



Tandem

Taking multicultural pre-school to new levels

By Marcus Berry

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In the second of our expat company profiles, Swisster examines Tandem, an international pre-school in Zurich, Zollikon and Uetikon am See which uses multi-lingual concepts to enhance a young child's early education. CEO Sonya Maechler-Dent tells Swisster about Tandem's approach, curriculum and some of the challenges she's had to face along the way.

An expat search for suitable pre-schooling and day-care in Switzerland draws uncomfortable parallels with trying to find an apartment, except of course you have an added element: to decide whether to trust a bunch of strangers with the most precious and vulnerable element in your life - your child, an agonizing choice for any parent.

Watching Tandem CEO Sonya Maechler-Dent interact with children however, does much to dispel any misgivings. She possesses a natural affinity with kids and a sense of confidence which is clearly evident when explaining her multicultural approach to early education and day-care, where the teaching of languages plays a central role.

"We're not just teaching a little bit of English from one teacher and a bit of German from another. We're actually getting the children to understand that each language is reflecting a cultural perspective," she told Swisster.

A simple illustration of this approach can be understood through animal noises, which provide interesting and, for some maybe, unlikely sounding variations according to the language. In Japanese, pigs apparently go "boo, boo" instead of "oink, oink" Maechler-Dent tells me.

"The children will go to a farm, record the sounds and will come back will ask why this culture has one sound and another culture has a different one. We employ the same technique with proverbs, fairytales, expressions and stories to help the children understand why different cultures approach the same thing from a different perspective," she added.

On the Tandem website it says that the child becomes "quickly aware that there are many languages in the world" and the concept of teaching "forms the basis of internationally oriented thinking and tolerance".

The ultimate aim of this concept is to provoke questions. "If you initiate this kind of inquiry in several languages then you're going to provoke a lot more questions in a child that you would with just one," Maechler-Dent explained.

Catering for 3-7-year-olds, Tandem employs English, German and French, languages which Maechler-Dent is perfectly at home with, thanks to her own multilingual upbringing.

"The core of our stakeholders are families with double nationalities. Seventy per cent of the parents in a survey said that their children were already tri-lingual within the family, but we have a lot of Swiss families as well," she said.

With Swiss families on board, Tandem is winning a five-year battle that might have been lost had the Maechler-Dent's concept been less quality oriented and perhaps less innovative.

When the pre-school started up, it faced rigid early educational guidelines and regulations in canton Zurich, which emphasized play over education.

" There were a lot of barriers set up, but we approached the issue patiently, we got through it and we're now receiving a lot of support," said Maechler-Dent who had a crucial trump up her sleeve. " We also showed that we wanted to be part of the Swiss concept as well, the fact that we participated in local village life was important."

Looking back Tandem has come a long way she said. " It started as a small day-care school and from that we developed our own curriculum, now we've become very much a school and not just a day-care."

" Quality in early childhood is important. The children are learning, but through play, we keep the play, but it is a play aimed at broadening their horizons while keeping it multilingual," she said.

With three pre-schools already under her wing in canton Zurich, Tandem is now turning its attention to French-speaking Switzerland, hoping to export the programme to teachers and organizations with similar multicultural ambitions in early education.

Tandem considers itself a non-profit concern. The website says " fees have been calculated to cover basic costs as well as to invest in quality education."

More precise information about fees is available on demand.