

Turkish community action in the Netherlands: Campaigning to retain mother-tongue education

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Classes in children's home languages used to be provided in the Netherlands during the primary school day. But recently, as in other European countries, including Denmark and Norway, such classes have been abolished. It seems that home languages are no longer admissible in the classroom – and some policy makers and politicians do not want these languages to be heard in school playgrounds either. The leader of a right-wing party in Denmark even proposed a ban on immigrant languages in the home, arguing that speaking languages other than Danish would block children's social and linguistic integration. In answer to such political moves, immigrant groups have developed their own strategies and solutions. In the Netherlands, this struggle has highlighted two important issues: that language policy often flies in the face of research, and that communities can resist policy changes by responding with their own initiatives.

Policies based on language ideologies

Dutch policy makers used three arguments for abolishing mother-tongue classes, none of which are justifiable according to current research. Instead, they reveal underlying negative ideologies concerning minority languages.

Argument A

'Home language instruction acts as a barrier to the integration of immigrant children'

This argument is only put forward with respect to immigrant minority languages. Learning English, for instance, is not considered to obstruct the social integration of English speaking children growing up in the Netherlands, and the learning of English is supported even in kindergarten. But where an immigrant language is concerned, policy makers display political resistance.

Argument B

'No scientific evidence is available to prove that a good basis in the first language leads to a strong basis in second language acquisition'

Policy makers are still using so-called scientific evidence from the 1960s. As reviewed in detail by Baker (2006), such arguments are old-fashioned and basically ideological in nature. Recent research, using more reliable methodology, has shown that well-grounded concept development in the first language has positive effects on the second language. The bilingualism literature is full of evidence in support of additive bilingual instruction but in an anti-immigrant era, there is no political support for these languages.

Argument C

'Home language instruction was done very poorly anyway - the teachers mostly did not have appropriate teaching qualifications'

If this were actually the case, the solution would not lie in stopping instruction but in improving the quality of teacher training programmes, providing appropriate pedagogic materials and increasing the status of these languages by making them part of the regular curriculum in schools. Instead, the classes were abolished, leaving 60,000 Turkish children deprived of maintaining their heritage language.

Community resistance to language policy

Creating a language policy does not guarantee its successful implementation. As pointed out by Lewis (1981: 262)

Any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitudes of those likely to be affected. In the long run, no policy will succeed which does not do one of three things: conform to the expressed attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes about the rightness of the policy; or seek to remove the causes of the disagreement. In any case, knowledge about attitudes is fundamental to the formulation of a policy as well as to success in its implementation.

Turkish community action in the Netherlands has proved the accuracy of Lewis's proposition. Turkish immigrants displayed a strong reaction against the new policy. A number of organisations issued declarations against the abolition of mother-tongue classes. In several cities, Turkish mothers organised protests and submitted thousands of signatures calling for withdrawal of the policy. All these protests showed that Dutch policy makers had made their decision without any consideration of the attitudes of the parents. Turkish mothers demanded Turkish instruction from the local schools, but their efforts were fruitless. Drawing on

political backing from the post-September 11 anti-immigrant backlash in mainstream society, the policy makers reiterated their rejection of home language instruction in schools. By sacking 1,400 mother-tongue teachers, they gave a strong message that an irreversible process had started. Yet, as Lewis (1981) stated, the success of a policy is not one-sided. If one of the parties does not recognise the legitimacy of the act, then implementation is difficult.

After the abolition of home language instruction, minority language communities began their own initiatives, both at national and local level, to maintain instruction for primary school children in an extra-curricular and complementary manner. The Arab community started organising mother-tongue classes in the local mosques. A number of Turkish religious organisations opted for the same strategy. However, realising this could lead to community language instruction becoming marginalised outside mainstream education, Turkish academics working at different Dutch universities formulated an alternative language policy. This had five successive stages:

- Preparation and mobilisation
- Dissemination and awareness raising
- Organising instruction based at local schools
- Resuming instruction
- Inspection

Preparation and mobilisation

The first stage aimed at mobilising Turkish community members against the abolition of mother-tongue teaching. An internet site was set up to inform parents, with the slogan *Türkçe için el ele* (Hand-in-hand for Turkish, www.turkce-icin-el-ele.nl), and in a very short period of time around 10,000 people registered their support for Turkish education. National and local media showed extensive interest, with coverage almost every day in Turkish-language newspapers. Having successfully completed the first stage, the Turkish-Dutch Education Foundation (*Stichting TON*) was established to gain an institutional identity.

Dissemination and awareness raising

The goal of the second stage was to raise further awareness of the importance of Turkish instruction. Within six months about 40 meetings were organised in towns and cities with a significant Turkish population. Turkish parents, mostly mothers, attended these meetings in large numbers. They heard lectures on the aims of the community action, as well as information concerning the importance of mother-tongue instruction for the cognitive and emotional development of children. These meetings

were extremely valuable because they revealed that most parents had been persuaded not to speak in mother-tongue to their children. Some mainstream schools had provided inaccurate information suggesting that if parents spoke in Turkish, children would not learn Dutch fully and would be disadvantaged in school. The second stage was therefore crucial for providing parents with accurate information in order to gain their support for Turkish classes. Parents were told that Turkish education needed to take place in schools rather than in mosques or community organisations.

Organising school-based instruction

After each meeting, a number of volunteers were nominated as the local representatives of the Turkish-Dutch Education Foundation, and given the responsibility of setting up Turkish classes. Their first task was to register all Turkish-speaking children aged 6 to 12. They then contacted the local school management and asked for classes to conduct teaching in extra-curricular hours. Some schools opened their doors wholeheartedly, but others demanded a huge rent for each class. In the municipality of Eindhoven for instance, the Board of Managers for Schools demanded €16 per hour per class, which meant paying around €40,000 per year. Such an enormous charge would prevent the establishment of Turkish classes in that city, so parents wrote protest letters to the Ministry of Education. The Minister, Maria van der Hoeven, sent a letter to all schools stating that they could not charge more than €5 rent per hour, but some local boards completely ignored this. Some school boards even suggested to parents that they should conduct Turkish instruction in local mosques instead. However, most schools co-operated with the Foundation and provided appropriate classrooms. Even though some religious Turkish organisations were prepared to offer places free of charge, the Foundation insisted that education needed to take place in children's mainstream schools. This goal has mostly been achieved.

Resuming instruction

Teachers have been selected by a commission of parents and educational specialists from the Foundation, in accordance with rules and conditions used by the Dutch Ministry of Education. The teachers are hired by the Foundation and paid through parental contributions. Turkish instruction has now resumed in schools, monitored by a group of local representatives. Because instruction takes place after school hours, two mothers are responsible for assisting the teachers in each school.

Inspection

In the final stage, teachers are inspected by educational specialists from the Foundation. Bi-monthly seminars are

organised to provide in-service training and promote increased interaction amongst teachers. Any teachers who could not fulfill the demands of the Foundation or who could not work in close co-operation with schools have been re-trained for better performance. This close cooperation between parents, teachers and the Foundation's specialists has improved the teaching-learning process and student numbers have increased.

Results of community action

Within a short period of time, the Foundation has acquired more than 40,000 members and now offers Turkish instruction for primary school children in over twenty municipalities across the country. At the moment, 3,500 children receive Turkish instruction in the schools they attend. The Foundation is successful in small cities where the parents are easy to mobilise. However, in large cities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam schools do not cooperate and Turkish instruction is provided by a number of local marginal groups. The Turkish Education Foundation tries to find common ground for Turkish instruction in schools but political resistance is hard to overcome.

This bottom-up push for instruction in Turkish has not found any political resistance in the Ministry of Education. The Minister herself expressed support for the activities of the Foundation. Yet she admitted that the Ministry could not provide any financial support at present due to the negative political climate in mainstream society.

The Foundation has multiple goals. As well as providing instruction in Turkish, the ultimate goal is pressurising policy makers for new legislation in which Turkish becomes part of the regular curriculum. Political lobbying and campaigns are planned to achieve this purpose. The Foundation aims to keep the matter of mother-tongue teaching on the agenda of both parents and schools. If this important issue loses its priority for parents, the struggle will be a lost cause. Because the Board of the Foundation is aware of this social reality, they aim to maintain the campaigning spirit through regular meetings.

Lessons to be learned

Turkish community action in the Netherlands has shown that if one of the parties does not accept the imposed language policy, a revision of the policy can be achieved. It has also shown that as well as official policy implemented by the government, there can be group-based policies to protect community interests. Because Turkish language is one of the most esteemed core values of Turkish identity, fear of losing their mother-tongue in the context of immigration has mobilised Turkish people

to set up their own language classes in the Netherlands. The reaction of Dutch policy makers is rather cautious at the moment, perhaps presuming that without financial resources and active guidance the Foundation cannot maintain these classes. The Turkish Education Foundation can always ask for financial support from the homeland, but the current Board of Directors prefers self-sustaining solutions. Because the majority of Turkish immigrants hold Dutch citizenship, the Foundation considers they are entitled to claim support from their own government in the Netherlands.

Finally – and importantly – the case of Turkish in the Netherlands demonstrates how the need to campaign actively for home language instruction can generate a new level of awareness and understanding of bilingualism among minority communities.

References

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