

1 Toolbox: Networking

1.1 Reasons for networking



Schools have to actively involve parents in school life, if they want to improve their students' educational opportunities. At the same time, school is the only institution that can reach a large proportion of the population, that is to say, the parents of all school-aged children regardless of their ethnic and social background and their religious orientation. Thus school plays a key role in the integration of migrants and has a certain responsibility in this direction. School has responsibilities that do not correspond with its traditional role. For example, many parents with a low educational profile need very basic help and guidance for the education of their children. There also are many parents who first of all need practical help in dealing with everyday problems before they are able to play their part in the educational partnership with the school. Since language is a key factor for educational success, parents with a migration background often find motivation and support in learning the language of their receiving country. Schools are confronted with these and similar problems. They cannot be ignored with regard to the educational success of children and young people. However, it would be too much to ask for if schools took over all these tasks themselves. That is why schools need networks.

Schools have always profited from having partners in their community and their district. With regard to the large group of parents with a migration background, networking means much more than the creation of motivating teaching and learning places outside school. Only within an active network can school become an integration agency in the interest of children and young people.

By networking, the school can use and develop existing supportive structures for families. Networking protects and supports "ordinary people" and strengthens families. Networks also build bridges. When it comes to overcoming barriers and building low-threshold contacts, people or groups from the same migration background can be helpful.

With the help of supportive further education courses teachers must be empowered to create and manage projects.

Use networks

Networks create additional value in school:

- information increase and structure improvement.
- networks have a further education character.

Social networking connects information, makes individual consultancy available to all and combines parents' course offers. Networking also serves to tactically use resources in the districts, concentrates competences, creates access to target groups that aren't used to learning and supports opening the institutions for the issue of parents' education.

Networks follow other laws than organizations. Different cultures clash and thus conflicts of

interest and competition are a crucial part of networking. Furthermore, the integration of network projects in local structures is often necessary and they also bring their own momentum. Therefore, creating inter-organizational networks requires special competences from the protagonists involved.

The problems of structuring

The individual protagonists work on the basis of different legal foundations, aims, self-conceptions and resources. The organizational and institutional frameworks of the individual protagonists complicate networking, e.g. teacher working time in comparison to the opening times of stakeholders. The present strict separation between the professions and kinds of school hinders a balanced cooperation within the network. The individual institutions dispose of different terminologies and different information and communication structures. Often there is little knowledge of the network partner's work. In the final analysis, no partner can be "forced" to cooperate.

Creating inter-organizational networks requires special competence of all participants. Network maintenance requires fixed basic conditions.

Managing networks

The first step in networking for a school is to be open toward the district, taking part in district round tables, getting into contact and identifying potential partners. In order to win over these cooperation partners, existing network connections should be visualized and the advantages of networking highlighted. It is important to establish a binding basic structure. Who does what, the exchange of information, the flow of information and extent of cooperation must be settled. The participants must be able to formulate quality benchmarks and the aims of their work. Networks

must take on an active quality. Therefore the participating institutions need coordinators for the following tasks:

- communication design,
- guaranteeing the exchange of information,
- organising the flow of information,
- offering a platform for the exchange of information,
- support for the growth of trust,
- conflict recognition and processing,
- outcomes assurance and evaluation of the networking content,
- finding a balance between competition and cooperation.

This form of networking is established with an eye to problem avoidance. Investing in this area can prevent problems from happening stop, even eradicate erroneous trends.

Three special reasons for networking

■ The transition from Pre-school to Primary School

Transitions present a challenge. They are sometimes difficult and crisis-ridden.

At the same time, they offer opportunities for learning and growth. Through lifecycle events like birth, starting pre-school or school transition phases occur which are linked with changes, behavioural insecurity, conflicts etc. The behavioural competences which are acquired at these stages have a long-lasting effect on the behaviour of families and on their willingness to accept the necessary help at a time of particular need.

The opportunities in parent education:

Courses in parent education should be relevant for the life of the families concerned, dealing with:

- Transition situations in family lifecycles

- Changes in the private networks of families
- Changes in the world of work
- Changes in social circumstances

"The goal to be reached is that the challenge of primary school is linked with the individual development of each child. The bridging function of the last year of pre-school into the school system must be strengthened and the transitions must be optimised.

Also the particular language development needs of children from immigrant backgrounds must remain in focus. The ongoing partnership of nursery, school and parents is imperative and should be a permanent component of regulations and programmes. The cooperative and networking structures of the local schools and out-of-school institutions and of the people involved must enable a steady language improvement during the transition from nursery to school on a reliable basis." (National Integration Plan, p. 56)

The entry of the child into the formal school system is an important developmental stage for the child and his/her family. Not only does the child become a schoolchild, but the parents, too, have to cope with a transition and need targeted support. A transition between phases for the parents is absolutely necessary, and should be considered compulsory and even crucial for success.

■ All-day schooling to complement family life

For the relationship with the parents it is important to create a basis of communication which enables a trusting and respectful cooperation for the good of the children. Long-term studies have clearly shown that parents experience phases of anxiety about expectations of achievement and selection at the time before and after the start of school for their children.

Parents must/should develop a sophisticated picture of their own child as co-experts on their children in a dialogue with school and conse-

quently play a part in the increase of the capabilities and potential of the child.

- parents will be taken seriously as experts on their children
- a sophisticated picture of the child can be developed by working together with the parents
- educational work with its goals and methods is made transparent for parents
- opportunities of participation for parents should be created
- easily accessible offers of advice are made through out-of-school partners to strengthen the competence of parents and families in education
- daycare centres come with their competences and develop together with the primary school common rituals and concepts of parent work for the transition period.

■ Schools are houses of life and learning, places to live in

The real life context involves perceiving the life situation of the pupils and their families and on this basis seeking ways of satisfying the different needs of the participants. It is important to take into account the differences in the life situation in dealing with individual cases.

Families who live in conditions of social disadvantage generally have the following indicators: social isolation, unemployment, poverty, lack of education, immigrant background. School and parents are particularly challenged to build a successful educational partnership and shape school as a life place. Particular offers of family education and counselling should be integrated into school for families to strengthen the competence of parents and families in the educational sphere.

On the basis of this understanding of a common education partnership between school and parents and of the requirement to plan the transition between pre-school and school for parents and schools, network partners and educators need a reliable professional set of skills.