

Jannis Zinniker

Education in a multi-cultural context: An overview of the last 40 years in Switzerland

In a multi-cultural context education has its own history, in particular also for handicapped persons. The shifting paradigms show how society has sought for solutions over the past 40 years. It is the intent of my paper to encourage you, my dear colleagues, to explore the history of education in the multi-cultural context of your country and its institutions, and to draw conclusions from the results for your current and future work. I am assuming that there are many similarities with Switzerland. Even if the Swiss are also frequently of the opinion that their country constitutes a special case.

In the first part of my talk I would like to give a historic overview of the changes in pedagogy which ensued from the immigration of persons from other cultural and linguistic regions. These changes can be clearly categorized into four stages.

In the second part I will show on the basis of examples how the religious and cultural context of the immigrants have influenced the perception of disability.

Part 1

The first phase of the immigration – The Italian workers

The year 1955 saw the beginning of the immigration of Italian workers into Switzerland. At the beginning of the 20th century Italians were already coming to Switzerland, and some of them have also stayed. This first immigration generation proved to be helpful to the new arrivals. They had immigrated with the intent of working in Switzerland, earning money and at a later time of returning to Italy.

But as so often history took a different turn. Looking back the authorities remarked: “We expected laborers – and what came were people”. Dealings with these persons initially took place on a linguistic level. Religion was not a topic because the immigrants belonged to the Catholic church. Progressive schools sent suitable teaching staff to Italy for purposes of developing their linguistic skills. In conflict situations these teachers acted as interpreters. But apart from that it was anticipated that the immigrants would integrate on their own. No thought was given to the time factor in the integration process. Everything was expected to happen “instantaneously”. But the fact remains that integration only became reality in the second and third generations.

As before, politicians and authorities have no concept of the processes of integration over time. In the integration of East and West Germany, Germany deluded itself, as did France with regard to the integration of the North Africans. England deluded itself in the integration of the Muslim population, just as did Holland. And politicians of the EU and Turkey believe that in 2015, meaning in a period of only 10 years, the integration could be completed.

My dear colleagues, don't trust anyone who promises you rapid integration with only a few meager measures. In Switzerland we have learned that it is not possible. But at the same time I would warn you against the fatalism which says: “Let's just wait two or three generations for the problem to take care of itself.”. The integration of Italian laborers and their offspring are where they are today because at that time teachers were educated as interpreters, and in courses organized in Switzerland by the Italian consulates children were simultaneously acquainted with “Lingua e cultura italiana”. Only from the security of their own culture and language was it possible for the children and youths to successfully learn a second language, and to gradually integrate.

In this first phase of immigration handicapped children and youths were frequently left out of the process. They were frequently not even brought along to Switzerland, but left in Italy, and that even if there were no appropriate schooling possibilities there. Roughly speaking, this was at first an immigration of the strong and healthy. The institutions hesitated in accepting handicapped children because it was frequently unclear whether and how long a family would stay in Switzerland. Limited financial means demanded exact clarification of the schooling perspectives. And this is still the case today.

The second phase of immigration – The Balkan bazar

Toward the end of the Sixties of the last century, i.e. 10 to 15 years after the Italian immigrants, laborers came to Switzerland from the Balkan countries: Greeks, Yugoslavs, and also some Turks. These were initially seasonal workers as well who were needed as laborers, but who were not actually thought of as persons destined for integration. But history took a different course than envisioned by the responsible politicians. The growing political instability in the Balkan countries, the dictatorship in Greece from 1967 – 1974, the death of Tito in 1980 in Yugoslavia induced the immigrants to search for ways that would enable them to stay in Switzerland.

By contrast with the first phase teachers were now not sent to attend language courses in the Balkan countries. Which language were they to have learned? Slovenian? Croatian? Serbian? Macedonian? Greek? Albanian? Turkish? Vlachish? Instead, teachers who interested themselves in Balkan cultures and languages and folk dances for private reasons became sought-after experts and translators. For these experts there were no quality controls.

Everyone recounted what he or she thought to know. In the education of teachers the experts found a thankful field of activity. Since most immigrants were from socialist Yugoslavia in which a consciously atheistic education was practiced, religion was scarcely a topic for the Swiss teacher-experts. Neither the Orthodoxy nor Islam were present.

Handicapped children and youths seldom reached Switzerland. They were left in the care of the large family in the home country. Firstly, the immigrants were ashamed of them, and secondly the immigrants were not informed of the possibilities available in the host country. The early disability welfare scarcely reached the immigration families. Too great were the linguistically-related information gaps. As an interpreter I too often experienced parents who decided to send the child back to the grandparents instead of sending it to a school for handicapped.

The third phase of the immigration – The colorful carpet

Toward the end of the 80's of the last century the escalating political conflicts on the Balkan, in the Near East, in Sri Lanka and in Africa resulted in an influx of refugees into Switzerland. Teachers and institutions felt overwhelmed by the diversity of languages and cultures. The former experts were still there for their special field. But many areas were not covered by their specialized expertise. By contrast with the labor immigration, amongst the new immigrants there was a greater number of disabled persons. Known are the cases of hearing damages by explosions, traumatizations by detention, physical disabilities due to gunshot injuries or mines. Disabled children of workers who until this time had been concealed in the country of origin were now fetched to their families in Switzerland since the information on institutions had gradually made its way to the immigrants.

The linguistic, cultural and religious background of the immigrants suddenly resembled a colorful carpet. Where to orientate oneself? A search was started for experts in the immigrant groups who mastered one of our national languages, and who had not yet lost their original culture. A difficult undertaking! Once the expert had been found, it often proved to be the case that he or she was from a certain, usually educated class who was not at all able to speak on behalf of an uneducated majority of the immigrant group. Catholic Albanians were

rejected as interpreters by Muslim Albanians. Thai Buddhists wanted to have nothing to do with Tamil Buddhists. Shiites rejected Sunnites. Turkish-speaking Kurds felt misrepresented by Turkish-speaking Turks. Total confusion reigned!

The fourth phase of the immigration – Parents as experts

Chaotic circumstances harbor great potential for creativity. The general perplexity at the end of the third stage merged into a simple discovery: The immigrant parents as experts of their own culture. We are still at the beginning of this fourth stage, but I would like to sketch out to you how developments could proceed from this point on.

At the second and third stages we already established that experts from outside were frequently not able to be of assistance to us. For example, the Islam expert related to us: “At the end of Ramadan the end of the fasting is celebrated in this and that way.” Whereupon the parents or children retorted: “Yes, perhaps others do it that way. But in our family we do it differently.” It is naturally incumbent upon us to orientate ourselves on the realities of the life of the family, irrespective of the proclamations of the experts. We must accept the version of the respective religion lived by the family, as well as its linguistic and social reality.

We can receive the best information on this reality from the family itself. In order for this exchange to function, a linguistic basis must naturally first be found. In this context the external experts are needed. However, the communication is not assured with interpreting alone.

In the eyes of immigrant parents, teaching staff are frequently persons of respect. Depending on the cultural background, dealings with persons of respect can contain an element of power struggling without that being the intention. Such a disruption must become the subject of discussion. For example, I say to the parents: “I notice that you almost always answer with yes and no. I could imagine that that is the way it is done in your home country. However, I would like to hear a lot more from you so that we can do the best for your child. You are therefore free to express yourselves in a manner which is unusual for you to the extent that that is already possible at this time. Perhaps you have to gradually accustom yourself to this way of discussion. It would make me happy if we were able to understand one another better as time goes by.”

My way of communication has naturally evolved in exchanges with parents. For me it is clear that I would now scarcely start off a discussion in our efficient, rational manner as follows:

“Nice for you to be here. Today we will be dealing with the following problem.”

No. I will not omit the courteous introductory conversation in which the parents are asked about how the grandparents are doing, about the latest news from the country of origin and about other personal matters ensuing from a genuine interest in this family system. The efficiency of discussions is measured by the generation of confidence, and not by the length of the discussion. Discussions are constantly beset by taboos which obstruct communication. This is the case in every society. In our case, it is usually the earnings and the value system. In your circles you can put this to the test yourself by asking “Tell me, how much do you earn, and what belief do you have?” You will experience astonishing reactions, especially from politicians.

Initially, a lot of discussions with immigrant parents on the sexual development of their children, in particular of the children with disabilities, are obstructed by taboos. In this case, the only thing that will help is making the difficulty the subject of a discussion. For example I will say: “I know that I will be expressing something to which you are not accustomed. At the moment it is perhaps embarrassing to talk about it. That is something I understand. However, I would also like for you to try to understand that I would like to talk about it for the purpose of finding out how we can treat your child in a way which is good for the child, for you as

parents and for us as counselors. If it is still uncomfortable for you, I hope that you will tell me openly, and that we will be able to talk about it the next time we meet.

Communication situations are difficult when it is necessary to communicate something which is unpleasant. There are cultures in which it is uncommon to communicate unpleasant things. If in Greece or Macedonia you ask a farmer whether it is far to the next village, he will assure you that you will soon be there, quite irrespective of the distance to that village. It is uncommon to cause others disappointment.

This is a inter-cultural communication difficulty. It does not further communication, nor will the problem be solved simply by adopting a different communication standard and declining to articulate the unpleasantry. The misfortune has to be named. How? The Dalai Lama, who recently lectured in Switzerland, put it concisely: "Communicate unpleasant things as politely and friendly as possible. That is much more friendly than being silent about them."

In Switzerland the new dimension in dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity has its effects on general pedagogy as well. Consciousness has suddenly developed that the insights gained are applicable for the indigenous population as well. We are always concerned with parents and children who are members of the most diverse groupings of social, linguistic and ideological orientation. The same applies for the teaching persons as well. This fact directs the attention fully to communication. How must communication be made up for human beings with different backgrounds in life to understand one another?

It is obvious: Inter-cultural communication is the competence which will be decisive not only in the work with students and parents, but also at the highest political level on the course of the world over the next years and decades. You, my dear colleagues, are endowed with a great treasure of experience in this field. It is my wish that you and others will be able to dislodge your experiences as being solely in the context of working with people who are deaf or hard-on-hearing and allow them to be applied to the development of general intercultural competence.

This was the first part of my talk. I would now like to give you the opportunity to move around a little bit. At the same time I would like to impart to you illustratively how many things in common and diversities there are in a group such as yours. May I ask you to stand up when the question I am asking applies to you.

Who of you speaks English?

Who speaks Russian?

Who speaks Dutch?

Who speaks Chinese?

Who speaks Swiss German?

Who speaks French?

Who speaks Italian?

Who speaks Danish?

Who speaks Turkish?

Who plays tennis?

Who does Yoga exercises?

Who plays piano?

Who plays violin?

Who keeps a diary?

Who meditates daily?

Who has his or her own garden?

Who collects stamps?

Who has a deaf person in his or her family?

Who has already worked with autistic deaf persons?

Who is in Geneva for the first times?

You see: 20 questions produce a lively up and down. But at the same time you have some things in common and differences with the other participants.

Before I go to the second part of my talk I would like to read to you a few texts from immigrant children. The children were given the assignment of bringing along with them a picture from their homeland and of writing a few thoughts about them. Try to intently discern which messages are concealed in these simple linguistically unspecified texts. It is an inter-cultural listening exercise.

Picture 1

When I small in Kurdistan. This doll. Exactly the same. But now lot of pretty Barbie in Switzerland. I am happy for Barbie in Switzerland. But my cousin in photo still old doll. Is poor cousin, but not so poor. Only no Barbie.

Picture 2

I, Serdar, play with Yaver horsecarriage. Play. Don't know yet going Switzerland with daddy. Always play in Azerbajdschan. Always play good. With horsecarriage, with cigarette lighter, with rifle. Switzerland only football and Gameboy.

Picture 3

With my mother in Kurdistan. I was still small. But my hair was so light. All always call me: Alman, alman, Germanbaby, Germanbaby. In Switzerland all only say: You Turk. But I Kurd. But real sure!

Picture 4

This photo with all uncles and cousins and so. Still in Turkey. I smallest. Mode Turkey old. But not always. Istanbul, Ankara, Mersin beautiful. But village so. Rubber shoes, called lastikler. Not Addidas. All cousins not school. Only I school. But I clever.

Picture 5

That two cousin. Deaf. Always draw with stone on rock. Not speak. I speak with sheep. Also draw rock. Turkey no crayon. In Switzerland have to draw Mandala. I don't know. Teacher: Nusret, hurry up a little!

Picture 6

In Kosova I was small girl. Always play with sheep and dog and chick and cat, name mace. Kosova no block, my house, my garden, my stable, my sheep, my dog. When I had to go from Kosova my dog cry, my sheep cry, I also cry.

Picture 7

In Turkey I prayed every day. Usually on the field. I prayed that we go to Germany or to Switzerland. Now I have already been in Switzerland for three years. I only seldom pray. I pray that we go back to Turkey. Then the cycle of life is finished.

Part 2

In the second part of my talk I would like to show you using a two examples how the religious and cultural context influences the perception of disability.

Example 1

An 8-year old boy from Sri Lanka could not keep up in primary school. Tests showed a mental disability, and we suggested to the parents that he should be sent to a special therapeutic pedagogical school. The parents disagreed, and said that their son was able to follow without difficulties the instructions in the Tamil Hindu temple which took place on the weekend. They showed us the well-written religion notebooks. We consulted the priest. He told us: "Yes, the boy has difficulties. I always have to guide his hand when he copies the texts from the holy books. He couldn't do that alone. But this copying is a great help for his inner self. In this way he can be in contact with the divine wisdom, and that even though from a conventional viewpoint he is a handicapped person. The priest and the teacher recommended to me to copy with my deaf and autistic daughter parts of the Gospel. I responded that at the moment, for me it was more important to train the method of facilitated communication (fc).

You can see how different perspectives of disability collide with one another. For the Hindu priest there are two parts of a person: the mortal ego and the immortal true self. Only the ego can be disabled. In the therapeutic efforts of the priest both parts of the handicapped were taken into account. It was useful to communicate this perspective to the parents, the teachers and the psychologists. The boy was accepted in the special school and was administered our therapies. At the same time he was accompanied by the priest in the Hinduistic manner. All parties were openly working together with the objective of doing the best for this human creature during this incarnation.

What can be learned from this example, and what not? It would be false to say: that is an example of how the Tamil-Hinduistic culture perceives disability. Because every family, and even every member of a family, has its own notion of what is Tamil or Hinduistic. We first have to be cognizant of this reality. If we consult the knowledge of experts for the purpose of understanding such realities, we need not accept it as absolute but adjust it to suit the case currently before us.

Example 2

The social worker would like to send a hard-of-hearing Turkish girl for examination to the doctor. The parents refuse. They say: "If the doctor sees the child, he will prescribe to her a hearing aid. Then it will be seen that the child is disabled, i.e. "sakat". The word "sakat" signifies a physical disability, and can also be translated with the negative attribute "cripple". Therefore, whoever needs a visible aid is categorized by these parents as "sakat". To the objection that a lot of people wear seeing aids as it did the father of the girl the parents replied glasses were something normal. Only the blind with a white cane would be regarded by them as disabled. A misunderstanding finally led to the circumstance that the girl was examined after all. The father said he had heard that a language computer could be implanted in the head of a deaf person (deaf in Turkish means 'sagir ve dilsiz', e.g. deaf and without language). The father would like to know if that would be a possibility in the case of his daughter. From the outside this computer would not be visible.

The examination yields that the girl suffers from a hearing impairment of a medium degree. A CI (cochlea implant) is unnecessary. The mother is relieved, but the father disappointed. He reproaches the doctor as being discriminative against foreigners and therefore not wanting to install a computer in his daughter's head. For this reason he would send his daughter back to her aunt in Turkey.

The girl's counselor explains from her standpoint the consequences that this decision on an eventual return to Turkey could have on the life of the girl. However, she also made clear that whether the girl is to be sent back is for the parents to decide. A time is agreed upon within which the parents would make their decision. After this time elapsed, the parents state that the girl would stay in Switzerland with a visible hearing aid. The Imam of the mosque who was informed by the girl's counselor and who was consulted, convinced the parents that this would be a good solution.

What does the example show? It demonstrates that the perception of disability is variable. First it was acknowledged what "disability" meant to the parents. Then they were allowed time to change that attitude. The responsibility for this process was put on their shoulders. The fortunate outcome is not always a sure thing. We have also experienced children having been sent back.

When we expressed our thanks to the Imam of the Mosque for his help, we wanted to learn what he had said to the parents. "I told them that everything comes from Allah, their daughter, the hard-of-hearing as well, and that with her they had received a special task for their life. But Allah would not leave people alone with a difficult task. That is why he sent them the tutoress, the social worker and the doctor". The Imam said this with every seriousness. His words were not simply psychological tricks to convince the people, but his own deep conviction, for which reason they took effect. After 40 years of working with immigrant children and their parents I am convinced that there are no tricks when it comes to successful communication, but only greatest possible truthfulness and love of mankind. This sounds unscientific. But it is the experience which I would like to warmly recommend to you, dear colleagues, as the result of my forty-year activity.

Before I conclude my talk, I would like to briefly summarize the main points:

The schools in Switzerland have adopted various strategies to deal with the growing multiculturalism in the past 40 years.

1st stage – The Italian workers: No integration assistance. Teachers as interpreters.

2nd stage – The Balkan bazaar: Individual members of the teaching staff search for solutions for reasons of their own interest. They become experts for the schools.

3rd stage – The colorful carpet: In addition to their own experts, suitable experts from the groups of immigrants are consulted.

4th stage – The parents as experts: Parents become the principal partners of the teaching staff. They alone can communicate the effects of the linguistic, cultural and religious background in the everyday life of the family.

This will lead to the situation that there will increasingly be individual solutions to problems instead of bureaucratically prescribed idleness.

Handicapped children have come to us with the immigrant groups only in the last phases. This has the advantage that institutions for these children are already able to begin at stage 3 (consultation of experts from the immigrant groups) and stage four (parents as experts for the culture lived in their family). The collaboration with these experts yields insight into the culture-specific perception of disablement. This in turn ends in the basic questions: What is the person, also the disabled person? Where does he or she come from? Where is he or she going? And how does he or she live and experience his or her life? A globalized world gives us a diverse range of answers which are waiting to be evaluated for their life-worthiness. To test this life-worthiness I wish you, dear colleagues, a lot of energy and confidence.

Many thanks for your attention!