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Short report “Growing up multilingual”

Scientific accompanying study on the volunteer projects under the “ici. here together.” programme

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Short report on the accompanying research on the "ici. here together." programme in the "Growing up multilingual" field of intervention

Introductory remarks

The acquisition and mastery of local language(s) are an integral part of integration policy. Some even view it as *the* “key to integration”, enabling access to education, the labour market and social participation. At first glance, therefore, rapid immersion in the language of the host country appears to be *the* goal, equipping people who have immigrated to Switzerland with the means to embark on the integration process as quickly as possible.

While this can be a guide for adults, the situation is different for children of parents who speak a language other than the local language. Growing up in a protected environment is crucial for them and their development. This also means that their parents speak their native language with them. Research has repeatedly shown that this contributes to children’s development and a secure family atmosphere.

Based on these findings, the programme management and advisory board of the “ici. here together.” funding programme have undertaken to support volunteer projects focusing on the multilingual upbringing of pre-school children. By supporting projects that are deliberately “at odds” with standard integration policy language support, they seek to create spaces for children (and their parents) in which their “foreign” or "imported" languages can be valued outside the family setting. The creation of meeting places where all languages (including the local language) are valued aims to facilitate contact between families with common first languages and encourage encounters across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Projects in the “Growing up multilingual” funding area

Projects related to growing up multilingual can take place in the most diverse settings, pursuing (slightly) different objectives and addressing various target groups. The following examples illustrate the wide range of services available. To a certain extent, they are ideal-typical and reflect the range of possible options. What they all have in common is the promotion and appreciation of multilingualism.

Telling a story in different languages

The focus of a playgroup for pre-school children is a fairy tale told in multiple languages (ideally, in the first languages of the children present) by (several native-speaker) playgroup leaders. By listening, the children get to know the sound of different languages and also recognise their own first language. Such projects also involve working with aids such as puppet theatre figures. Some projects offer a case of materials that can be borrowed by crèches, volunteer groups or libraries.

Understanding the intercultural library as an inclusive (meeting) place

In addition to the traditional lending of books in various languages, an intercultural library regularly organises events that focus on multilingualism. They focus on the intercultural library as an inclusive place and usually offer a kind of meeting café. These events can be organised in various ways: there may be readings or storytelling sessions, or people may bring their own stories/books and present them. The local language or a mutually agreed language is used for communication between native speakers of different languages.

Cultural encounters through movement, singing and playing music

A Capoeira programme for children not only conveys the movements typical of this martial arts style, but is also a way of getting to know and playing various musical instruments. By

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singing the songs together, children of Brazilian, Portuguese and African origin can access the cultural programme in a playful way and in the local language.

(The project mentioned refers to Capoeira. However, dance and other types of movement may also be very well suited to practising several languages through play).

Bringing families with a common first language together while facilitating their acquisition of the local language

An offer for children and their parents who have demonstrably greater obstacles to overcome in learning German or French (for example, because they have a different alphabet) is designed to bring them together to learn as a group. The focus should not only be on learning the local language but also on appreciating and cultivating their own language.

(Such offers are most similar to the native language and culture courses known as “HSK” organised by many language communities to maintain and preserve their own culture).

Introducing children to multilingualism when parents attend German or French courses

Children of parents attending a German or French course are looked after by volunteers or trained playgroup leaders while their parents attend their language class. The children get to know the local language and the languages spoken in the group through singing, storytelling and games. They are also encouraged to speak their own mother tongue.

Qualify volunteers to run (multilingual) playgroups

A trained playgroup leader runs a playgroup with multilingual volunteers. While the volunteers are primarily involved in the day-to-day running of the project for their first language, thus emphasising the appreciation of languages other than the local one, they gain experience and skills as playgroup leaders. This can qualify them for a possible later career entry into this profession.

Testing and recommending concepts for multilingual preschool education

One of the projects explored ways in which children can develop multilingually at kindergarten. Based on the experience gained, the project managers drew up an information sheet for institutions working in the pre-school sector to raise awareness of the benefits of a multilingual upbringing. Find below a project link and flyer:

https://proenfance.ch/un-depliant-pour-soutenir-le-plurilinguisme-et-leveil-aux-langues-de-loffre-daccueil-de-lenfance

https://proenfance.ch/images/Prestations_locales/Depliant_EncouragementEnfance_Web.pdf

The accompanying study: research question and methodological approach

The Institute of Early Childhood Education 0 to 8 years at St. Gallen University of Teacher Education was instructed to carry out the scientific study accompanying the "Growing up multilingual" focus area.

The researchers based the accompanying study on two questions:

- What strengths, challenges and solution strategies are evident in projects that encourage parents to cultivate their children’s family language? How do these projects manage to address important topics for parents and get them to participate?
- How do language practice and attitudes towards languages manifest themselves in relation to growing up multilingual in families? Can we identify distinct attitudes and language practices?

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the project managers of eight projects.

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They discussed the experiences and challenges encountered during the project, particularly with regard to the promotion of multilingualism.

A questionnaire was developed to record language practices within the families and the parents' attitudes towards the languages. The questionnaire was made available in 12 languages via QR code for answering on a mobile phone. The questions were provided for listening, and symbols were selected for the answers. This new and innovative format ensured easy accessibility for the respondents. The questions on the parent questionnaire were answered on site as part of the project, but the participants remained anonymous. In total, 84 parents took part in the survey.

Results of the accompanying study

The results of the interview analysis show that the projects' offers focus on a specific target group, which is transparent in their day-to-day project work. Those responsible for the project endeavour to adapt the offer and activities to the family circumstances and needs of the visitors. They also emphasise the motivation and commitment of all employees and volunteers as positive.

Maintaining a respectful and trusting relationship with their visitors is important to the project managers. In addition, they wish to support the participants in their integration into Switzerland by offering easily accessible services and personal dialogue. The various attitudes, lifestyles and languages both of the countries of origin and Switzerland should be reflected. Living this cultural and linguistic diversity in everyday project life is seen as both an enrichment and a challenge.

The project managers agree that the appreciation of multilingualism and the cultivation of the first or family language are important and should be practised in their programmes. One of the challenges identified is that multilingualism and individual first languages are judged differently in local society and politics.

The parent survey impressively demonstrated that the projects succeeded in addressing the target group of families with young children with first languages other than the local language. This can be seen as a great success.

With regard to language practice in the family, the results of the parent survey show that the majority of families use their first language very frequently at home. It is important to the parents that the children speak their first language. However, it is equally important to them that the children can learn the local language. The language constellations of the parents also vary greatly; in some families, the local language is also the family language. Families differ in their approach to languages and their attitude to promoting the first and local languages.

Language-focussed recommendations

Based on the research literature and the results of the accompanying study, the researchers have formulated recommendations focussing on the use of language.

1. All languages are important: family languages and local languages

Research shows that early multilingualism is important for children's development. Family languages should be cultivated within the family. It is important that parents speak their first language with their children. This is crucial not only for their language development but also for the relationships within the family and the child's sense of identity. Early and natural acquisition of the local language is important for the integration and educational career of children.

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Children learn languages by playing with other children. Meeting places like the "Growing up multilingually" projects bring children into contact with other children speaking the same first language, other first languages and the local language.

All the languages are also important for parents: maintaining the first language and learning the local language. Parents are encouraged to find an appreciative and pragmatic approach to their specific language constellation in the family.

2. Recognising and cultivating multilingualism

The projects and meeting places are to foster a culture in which all languages are appreciated. The local language should not be the only language of communication: visitors, volunteers and employees should be encouraged to speak their own first language and other languages in the project.

Actively utilising linguistic resources in the team

Project managers, volunteers and employees are trained to utilise their own language resources and the resources of the participants. They should also be taught that every first language is equally important. This allows them to use their own first language as role models in the project and simultaneously promote the acquisition of the local language. Switching between languages and ongoing spontaneous translation *("translanguaging"*) help understanding and show a lively appreciation of all languages.

Project managers, volunteers and employees reflect together on how they can strengthen the culture of multilingualism in the project or at the meeting place. This includes both oral language in communication and familiarisation with written languages. Approaches include, for example:

- Visitor networking: find out which language is a visitor's first language and bring them into contact with other families speaking the same language, encouraging them to use it.
- Target and approach key individuals from language groups that are not yet represented.
- Offer information translated into numerous languages.
- Use interpreters and multilingual key persons.
- Perform greetings in multiple languages, either in the group or individually.
- Alternatingly emphasise specific languages (e.g. stories, nursery rhymes, singing and dancing).
- Offer multilingual picture books.
- Organise rooms clearly, use pictograms.
- Incorporate various cultural traditions of the participants (e.g. cooking, festivals).

There are many ways to grow up multilingual

The language constellations in families are very diverse. Parents' attitudes to language support also vary greatly: some families emphasise that they actively promote the first language, other families see less of a need for early support, and for other families, the local language is one of the family languages. For the projects, this means accepting this diversity of language practice and attitudes and offering different programmes.

3. Reflecting linguistic diversity in the programmes

When designing the programmes, the focus is on the diversity of topics, languages and target groups.

Language-orientated programmes for maintaining the first language

Playgroups or parent-child groups are offered for a specific first language. This strengthens the children's acquisition of their first language, as encounters with other children are important for language acquisition.

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Parents are offered a meeting place where they can get to know each other and exchange ideas, for example, during joint activities. This gives them space for their language and cultural expressions.

Networking with the local library could be a way to make families aware of offers such as "Schenk mir eine Geschichte" (give me a story) and the books available in the various first languages. It is important that families are encouraged to give their child access to the written form of the first language. Children should have first encounters with the written language (e.g. picture books in their first language, multilingual picture books).

Multilingual programmes

Playgroups, toddler groups and open play programmes foster multilingualism. The local language is central to communication, and the participants' various languages are also present. Mixing languages is seen as normal for multilingual project managers, employees and volunteers (translanguaging). They use their entire language repertoire. Parents are encouraged to use their first language with their children. In this way, multilingualism is made visible and experienced as an everyday occurrence. When interacting with families who speak other languages, the local language is often the language of communication. Other common languages are also used. The aim is to promote understanding and encounters.

Parent education, counselling services and leisure activities with childcare

Parents have many thoughts about their children's (multilingual) upbringing. The project managers and employees use their knowledge and their own experience to support the families. Parent education programmes and informal counselling are available.

The parents need specific support services, such as language courses, help with completing tax returns or information about the school system.

Leisure activities such as cycling, sewing and cooking are also very important ways of fostering encounters.

All these services, parental education, counselling, support and leisure activities are to be complemented by childcare services. In childcare, the local language is often the main language of communication. The childcare volunteers receive further training in language development through play. They also use their own multilingualism.

4. Further developing quality

Research has shown that the quality of early education programmes determines whether they lead to participation and equal opportunities for children. Several basic attitudes and structures are important for language-focussed recommendations to be effective:

Participatory and resource-orientated

The projects and meeting places ensure that visitors can get involved: all skills can be shared, and visitors, volunteers and employees learn from each other. Visitors can contribute their strengths and interests to the programmes or start their own programme.

Easily accessible and needs-orientated

A meeting place (e.g. a café) with a play area is easy to access. Drinks are available for purchase, but there is no obligation to buy anything, as visitors can also bring their own food.

Ease of access is also important for specialised counselling services. These can be included in parent education programmes and parent-child groups, but they should also be present at the meeting place (mother-father counselling, job placement, budget counselling, social work, educational counselling, school).

A periodic review, e.g. by means of (self-)evaluation, is important. Families can be asked anonymously or in person how they rate the services and what other services and support they would appreciate.

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