

## What are the current experiences in the Neukölln project?

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Ahmad Al-Sadi, a Palestinian who grew up in Jordan and holds a Ph.D. in regional planning with a focus on the catastrophe economy in refugee camps, tells us what the project has achieved so far, and what it has not yet achieved. Dr. Al-Sadi works in the Neukölln Citizens' Foundation and as an "intercultural moderator" – a carer who himself experienced the meaning of the word majority society. His stories tell of Nelson, Gül, and Samir (not their real names), but also of their parents, with whom we will start.

"Nothing keeps you here. No village, no family," is the sentence Ahmad Al-Sadi hears most frequently. And: "we are not used to these freedoms." He reports that overtaxed parents and children, who experience the neighborhood as liberating, literally don't understand each other anymore, that the relationships between men and women are broken. The divorce rate among Arab families rises dramatically. More and more young mothers have to cope on their own. The picture drawn by Al-Sadi has little in common with generally accepted notions about large families with authoritarian structures, who traditionally "hand their children over" to the schools, delegating all responsibility to them. His plea points in a different direction: "Invite the parents, or better still, visit them. They need information about their children, whom they no longer know, and they need help themselves."

But where is the knowledge about every single child which the parents need so desperately? At the schools? Ahmad Al-Sadi tells us about Samir, in the seventh grade, born in Berlin, with Lebanese parents. A teacher's note reads: "is undisciplined, bullies other pupils, frequent physical confrontations." The note does not point out that Samir speaks neither German nor Arabic well enough to follow the class. Of course, neither are such situations recorded like the one when he, sent out of the classroom, ran into Al-Sadi's arms, crying and saying, "my heart hurts because of the way the teachers treat me."

The conversation about Samir ends with three promises by the "Square Kilometer":

- Firstly, the project will help to ensure that teachers are competent and sensitive enough to perceive the learning progress as well as deficits of the children, and will seek to enter into a dialog with the parents.
- Secondly, it must keep assuring the trusting relationship to such carers as Ahmad Al-Sadid, who is addressed by both children and parents as "uncle."
- Thirdly, Samir's prospects for the future have been doubtful for a while. His teachers are overburdened, which is understandable in view of the fact that there are more than 25 pupils in his class who have more or less the same problems, and in view of the insufficient integration efforts by society at large and the educational system. Together with his teachers, many volunteers and professionals such as doctors and social workers, we will agree on which developmental perspectives Samir (and every single child) has and who will support him, as well as who will aid his supporters.

Samir's success at the end of tenth grade will be a yardstick to measure "Square Kilometer of Education" – and the cooperations which were set in place for that success will teach us almost everything about long-term change in the entire system.

Nelson and Gül show that these promises are more than just well-meaning dreams. Both attended the same school as Samir, and both finished the tenth grade, passing all their exams for graduation, which is by no means a matter of course. In addition, Nelson and Gül were the only ones whose exams were so good that they were able to go on to the next level of schooling, which qualifies students to apply to university. Nelson, a refugee from Africa who has been living in Berlin with his mother for five years, and Gül, a Turkish Berliner from birth, had the support of mentors of the "Square Kilometer" – university students like Safyah Hassan, Marco Gräber, and Robert Büttner, who helped small groups of 10<sup>th</sup> graders to prepare for their final exams, and in so doing became young role models. Their recipe for success was described by Gül and Nelson with a certain amount of astonishment: "They are really committed to us." Robert and Safyah would keep calling Nelson and others on the phone until they started attending their course, and Marco taught Gül, when nothing else was possible, on the staircase in front of her parents' apartment.

Nelson now actually attends a vocational school. Robert is helping him on a regular basis, and he is making progress. For Gül, continued support would have meant a loss of face. She started vocational training, but has since stopped. Dr. Al-Sadi is trying to convince her to work with Marco and Safyah again, and he is helping her with a new vocational start. For the "Square kilometer", this leads to a fourth promise: we will start a fellowship-mentor-program that will go beyond school.

The chances of the children in "A Square Kilometer of Education" increase the earlier their educational needs are addressed. In this project, it starts at the kindergarten stage. The strategy remains the same: observe the children, document their educational successes and deficits, inform and advise the parents in a way they can understand, offer individual support, cooperate with many players both inside and outside of the educational institutions, keep learning yourself, and change education in the neighborhood as a whole. We might precede each of these phrases with "be able to". This is why the qualification of kindergarten and school teachers an important task for "Square Kilometer" and its pedagogy workshop.