

2 Toolbox: Teaching Tolerance

2.1 Activating teachers with a background of immigration



Empathy and the ability to take another perspective are important aspects of intercultural competence, which demands of us that the own perspective must be questioned and that we should be open to the experience and interpretations of the world as others see it. This applies especially when working together with the parents in (im)migrant families.

In the meantime, there is a considerable growing number of teachers with a background of (im)migration in schools, who can be good mediators, above all since the awareness of the issues at hand has changed. The professional background of teachers qualifies them particularly in the area of intercultural communication, not necessarily per se as members of the teaching profession, where it might be a question of 'right' or 'wrong', but rather of the openness to other points of view. The latter can perhaps provide concrete help in reaching out to (im)migrant families.

This box contains modules for teacher education or training courses which are intended to promote an awareness of the intercultural sensibility that is needed to deal with problems among

children, parents and school staffs. The interviews can be used to identify central issues and attitudes that definitely should be discussed openly and reflected upon.

It is much easier to re-think once own positions and perspectives on critical events if you have colleges with a similar interest to support you in your clarity and discipline of thought.



Excerpts from Interviews with Teachers of Turkish origin at German Schools

Nature has given us two ears, but only one mouth, so that we can hear twice as much as we speak (Epictetus).

The interviews with teachers of Turkish origin at German schools were conducted with the help of a catalogue of questions. Room was left for individual variation as the case required. The interviews were conducted in German by a project worker who was born in Turkey and professionally trained in Germany. Using the recordings, a standard language transcription (hardly varying from the original) was produced to enable the material to be used in INSET.

The interview texts can be seen as stimuli to make such contacts and conduct such conversations locally to raise awareness for the improvement of parental involvement.

Catalogue of questions

- Were you born in Germany? If not, how long have you lived here?
- In what form did your parents become interested in your successes and problems at school?
- What experience have you gained regarding working with parents in families with a background of migration?
- Do parents with a background of (im)migration miss contact persons in the schools who speak their language?
- Is it mainly the language that stops many parents from coming into the schools or is it the fear of an unknown system?
- Is it sufficiently clear to parents with a background of (im)migration that their participation in school committees and groups is desired?
- Should working with parents include the task of explaining how school works in Germany to those with a background of (im)migration?
- Do children from families with a background of (im)migration do less well than pupils of German origin?
- Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

- Do you believe there is a connection between parental interest in school life and learning and the success of their children?
- What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

Excerpts

Interview Teacher A

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 5 years
Female

Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

Not responsible in the sense that they can no longer cope. I have many colleagues who are very keen and see the children as such. Sometimes they are confronted with situations which are foreign to them. They are grateful for any help. For instance, if they know something is up in the family, then they can react accordingly. There are colleagues who say it is not my affair. I am not here to bring up the children, but to pass on knowledge. They simply can't cope. We have too few specialists in the school who are qualified to deal with such problems. We need social workers in the schools, school psychologists or teachers/experts with a background in intercultural education.

Do you believe there is a connection between parental interest in school life and learning and the success of their children?

I do. Parents are models for their children. If they read a paper every day or like books, they don't need to encourage their children to read. Of course, there are some kids who make it, and others don't. There are parents who are continually pushing their child, and still he/she doesn't make it. Other parents don't lift a finger, and the child is nevertheless successful. Maybe it has something to do with intelligence and motivation? There is some connection between great interest on the part of the parents and success on the part of the pupil. There are parents who let their children run wild, because they have no time for them. Or they have time, but don't know what to do with their kids. One third of my pupils have parents who are on benefit, which doesn't necessarily mean they have a low educational profile. Most parents do not know about the possibilities that secondary education offers.

What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

The passivity of parents has nothing to do with culture and nationality, but rather with their life circumstances, that is to say, if someone is integrated into society and reasonably self-confident, then he/she is going to take an active part in school life. The wish or motivation to move forward and help change things is present. The parents need some good tips on bringing up kids.

When you take over a new class, you should visit the parents at home and arrange the first contact over the phone. At home you see the child in its natural environment. The parents are not so shy and are not so inhibited afterwards, when, one day, they come into the school. That is extra work, needing time and trouble, but it pays off. You are not annoyed for the next four years that you didn't reach out to the

parents at a critical moment and that the child has run wild. In this way, you know who to contact, where the child lives and what his/her home life is like.

Interview Teacher B

Comprehensive School

Teaching experience: 21 years

Male

Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

In primary schools I have experienced that the language difficulties of the Turkish kids were considered to be a sign of low intelligence. They were subsequently sent to schools for children with special needs, although in reality their only difficulty was the language. The same happens when their social behavior does not follow the German norm because of cultural differences. That can't be right. The low intelligence quotient is apparently validated through tests and interpreted in such a way that the kids can be sent to a special needs school.

Do you believe there is a connection between parental interest in school life and learning and the success of their children?

Absolutely. If the teachers take up contacts with the parents, make home visits and can talk to the parents more easily, the children will feel accepted and more motivated. Home visits are a must in the case of the Turkish parents and they usually lead to success. We visit the core group of parents once a year. Unemployment is high among the Turkish parents. The mothers work mostly as cleaners, the fathers are unskilled or even illegal workers.

Interview Teacher C

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 35 years
Male

Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

That depends on the school. If the head teacher feels responsible, the rest of the staff follow. In the schools I used to work in, the situation was not so good. They were merely tolerated and unfortunately, I have to say, at a disadvantage in many aspects. To start with, the language. The parents are not able to help their children. They can neither coach their children, nor pay for coaching.

have some rest at home and not ask the kids about their school work or offer to help them. In secondary modern schools the kids see the lack of perspective that their parents have and wonder what is going to become of themselves. There is no stimulation. It depends on the parents' outlook and education. The parents should be saying "I haven't been so successful, but I want to help you make the best of your opportunities". That means giving full support, especially in the financial aspect.

Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

I think that, if a pupil is difficult and disturbs the class, then teachers often feel they can't cope, so they say the pupil should stay down a class and/or maybe send him or her to another school form.

Interview Teacher D

Comprehensive School
Teaching experience: 6 years
Female

Should working with parents include the task of explaining how school works in Germany to those with a background of (im)migration?

I think too much is being asked of the teachers. What else are they supposed to do? Honestly. They are supposed to give the young people a reasonable start to their working lives. They are supposed to keep order in the classroom, and then they are supposed to use the remaining time to visit parents. I think that should be someone else's job.

Do children from families with a background of (im)migration do less well than pupils of German origin?

That depends on how much the parents support the children in school. If both parents are out at work, possibly doing heavy work, then they will want to

Interview Teacher E

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 13 years
Male

Do children from families with a background of (im)migration do less well than pupils of German origin?

Yes, that is correct. It is mainly due to German language and educational deficits. A family that does not move forward educationally cannot educate its children. The German education system depends on the families. At the same time it can be observed that the children of (im)migrants do not read enough and they learn through pictures rather than the written word. The media have a bad influence on those children.

What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

To involve parents, events have to be organized with regard to the cultural background of the parents. I have been a teacher in Germany for 13 years and never has a colleague wished me well on a Turkish or Kurdish feast day or festival. In contrast, I have always congratulated my colleagues on German feast days or festival days.

Mutual respect is a must among different cultures. Everyday greetings could be taught in Lower Saxony schools. Non-Germans should primarily have some interest in German history and culture, but, on the other hand, Germans should show some interest in other cultures and languages. The contacts between the German teachers and the (im)migrant parents should not be restricted to two parents' evenings a year, or to occasions when problems occur, but should be extended to other opportunities.

Interview Teacher F

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 24 years
Male

Do you believe there is a connection between parental interest in school life and learning and the success of their children?

Most certainly, yes. The more educated the parents are, the more they are interested in the education of their children. Nationality is not important. Beside education, the economic situation of a family is also important. If a child does not have to follow any rules and has no education within the family, it will have a very difficult time later in school.

What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

We are talking about society. Uninterested Turkish parents have developed a lack of trust in German teachers. They feel they enjoy insufficient recognition. On top of this there is the traditional barrier of the cultural and religious factors. We need to enlighten people to reduce their prejudice. The communication between teacher and parents has to be improved, in order for the teacher to be able to understand what sort of home a child has. School should employ social workers and psychologists and work together with parents' associations.

Interview Teacher G

Primary School
Teaching experience: 20 years
Female

How do you make contact with (im)migrant parents?

I mostly use the phone, or in case of problems I call round the home, where the parents are usually very cooperative.

What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

A difficult question. Most parents don't come to parents' evenings. When the parents meet me in the street or when I'm shopping, they ask me about their children then. That's not always the case. If parents have higher expectations, then teachers usually react positively. I always tell the (im)migrant parents to overcome their fears and modesty. They should find more time for the school affairs, the teachers and their children and work together with the teachers. If we don't work together with the parents in primary education, we will have trouble with their children later. That, in turn, means more work later to try and repair the 'damage'.

Interview Teacher H

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 6 years
Male

Should working with parents include the task of explaining how school works in Germany to those with a background of (im)migration?

I think school should show the parents how school works and what awaits their children. When the question of choosing a career occurs, it is vital that the parents cooperate, and that is what we do in our school. The parents support us in finding an apprenticeship for their children. Basically, it's not our job, but we do it nevertheless, as far as we can help.

Have you gained the impression that German schools do not feel so responsible for the children of (im)migrants as for those of German origin?

I don't believe that. I sometimes think more understanding could be shown among the staff. Of course, it's not possible if there is no Turkish or other foreign colleague in the staff room to explain. I appreciate it when a colleague approaches me asking for an explanation, for instance, "Have I insulted his honour somehow?".

What steps and/or activities would you recommend to schools to open themselves to increased cooperation with families who have a background of (im)migration?

I think the first contact is the most important. There is nothing worse than having parents in your class you know nothing about. I think the personal contact counts and helps to build bridges. Consciously keeping in contact encourages the parents to get involved. Possibly they may even wish to talk about their culture and religion – maybe at a school festival, where they can show presence and help to reduce the fears existing between German and Turkish parents. Eating together always goes down well. German parents often complain that the Turkish

parents don't help in the life of the school. That in itself is a barrier. How it can be overcome, I can't say. I would link social benefits to parent involvement, that is to say, parents who withdraw from school life would feel it their purses.

Interview Teacher J

Secondary modern school
Teaching experience: 10 years
Female

Do parents with a background of (im)migration miss contact persons in the schools who speak their language?

Most certainly. In my case, the parents are more open to me than to my colleagues of German origin. We have some sort of common link. We share the same belief or the same mother tongue. Along the lines of "She understands what I'm talking about, she understands me", so it's a language and a cultural understanding.

Is it mainly the language that stops many parents from coming into the schools or is it the fear of an unknown system?

Language does play a large role, yes – it causes problems. Secondly, I believe, it is the parents' own educational profile. You see, if the parents had had a better education, vocational training, with some sort of qualification, or even a university education, then they would become more involved in the school and be there to deal with their kids' problems. Thirdly, there is simply a lack of interest, not language deficits, not a lack of education, just a lack of interest. A bit like: it doesn't really matter, the main thing is that they can earn money after school.

How do you make contact with (im)migrant parents?

I use the telephone usually, unless there is a problem, in which case I call by their home. My experience is that there is then mostly no problem at all.