A very ordinary school

The primary school in Yaiza (Colegio de Educación Infantil y Primaria de Yaiza)

In a municipality where there are increasingly more people from different countries living together, you cannot begin early enough to start the process of integration. A perfect example how integration of foreign children functions is offered by the public primary school in Yaiza. Of the 160 pupils who are going to the school this year, more than 50% are not Canarian. A big part of the foreign children come from Britain, but you will also find German, Nordic, Chinese and African children, as well as children from mixed couples. All of them are part of the international intake of this school.

For seven years Maria Teresa Villaverde Vialrelle has been the director of the Colegio in Yaiza and she sees this mix of nationalities as an enrichment as well as a challenge. "Five years ago the number of foreign pupils started to increase and we decided that it was important to integrate them, as well as their parents" said the director in a our interview. "The foreign parents value our school and we make every effort to get them involved in the day to day running of it."

A brochure with information about this year's curriculum was published in Spanish, English and French, demonstrating the international direction of the school. In this brochure the parents can find all the important information about the school year, the planned excursions and the numerous additional events that the school organizes. "We also noticed that a lot of the parents do not speak Spanish, therefore we offer all the information in other languages too. Often the children give their parents the first serious contact with the Spanish language", explains Maria Villaverde. "We also try to get parents to become involved in the events that the school organizes. For example, a group of English parents presented traditional Christmas songs during our Christmas celebrations. A Finnish mother is the second chairman of the parents association APA and a lot of the parents are actively helping to make the school more colourful and friendlier."

Entering the little school in Yaiza you immediately notice that integration is the major theme here. Hanging above the secretary's door is a big collage of planet earth, made out of photos of the pupils, on the walls you will find painted scenes with texts in different languages, and in the rooms and in the passages there are handicrafts or pictures of the last 'intercultural week'.

"The intercultural week is like a big exhibition where the children present objects or food from their home countries. Additionally we organize workshops, put maps of the countries on the walls, traditional songs and dances are performed, and last year a couple of parents presented a marionette play in French. With children from 17 different nations you get an immense variety, and at the same time they get to know other cultures and learn to respect them while they are playing together."

In general the harmonious tone of the school is very obvious. Although there are little quarrels, which is normal between children, the difference in their nationalities is never the issue. The pupils learn a lot of things in their everyday life with children from different nations: respect, tolerance and understanding are the positive effects of integrating from the beginning.

The elementary school of Yaiza is public and like all public schools free of charge. When the children are 3 years old they start the pre-school classes. At 12 they take exams to change to the Instituto. Basically the school is open to everybody, but residents and locals have priority.