

23. February 2023

Integration Council

## Discussion round on Mother Language Day

Being able to understand and speak several languages is comparable to a "treasure" that needs to be promoted. This was the consensus of the participants in a discussion group that met on "Mother Tongue Day" at the Bocholt Textile Factory. The day has been proclaimed by UNESCO to "promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism". More than 80 guests accepted the invitation of Mayor Thomas Kerkhoff and Juan Lopez Casanova, Chair of the Bocholt Integration Council.

The working group "Arriving and Staying" had developed the idea of such an event, above all to highlight the importance of teaching the language of origin (HSU) for the development of children with an international family history. "In addition to all Bocholt schools, we also invited the kindergartens and the council to further sensitise them to the topic," said Bruno Wansing, Integration Officer of the City of Bocholt, who had organised the event together with the working group and the Adult Education Centre Bocholt-Rhede-Isselburg.

After a minute's silence for the earthquake victims in Turkey and Syria, moderator Raimund Stroick began the interviews - initially in Low German. "Kiek es an, usse Bürgermeister kun platt kürn", Stroick joked towards Mayor Kerkhoff. He replied, "I understand everything, but I'm a generation too late to speak it." He emphasised in further conversation that the mother tongue is of immense importance and that the Integration Council, the Integration Office and the Working Group had hit a nerve with this event. "We are so multicultural here, I think that's great."



## Lazy Germans?

He only wants to describe the Germans as "lazy" to a certain extent. "We just let ourselves be quickly put off," Kerkhoff emphasised. While other nations, when learning a foreign language, would "just speak away", "Germans are afraid and worried about making mistakes".

"If colleagues speak several languages, that of course helps us in this fast-moving world", Kerkhoff elaborated and announced that he wanted to determine the language competence in the city administration. "We will tackle this with a project at the University of Police and Public Administration Münster, I am in constant contact with the Integration Council on this."

In addition to Kerkhoff, the other panel members Juan Lopez Casanova, Dr. Isabelle Mathe, Prof. Dr. Anja Wildemann and Teuta Dervishi were then given the opportunity to present their own views on the topic of mother tongue or multilingualism in 60 seconds.

While Juan Lopez Casanova wants to use the potential of multilingualism and not talk about deficits, for Dr Isabelle Mathe multilingualism is a matter of the heart: "The capital of languages moves society forward. Language is the basis for communication and peaceful coexistence, I wish for communication, multilingualism, exchange." Thomas Kerkhoff spoke of a "gift of the second language". He had been able to experience this himself with friends whose children were growing up bilingual. "This is a gift, we must promote this treasure."

Prof. Dr. Anja Wildemann would like teachers to dare to use languages in the classroom. "Both monolinguals and multilinguals benefit from this." HSU teacher Teuta Dervishi, who teaches Albanian, also cares about the mother tongue. "I teach the children their mother tongue, which is about appreciation and enrichment."



## German a prerequisite for integration?

Juan Lopez Casanova is a Spanish German, married to an Italian woman and blessed with two daughters who have Italian, Spanish and German passports. It is often said that the German language is a prerequisite for successful integration. "That is too short-sighted," emphasises Lopez Casanova. "Children who can't speak, read and write their language of origin don't learn German properly either."

It is important to know and recognise one's own culture, he says. "If that's not the case, there are also problems with the 'new' culture and no understanding of cultural differences can develop in the first place." The mother tongue as a whole can only be learned in class. "I also learn German in class," says Lopez Casanova. "Here we have to find the right approach to the parents and make them understand the importance of teaching the language of origin." The questioning system definitely needs to be reworked. "It is not just a question of making the questionnaire available online. I am of the opinion that the parents must be addressed directly and we must not shift the responsibility onto the teachers."

Dr Isabelle Mathe is sure that language can create more proximity to citizens. "Language is like building bridges between cultures," says Isabelle Mathe. In this context, language is powerful and this power is something positive: "However, this only applies if the values behind it are also positive," Mathe emphasises. Pure, non-verbal communication is not enough.

Stroick reported on an experience in a neighbouring country when German and Dutch children spoke in German, English and Dutch in confusion, just like that, and then immediately followed up with the question of what the children should be trusted with. "Trusting the children is so important, but with structure and guidance. I have to be able not only to speak the language, but also to read and write it, and that's the booster," Mathe emphasised. Language-of-origin teaching is the method that shows what I have achieved. It is important to expand capacities here, he said.

"In addition, it is important that all participants get as much information as possible, the better the result will be and in the end it is a wealth for all of us, for society and for peace," Mathe is sure. The language-of-origin classes also promote the children's ability to solve problems, as university professor Dr. Markus Hengstschläger coined the term, he said. "This creates a breadth in education that is very significant for society as a whole," Mathe concludes.





**The diversity of language can also be used in regular lessons - and this is not only about the so-called elite languages English, French, but about all of them.**

Prof. Dr Anja Wildemann

## Abolish insurmountable hurdles

Mayor Thomas Kerkhoff spoke of "language as his tool of the trade. We lawyers in particular attach great importance to formulations, I think the variance of the German language is fantastic." He said that the systematics of his large Latinum had helped him in learning other languages. Above all, he has respect for people who can switch fluently from one language to another.

Language of origin classes should also convince children to learn a language other than their own. The offers of the HSU had to be made better known, said Kerkhoff. "Perhaps the registration procedure could be simplified by making it digital. We should remove insurmountable hurdles here very quickly." There should also be a rethink in the admission of teachers from other countries. "Does it always have to be the German state examination or can the hurdles be lowered in order to be able to expand the HSU's offer?" asked Kerkhoff.

Prof. Dr. Anja Wildemann lectures and researches at the Rhineland-Palatinate Technical University of Kaiserslautern-Landau and is involved in primary school pedagogical research with a focus on language education. "The diversity of language can also be used in regular classes, and this is not just about the so-called elite languages English, French, but all of them," Wildemann said. Integration should not be seen one-sidedly, he said, but reciprocally. "Too often, many people have their deficit glasses on and the positive is not seen enough," Wildemann knows. She advocates an understanding between HSU, German and foreign language teaching.

The framework conditions for HSU also need to be improved. She wants to encourage teachers to dare to use several languages in their lessons. "We don't do research for research's sake, but to pass on the results to future teachers in their studies. She would also like to see more money put into education, the whole thing put on a much larger footing and always accompanied by scientific research. The second and perhaps most important wish is to dare to do something. "There are many great ideas, and we should support them accordingly.

"We can expect a lot from the children," Wildemann emphasises. Neurolinguistic studies show that children find it easy to learn or acquire languages up to the age of six. "After that, it becomes more difficult. That's why it would be important to start as early as possible with a second or third language and accept the level."



## "Many children lost"

Teuta Dervishi works at the root. She is an HSU teacher for the Albanian language. For her, integration is when you keep your own culture, learn the new culture and value both. Through HSU, the children learn to read and write in addition to just speaking. "This is a treasure that we need to promote much more," says Teuta Dervishi. For her, she says, it is often difficult to maintain a balance in the classroom when teaching mixed groups with a wide range of skills. "I always try to keep it fun, even if it is the afternoon class."

Many children are lost, she says, because they can speak but not read and write, because the school knowledge is simply missing. At the same time, HSU in Germany is a great offer, she said. "These three hours a week should be used, in other countries you have to pay extra for it." Learning the language at home is not enough. "Then the vocabulary, grammar and also social contacts are missing," Dervishi emphasises. "Actually, HSU is a blessing, it's just that many people are simply not aware of it." She would like to see help with lesson planning and the same in-service training for HSU teachers that teachers in schools would receive.

The discussion that followed was open, provocative and also emotional. In particular, it was about valuing language for a person's identity, using linguistic resources and approaching the whole thing as an issue for society as a whole. Monolingualism is a myth and multilingualism is the normal case, be it dialects like the "Bokeltse Platt" or other regional features of the language.

Here, it is not only the origin that plays a role. A young woman in the audience said that she was multilingual because she had gone to school in different countries for several years and that she appreciated this multilingualism in her everyday work as a doctor. Maria Störzer felt that the whole organisational procedure of HSU registration lacked feedback from the district government, the education authority, on how much interest there was in the different languages: "If I can't tell the parents how many have registered for HSU in the language in question, interest drops, the parents are frustrated, the teachers too."

There was also criticism that the grade in HSU appears on the report card under "Remarks" and not as a separate grade. In addition, there are many nationalities of origin in the schools, and HSU is only offered for some of them. Jan-Bernd Lepping, head of the Euregio-Gymnasium, demanded that people with an international family history should be encouraged to become teachers. He said there was only one teacher with such a family history.

# Contact

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## Bruno Wansing

**Integration/Soz.Leistungen und Wohnen**

**Soziales**



[Send e-mail](#)



[+49 2871 21765-612](tel:+49287121765612)