven and twelve, preferably presented by representatives of different religions together.

“All religions are equal and good, if only the people who practice them are honest people; and if Turks and heathens came and wanted to populate the country, we would build mosques and churches.”

FREDERICK THE GREAT



Beyond all attributes

Openness to cultural and religious diversity is of extreme importance. But the inner attitude of all educators is an equally central factor. We should always keep in mind that every child is at the crossroads of many different relationships: family, language community, nation, social class, religion—but in terms of his or her individuality, the child is unique.

This innermost being of the young person, his or her ego, educates itself, and it is our task as parents, kindergarten teachers and educators to provide that unique spark with the most stimulating developmental space possible. This work involves our repeatedly practicing the renunciation of fixed images and attributes. Categorizing, attaching labels such as “Turk, Muslim, migrant, lower-class” has no place in a Waldorf school, especially not in a socially integrative, intercultural context. Only when we as educators can see the individuality of the children and adolescents will we be able to support them properly.



Intensive parental input

Involving parents in the work of the kindergarten or school, and coming together in joint actions and joyful occasions, is especially important in socially integrative, intercultural institutions.

Personal contact is particularly valuable: A brief conversation before classes begin, a parents' evening with a festive meal, a joint excursion can effectively build and strengthen trust. Especially at various festivities, parents with an international background help out as a matter of course: gözleme and baklava are baked, dishes with bulgur, chickpeas and oriental spices are brought along—diversity that tastes good. But also the opportunity of participating in the self-administration of the school is essential for some parents.



Funding and rooting in the neighborhood

Socially-integrative intercultural Waldorf kindergartens and schools face a difficulty from the very beginning: numerous parents will only be able to raise a small financial contribution, if any. In view of this situation, it is necessary to develop creative solutions.

One can turn to foundations, one can try to win private donors, one can strive to realize Waldorf education in a state-run institution, one can redistribute income in such a way to create free places for pupils. **The more intensively those responsible are connected with the idea of Waldorf education and can present it convincingly, the more likely it is that supporters will come forward.** It is of great importance to establish a good relationship with the local school environment. It is helpful if the building does not stand out from the architectural style of the neighborhood, although simplicity and appealing aesthetic design are not mutually exclusive. Signals of openness can be sent out in a variety of ways: newsletters in several languages, open-school days, a parents' café offering counseling and language courses, presence at street festivals, as well as open invitations to school celebrations, presentations of pupils' annual projects, and school bazaars make it clear that the kindergarten and school see themselves as actively participating members in the community. Close contact with the migration advisory boards, cultural associations and religious communities appears to be particularly important: **the more firmly rooted the institution is in the district, the greater its acceptance.**







Perspectives is a publication that provides brief and concise information about Steiner/ Waldorf schools and education at irregular intervals.

Issues published in German under the title "Blickpunkt":

Blickpunkt 1: Was bedeutet Waldorfschule? Eine Orientierung

Blickpunkt 2: Die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Lehrerbildung an Waldorfschulen

Blickpunkt 3: Lehrerbildung an Hochschulen und Seminaren im Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen

Blickpunkt 4: Waldorflehrer werden – Bildung fürs Leben

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Blickpunkt 11: Eltern an der Waldorfschule

Blickpunkt 12: Waldorfpädagogik und digitale Medien

Blickpunkt 13: Freunde der Erziehungskunst

Blickpunkt 14: Waldorfpädagogik in der Migrationsgesellschaft

Issues of "Perspective" available in English:

Perspectives 1: Steiner/Waldorf Education – A Short Guide

Perspectives 7: Frequently Asked Question about Steiner/Waldorf Schools

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