

## 2.3 What makes you a foreigner?

### A course for teachers in fostering co-operation with migrant parents

#### General introduction

"Culture in its broadest sense is what makes you a foreigner when you are abroad", says a popular definition of culture. Foreignness always presumes someone who perceives someone else as foreign. However, foreignness also helps you to discover your own culture. Creating awareness of your own culture, an important aim for achieving intercultural competence, is impossible without the reflection from a foreign point of view.

In this context the most important question is how to cope with intercultural competence.

The basis for a successful communication is above all emotional competence, together with intercultural sensitivity. The understanding of other behaviours and ways of thinking as well as the ability to express one's own point of view in a transparent way with the aim to be understood and respected.

This module aims at qualifying teachers to deal with foreign cultures and their specific features in a sensitive and goal oriented way. By dealing with cultural values, mistakes and prejudices the participants learn to analyse various ways of thinking and behaviour, norms and values in order to avoid misunderstandings.

#### Target group

The project is aimed at teacher students and teachers of all school types and grades.

#### Aims

The most important aims of the project are

- developing long-term intercultural competence as a key competence for teachers in teacher education and in-service training

- preparing teacher students and teachers to deal with migrant parents and creating their awareness of different cultural views
- preparing teacher students and teachers to deal with minorities and thus making a contribution to education for democracy and tolerance
- prevention of misunderstandings when dealing with parents or pupils
- fostering the cooperation with migrant parents

#### Sessions in Practice

##### Session 1: Typical!?

Personal conduct as a starting point for discussing various forms of cultural imprint

#### Participants:

Variable, up to 12 participants

#### Step 1: Exchanging personal experiences

Working with different cultures requires sensitivity to cultural differences. Sometimes it is very difficult to realize that we all have our prejudices or images related to a certain culture. A first step could be the willingness to communicate these differences. In the following warming-up participants are asked to exchange and communicate their personal experiences.

The participants walk around the room, listening to music from various countries. When the music stops, everybody has to find a partner to whom he /she recounts a positive or negative experience which he /she associates with members of a foreign culture area. The music starts and stops again. Everybody looks for a new partner he/she can exchange his/her experiences with.

Afterwards all participants sit together in a circle and talk about whether they had to face any taboo subjects in the above contacts.

Then they are asked to start the first round with a presumption like "I think that migrant parents often avoid the contact with school because ...". After that a second round starts with a sentence like "I should think that migrant parents wish to ...".

## Step 2: Case study

The participants watch a short scene about a Russian family and their daughter who are invited to a talk with the daughter's teacher. Their son Ignaz is supposed to translate the conversation because of his good knowledge of German. The scene shows how the first meeting can lead to misunderstandings and a tense atmosphere.

The examples are meant to present various forms of behaviour as a basis for a discussion. They are not meant to strengthen existing stereotypes or to generalise.



We tend to reject forms of behaviour that we do not understand. In Germany, punctuality is considered to be a form of good conduct. In Russia, someone who is late does not necessarily meet

with rejection. During a first meeting these different points of view can be a hindrance to starting a good conversation.



Superstition is common and important in various cultures. In Russia, it is supposed to bring bad luck, if people shake hands across the threshold. An as yet unknown experience during a first meeting requires tolerance and the willingness to engage in a change of perspective.



The Russian parents have problems to follow the conversation because of their poor knowledge of German. Ignaz translates for his parents and his teacher.



The teacher suggests Friday 13th for the next meeting but the parents disapprove of the suggestion. This superstition (well-known in Germany, too), according to which a meeting on such a day is supposed to bring bad luck, can offer the opportunity to make a conversation on a more personal level.



Migrant parents often bring small gifts. This gesture is taken for granted in their country. However, it is considered controversial in Germany because it can give the impression of bribery. But couldn't this gesture also be an enrichment of one's own culture?

### Step 3: Analysis

Having watched the scene, the participants are asked to evaluate the behaviour of the actors.

After that forms of behaviour typical of other culture areas (Turkey, Italy etc.) are discussed and compared with one's own culture area.

The findings are fixed in a table and discussed under various aspects, e.g. which forms of behaviour are considered to be positive preconditions for a conversation and which of them are considered to impede establishing contact with parents.

Questions that help to analyse the situation:

- Did you recognize different verbal signals in communication?
- Were there any cultural similarities that play a positive and constructive role?
- Did they first try to understand or did they immediately evaluate what was said?
- Who spent more time on speaking?
- Was there any need to interpret the meaning of words and gestures?
- Who dominated the conversation?
- What about the distance. Did you notice any signals of discomfort?

## Session 2: Russian proverbs – a reflection of the session 1

### Step 1: Russian soul

#### Participants:

Variable, up to 12 participants

#### Getting to know the cultural values of Russia by analysing selected Russian proverbs

First the participants get a list of Russian and German proverbs, translated literally into their mother tongue. Some translations may sound strange, which, however, is only a logical consequence of transferring specific cultural contents

into a foreign language. Proverbs and sayings usually reflect deeply rooted values which is the reason for the difficulty of translating and understanding them.

Some examples:

- Teach others and you will understand more yourself.
- Science only teaches the clever.
- Even power gives in to brains.
- Talk less to others and more to yourself.
- It is not a shame to be silent, if you don't have to say anything.
- An old friend is better than two new friends.
- Every snipe praises its swamp.
- The Russian loves the words maybe, roughly and anyhow.
- The legs of a German are a bit skinny and his soul is a bit small
- His bark is worse than his bite.
- Better late than never
- Blood is thicker than water.
- The dumbest farmer harvests the thickest potatoes.
- Humans thought, God laughed
- In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king.
- One shouldn't praise the day before the evening
- No pain, no gain

The participants discuss the proverbs and sayings and try to understand the values hidden in them. The ones they don't understand should be analysed with regard to the reasons why they are not understood. Apart from that the proverbs should be compared with ones from their own language.

### Notes

Most important in this exercise is to make the participants acquainted with the cultural variety

of values. Speculating about these values, of course, doesn't mean that a precise and solid definition can be expected.

## Session 3: Basics of a conversation with parents

### Activity 1

Practical experiences in parents' involvement with Turkish migrants show that parents often cannot be reached because of misunderstandings and different forms of communication.

#### Participants:

Variable, up to 12 participants

### Step 1

The participants are shown a photograph of a conservative Muslim woman dressed in a long coat with a headscarf. Her hair and her body are covered. The participants are asked to identify the woman.

### Step 2

Afterwards they are given the following case study:

Mr K., teacher of German at a comprehensive school in B., has invited the parents of pupil Cem A. to school for the first time in order to discuss their son's unsatisfactory achievements in German.

As Cem's father is not able to come, because he is tied up with business matters, only Cem's mother shows up.

Mr K. shakes hands with Mrs A. and takes a seat behind his desk. He asks Mrs A. to sit down in front of him and starts the conversation by talking about Cem's unsatisfactory achievements in German.

He mentions all of Cem's shortcomings in detail: deficiencies in spelling, basic grammar, text analysis, argumentation etc.

Apart from that, he criticises Cem's behaviour in the lesson: he is often inattentive, disturbs his classmates by talking to them, listens to music on his mp3 player, eats and drinks during the lesson etc.

The teacher asks if Cem behaves similarly at home and if he does, how the parents cope with it: admonitions, corporal punishment? He asks Mrs A., if Cem's father behaves in an authoritarian way towards him.

In the end, he tells Mrs A. that he has three more Turkish pupils in his class, one girl and two boys, who, in contrast to Cem, don't cause any problems at all.

He stretches out his hand to say goodbye and asks Mrs A. to come again to school together with her husband before the end of the school term.

After the presentation of the case study – best of all as a staged video or audio sequence – the participants get the text script of the conversation.

### Step 3

The participants are split up into small groups and are given the task to analyse Mr K.'s behaviour with regard to cultural mistakes which – in the worst case – can lead to a communication breakdown.

### Step 4

In a final phase the participants are asked to develop alternative drafts of what they consider a more successful run to the conversation.

#### Hints for evaluation:

In the evaluation phase the participants are given a list of typical (cultural) mistakes taken from the conversation between Mr K. and Mrs A. which they are asked to compare to their own findings:

- **A man shaking hands with a conservative Muslim woman:**  
Most devout Muslims avoid any body contact with the opposite sex outside their family. If a German teacher shakes hands with a devout Muslim woman, she is likely to react because she wants to be polite but she would rather avoid the situation. The teacher should have checked in advance by talking to his pupil or to the pupil's mother, if he has to observe any rules of behaviour for the initial hello.
- **Sitting behind a desk:**  
A conversation led from behind a desk makes it more difficult to get in contact with parents. A conversation with parents should generally take place in a pleasant atmosphere of mutual respect (at a table, offering drinks, biscuits etc.)
- **Confrontational approach:**  
Starting a conversation by talking about a child's problems straightaway should be avoided. Instead, it is recommended that the child is invited, too, and all three have a conversation together, chaired by the teacher.
- **Educational and scientific terms:**  
Educational and scientific terms should be avoided because (not only Turkish) parents would - out of timidity and politeness - not admit that they don't understand particular words.

- Criticising the child's behaviour:**  
 Criticism of a child's behaviour is often interpreted as criticism of one's own person. It implies the parents' failure in teaching their child proper behaviour. Criticism is allowed but it should not be put forward in the form of prejudices.
- Accusations:**  
 Accusations with regard to deficits in educational matters are often interpreted as a personal attack or incompetence. Parents expect support from a teacher, and not reproaches.
- Comparisons:**  
 Comparisons with other pupils are counter-productive, because the parents would like to be seen as individuals. Comparisons can, however, be made, when they are advantageous for the pupil ("Your son is not the only one with these problems. We have come together today to try and change things a little...").
- Leave-taking:**  
 The next meeting should be arranged and one or two objectives should be agreed which all parties wish to be met. All participants thus feel that they have a task to fulfil, which is going to be checked at a certain moment.

## Session 4: Role plays on intercultural conflicts

### Activity 1: Role plays

Conflicts caused by cultural differences can best be presented in the form of role plays. The actors have to tap their full potential in order to bring the roles to life. This includes the risk of presenting caricatures, which, however, is not necessarily disadvantageous but rather an additional challenge, because in spite of vehement reactions a controlled form of communication has to be aimed at.

#### Participants:

Variable, up to 12 participants

#### Role play 1

A 10th form plans its graduation trip. Sirin, a Turkish girl, would like to take part in the trip. The class teacher supports Sirin's wish. However, her conservative Muslim parents are concerned about Sirin violating religious rules (collective swimming, sports activities, conflicts because of constantly wearing a headscarf etc.). Franziska, Sirin's friend, also takes part in the conversation in order to convince her parents of the importance of a graduation trip.

### Rolecards:

#### Klassenlehrerin



- has a lot of experience with foreign pupils
- shows a lot of understanding for parents
- shows that Sirin is well integrated and should not be excluded from the trip
- asks Sirin's friend Franziska, how Sirin can be supported during the trip

### Father



- holds the opinion that his daughter will be unable to follow Muslim rules during the trip
- does not allow collective swimming with Sirin's classmates
- explains that eating habits have to be obeyed (e.g. no pork)
- explains that a trip can cause a conflict because some of the compulsory events are inconsistent with the religious beliefs of Muslims

### Mother



- feels torn between her daughter's wish to go on the trip and her own religious belief
- offers her daughter a family holiday in Turkey as a compensation
- takes up her husband's arguments in order to strengthen his position as the head of the family
- appeals to the teacher's understanding

### Sirin



- wants to take part in the trip at all costs
- doesn't see any risk in violating religious rules
- doesn't show any understanding for her father's strict position
- puts her hopes in the good influence of her teacher

### Franziska



- tries to convince Sirin's parents by referring to other school events which didn't cause any problems
- explains to her teacher that nobody should be excluded from a graduation trip
- blames Sirin's father for giving her the feeling she is still a stranger in the country she has been living in for many years

Intercultural conflicts are not only rooted in various religions and habits, they can also be based in different attitudes to life. "You are not able to understand me", is part of the repertoire of every conflict-solving talk.

The following role play shows that Magda feels misunderstood between the cultures.

## Role play 2

Magda, a Polish pupil of the 11th form, moved to Germany with her parents one year ago. In Poland

she was the best pupil in class and now, in Germany, her achievement in all subjects is either just passable or poor. Her school performance is under par because of her failings in German. Her class teacher tries to explain to her that a school-leaving certificate is out of the question. The head suggests a stint of practical work to improve her German. Magda feels that she has failed; she is so stressed out that she often feels off colour. She doesn't want to leave school, on the contrary she would like to go on to university. Her mother argues that higher education for a girl would be completely unnecessary. Sooner or later, her future husband would provide for her.

### Rolecards:

#### Magda



- wants to go to university and finish school at all events
- she argues that she has done and is doing some language courses and can follow in school
- she has made a lot of friends, who help her with her work
- she reminds the others that she was previously an above-average pupil

#### Class teacher



- praises her work discipline
- is worried about overtaxing Magda
- describes the high degree of difficulty Magda will have obtaining a school-leaving certificate
- tries to persuade the mother that Magda should repeat a class at all school-leaving certificate

### The Head



- points to special regulations in the exams for foreign-born young people, in order to give Magda a fair chance
- asks Magda if she knows what she would like to do after school
- considers a period of practical experience to be a good idea for an appropriate transition

### Mother



- doesn't think much of Magda getting a school-leaving certificate
- reminds everyone that no-one, as yet, in her family had been to university
- claims that young women in Poland marry early
- sees Magda as too immature
- would prefer the offer made by a friend to employ Magda in her beauty parlour

## Evaluation of the role plays

At the beginning of the role plays, the pupils who are not involved get small cards telling them to observe a certain role person and to note down where intercultural differences occur.

After the role play, all the active participants in the role play are given the opportunity to freely exchange views, in order to leave their assumed role and set up some distance from that role to make an evaluation possible. Pairs are made from the active participants and the observers. The observers are asked to say where they would have reacted differently, resp. where there were irritations. They discuss the key scenes with the role play participants.

The role plays are compared by the whole group and the key scenes concerning intercultural differences are presented and discussed.

The simulation of cultural differences aims at making us sensitive to our perceptions and at enabling us to interpret conflicts from different sides.

## Final session – Evaluation

### Aims:

- A summary of different aspects of the in-service course in the form of a survey of the participants.
- Checking out the success of the working sessions
- Support measures for ongoing work

### Questionnaire:

Please fill in the form with regard to the course:

1. Which aspect was especially important or useful?

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2. Which aspect was least important or useful?

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3. What would you change, skip or add?

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4. Which topics would you put into a future course?

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5. In general, I thought the course was (circle the answer, please):

*Excellent*      *very good*      *good*      *so-so*      *bad*

6. Any comments?

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