The Problem of *Special-Educational* Advancement of Children From Migrant Families – Integrative Help in the Regular Schools To Prevent Multiple Processes of Social Separation

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Culturally Specific Influences as Factors Affecting Attitudes toward Illness and Disability

The theme of this volume is concepts and attitudes in relation to disability in different cultures. In the course of my many years of experience as an individual case- and family worker[1] involved in supervision of Turkish and Kurdish children with disabilities with the co-operation their families, I have noticed that differences in outlook, in terms of perception, evaluation and reaction to disability, have an influence on the concrete child rearing practices of parents. Such cultural factors also influence parents' acceptance of offers of non-familial parental counseling and therapy. When circumstances are unfavorable, such differences can lead to serious conflicts between professionals, institutions and families. The perception of and reaction to human *otherness* are subject to cultural influences. In the attitude towards and the social reaction to otherness (such as disability, cultural origin, abnormal behavior patterns etc.) we confront individual norms and values as well as those tending toward the universal. Neubert & Cloerkes (1994) differentiate, in their analyses of available ethnological studies for comparative purposes, the cross-cultural from the intra-cultural levels as well as attitude from the reactions to and behavioral responses to disabilities. They define disability, in this context, as "a way of being different that is generally evaluated as being very negative" (Cloerkes 1997: 100). On the basis of this they assume that, in the negative evaluation of disabilities, especially in the case of extreme deformity, culturally universal tendencies tend to prevail, whereas the patterns of active response to disabilities, in various cultures, tend rather to variation when seen from a cross-cultural perspective.

On the basis of my own experience as a social-pedagogical case and family worker, assisting families of German as well as of other cultural origins, and also reflecting on my co-operation with professionals in

relation to this work, I can confirm that differentness[2] provokes similar reactions among people of various cultural backgrounds. Diverging from Cloerkes' assumption, I tend more to assume that the evaluation of this differentness is, in general, cross-culturally as well as intra-culturally variable. This may even be true on an inter-personal or even on the intra-subjective level. In my opinion even the values and norms which constitute the basis of the perceptions and evaluation of a disability are determined by various subjective and individual factors that are independent of membership in any national or territorial culture. A static concept of culture, based solely on territorial or national origin, must be critically examined in relation to social outlook and behavior. Such a concept is inadequate for the investigation of social behavior in terms of either cross-cultural or intra-cultural comparison and, in particular, seems totally unsuited for dealing with the phenomenon of *migration*. Thus, the existence of a nearly homogeneous *territorially defined, national culture of Germany at the present time can seriously be questioned* (irrespective of possible differences between the former East and West Germanies). Examined more closely, a growing *cultural heterogeneity* in the German population can be observed. One thinks, for example, of the increasing ethnic pluralization of the population through various waves of migration (labor migration, immigration from war and crisis zones, the opening of the European Common Market, etc.) and the pluralization of *life worlds* (stimulated by international tourism, the widening of horizons by the international media, the internationalization of the market etc). The migrant social network in Germany, especially, is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity in cultural experiences and *life world* orientations. On the other hand, an Americanization can be widely observed that, with its *fitness philosophy*[3], is exercising considerable influence over the human image due to its strong norm and value orientation towards *youth, beauty and success*.

In relation to the intra-cultural level, Cloerkes supports the position that, in every culture, basic uniform attitudes towards disability predominate and that "socio-economic, demographic and personality specific variables are insignificant compared to extremely rigid attitudes" (Cloerkes 1997: 98). These influences should, in my opinion, be accorded a greater significance. On the basis of a wide range of experiences in working with migrants, I have come to the conclusion that sub-cultural and socio-cultural factors have a far greater influence on people's attitudes towards disability than their cultures of origin. Among Turkish and Kurdish migrant families, for example, I was able to establish that religious affiliation (as a cultural factor) had less of an influence on

childrearing and educational plans for their disabled children than the socio-economic circumstances of their lives. The culture of origin, religious affiliation and the ethnicity of the individual families have been proved to have an influence on attitudes and behaviors towards people with disabilities (see Merz-Atalik 1997), even if these are highly individualized. Rather than the frequently used concept of *culturally specific attitudes*, in dealing with other cultures the *culturally specific influence factors* within the group and their individual expression in each case should be investigated. My experience confirms that we encounter, on the cross-cultural as well as on the intra-cultural level, a variability of attitudes and reactions to disabled people. In working with individuals and families of different cultural origins living in Germany, it is not sufficient to work with culturally bound categories. In order to understand the role of the reactions and attitudes of parents towards their disabled children, and thus also to be able to arrange training and education in special or integrated facilities, it is necessary to look into the individual ethnic and socio-cultural factors that are involved in each case (see Merz-Atalik 1998).

The Experience of Social Isolation and Separation

> That racism and social racism go together and that we must take action against both is ... not obvious. (Sierck 1995: 6)

Tendencies to Isolation and Barriers to Action in the Parental Home

The overwhelming majority of families of pupils attending German schools who do not speak German as their first language, are of Kurdish or Turkish origin and come from Turkey. Turkey is a country which is characterized by a high degree of cultural heterogeneity and the Turkish population includes a variety of ethnic groups (Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Kyrgyz, Lazars etc.) and a number of religious groups (for example, Sunni, Alevite and other Muslims, Jews and Christians). In addition, the families who immigrated to Germany came from various, socio-economically very diverse, regions of Turkey (such as West, Central or Eastern Anatolia; from urban or rural areas). The coping mechanisms and the ways of interacting with a disabled child among families from Turkey are just as heterogeneous as their cultural backgrounds and patterns of living (see Skutta 1994). The individual and personal formation of the *life world*

and the home life of Turkish and Kurdish families is dependent on numerous factors, for example on the reason for migration and when the family arrived in Germany (migrants of the first, second or third generation), the individual experience of migration, their socio-economic life circumstances, their educational level, religious affiliation and many other factors (see Merz-Atalik 1998).

Schäfer-Böker (1987) researched the effects of a chronically ill or disabled child on the immigrant family system. She examined their coping mechanisms on the basis of case studies of twenty two immigrant families. As a result, she came to the conclusion that, contrary to her expectations, most families coped with the frustration resulting from their double burden (migration and caring for a disabled child) without taking the stress out on the child. To a much greater extent, the host society and the representatives of the medical system were the preferred targets of their aggressive impulses. "The parents believed, for example, that if they had not emigrated their child would not have become ill, since they frequently attributed the child's condition to malpractice on the part of German doctors" (Schäfer-Böker 1987: 97). The families appear, as a result of the double burden of *migration and a disabled child*, to have become closer and more supportive of each other. Separation of the parents was relatively infrequent. This is, in my estimation, generally true of Turkish and Kurdish families and not a specific phenomenon of families with disabled children. While Schäfer-Böker found an extremely high level of isolation among Turkish families with a chronically ill or disabled child, Hohmeir (1996) on the other hand contradicts the thesis of a high degree of isolation. The staff members of the early childhood development support centers whom he interviewed state that 76 percent of immigrant families receive help from relatives, but, with only 27 percent, they have contact with other families with disabled children to a lesser extent than German families. I found this to be the case for a majority of the families that I worked with. Most of their needs for social contact were taken care of within the family itself and their interaction with the social environment outside the extended family, for example with neighbors or co-workers, appeared to be limited. In my opinion, we can assume that this is also true for many Turkish and Kurdish migrant families without a disabled child. Relevant publications, discussions with primary and special education teachers and with a number of counseling services, suggest that parents frequently reject vigorously the assignment of their child to a special school for pupils with learning problems. In Turkey, a committed program of special education has only existed since the 1980s. In general, this involves special schools for the physically

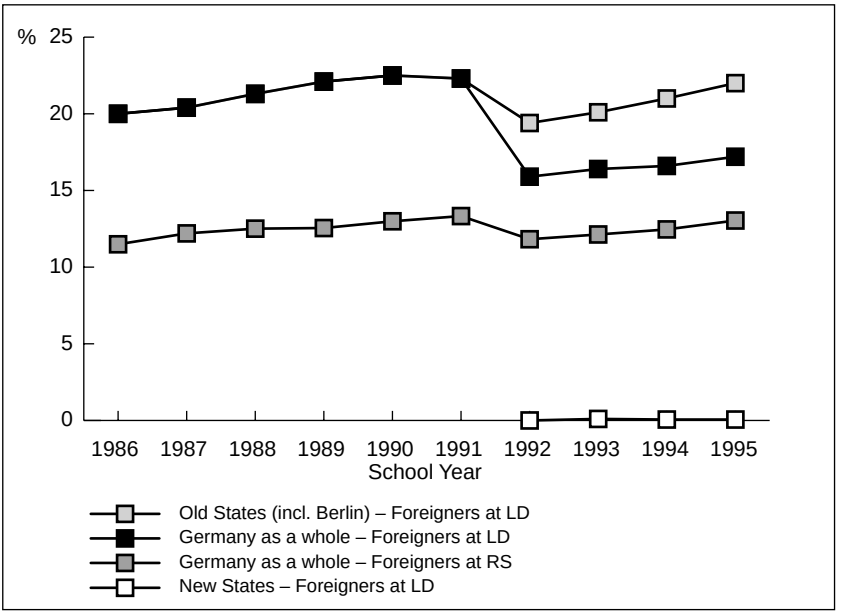
disabled (with organic impairments such as blindness, deafness and physical disabilities) that have been established for some time. In regard to these *physical disabilities* the acceptance of special education is still relatively high in comparison to that for attendance of a special school for children with learning or behavioral disorders (Boos-Nünning 1990).

Many Turkish and Kurdish parents are pleasantly surprised to learn about the possibility of schooling disabled pupils together with non-disabled children. This is especially true for parents who have non-disabled children already attending the school in question. The parents of non-disabled children have, however, the same reservations as many German parents and do not, in any case, want their children to be placed in the same classroom as *disabled* pupils. Many explanations have been offered for this behavior, which I do not wish to go into here. I see a major cause in the lack of information about opportunities for integrated schooling in Germany. Despite intensive inquiries for all the German federal states, I have not be able to find any specific information materials on the topic of *integrated schooling* designed for families of non-German origin. In my opinion, a direct translation of the language of information brochures is not suitable [4] (Merz-Atalik 1997).

School Tracking and Exclusion

As soon as their children start primary school, parents from the initial immigrant groups in post-war Germany, just like those coming from war and crisis zones, often have difficulties with the complex bureaucratic demands of the German educational system. These procedures tax the limited language skills of the immigrants as well as their ability to cope with complicated regulations. This is equally true for those schools that serve disabled children, including special schools as well as the various types of integrated educational alternatives. In some places, the decision to place a disabled child in a regular school together with non-disabled children demands high levels of commitment and persistence on the part of parents (for example, in the German states where special schools for disabled pupils are the rule and mainstreaming of disabled children in regular schools is the exception). In the special schools, and especially in the schools for children with learning disabilities and mental retardation, a significant over-representation of children who speak languages other than German as their first language has been observed. Since the 1970s, the proportion of immigrant children[5], placed in schools for the mentally retarded increased from approximately 0.5 percent to 23.9 percent (1993) (Kornmann and Klingele 1996, 1997).

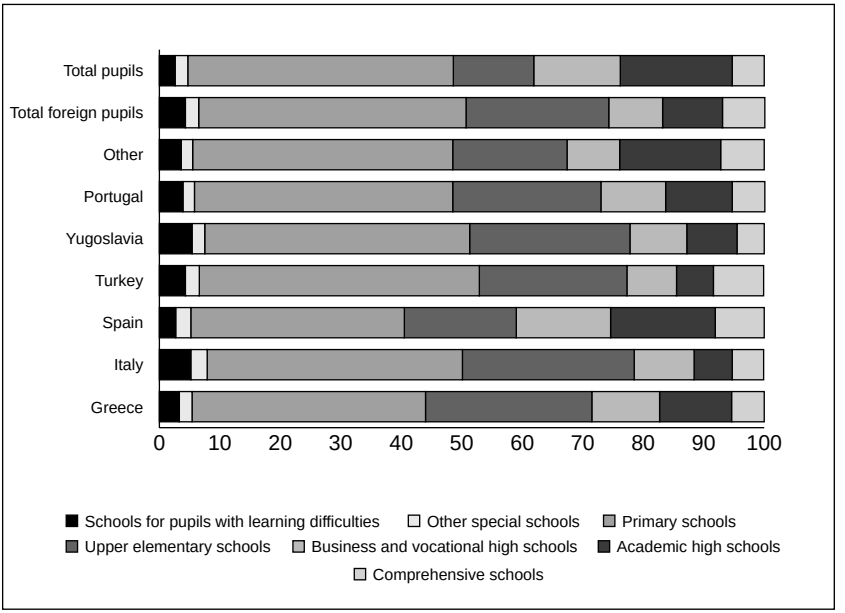
Table 1: Comparison of the growth of the number of children of immigrant parents attending schools for the learning disabled (LD) with that of those attending regular schools (RS) (in Germany as whole)



(Calculations based on: Secretariat of the Standing Conference of Ministries of Education of the States of the German Federal Republic (ed.). *Foreign Pupils and School Graduates 1986-1995.* Statistical Publications of the Education Ministries Conference, no. 138, December 1996).

At this point, one might say that the causes of disturbances in the social and learning behavior of the children of migrants, such as language and cultural barriers, are known (for example, see UCAR 1996) and have been taken into consideration for years in the discussion on cross-cultural teaching (Auernheimer 1990). In contrast to the usual assumptions, it is not just the children of recent migrant families that are over-represented in the special schools but even children coming from families of the so-called second and third generations (for example the children of Italian immigrants).

Table 2: Distribution of pupils of various national origins in the general education schools in the school year 1996 (for Germany as whole)



(Calculations based on: Secretariat of the Standing Conference of Ministries of Education of the States of the Federal German Republic (ed.). Foreign Pupils and School Graduates 1986-1995. Statistical Publications of the Education Ministries Conference, no. 143, December 1997).

The diagram shows clearly that pupils of foreign national origin more frequently attend schools for pupils with learning difficulties and the mentally retarded than is characteristic for German school attenders as a whole. This is obviously true for the group of pupils coming from the countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia and from Italy. In terms of secondary education, it can be established that a far larger proportion of the children of immigrants are assigned to the vocationally-oriented *Hauptschulen* (upper elementary schools). Only pupils from the *other* country of origin group and from Spain indicate a rate of attendance at the *Gymnasien* (academic high schools) that is comparable with that of pupils in the German schools as a whole. From the perspective of

the educational sciences, the causes of this situation are seen, in particular, as being the selective structures of the German school system and educational planning which is oriented to the typical German middle class family. Children with socio-cultural life circumstances that diverge from this statistical norm are systematically disadvantaged. Especially in terms of attendance of schools for the learning disabled, but also for all other special schools, we can show that the children of migrants are over represented. In the case of Denmark, Jabiri and Kruuse (1992) come to the conclusion that migrant families have a greater chance of having a disabled child. Their explanation for this higher risk is, among other factors, the primitive conditions associated with childbirth which prevail in the migrants' home countries. Turkish and Kurdish families more often have disabled children as a result of marriages between close relatives, such as between cousins. Many families with disabled children also deliberately migrate, or abandon plans to return home, because of the better medical and therapeutic care available in the host country (see Merz-Atalik 1997).

A few years ago, it was assumed that the over-representation of children of immigrants in special schools would be reduced with the increasing length of residence of their families in Germany. Today we must admit that this has not happened (see initial immigrant groups in table 2). The proportion of children of immigrant families attending schools for the pupils with learning difficulties and the mentally retarded continues to increase. As a result of continuing immigration from war and crisis zones the (special) school is confronted with cultural heterogeneity among the group of children that it serves and is being challenged to adjust its basic organizational structures, curriculum and teaching methods to the increasingly multi-cultural nature of German society. The processes of educational sorting and separation into groups also occurs within the classroom itself and can lead to a marginalization of children of non-German origin. Doris Houbé-Müller discovered, by means of a qualitative analysis of social conditions of marginalized immigrant children in school classes, that "in reference to peer relations, three out of five immigrant children attribute their marginalized position to their status as foreigners" (Houbé-Müller 1996: 233).

Opportunities for Integration Support

As the conditions presented above show, disabled children from cultural and ethnic minorities, and their families, are increasingly threatened by risks of social isolation and separation. This can be demonstrated especially in the case of institutionalized offers of counseling, assistance in childrearing and schooling for children with disabilities. These increased risks can be identified or suspected on all levels of the *integrative process* (Reiser 1990). Examples of such risks are experiences of persecution, war or being a refugee as influential factors on the global level, life as a member of a cultural minority on the societal level and the tracking practices of the German school system, as suggested above, on the institutional level. On the situational-environmental level, deviations in the *life world* experiences of migrants make integration into the existing system difficult, when such differences conflict with German expectations of cultural homogeneity. On the level of classroom teaching, this is especially true in regard to educational materials. These are mono-cultural in content and approach. On the psychological level, one can imagine that this could have a negative effect on the self-esteem of children of non-German origin (see Houbé-Müller). Language and cultural barriers interfere with integration on the social interaction level.

The challenge of cross-cultural lesson content and instruction lies in adequately dealing with the cultural and language heterogeneity of specific groups of pupils.

> This should ... not be carried out by means of the old, segregative, methods. It should be accomplished without pressure for conformity and without threats of division of the group, on the basis of selective criteria, in response to cultural and language differences. (Hinz 1993: 225)

These calls for educational methods and contents appropriate for culturally heterogeneous groups are also central to the basic ideas about teaching children with disabilities together with non-disabled children in the same classroom. The goal is to create a learning and teaching culture in which all children can feel secure and cared for. At school, children must be able to have the experience that, instead of being branded for their weaknesses, they are supported in developing their strengths.

> Here the opportunities connected with mainstreaming in the classroom clearly reveal themselves: we mean, living with human variety, seeing difference as a positive and enriching stimulus, recognizing the individuality of the other as unique, but also productively dealing

with the conflicts that arise from heterogeneity and making and keeping rules for getting along. (Werning 1996: 468)

Werning sees the pedagogical-didactic challenges of this kind of teaching as:
- the perception and taking into consideration of the *life world* of the pupil,
- stimulating, supporting and supervising the development of social resources through common action characterized by solidarity,
- overcoming a deficit orientation in favor of one focused on abilities,
- accomplishing these goals through collegial co-operation.

In doing so we are no longer emphasizing whether, for example, we are concerned with heterogeneity in capabilities, giftedness, gender or *life worlds*. Proceeding from the basic idea of the *contact hypothesis* (Cloerkes 1997), that an intensive, protracted and encompassing contact with human otherness can lead to positive changes in outlook, difference at school should be accepted and be interpreted as an exciting expression of human variety.

Notes

1 In connection with the individual integration of children and youth with disabilities or impairments into various areas of social life (such as day care centers, schools, employment, recreation and housing), for over fifteen years individual case workers in Berlin have been employed and funded within the framework of social integration assistance measures mandated by German Federal Social Welfare legislation.

2 In contrast to the term *otherness*, as used by Cloerkes (1997), I use the term *differentness* here. People with disabilities are in no way *other* but are disabled by a specific characteristic that affects their social existence.

3 See Udo Sierck: Integration and the Fitness Philosophy. Paper presented at the Conference for Integration Research, Hamburg, Germany: February 21–24, 1996.

4 My letters to the state task forces of the German Association *Living Together and Learning Together e.V.* in March 1995, requesting information materials or brochures on the school integration of disabled with non-disabled children for non-German (especially Turkish and Kurdish) parents, all received negative replies.

5 Author's comment: A basic limitation is noted for studies that deal with immigrants in Germany as a single group. The results obtained by means of this approach ignore the variety of life experience and backgrounds of the *foreign* population in Germany and, thus, are of limited validity.

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