

## **Do Turkish parents care about education ?**

**This paper by S.Y. is based on interviews conducted in Turkish families in Braunschweig.**

*It is a stereotype heard by some teacher training students and also propagated in the media that Turkish children are disadvantaged because their parents are less concerned about education. The task given to the student was to research how the stereotype and the data gained in the families relate to each other, and, second, which difficulties Turkish parents encounter. The interviews were conducted in summer 2008, in German. The paper, however, was written in English.*

### **1. Turkish Families in Germany and Education**

On the basis of a questionnaire this paper will show the difficulties Turkish and immigrant families in general have as far as education is concerned. Three Turkish families have been interviewed in order to find some exemplary, not representative results, showing a variety of opinions on education. Because there has always been criticism concerning Turkish families and their view on education. It is said that Turkish families are far away from striving for quality education, the children of Turkish families speak only Turkish at home and the parents do not care about their school affairs. Especially the mothers who are usually housewives have never had access to education and cannot deal with the school affairs of their children, because they do not speak German very well. We will see that Turkish and immigrant parents sometimes are helpless. If they want to be good examples for their children as far as education is

concerned they have to talk to them in German, read German books and newspaper, have German friends as well as watch German TV. Exactly this is very difficult for them, they want to be as near as possible to their home country, its culture and its language. This is why they mostly stick to it, not being aware that their children will have disadvantages because of that behavior.

The questionnaire is structured in four parts, the first contains questions about the background and education of the parents, the second part about the school of their children, the third part about how they spend the rest of the day and the last questions deal with the relation the parents have towards their children. Each couple has been given one questionnaire and the answers have been given by them in a conversation. One main goal is to show how difficult it is to make any generalizations. We will see that these three families vary a lot in their opinions, in their courage and in their behavior although they are from similar backgrounds.

### **1.1 Basic Information about the interviewed families**

I will name the families, family one, family two and family three so that we can distinguish them from each other. The children of all three families were born in Germany and are between seven and thirteen years old. In family one there are four children, in family two there are three and in the third family there are two children. Family one has an urban background, families two and three have rural backgrounds. The parents of all three families were born in Turkey and went to school till class 9 and have the degree of the "Hauptschulabschluss" in Germany. After class nine they were for a year at a vocational school. None of them studied or has the "Abitur". The father of family two worked as an electrician, of family three at the post office. Both are self-employed now and earn good money. They own snack bars and restaurants. The father of family one is not self-employed, he works as a crane driver. The wives of all three are house-wives. Those two fathers who are self-employed give evidence that there is no need to have a higher education in order to have a comfortable life. They are owners of big houses, new cars and several snack bars. The father of family one could not buy a house but he is the owner of a flat although he has got four children and is the only person with a fixed income. In spite of their non

academic professions all three parents could buy some property in order to secure their children in some way.

## **2. The importance of reading**

### **2.1. The reading habits of the Parents**

All the six adults read daily newspapers, Turkish and German. They admit not to read novels, short stories or other books. The books they read are mostly in Turkish instead of German, because they, on the one hand think they cannot understand everything if they read German books, on the other hand they read Turkish books when they feel as strangers in Germany. The difficulty for children is that if there are no or just few German books in their household, they will not discover reading automatically. The parents as role models do not show that reading is an useful pastime and that one can learn a lot from books. Children thus do not grow up with books, reading does not seem familiar to them, apart from newspapers. Newspapers maybe deter children because they are considered to be boring and children may think that they are adult stuff. The parents admit that they have not seen their children reading a book as a pastime.

All three parents state that the conversations with their children occur in Turkish rather in German. So the children are dependent on what they learn of the German language at school, because at home they have to stick to Turkish. Their children have no chance to improve their vocabulary and their knowledge of the German language. It would be important to offer them a balance. Reading German books would be a perfect alternative, because children learn new vocabulary, improve their sentence structure and get used to the language. Most of the day they are confronted with Turkish if they do not have German friends and do not go to sport clubs. In the case of our three families two girls do not do any sports and they also do not have German friends. Their parents say that it is difficult for them encouraging their daughters to find some German friends. They say that their cousins are their best friends. In this case the parents feel helpless, because the two girls do not listen.

## 2.2. PISA and Reading Competence

If we view the results of PISA we come across the importance of reading competence. PISA tested reading competence, math and science of fifteen year old students. The performance of students with and without an immigrant<sup>1</sup> background can be compared. There is high variety in the performance of students with an immigrant background within the German states. While Bavaria has shown the slightest difference between students with and without an immigrant background in PISA 2000, in 2003 Rhineland-Palatinate has shown the slightest differences (Auernheimer 54). But in general we can say that immigrant children have fewer chances and less success on the labor market in Germany. When comparing PISA 2000 and 2003 it gets clear that the chances for immigrant children and children from less educated and poor families getting a high education have decreased (Auernheimer 103). PISA has explained that the reason for the disadvantages of immigrant children is their language competence in the first place:

So wird ausdrücklich betont, dass für die Benachteiligung in der Bildungsbeteiligung von Schülerinnen und Schülern aus Zuwandererfamilien weder primär deren soziale Lage noch eine eventuell vorhandene kulturelle Distanz vorhanden sei, sondern vielmehr 'die Beherrschung der deutschen Sprache auf einem dem jeweiligen Bildungsgang angemessenen Niveau' (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001, S. 379 in Auernheimer 145).

Language abilities play a major role in education, especially reading competences which PISA tested. If you do not understand what you read you can hardly be good at any subject. It is very difficult for immigrant children to improve their language competence when their chances of doing so is restricted. At home they stick to their mother tongue, their parents do not read German books and they have usually friends with an immigrant background. Sometimes the so called phenomenon of "doppelte Halbsprachigkeit" (Seitz 86) is developed. Young immigrants neither reach a high level of language competence in their mother tongue nor in the Second language. If they speak and read well in their first language it will influence the second language acquisition in a positive way. The child deals with language in a more conscious way and develops metalinguistic competences, because he has to be more

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<sup>1</sup> „immigrant background“ means here that at least one parent has been born in a foreign country.

flexible in dealing with both languages. By this he realizes similarities and differences in grammar and vocabulary. His first language helps him in the acquisition of the second language:

Der Muttersprache kommt beim Zweitspracherwerb eine Schlüsselfunktion zu, da einerseits auf Fähigkeiten, die beim Erstspracherwerb entwickelt wurden, zurückgegriffen muss, andererseits die Entfernung (bzw. Nähe) zur Zielsprache Auswirkungen auf den Lernprozess hat (Seitz 102).

Unfortunately, most immigrant children do not have a high developed first language competence, because they have been born in Germany and have been brought up between two cultures and two languages. Their language experiences are low, they just know the basic and common grammatical structures and vocabulary, because they do not read or use abstract language in their daily life in their first language.

### **2. 3. The Immigrant School Leavers**

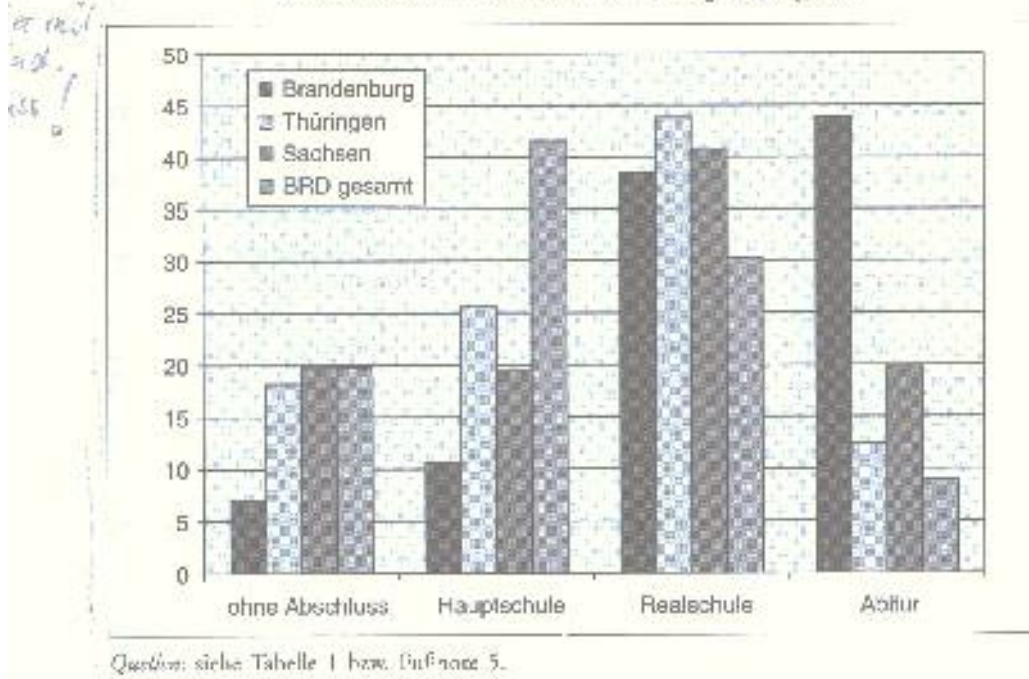
Still there are not only negative results about young immigrants and education. In 2003/04 43,8 per cent of all immigrant children have graduated from school with their "allgemeinen Hochschulreife" in Brandenburg. The percentage of German students was 29, 4 (Auernheimer 180). These numbers show a contrast to what is expected from immigrant students. The other German states do not show such a high success but they as well show a higher level of education than immigrants are assumed to have.

The diagram below shows the percentage of graduation from different school types of immigrant students in three eastern German states in comparison to Germany as a whole<sup>2</sup> (In: Auernheimer 181). It can be seen that the majority of immigrant students have really graduated from lower school types, but considering the percentages of the higher school types the result is not as bad as it is thought to be. One should also not forget that there are a lot more German students in each school type than immigrants, because immigrants are a minority looking at the whole German population.

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<sup>2</sup> Brandenburg: Landesbetrieb für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik, Statistische Berichte B1-j/04, S.61; Sachsen: Statistisches Landesamt des Freistaates Sachsen, Statistische Berichte: Allgemeinbildende Schulen im Freistaat Sachsen, Schuljahr 2004/05 BI-j/04, S.15; Thüringen, gesonderte Berechnungen des Landesamtes für Statistik nach Anfrage, 26.8.05.

Abbildung 7: Bildungsabschlüsse ausländischer Jugendlichen in den neuen Bundesländern und in der Bundesrepublik gesamt



### 3. School Affairs

On the one hand parents try to control the school affairs of their children, all of them state that they often check the portfolios of their children or check their homework. They take part in parent-teacher meetings regularly. One of the three mothers, the mother of family one, is a member of the parents council. The reason why she wanted to be a member of the parents council is that she wants to show German parents and teachers that immigrant mothers are also engaged in school affairs. It is not true that mothers from Turkish families just sit at home and do not care for their children and especially their school affairs. She also tries to encourage other immigrant parents to take part in such activities. Unfortunately, she told, most of the immigrant parents do not dare to take part in such activities, because of their German language abilities. Most of them are afraid of speaking wrong German and not being able to express themselves.

#### 3.1. Dealing with Bad Marks

All three couples are well informed about the behavior of their children at school

and discuss bad marks. For couple number three a bad mark is the mark five which leads to discussions and for the other two couples the mark four already gives reason for a discussion. Additionally each couple state that they would always support their children so that they can improve their achievements at school by making private lessons possible, which is true for couple number two. But on the other hand they try to offer their children as much Turkish environment as possible because they are afraid that they themselves and their children may forget their culture, origin and language. This is why they often watch Turkish TV and read Turkish newspapers and books. By doing so they are not aware of the disadvantages their children will probably have in their future not only concerning their chances on the labor market, but also their ability of gaining the "Abitur" and taking part on the intellectual life of society. A German study IGLU (Internationale Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung) has found out that the chance of immigrant children to go to a "Gymnasium" is much lower than that of German children:

Ohne Berücksichtigung andere Einflussfaktoren ist, verglichen mit Kindern, die eine Hauptschulempfehlung erhalten haben und deren Eltern beide im Ausland geboren wurden, die Chance eines Kindes, dessen Eltern beide in Deutschland geboren wurden, eine Realschulempfehlung zu bekommen 2,73 mal so hoch. Die Chance für eine Gymnasiumempfehlung ist 4,69 mal so hoch (Seitz 80 from Schwippert/Bos/Lankes 2003, S.282).

Reading, listening, understanding and speaking are close connected if immigrants do not have a good command of the German language it is obvious that they have less chances for a high education.

#### **4. Bringing up Children**

Basically it is difficult for some Turkish parents to bring up their children in a modern society because they themselves have been brought up in the traditional environment. So if they do not even find their way around in such a modern industrial society, how could they help their children to find a balance between these two societies? Boos-Nünning points out that immigrant parents fail in imparting their children German values and standards,

Die ausländischen Eltern können ihre Kinder nicht auf die Werte und Normen der deutschen Gesellschaft vorbereiten, so dass bei den Kindern „Sozialisationsdefizite“ schon bei Schuleintritt vorhanden sind (p. 62).

Furthermore living in unfamiliar surroundings, which the parents mostly do, force them even more to bring up their children in the traditional way, because they are afraid of this unknown society. This is one of the reasons why they stick to their own values, their own language and tradition. On the one hand one may say that bringing up children in this way will have negative consequences in their future lives. On the other hand there is no need for negative consequences concerning their future chances. As the Turkish – German reading competition shows it can be a prestige for Turkish children to speak Turkish at home and learn reading and writing in Turkish. The Turkish – German reading competition has been an arrangement of Turkish and German people with Turkish entrepreneurs where children have had to read aloud in Turkish and translate spontaneously into German. Those children who speak, write and read in Turkish as well as in German will have good chances on the labor market. As a result of that we can say that it has not always negative consequences when speaking, reading and writing in one's first language occurs in daily life.

#### **4.1. The Afternoons of the Children**

Two of the families watch five and more hours TV per day, Turkish and German. Family number three watches between three and five hours TV per day. A common evening of all families consists of eating together, reporting of what they have done during the day, watching TV and discussing the program or certain topics on TV. The spoken language is equally Turkish. They seldom play table games like cards. Family trips besides going on holidays each year to Turkey are rare. The children normally eat at home after school, because their mothers usually are at home waiting for them. Their afternoons are equally structured, after having lunch they do their homework. At that point it depends on the family, family one and two do homework with their children or at least supervise them. The other parents usually do not help or supervise their children in doing homework. After finishing the homework, in all three families, they are allowed to watch TV for one or two hours. Then they play in the open air or at home, normally with their siblings and cousins who often live in the neighborhood, sometimes with friends from school. Playing with their siblings it

is not only for fun but taking care for them as well. Basically in the Turkish tradition it is usual that elder siblings take care and are responsible for the younger ones. In the evening when they come home they eat together with the family and watch TV until it is time for bed.

It seems as if the TV is on most of the day. When the mothers are in the kitchen either the TV is on or the cassette recorder plays Turkish music. There is no real quietness which children need in order to concentrate on something. Apart from that it also seems as the children do not have much variety, but they have got used to it. Maybe this is why they do not complain.

#### **4. 2. Compared to a German Childs' Afternoon**

Comparing to a German child's day there might be less diversity and less pedagogic input. With pedagogic input I also mean tools like picture books, paintings, glue, radio cassettes, building blocks and other creative tools. The problem in this case is that the parents who have been born in Turkey are brought up in a traditional environment. In this traditional environment as they know it, children are brought up differently than in Germany. Pedagogic tools do not exist in most families in Turkey. Children in Turkey are not brought up but they grow up. As Vera Behr finds out, „Die Kinder werden zwar nicht erzogen, aber sie werden auch nicht unterdrückt oder ihrer Persönlichkeit beraubt“ (156). It is assumed that Turkish children practice life in immediately taking part in the life of the adults, different from German children who practice life by playing. This is due to the fact that in Turkish society children are present everywhere with due respect and distance. The adult life is not separated from that of the children. All in all the upbringing of the children is more influenced by the social life and the social surroundings than by their parents (Behr 156).

#### **4.3. Their Surroundings**

Another difficulty of immigrants and a disadvantage in their second language acquisition is that their families are mostly big with many children. They enjoy being surrounded by many people and their children always have their cousins or other relatives as play mates. The difficulty is now that those cousins or relatives unconsciously suffer from the same problems. They also have a

limited vocabulary, their sentences also show grammatical mistakes and they mostly have no balance between the few German speaking hours at school and their Turkish environment as well. But it is so important for them to be surrounded, at least for one or two hours per day apart from school, by German children in order to learn from them.

Nur Kontakte zu deutschen Kindern und Jugendlichen können das für die ausländischen Schüler wichtige Lernen der deutschen Werte und Normen und der deutschen Sprache erleichtern (Boos-Nünning 98).

## **5. The Atmosphere within the Families**

### **5. 1. Future Hopes for the Children**

As far as the career of their children is concerned the parents have different wishes. Couple number two wants their daughters to study economics and their son engineering. They are willing to pay for private lessons so that their children's marks improve and this wish of theirs becomes realistic. Somehow they put pressure on their children by checking their homework and being informed of the dates for classroom tests. They enthusiastically care about the school performance of their children. Couple number three with two children wants a commercial education for their children. They say that studying is not necessary, main thing is that they will find a job in future. They do not want their children to do more than they can handle. Couple number one with four children and the mother as a member of the parents council have the opinion that the professions their children will choose must fit to their abilities. They do not want to force their children to become a doctor when they do not want to. Furthermore the main thing for them is to see their children happy and they would support their children no matter for which profession they will decide. And they do not put any pressure on their children as far as marks and performance at school is concerned.

This point shows three different opinions dealing with one question. We can neither say that Turkish parents are very concerned about the future career of their children and put a lot of effort in supporting their children, nor can we say that Turkish parents show disinterest when talking about the future career of

their children. Some are very ambitious and put pressure on their children in order to make a good future possible and some are more loose in this aspect.

## **5. 2. Goals and Wishes of the Children**

When they have been asked whether they know the goals and wishes or desires of their children all of them stated “yes”. By asking for some goals and wishes they have answered in materialistic terms, e.g. that their daughter badly wants to have a cat. But after making clear that this question does not only mean materialistic things, they have been kind of speechless. Only the self-employed father who wants his daughters to study economics could give an answer. He has told that the dream of his eldest daughter is to carry on her father’s business.

## **5. 3. Need for Conversation**

Another important question is how many persons each child can contact when there is need for conversation and whether all of the persons interviewed have time for conversations. Couple number three state that both parents are always there for each child. The mother is mostly at home, the father is more busy because he is self-employed. On the weekends he tries to spend as much time as possible with his children. Besides, during the week when he is in the restaurant, watching that everything goes well, his wife and children visit him as well and he tries at least twice during the week to be at home at eight o’clock to see his children. Furthermore he states that he always goes with his son to his football matches which usually take place on weekends. But if the matches take place during the week he always tries to find some way in order to company and support his son.

Family number two tells that each person has four others who he could talk to. It is a similar case here. The father is also self-employed and more busy than the mother who is a housewife. Both try to have an open relationship with their children. Although the father is self-employed he takes his eldest daughter twice a week to private lessons and his son to the football club. He always tries to be at home at eight o’clock in order to spend the rest of the day with his family. The mother tries to be there for supervising when they play and their friends or

cousins are on a visit. Furthermore both parents tell that the relation between the siblings is a good one. They really trust each other and know about their secrets.

Family number one answers in a similar way. In their family each person has five persons whom they can contact, but it is clear that they see their parents when serious topics have to be solved. In other cases they have their siblings. Additionally the parents try to inform themselves about topics which can be interesting for children. On this way they want to be update and be able to understand their children and their way of thinking. The relationship of the siblings is an important thing, because they are the first address for each other. So they seldom deal with a problem on themselves.

## **6. Conclusion**

The results of the questionnaire varies at some points and show similarities at other points. What we get to know is that we cannot generalize from these answers but only tell some tendencies. A general tendency is that all three parents do care for the school affairs of their children and are troubled for their performance at school. Family one and two are more engaged in school affairs than family three. They are in so far lucky as their children do not need much help at school. We do not have the case where parents tell or show by their behavior that they do not care for the education of their children. The couples have not been born in Germany themselves, still they speak German very well. But their spelling in German is not well, it shows grammatical mistakes as well although they are not realized when they speak. One problem is that these couples are not troubled to improve their German which is quite a pity.

There are supporting measures from the government to help those parents, especially mothers, who do not speak and write German very well, because they usually cannot help their children in doing their homework. One measure is called "Mama lernt mit", here mothers go with their children to school in the afternoon in order to do their homework. At school they are supported by assistant teachers who explain the various tasks to them. In this way immigrant parents as well as children are assisted. Unfortunately this supporting measure is not much widespread yet. But it is a starting point where one can add more.

It is important to say that the reading habits of the parents, for example, are not necessarily connected with the performance of their children at school. For PISA it is close connected, but the result of my interviews are more differentiated. The chances of especially Turkish people to get a high education like a graduation from university are in general low which does not mean that there are no Turkish youth studying at German universities. Unfortunately they are a minority.

This questionnaire was intended to get an idea of how Turkish parents deal with the school affairs of their children and how much they are engaged. Fortunately, we have seen a varied picture and I think this reflects reality. One cannot take the responsibility for any generalizations concerning this topic. The tendency is that the majority of Turkish students have difficulties to reach a high education, but it is not a tendency that their parents do not care or do not support them.

## **Appendix Umfrage zu dem Thema „Türkische Familien und Bildung“**

1. Bis zur wievielten Klasse besuchten Sie/ Ihre Frau die Schule? Was für einen Beruf haben Sie/Ihre Frau ausgeübt (ggf. in der Türkei)? Haben Sie/Ihre Frau studiert?
2. Wo aus der Türkei kommen Sie /Ihre Frau her? Ist es ein eher ländliches oder städtisches Gebiet?
3. Wie oft in der Woche lesen Sie/Ihre Frau und was lesen Sie? Ab wann sind Sie /Ihre Frau zu Hause?
4. Machen Sie/Ihre Frau Hausaufgaben mit ihren Kindern? Werden ihre Hefte und Mappen kontrolliert?
5. Was ist eine schlechte Zensur für Sie/Ihre Frau? Gibt es Diskussionen mit Ihren Kindern wegen schlechten Zensuren?
6. Welchen Beruf wünschen Sie/ Ihre Frau für ihre Kinder (realistisch betrachtet)? Möchten Sie, dass Ihre Kinder studieren?
7. Wie viele Stunden am Tag wird bei Ihnen zu Hause ferngesehen? Von wann bis wann (ungefähre Angabe reicht)?
8. Werden viele Gespräche bei Ihnen zu Hause geführt? Mit Ihren Kindern? Über welche Themen sind diese meistens? In welcher Sprache werden sie geführt?
9. Wie sieht ein gemeinsamer Abend mit Ihren Kindern aus? Was tun Sie gemeinsam, einen Film/Programm schauen, ein Spiel spielen, vorlesen, über den Tag berichten und/oder gemeinsam essen?
10. Wie viele Zuhörer hat jedes Kind zu Hause/ An wie viel Personen kann er sich wenden?
11. Was tun Ihre Kinder gewöhnlich, nachdem sie von der Schule nach Hause gekommen sind bis zum Abend (in Stichpunkte)?
12. Kennen Sie die Ziele und Wünsche Ihrer Kinder?
13. Was tun Sie zur Unterstützung Ihrer Kinder die Schule/ die Bildung betreffend?