

# **Aziz Nesin Grundschule, Berlin: A Bilingual Turkish-German Public Elementary School**

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**Abstract in English:** Aziz Nesin Elementary School is one of Berlin's sixteen elementary "Public Europe Schools". These special type of schools offer bilingual elementary education to children with two different native languages. Out of these sixteen schools Aziz Nesin School is the only Turkish-German "Europe School", targeting children with Turkish and German as a native language. The concept of the school is that of "linguistic equity in the classroom". The body of teachers/students is 50 percent Turkish and 50 per cent German. Both languages are treated equally, subjects are taught in German and Turkish alike.

**Area:** Education

**Kind-category of project:** Bilingual Public School

**Kind-category of actor:** Public body, Public School

**Country:** Germany

**Year:** Since September 1995

**5 key-words:** public school, minority languages, bilingual education, intercultural learning, integration

## **1. THE PRACTICE**

### **1.1 Description of the project**

#### **Project Initiator:**

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#### **Objectives:**

According to the general concept of Berlin's "Europe Schools" the main objectives of Aziz Nesin School are

- To create an elementary school that offers the possibility of mutual intercultural learning for children with two different native languages (Turkish and German)
- For Turkish children: to make Turkish native speakers bilingual and bi-literate in Turkish and German after seven years of programme
- For German children: to develop some proficiency in Turkish as a

language of contact

- In regards to all children: to achieve linguistic equity in the classroom as a precondition for intercultural learning and a positive attitude towards other languages and multilingualism in society

### **Activities and Results:**

Uncommon for Berlin's elementary Schools, Aziz-Nesin-School is a bilingual school with emphasis on education in German and Turkish. The school is one of the city's 16 elementary state "Europe schools" which aim at a bilingual education and alphabetisation of children with two different native languages. As with public schools, all "Europe schools" share the official curriculum valid for Berlin's elementary schools, yet their curricula are partly modified to meet their special needs, this being bilingual language education and intercultural learning. Although the Turkish minority is the largest ethnic minority in Berlin with a number slightly more than 120,000 (as of 2003), Aziz Nesin School is the only elementary school with a focus on Turkish-German bilingual education that has become part of the "Europe School" concept. Additionally, there are presently four other elementary schools in Berlin, which have a bilingual Turkish-German concept yet operate outside the framework of "Europe Schools".

At Aziz Nesin School the children are taught in German and Turkish from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Upon entering the school the language abilities of children with a non-German-German family background are examined. Then, according to their initial language skills, the children are divided into two groups, ideally of equal size: those with Turkish as main language and those with German as main language. Alphabetisation of the children is always undertaken in the main language. The other language, the "language of contact", is taught in 1<sup>st</sup> grade for three hours per week and, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade onwards, six hours per week. In general, children at Aziz Nesin School in 1<sup>st</sup> grade receive up to 12 hours of language education a week, which is seven hours more than at a regular elementary school.

All other subjects, apart from the language classes, are jointly attended by both groups. Maths is taught in German, General Knowledge classes in Turkish, Art and Music in both languages. Adequate teaching materials have been developed.

As a "Europe School" Aziz Nesin also has additional features that distinguishes it from "normal" Berlin elementary schools. First of all, the school is freed from the usual practice that children can only attend schools which are located in the district in which their parents or guardians are registered. This means that native Turkish and German speaking children all over Berlin are allowed to enrol at the school. Second, Aziz Nesin is a so-called *ganztagschule* which provides activities from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. After the official classes are over there are also free time activities offered so that the children can learn the use of the languages in a more playful way. "Normal" elementary schools usually finish with the end of teaching, that is at 1:25 p.m. at the latest.

At Aziz Nesin School 50 percent of the students graduate with a recommendation for *gymnasium*. Another 20 percent achieve a recommendation for *realschule*. The

students graduating with a recommendation for *gymnasium* do have the chance to go to nearby Carl v. Ossietzky School where they can then graduate with a Turkish-German *abitur*. Hence the continuity of their bilingual education is ensured all the way to graduation.

## **1.2 When and how long: Structure and Steps of the Project**

In September 1995, Aziz Nesin Elementary School opened its gates for two pre-school classes each consisting of 16 children. In January 1996, these students entered 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The official bilingual teaching in German and Turkish started with two Turkish and two German teachers. According to the concept of *ganztagschule* there were two additional educators, who attended the children after class.

From 1996 onwards, the school has opened new classes each school year, and in 2005/06 the school has expanded considerably, now teaching a number of 400 children in a total of sixteen classes.

Presently, the school has a total of 32 teachers, 16 of which are native German, the other 16 native Turkish speakers. Additionally, there are 24 educators working at the school. Of the educators there are 18 with German as their native language and six with Turkish.

## **1.3 Place and Social Context**

### **The three-branch system of education**

In Berlin, children start attending elementary school in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, usually at the age of six, and they graduate from elementary school after the completion of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. By then, they are usually 12 to 13 years of age. Typical for the German educational system, it is divided into three branches: when graduating from elementary school, all students receive a recommendation for one of three types of higher education, *gymnasium*, *realschule*, or *hauptschule*. Although these recommendations are not mandatory, most parents follow the advice given to them by the schools. *Gymnasium* lasts until 13<sup>th</sup> grade, graduating students are then qualified for studying at universities. *Realschule* and *hauptschule* finish after 10<sup>th</sup> grade, graduating students are meant to apply for job training in various professions that do not require a university degree, with the level of education and job qualification provided in *realschule* being higher than that in *hauptschule*.

This divided educational system was heavily criticized in the aftermath of the outcomes of the international student assessment PISA. The PISA study showed that in Germany, more than in other Western industrialized countries, there is a strong correlation between the social background of students and their perspectives of pursuing a successful educational career. Children, especially those with a working class or a migrant family background do face disadvantages. For instance as they often lack high level language skills and often do not receive special training they

tend to finish elementary school receiving a *realschul* – or *hauptschul* - recommendation, and from then on their future career in the educational system is confined to the limited possibilities of advancing within the boundaries these types of schools offer. Especially at Berlin's *hauptschulen*, the students are nowadays heavily socially stigmatised. The case of Ruetli Hauptschule in Neukölln, where teachers applied to the school senate, proposing a shutting down of the school, as they felt threatened by their students due to a lack of discipline and other troublesome conditions, the teaching became practically impossible. The case of the Ruetli Hauptschule aroused an emotional debate on the state of affairs at *hauptschulens* in all parts of Germany, far beyond the borders of Berlin. In many cases the student body of these schools is almost totally dominated by migrant students. Since interesting job perspectives for *hauptschul* graduates are generally limited, and graduates with a poorer graduation score are almost out of the job market, the students are facing a lack of motivation in combination with being excluded from the majority society.

The inequalities between Turkish and German students concerning their educational success is backed by recent data: The percentage of students with a Turkish family background that manage to attend *gymnasium* in Berlin in 2006 is at 9.4 %. In contrast, 30 percent of German students manage to get into the privileged position of attending *gymnasium*. In 2006, out of the 12,258 students successfully graduating from *gymnasium* in Berlin, there were only 165 Turks, that is a total of less than 1,5 percent. However, it needs to be noted, that these numbers do not take into account the naturalised Turks, that are students with a Turkish family background that are holders of a German passport. For this group there is presently no data available.

### **The situation at elementary schools**

Generally, it can be stated that the path for a successful way through the educational system is been paved at elementary school. In Berlin, there are presently 448 public elementary schools with a total of about 148,000 children. Out of these 148,000 students, about 21% percent are holders of a foreign passport. If one takes into account the “naturalised students”, that is students holding a German passport, yet having a native language other than German, the percentage of elementary school children with a non-German speaking background increases to more than 30%.

This data takes into consideration the situation in Berlin as a total. However, it is important to stress that children with a migrant background are not equally distributed among the schools. Instead, they concentrate on elementary schools located in the inner city districts of former West-Berlin: Mainly Kreuzberg, Neukölln, Wedding and parts of Tiergarten and Schöneberg. As a result, in these areas the amount of students having a native language other than German averages between 30% and 45%. In some elementary schools in Kreuzberg and Neukölln, Berlin's neighbourhoods that have the highest percentage of Turkish inhabitants, the non native German speaking children outnumber the German to even greater degrees.

Having a student body made up of a large number of non-native German speakers poses a great challenge to concepts of integration and education. A serious problem is the lack of proper German language skills. Many of the children with a migrant family background have enormous language deficits. “Bärenstark-Test”, a language

test conducted in 2003 by the Senate of Berlin to examine the German skills of 26,700 children before entering the school system, showed that 80 percent of children with a non-German speaking family background had insufficient German skills for their age, compared with 30 % of children that came from a native German speaking family. Another finding, that surveyed 21,000 children attending first grade school in 2004, showed that about 10 percent of the Turkish children barely spoke German, an additional 34 percent spoke it only in a flawed manner. The latest language test for first grade students, taken in August 2006, again showed that 56.6 percent of migrant children had insufficient language skills.

As a result, at the age of six, when entering school, the children with a non native German background (and consequently often insufficient language skills) face enormous difficulties as the classroom language is German. An additional problem that many of these children face is that their language skills in their native language are also insufficient. If there is a lack of native German speaking children amongst their classmates, the language of communication outside class is the native language of the migrants.

Dealing with these children also sets a challenge to the teacher body, especially when there is a lack of special pedagogical programs at the schools, and language and cultural barriers not only between teachers and students but also between teachers and parents.

The high concentration of non-native German speakers in schools in the inner city areas reflects the practice that children have to attend schools that are located in their neighbourhoods/districts. For instance, a student whose parents are officially registered in the district of Neukölln has to attend elementary school in that district. As mentioned above, the Turkish community in Berlin mostly concentrates in the districts of Neukölln, Wedding, Kreuzberg, and parts of Schöneberg. The inner city districts are generally characterise as having socio-economic difficulties. Unemployment is above the city average.

### **The social set up of the Turkish student body**

The Turkish migration to Berlin was historically mostly working class immigration, with the first migrants coming to the city to be employed primarily as industrial workers. The early Turkish migrants who came to Berlin on the so-called “guest workers programme” after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, often came from remote rural areas in Turkey such as Anatolia. Often they had a low level of education and a traditional set of values. Hence, the original Turkish community in Berlin did not have a major body of highly educated people or intellectuals, but rather came from a background that German’s term *bildungsfern*, which might be translated as “distanced from education”.

Today, 70 percent of the Turkish children in Berlin are considered to have an ‘underclass’ background. Their parents often have no higher education themselves, insufficient German language skills and no knowledge of the German system of education. Additionally, the children not only face the above mentioned language problems, but also class related disadvantages such as being overweight (23% of

Turkish children in first grade, compared to 10 % of German children), higher TV consumption (64% spending more than one hour daily in front of the TV, compared to 31% of German children), and poorer health (e.g. only 72 % of the Turkish children have well taken care of teeth, compared to 87 % of German children.)

Additionally 40 % of the Turkish children show motoric deficits that inhibit their learning processes, compared to 25 % of German children. From this data it can be easily deduced that at the start of their educational career a large number of children with a Turkish family background are face serious difficulties.

### **Bilingual Concepts**

The high percentage of non-German native speakers at the Berlin's inner city elementary schools has also meant that German parents often try to avoid sending their children to schools located in these areas. This observation is equally valid for well educated parents with a migrant background that do not want to have their children educated at schools in which the majority language of the children might be one other German.

Generally, politicians responsible for education have, both in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany, turned a blind eye to the special needs of children with a migrant background attending schools in Germany. Instead of developing concepts that aimed at fostering the potential bilingualism of the children, in many cases they have been left with literacy deficiencies in either or both of their two languages. Up until today the concept of bilingual education is subject of many controversies.

In Berlin, the concept of Turkish-German education started in 1980 at a Kreuzberg elementary school. In practice it started out as a "compensational model" that exclusively targeted Turkish children. In special language classes (*Ausländerregelklassen*) these children were alphabetised with parallel Turkish and German by Turkish and German teachers, for a two-year course. The idea was that the Turkish children would be able to learn German better, when taught in a parallel fashion alphabetised in Turkish. In 1986, this concept was given the status of an official educational experiment with accompanying scientific evaluation, and by 1992 it had been expanded to twenty schools located in the districts of Kreuzberg, Schöneberg, Neukölln, Tiergarten and Wedding. Taking into account the increasing critique of *ausländerregelklassen*, since 1988, the concept was reworked and the joint education of German and Turkish children in bilingual classes came into focus. What are the results of these efforts?

In 2006, from the elementary schools offering a bilingual Turkish-German education only five such schools were left. Unfortunately, the scientific evaluation of the project has never been published by the Berlin Senate School Administration. Why the Senate is so reluctant to publish the findings one can only guess. Yet the fact that so many of the schools gradually abandoned the concept may most likely be linked to the following reasons: First of all, for years there been a lack of German children going to

these schools. Concerned German (as well as Turkish parents) fear that the teaching of Turkish would be at the expense of German and that, as a result, the German skills of their children would be significantly lower than the one's of children attending "regular" elementary schools.

As a result of this reluctance on the sides of parents, the required joint fifty-fifty Turkish-German set-up of the classes could no longer be matched. German parents often generally feared the "fifty-fifty" set up of the classes. In some inner city schools, such as at the Karl-Weise-School in Neukölln, which originally participated in the project, the number of the non-German students increased in the recent years up to 65 percent; in practice the maintaining of the "fifty-fifty" concept became practically impossible. At Nürtingen school, which has also abandoned the concept, the school director has observed not only a lack of native speaking German students, yet also that the Turkish language abilities of Turkish children have worsened. Hence there is no foundation for bilingual education; the children are overtaxed with bilingual requirements.

Also the official status of the subject Turkish in the schools' curricula was in many cases unclear. Often, bilingual education was limited to grades 1-4 only. In many schools the subject was not graded, and never had the status of an "official" subject, hence its "weight" was lower than that of other subjects, and the motivation of the children to learn was low. Also negative publicity regarding these schools may have taken a toll on the willingness of parents to send their children.

Out of the remaining five schools that successfully teach Turkish and German in bilingual classes, Aziz Nesin school is the only one having the status of a State Europe School. As stated above, this puts the school in the position to attract students from all over the city, not only from Kreuzberg district were it is located.

#### **1.4 Target**

According to the status for Europe Schools, Aziz Nesin School equally targets at elementary school children with German or Turkish as their native language. Additionally there are no restrictions concerning the district the students are coming from.

The school's naming after Aziz Nesin, a critical Turkish writer and pedagogue who has translated "The Satanic verse" into Turkish, initially led to a withdrawal of Turkish children that came from a more conservative political background.

#### **1.5. Project Methodology**

According to the concept of Europe Schools, Aziz Nesin school aims to have a student body made up of 50 percent native speaking Turkish and 50 percent native speaking German students. As mentioned above, the idea is to achieve a "linguistic equity" in classroom which means that both languages are treated with equal weight.

In first and second grade, seven lessons a week are devoted to bilingual instruction by a team of one Turkish and one German teacher. In contrast to the regular curriculum, Turkish native speakers receive five, German native speakers two additional Turkish language lessons. Initial reading and writing instruction in both languages starts in first grade simultaneously. Special attention is given to coordinating both languages and their respective writing systems. In third and fourth grade, five additional Turkish-lessons are provided for the Turkish native speakers and two Turkish-lessons to the German native speakers. A Turkish and a German teacher cooperate in bilingual instruction of Social studies and Science (five lessons). In grades five and six, bilingual team-teaching is devoted to the subjects of geography, history and biology (four lessons). Art lessons in Turkish language comprise four lessons a week for the Turkish native speakers and again two lessons for the German native speakers.

Bilingual Turkish-German instructional material has been developed for all grades, for instance of bilingual primer with a Turkish and German part, as well as several units for bilingual and intercultural instruction of Social Studies, and the subjects of history, geography and biology.

## **2. Experiences**

Following, there is a brief outline of the most important conclusions that can be reached after the school's brief ten year existence. So far there has been no scientific evaluation of the school's work.

### **2.1 Strength**

- in comparison to other elementary schools in Berlin, especially compared to those with an equal share of children of migrant background, the children at Aziz Nesin school achieve considerable results: 50% of the children receive a recommendation for *gymnasium*, another 30 % recommendation for *realschule*. Against the backdrop of the initially outlined educational situation of children with a Turkish background in Berlin these results definitely stand out.
- All children, the German and Turkish alike, are, from the beginning confronted with diversity. The concept of intercultural learning fosters mutual understanding, acceptance and knowledge about the other cultures and is a positive step in road to improving German-Turkish understanding. The school successfully fosters the children's intercultural competence.
- For native speaking Turkish children, their bilingualism is fostered and strengthened. The bilingualism of the children is treated as a great opportunity, not as disadvantage and it takes into account the actual situation of many children with a migrant background. The Turkish parents also see the chance to get more involved in school, as their language and culture is treated equally to the German, and they have also Turkish teachers and educators whom they can address.

## 2.2 Critical Points

- Generally, if native speaking German parents who wish to foster bilingual education for their children prefer other languages (e.g. English or French) to Turkish. The school has now a shortage of native speaking German children to stick to the fifty-fifty quota on which the concept was initially based.
- The parents who send their children to the type of “Europe school” are usually well informed, and hence are usually educated. The students attending Aziz Nesin Elementary School are mostly the children of parents with a middle class background, and hence initially “privileged” in terms of their educational perspectives, which may also in some way explain the high levels of results attained by children at the school.
- The training required for bilingual teaching has mainly been provided by experienced teachers as in-service training. However the lack of university programs for preparing future teachers in bilingual education and cut-down on in-service training are a serious impediment for the further development of this model of bilingual education.

Links:

School website?