Language as Key to Educational Success (March 6, 2003)

Abstract

Responding to the shocking results of an international comparison of student performance (PISA), politicians and parents demand improvements in the school system, including better German-language instruction for migrant children since German language skills are the key to educational success in the German school system.

Source

Language is the Key to Educational Success

PISA DEBATE—Following new insights from the Pisa Study, Berlin, too, is once again discussing the percentage of foreign children in school classes. Educational policymakers want better German language instruction—for all children.

Parents in Berlin have apparently known this for a long time, but educational policymakers have only noticed it recently: when 20 percent of children come from an immigrant background, the achievements of the entire class plummet, as scholars note in the Pisa Study, whose newest partial findings are being presented officially today, Thursday. In Berlin, educational experts believed that the critical figure was 50 percent. On average across Berlin, the 20 percent mark has already been reached. The school authority for the state of Berlin has recorded 30 schools with more than 80 percent foreign pupils, and in an additional one hundred schools the quota is over 60 percent. However, in recent years many German families and better-off foreign parents have already enrolled their children in other schools, before the 50 mark was reached. What can be done? The new Pisa findings were not very surprising to educational experts, even if the figures provide no information specifically for Berlin. Because pupils at comprehensive and non-academic secondary schools (*Gesamt- und Hauptschulen*) did not participate in the Pisa Study in sufficient numbers, Berlin was left out of the survey, as we reported. “The new figures are alarming nevertheless,” said Senator of Schools Klaus Böger (SPD) on Wednesday. He believes this affirms his political approach, since he has been promoting increased language teaching for months now. For example, Böger commissioned the study “Bärenstark” (Strong as a Bear), which tests the language skills of preschool children. According to the findings, not just foreign children but one-third of German children as well are not proficient in German and could not follow what was going on in the classroom. “Language is the key to educational success,“ states Böger. All children in Berlin should now be tested before starting school so they can receive extra instruction where needed. Böger wants the test to be repeated before children begin the second grade. This policy is supposed to go into effect beginning with the next school year. The Senator has the support of educational experts from the other parties. The CDU, however, demands more serious consequences from the language test. Those who fail the test must not be allowed to enroll. “If the children are not allowed to go to school, that pressures the parents to devote more attention to their linguistic competence,” said Goetze. The educational experts reject a quota of no more than 20 or 30 percent foreigners at Berlin schools. The general view is that this is not feasible. Nobody wants to blame teachers for the falling standards, either. “Training needs to be improved,“ noted the Green Party politician Özcan Mutlu, a member of Berlin’s state parliament. The university did not prepare teachers for the deficient language skills and the high proportion of children whose mother tongue was not German. The proportion of foreign pupils is the highest in the Mitte district. This is the result mainly of the high proportion of foreigners in Wedding and Tiergarten, which merged with the former East Berlin district of Mitte. In Berlin there are some 30 schools with more than 80 percent pupils of immigrant background and about one hundred schools with more than 60 percent

foreign children. Many of them still need to learn German.

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