

Special Report: Discrimination in kindergarten

Nursery for discriminated children in Hamburg

To find solutions to the problem of discrimination against children of African descent in German kindergartens, parents have had to take initiatives and establish alternatives. For example, in Berlin there is Kwetu, a self-help kindergarten founded by parents of Black children (see the April/May 2003 issue of this magazine). Maimouna Kinderladen* in Hamburg, which marked its 10th anniversary recently, is another successful story of a similar initiative



Barbara Maassen

The children of Maimouna nursery school with their teachers, Dora from Ghana and Damarys from Cuba

The beginning

The idea of Maimouna was born 17 years ago. Since 1987, the parents of Black children held regular meetings at the "Sokoni" café which is part of the African-German social centre in Altona. Their experiences with nurseries and schools were similar: if their children weren't discriminated against, whether in a rather subtle or more blatant manner, they were reduced to playing the role of the exotic little spot of colour.

Neither the nursery and school teachers nor the parents of White children showed themselves willing to deal with this problem. Their answer was always the same whenever discussions about racism were started at parents' meetings or on other occasions: "You are over-sensitive, we don't really mean it like that."

At some point, the parents' group had

enough of this and in 1993, they started their own nursery called 'Maimouna Kinderladen', despite the many obstacles and difficulties.

Concept and structure

The profile of the 'Kinderladen' is not only defined by the fact that we unite many different nationalities under one roof. In contrast to some of the other multicultural nurseries, it has developed an anti-racist concept as well as intercultural skills that enable it to act in a professional and anti-discriminatory way. This conceptual framework is based on understanding migration, different conditions of life, the problem of 'illegalisation' in the immigrant communities, controversial forms of communication, knowledge of languages and political and legal structures.

On a more personal level, a certain degree of sensitivity for the creative and flexible

tackling of contradictions and insecurities is required. Maimouna is run by a team of migrant teachers with multilingual skills and equal rights since there is no internal hierarchy, and qualifications from all over the globe are accepted. Maimouna is not an isolated island but as an integral part of the area, has an impact on the youth welfare planning in the borough as well as on numerous educational training centres.

The educational work

Maimouna provides care for about 40 children ranging from age 1 to 14, most of whom are fluent in two or more languages. About 70 per cent of the children are of African descent, Ghana, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Togo, Sudan, Ethiopia and Mali being among their countries of origin. The main focus of the educational work is to support these children in finding and maintaining their identities in a society dominated by White people. This is achieved by promoting skills such as bilingualism, for instance, or the positive orientation towards Black role models and the development of life perspectives for migrant children other than careers in sports or music. The co-operation with the parents is most essential which is why any information provided is multilingual, and the parents' meetings are held in several languages.

Younger children of different ages are looked after in the "family group" whereas the after-school-club provides care for schoolchildren who meet here for lunch, homework and various activities. During the holidays, full-time care is provided.

The weekly programme runs from 6 am to 6 pm and offers activities such as German lessons, swimming, music, sports, sensorial perception training, excursions, creative workshops and different projects to both groups. In March, the nursery will move to a new location closer to St Pauli. There will be additional places available for children and the parents' café and the social welfare centre will be extended, offering language and orientation training courses for parents.

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* In contrast to a kindergarten, a 'kinderladen' is not a governmental but an autonomous institution, usually initiated and organised by a group of parents.