

2.4 Meeting parents – Parents' meetings

The entrance of a child into formal schooling is an important step in its development and for its family, as well. Not only does the *child* become a young *pupil*, but also the parents have to cope with the transition and often need specific support, whereby attention has to be paid to the diversity among families.

Socially disadvantaged parents, in particular, and parents with a background of migration are not easily involved in cooperation. Parents with high socio-economic status participate more, however, in school life, while parents with a background of migration show a low level of participation (Züchner, 2007).

As a rule, families living in socially disadvantaged conditions show, among others, the following characteristics: social exclusion, unemployment, poverty, low education profiles and a background of migration. Schools and parents are today specially challenged to develop a successful partnership in educating and bringing up children and putting sense and form into the life of a school. The real life reference infers that there has to be a perception of the pupils' lives and their families and that, on this basis, opportunities have to be found to satisfy the different needs of those concerned. It is important to take note of the differences in the lives of the families and to respond to individual cases. Special offers of family education and counselling in school should be integrated, in order to improve the competence of parents and families above and beyond the area of education.

On the basis of this understanding of a mutual partnership between schools and parents in education and bringing up children, and the challenges which this involves, schools, networked partners and teachers need an established, vocationally-oriented set of feasible strategies. They will require – above all for the cooperation with parents – among other things, a knowledge of how to manage interpersonal communication, how to use discussion facilitation techniques, and

how to apply the principles of group dynamics and mediation (cf. Lahninger, leiten – präsentieren – moderieren, Ökotopia Verlag).

Target group

In this module, teachers are intended to learn and develop different aspects and forms of partnership in education and upbringing and to acquire a qualification to conduct a successful partnership-oriented dialogue with parents. There is a special content focus on positive individual parent contacts and the conduct of talks with parents and of parent evenings.

Aims

- Intercultural competence
- Communicative and strategic competence in order to successfully cooperate with parents
- Knowledge of types of dialogue
- Communication rules to hit the right note with parents
- The elaboration of forms of partnership in education and upbringing



Family diversity – Doll figures present family impressions

Sessions in practice

Session 1: Intercultural competence

Introduction

Intercultural competence is seen as a key competence. The clientele in schools includes parents with migration histories of different length and from different home regions. In these contexts, more and more flexibility and a readiness to show acceptance of the other are expected, plus the ability to deal with conflict, which – whether real or imagined – results from different values, perceptions and communication styles. The aim of the training sessions is to make teachers sensitive to the special needs of intercultural communication, and to offer an orientation guide and greater (self-) confidence in the handling of the contact. As the pre-condition for intercultural competence is not primarily knowledge of the other, but, above all, a high degree of knowledge of the self, experience- and action-oriented forms of learning will be at the forefront: exercises in sensitivity for own (and other) cultural pattern perception, recognition of communication styles and negotiation of value systems. These will empower the participants to take on other perspectives when needed to deal with 'critical situations'.

Step 1: Getting started

Welcome and introductions: The participants are given the task to interview one another in partner work and note three common interests they share and three differences they have. In the following plenary session the participants will introduce one another, naming these differences and shared interests.

First approach to the topic via personal experience of interculturality and diversity.

Question: What do the expressions 'intercultural competence' and 'intercultural learning' infer? Participants formulate their ideas.

Step 2: I see something you don't see ...

A series of exercises on mechanisms of perception and prejudice, and the forming of stereotypes.

Activity 1: Positive and negative messages from visual material

Material: a selection of pictures from newspapers with neutral messages from the visuals, e.g. a landscape, a street. Each participant chooses a picture and comments upon it with a positive utterance, which is also written on a separate sheet.

The picture is given to the neighbouring participant on the right, who looks at it and writes a negative comment. The pictures are then shown to the group one after the other, and both comments are read out loud.

A discussion then follows in which the participants say how they feel about the exercise, what surprised them and how different opinions about the pictures came about.

Activity 2: Chinese whispers

Seven participants leave the room. Those remaining have a look at a picture one after the other. The first person comes back in. He or she has a close look at the picture for three minutes. (The time is taken on a stopwatch; each person is supposed to think that three minutes is a pretty long time.) The picture is now turned over and may no longer be seen.

The next person comes in. The first person recounts what he or she saw in the picture. Questions about the picture are not permitted. The second person now does the same with the third, saying what he or she has understood, what there is in the picture, then the third to the fourth and so on. The last person draws a picture of what he or she has understood on the board or on a large sheet of paper. All seven participants, who went out of the room, are now allowed to see the original picture.

Evaluation:

Discuss how the original has changed in its perception through verbal communication with no visual impression vis-à-vis the new picture, what disappeared first and which elements remained longest.

Did stereotypes play a role? Did they remain longer than abstract elements?



Samples from the Diversity Exhibition in Hanover

Activity 3: Collecting Words

Culture – what is it actually?

Possible answers: clothes, food and drink, dancing, music, jewellery, body language, language, patterns of behaviour...

Develop the iceberg model visually, using the word collection above:

Above the surface (10%): clothes, food and drink, dancing, music, jewellery, body language, language, patterns of behaviour...

Below the surface (90%): customs, religion, traditions, taboos, history, ideal beauty, the distribution of power, humour, the attitude to animals, laws, norms, punishment...

Activity 4: Time

Introduction: Every culture has its own concept of time. We mostly believe our own concept to be the norm and project it on other cultures. Punctuality is, for example, very important in Germany, in Switzerland, in Northern Europe and the United States, whereas it is the exception, and not the rule, in Latin America, the Middle East and Southern Europe. In Peru, being an hour late is considered to be normal for pupils and teachers. Iran, India and many Asian countries are oriented towards the past. Urban America, however, lives on a present-future continuum. In many cultures, time heals all wounds; in others people are still angry about what happened centuries ago.

The concepts of polychronous and monochronous time are explained here.

Monochronous time

- consecutive actions,
- highly structured,
- punctuality important,
- interruptions are unwelcome.

Polychronous Zeit

- many actions simultaneously,
- the obligation to be punctual has little meaning,
- human relationships are more important than deadlines.

Activity 5: Design an onion diagram

(cf. G. Hofstede, Manifestationen von Kultur auf verschiedenen Ebenen)

Symbols > Heroes > Rituals > Values

1. Symbols, heroes, rituals and values are drawn as the skins of an onion (draw a picture). Symbols will be on the surface and values will be the inmost manifestation of culture. Heroes and rituals will be in between.
2. Put together an onion diagram which is specific to your own (sub)culture; try to include the symbolic representations of heroes, rituals and values.

Symbols:

Heroes:

Rituals:

3. Ensuing discussion:
That is important to me...!
My personal set of values. Are values negotiable?
Which compromises am I prepared to make?

Activity 6: Individualism versus collectivism

Introduction: The Germans belong to an "individualistic society", in which social ties between individuals, even within families, are not very close (everyone looks after themselves first).

In contrast, there is the collective form of society. A more collective cultural orientation is to be found amongst migrants, resp. immigrant ethnic

groups, for instance, from Turkey, Asia, the Arab countries and ethnic Africa. (They are group oriented; group loyalty is valued above individuality).

"In Europe, individuality is highly valued; in America, it is valued above all else. In Africa, however, individualism is a synonym of bad luck, a curse, a tragedy" (Kapuscinski 1999, 93 f. quoted in: Fischer et al. 2005, 179)

Collectivism

- People are born into extended families or other we-groups, which they continue to protect and expect loyalty from.
- Identity is founded in the social network to which you belong.
- Children learn to think in terms of 'we'.
- Collective interests dominate the individual ones.
- Private life is governed by the group.
- Opinions are pre-determined by membership of the group.
- Harmony should be maintained and direct confrontation avoided.
- High context with an unbroken flow of information.
- Breaking the rules leads to humiliation and loss of face for the individual and the group.
- Aim of education: How do you do something?
- Interrelationships take priority over the task.

Individualism

- Harmony and consensus are the supreme aims in society.
- A person develops his personality, in order to care exclusively for himself and his direct (core) family.
- Identity is founded in the individual.
- Children learn to think in terms of 'I'
- Giving an opinion is characteristic of an autonomous being.

- Low context with thinly-woven information networks.
- Breaking the rules leads to feelings of guilt and loss of self-respect.
- Aim of education: How do you learn something?
- The task takes priority over interrelationships.
- Everybody has a right to privacy.
- Everyone is expected to have an own opinion.
- Realising one's individual potential is one of the supreme aims.

Activity 7:

Please choose an up-to-date example!

School's over: There has been small celebration in class 1 in the afternoon. Unfortunately, not all the parents came. Nazike's parents didn't come, either. The celebration is over, it is late in the afternoon and all the children have gone or have been fetched. Just Nazike is left. The parents have said goodbye and Mrs Martensen, the teacher, is still waiting for Nazike to be picked up. The more time slips by, the angrier she gets. She has a family and has got to do her shopping. Over half an hour has passed before Nazike's mother arrives. Mrs Martensen shows her displeasure at her coming late. Nazike's mother explains that there was a small celebration in her family at home. Mrs Martensen is speechless, pushes Nazike towards her without another word and locks up.

The following day, she is still angry and decides to talk to Nazike's mother to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen again.

Please do the following tasks in your group:

Part 1

1. Outline the facts of the situation and the problem that has arisen.
2. Find out which cultural rules the mother has broken and which of her own rules she has followed (see table below).

3. Evaluate the situation against the background of the results of 1 and 2 and say what you think should have happened. Are there any possible ways out of this situation? What would be the appropriate reactions?
4. Put together a short roleplay, at the end of which both partners in the dialogue are satisfied and can get out of the situation 'with a smile on their face'.
5. Give your opinion of the roleplay: What was your intention? What was supposed to happen? What were your feelings and thoughts? What were the thoughts, feelings and expectations of your dialogue partner?

Part 2

Transfer: (Intercultural) conflicts in school

1. A collection of critical situations from everyday practice
2. Selection of a case study in groups
3. Becoming acquainted with and using the method of 'Advising a colleague on a case'.

Part 3

- Concluding
- What have I learned?
- Did I have any other expectations?
- What would I like to carry on with/learn more about?

Session 2: Communicative competence, developing patterns of behaviour and structures for successful cooperation with parents

Introduction

To establish good relations with the parents, it is necessary to create a basis for communication, which will make trust and respect the key features in working together for the good of the children.

Parents must, or at least should form a more open picture of their children as co-experts in a dialogue with the teachers and, based on this, work towards the improvement of their children's abilities and the fulfilment of their potential.

Aims

Accordingly, teachers should

- take parents seriously as the experts on their children.
- maintain a high level of transparency towards the parents regarding the aims and actions planned in educational measures.

Getting prepared for the meeting

Regular contacts with the parents form a stable foundation and must not be the exception! However, in talks with the parents it should not be forgotten that certain situations may well be looked upon culturally in a different way.

Example: 'Having a quick word'

In the everyday work of a primary school, quick words with parents are all part of the action. Is it clear to the parents that this is an offer open to all of them? In Turkish, there is an expression: 'Let the talk slip by between two doors' and it has negative connotations! Thus, the value placed upon 'A quick word' is culturally not the same.

How do I as a teacher deal with this form of communication? Do I want this form of informal contact? Can I use these contacts and turn them into forms of communication? 'A quick word' can be a sort of signal and be used to open up other channels free of fear and stress.

When parents come for a talk about their child, the following aspects should be taken into account:

- Preparation: Why have they come, what is the topic of the conversation and where should it lead? What are my expectations? What could be the parents' motivation?

In what form should I make a record of what is agreed? How should I set up a subsequent appointment?

- Introductory remarks: Non-verbal signals will make a good start (drinks, welcoming gestures, ...).
- The course of the conversation: Getting started. Going over to the reason for the conversation in the first place. To avoid all language difficulties, an interpreter should be available (use networks). Eye contact (culture specific!)
- If further, more expert advice is needed, the parents should be passed on to more appropriate help agencies. Act responsibly in the case of parents unfamiliar with the formalities.

(See also: Zusammenarbeit mit Eltern interkulturell, Elke Schlösser; Ökoptia Verlag und Grundschulmagazin 4 - 2004, Praxiswerkstatt, Fachbeitrag).

Session 3: Naming and developing forms of partnership in education and upbringing

Introduction

Special focus: educationally disadvantaged parents and families, who, for example, have lost their inner balance through unemployment, mental health problems, illness, addiction, social exclusion etc.

Children, whose families no longer offer them a feeling of security, have to expend an enormous amount of energy to overcome their problems. They often have insufficient possibilities to develop in peace and form a stable basis for their life at school. There are general social conditions which increase the inequality of opportunity for children. It is not possible to achieve equality of opportunity, but it is important to create opportunities.

Step 1: Partnership in upbringing with parents

A partnership in upbringing needs dialogue. It is only in dialogue, where both partners have equal rights and accept one another as adult persons that both sides will learn how the child behaves in the respective 'other' world.

- Parents are 'experts' on their children; they have known them longer and in different situations.
- Children behave differently in their families to the way they do in school.

Parents have gaps in their knowledge of everyday upbringing and of how their children develop at school; teachers have gaps in their knowledge about the situation of the family and the behaviour and perception of the children outside school.

Partnership in upbringing means that, on the one hand, teachers and parents exert their influence on the development of the child, and, on the other, that their common responsibility for the upbringing of the child is at the centre of the relationship between both sides. The term 'partnership' also implies that family and school have equal rights, that they have struck an alliance, that they have similar aims and that they work together.

Furthermore, this cooperation should lead to an improved upbringing in the family. Parents must accept more responsibility for the education, upbringing and personality development of their children. Teachers can motivate them to do this (and specialists who are tied in to the school's network!) and should exert more influence than at present on the upbringing in the family, that is to say, they should have an educational effect on the parents.

Step 2: Partnership in education

In addition, Partnership in education means that the inclusion of parents in educational activities should be supported:

- Parents should be included in school projects where they are competent and have know-how.
- Parents with a background of migration can make their own contributions, as parent assistants, for other parents.
- Project work in the classroom:

Families can be made visible:

- Who am I? Who belongs to me? What do I look like?
- Family portrait wall - this gives an identity boost, experience with diversity is gained (language, habits, appearance, behaviour), recognising and accepting differences. Family portrait wall with a mirror in the centre.
- My name. Parents write letters to the children, in which they explain the meaning of their names and say why they chose this or that

name for the son or daughter. My name is Kerim, because... A wall poster with letters can be made out of this.

- A map of the town. Where do I live?
- Memory. Which child belongs to which family? Parents can introduce themselves through a photo-memory game.
- A mobile with photos and names of the children in different lettering.

School, too, must become visible for the parents:

- The educational profile of the school
- A parents' ABC: Educational aims and their sense for the children and their families are presented to the parents visually and in words. Written communications only to the parents throw up boundaries for those who can neither read nor write, nor understand the dominant language. It is therefore sensible to work with many photographs.
- School can offer and use all sorts of open days, by inviting parents to sit in on lessons, the school can present its profile, explain its educational ideas, display photos, show a film etc.

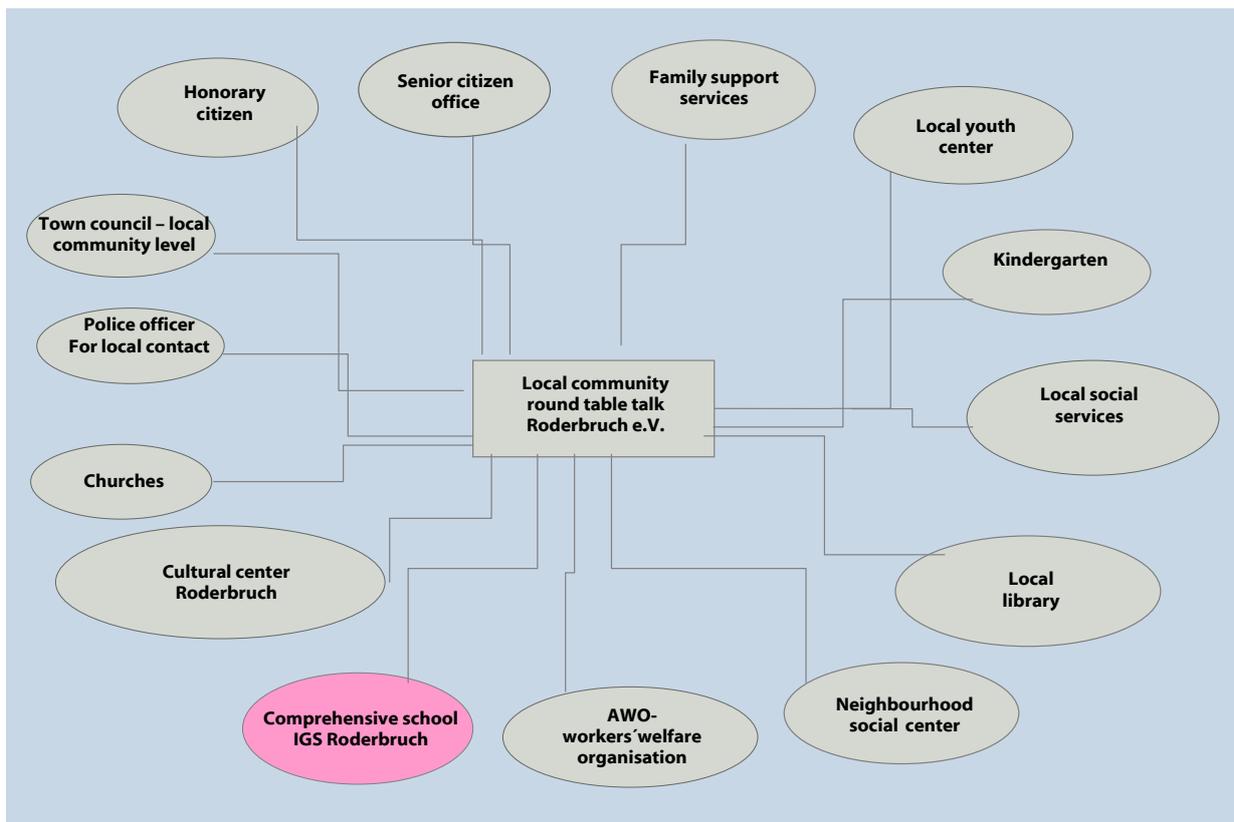


Step 3: School doesn't have to do everything itself

It can (must) engage in networking and so use supportive resources. It can offer a middle ground where families and support agency professionals can meet. Working in a successful network should

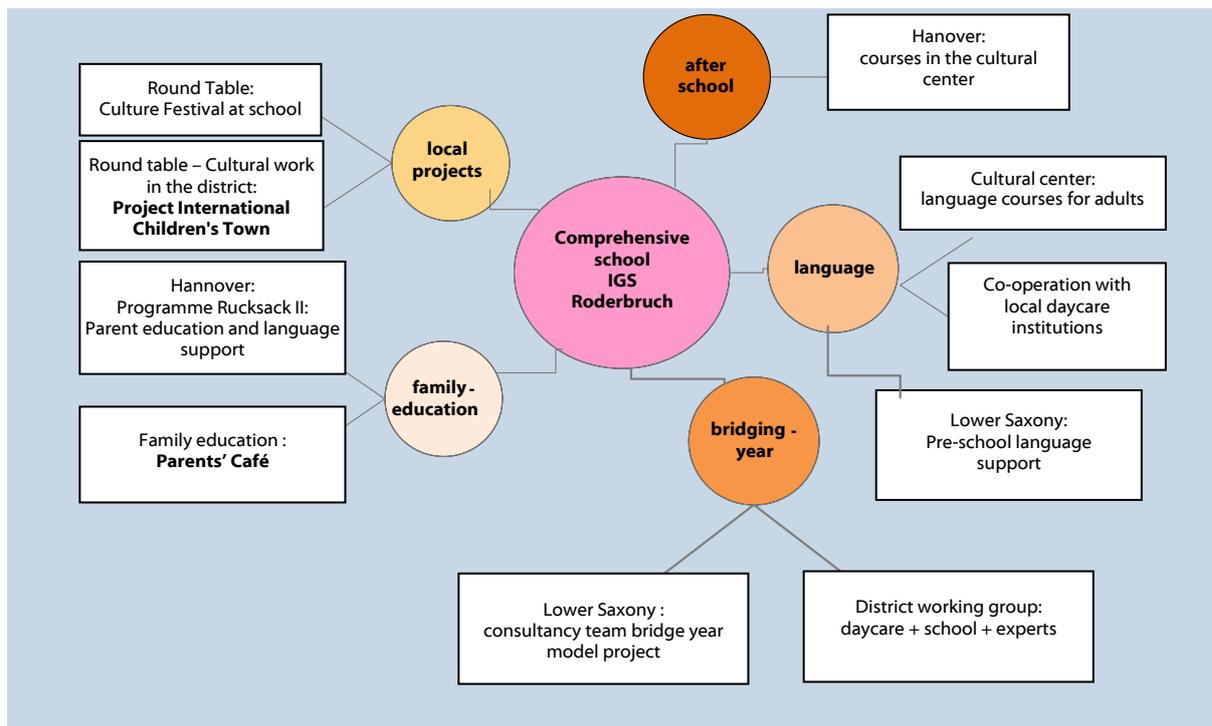
not only be seen as a structural gain, but also always takes on the character of further education, bringing with it a mass of new information. By using networking and increasing the knowledge of all concerned, 'small people' can be protected and supported. Families can be consolidated.

The cooperation of Roderbruch Comprehensive School in Hanover with the local network community round table talk *Roderbruch e.V.*



Community round table talk Roderbruch e.V., Stand: 06/2009

Making use of the community round table talk *Roderbruch e.V.* within the school structure



The Roderbruch round table talk has managed many successful projects and measures for the people's benefit in the housing projects of Roderbruch. The main objective is to improve the quality of life of the people in the Roderbruch district of town in Hanover.