

# The Intercultural Waldorf School of Mannheim, Germany

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In an age of globalization, in which the world's population is growing and distances are shrinking, teachers have to find fresh ways to bring together highly disparate cultures. For instance, children from very diverse religious and cultural backgrounds can be brought together to study under the same roof, allowing children to experience—and come to respect—a great array of cultural traditions and festivals. A new inner-city Waldorf school in Mannheim, Germany, is attempting to form such a community. In the changing face of modern Europe, Mannheim is a city that has a total area of more than 90 square miles and a population of 324,000; of this total, twenty percent are immigrants attracted by the job market and fourteen percent are on welfare. This combination creates many social challenges.

As the second largest city in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, Mannheim boasts one of Europe's main ports, an inland harbor on the Rhine River. Listed as the seventh largest industrial area in Germany, it is home to many international companies from all industrial sectors. The life of commerce is expansive, but Mannheim has been identified as one of the German cities having particular problems with its adaptation to new economic structures.

The city is also home to several Waldorf initiatives: a dual track K–12 Waldorf school with

more than 900 students; several Waldorf kindergartens; a Waldorf curative school; and a Waldorf teacher training college. To this list can now be added the Freie Interkulturelle Waldorfschule Mannheim

(Independent Intercultural Waldorf School), founded to deal with the social and ethnic tensions of the city.



*Fig. 2—Mannheim Waldorf School, Interior*

The Mannheim Waldorf School (not to be confused with the Intercultural Waldorf School), the kindergartens, and the college are all housed in spectacular multi-million dollar buildings of anthroposophically organic design. The schools, which have gardens, sculpting studios, and large classrooms, are located in park-like settings. A separate building offers after-school artistic classes and other classes to children unable to attend the

Waldorf School. On the playground children mean-der among friends, chatting, jumping rope, and playing ball games. They



*Fig. 3—Mannheim Waldorf School*

are healthy, homogenous, and quick to say hello to visitors.

In stark physical and socio-economic contrast, the Mannheim district of Neckarstadt-West is a working class neighborhood with high population density. Here the percentage of foreigners is twice



*Fig. 1—Waldorf Teacher Training University, Mannheim*



*Fig. 4— The Intercultural School, Mannheim*

as high as the city average. The majority of immigrants come from Muslim countries. In this district there is a high concentration of socially challenged households (both German and immigrant), and a high proportion of unemployed persons (21%) and welfare recipients. A high proportion of public school graduates is inadequately prepared for vocational training and cannot easily integrate into the job market. Women, in particular, need additional support when they look for vocational training or qualification. Although, on average, girls get better school grades than boys, they have problems getting access to the vocational qualification market, especially when they have immigrant backgrounds.

The children and adolescents in Neckarstadt-West, especially those between birth and the age of 14, are strongly affected by the poor socio-economic situation of this district. The annual reports of the city show that the most urgent needs or problems are child guidance and education. For children with immigrant backgrounds, the most pressing shortcoming is insufficient knowledge of the German language. Additional problems result from the public school system, which does not properly take into account the needs of immigrant children, who often find themselves growing up simultaneously in two different cultures. Many have to learn two different languages at the same time.

### Visiting the Intercultural School

To address these challenges and other increasing problems in society, the Independent Intercultural Waldorf School was opened in the heart of the immigrant neighborhood. I had the opportunity to visit this school recently during a

stop in Mannheim. As my colleague parked the car, I looked around but could not locate the school. I saw a discount store, a Turkish supermarket, an Asian shop, a gymnasium, and a telephone center. A sign above a glass door that opened to stairs leading to the second floor of what had been a furniture salesroom was the only indication that a school was housed in this commercial building. The interior spaces were friendly and, because of large windows, full of light. The furniture was varied and had been donated by other schools. As I passed smiling teachers in the winding corridors, I could sense an air of excitement in the echoes of children singing in unfamiliar languages and playing folk tunes from distant lands on recorders.



*Fig. 5— The Intercultural School, Mannheim*

Currently, the school has about 150 students from twelve nations. Turkish is the mother tongue for approximately 50 percent of the students. The social background, education, occupation, and social status of the parents vary greatly. If parents cannot afford school fees, the school helps them as much as possible. Close contact with the parents is a priority of the school. The Independent Intercultural Waldorf School is a day school that takes a social-integration approach, demonstrating through its pioneering educational concept that



*Fig. 6— Children from the Intercultural School, Mannheim*



*Fig. 7— Children from the Intercultural School, Mannheim*

children from different backgrounds, nationalities, and religions can learn to live with one another.



*Fig. 8— Children from the Intercultural School, Mannheim*

### **The Differences in a Multicultural School**

The school's multiculturalism is used as an educational opportunity. The interdenominational curriculum, focused on human values, enables the integration of intercultural issues in many subjects. Which fairy tales and legends are told? How are annual festivals celebrated and how can cultural variety be experienced in real life? Which themes are to be included in history lessons? These are questions with which the college of teachers engages intensely. Each festival must be approached in a new way, since cultural elements from all regions of the world enter the experiential worlds of children, parents, and teachers of this school. Monthly festivals are based on an expression of an open meeting of cultures and on mutual respect.

Special attention is paid to language learning. An important aspect of the intercultural integrative education practiced at the school is the cultivation of an environment characterized by sound verbal communication and the differentiated use of language. These are necessary preconditions

for helping the children to widen their verbal repertoires.

Lessons are generally taught in German. From class one (first grade) onward, children also receive English lessons. In addition, children have a subject called "foreign language instruction"—including Polish, Russian, Turkish, Croatian, and Spanish—so that many of the children meet their native language in school. Music, dances, and songs of other cultures are also taught. Cross-cultural issues are used consistently in the teaching material in various projects and group activities.

Several projects are available to the older classes, such as:

- Movement and coordination training
- Reading projects
- Training of the senses
- Prevention of violence / conflict resolution drama and role play / communication
- Forestry
- Farming
- Social work
- Education
- Horticulture ("Living nature")
- Specific assistance with delayed development in children
- Training the capacity to learn
- Expanding on content from subject lessons

### **Goals of the Teachers**

The teachers express the following thoughts about the Intercultural School:

Our task is to create a school for all children, no matter what social class, which religion and culture—an education milieu to which all belong. Children should be encouraged to find both themselves and those different from themselves with

empathy. Waldorf schools worldwide work using a consistent educational model based on promotion instead of selection; learning without fear; no repeating of years; and no exclusion of children or sending away to other types of school; schooling of sensory awareness; artistic teaching methods; foreign language instruction from the first class [grade] onward; and active, hands-on learning geared toward the child's development. Because of its human and individual orientation, we see Waldorf education as the foundation for our educational practice. We strive to make social aspirations based on the Waldorf school a founding impulse—at the same time we know that we must look at the actual social and cultural situation in Mannheim-Neckarstadt and must learn to adapt our Waldorf pedagogy. We must be open, flexible, and always ready to be corrected by the children and our own observations.

We want not only to teach the children, but to give them a habitat in which they can flourish intellectually and artistically, and develop practical skills in a learning community. A perception of humanity lives within Waldorf education that sees cultural differences as rich and diverse. This is important for the mental development of children.

We are interested in the varied cultural worlds of the children and look forward to their diversity. We seek to refine our view for the possibility of individual development in each child.



*Fig. 9— Children from the Intercultural School, Mannheim*



*Fig. 10— Children from the Intercultural School, Mannheim*

### Study of the School's Validity

The Institut für Ausbildungsforschung und Berufsentwicklung (Institute for Educational Research and Career Development) in Munich was commissioned in the autumn of 2004 to engage in a study to document the development of the Intercultural Waldorf School. In an interim report on the evaluation, the commission came to the following conclusion:

The Independent Intercultural Waldorf School at Mannheim-Neckarstadt has already developed into a stable and well-functioning education facility. It has become an integral part of its town district and is enjoying growing demand. What began with a lot of idealism, 30 children, and two classes, today presents an education facility which functions well in every respect, where 22 teachers provide a full-time education to 150 girls and boys in six classes.

The parents support the school's intercultural and anthroposophical educational concept and are actively engaged in the process of shaping the school.

An extensive analysis of the children's educational and social development will soon be available, based on the commission's findings.

The Intercultural Waldorf School presents an excellent and intriguing model for inner-city schooling. Those interested may contact:

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