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Raising Empowered Children

**A Parent's Guide to Addressing
Racism and Discrimination**

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Daycare and Schools

The Problematic Nature of Discrimination in Education and the Absence of Cultural Sensibility

In high school, a Muslim girl wearing a headscarf tells the head of her youth group that she is being bullied by her teacher because of her headscarf. She bears it every day out of fear that speaking up could have a negative impact on her grades and her high school degree (*Abitur*).

Racism in class: A biology teacher talks about studies which claim that “Africans have smaller brains”, and does not distance himself from these theories. Afro-German students are insulted, but they have no recourse against his statements.

The German education system has been criticized by the European Union (ECRI) and the United Nations (CERD) for its highly selective system and lack of equal opportunities. Children with immigrant backgrounds are disproportionately referred to special-needs schools (*Förderschule*) and main schools (*Hauptschule*). On the other hand, these children and adolescents are also underrepresented in rec-

ognized academic high schools (*Gymnasium*). A simple explanation for these statistic realities could be that “children with immigrants are stupider.” But of course, this is nonsense. Rather, the problem stems from the selectiveness of the German education system (Fereidooni 2011, Antidiskriminierungsstelle 2013). This has been illustrated through research results in intercultural pedagogy and sociological findings on institutional discrimination in Germany. According to these findings, the current education system does not provide equal opportunities to low-income families, students whose parents do not have a university degree or are not native German speakers. They do not enjoy the same chances as middle-class children from non-immigrant families, or whose native language is German. For example, there are high language requirements at academic high schools and it is expected that a lot of learning happens at home. Families with parents who have university degrees and are financially well-off have an advantage, of course, because they can help their children better as educational residents, and can also afford to pay for tutoring. This does not mean that they cannot have an immigrant background. Unequal opportunities are amplified by the bias of some teachers, who have a strong influence on these children’s education—whether in elementary school or during their transition into secondary school—, and who let themselves be guided by stereotypical attributions and bias when evaluating the capabilities of children from immigrant families. I am not saying that all teachers are biased and discriminate. There are countless teachers working towards equal opportunities, who want to help all of their students succeed and are respectful towards all of them. My criticism is directed towards educators who have not yet reflected on the clichés that guide their evaluations.

A current study by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Office on the educational situation of children from immigrant families from 2013 provides further examples of problematic areas (Antidiskriminierungsstelle 2013). These include:

- ▶ The lack of protection for children from immigrant families from discrimination.
- ▶ That children from immigrant families suffer under the biases and incorrect attributions, such as lower capabilities, they are subject to. They are more likely to receive a recommendation for special-needs education (ibid.: 15).
- ▶ That students with a Turkish name or a “low-income background” are more likely to receive lower evaluations from their teachers. Children from immigrant families are less likely to receive recommendations for academic high schools, even if they have similar grades to their non-immigrant peers (ibid.).
- ▶ That the capabilities of Muslims who wear headscarfs are underestimated on a regular basis (ibid.: 16).

Racial biases can also include positive attributions, such as “Asians are hardworking and are good at math.” In general, heritage, culture and belonging to a non-Christian religious group are three obstacles that stand in the way of positive expectations by teachers. On this note, Mechthild Gomolla conducted an interesting study on this subject in 2009, in which she investigated the criteria by which teachers provide their recommendations for secondary schools. Her findings show that language deficiencies and a supposed lack of motivation by the student are often provided as reasons for not providing recommendations.

This discriminatory behavior is problematic. Discrimination is a serious injury in a holistic sense. Such denigrations and repudiations have serious consequences for the motiva-

tion of students to learn, as well as their achievements and health.

The intercultural educator Toan Nguyen summarizes that “a denied sense of recognition and belonging rattles the health, wellbeing and learning performances of students, who are discriminated against.”³ In his report, Nguyen refers to studies by the Network Against the Discrimination of Muslims (*Netzwerk gegen die Diskriminierung von Muslimen*) and the ADNB of the TBB. They illustrate that the discrimination of students leads to frustration, resignation, insecurity and alienation. In his own qualitative study of racism in schools, the students he interviewed stated that they did not trust their teachers, educational material and school itself anymore (Nguyen 2014). They transferred to other schools or dropped out entirely. Some even became sick from the permanent bullying at school. The experience of having to deal with racist rejection and biases, as well as having to prove yourself, over and over again, is an extra burden on children and adolescents searching for their identity.

Katherina, an Afro-German participant in the study I conducted for my doctoral thesis (*Akkulturationsstress von Migranten* 2010), provides a vivid example on the ramifications that racist experiences have on the psyche and everyday life of children. She pointed to the “constant stress” of having to meet performance requirements and defend herself against prejudice:

“The foundation for my non-existent belief in my own capabilities and achievements was laid early in my education. You

3 This correlates with findings in child psychology, according to which emotional insecurities can lead to psychosomatic afflictions (Largo 2000: 233).

don't just have to learn and meet performance requirements, you also have to defend yourself against prejudices. That means you have to exert yourself more than everyone else. You need more energy, in order to prove that you can meet requirements. So school means stress, constant stress." (Katherina, Afro-German educator)

In the rest of the interview, she underscored the importance of social support. This correlates with the statements of the other participants in my study. If you do not receive support at home, it is difficult for a young person to deal with the—sometimes massive—discrimination by teachers and fellow students. Without social support, young people can sometimes even fall into despair due to the discrimination they face.

The Lack of Intercultural Sensitivity

According to a resolution by the Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs from December 2013 on "Intercultural Education in Schools", schools are required by the government to "develop and implement educational concepts on diversity" (Kultusministerkonferenz 2013: 2). The "guiding principles" further state:

"In order to nurture the talents of all of our students, we need schools that cherish diversity and are devoid of open and hidden racism. Furthermore, they must consciously adjust themselves to the heterogenous social, cultural and linguistic needs of their students." (ibid.: 3)

A study by the Council of Experts on Migration (*Sachverständigenrat für Migration*) on "Segregation in Schools" finds that two thirds of all young teachers do not feel properly prepared to deal with intercultural, multilingual classes.