

3.3.2 Visits to parents

Within the processes of social work, “Reaching out to parents” is classed in the narrower sense of the prevention strategies. All families of a class or group are visited by educational professionals at a particular point in time, for example starting school or changing schools, in order to build up a trusting relationship between the families and the educational professionals so that support needs may be identified early. A further interpretation of “Reaching out to parents” could include the conversations which take place between educational professionals in the home setting of their pupils.

A range of reasons for “Reaching out to parents” are given

- Visits to families provide a good opportunity to introduce oneself and become known as a contact person. Emotional bridges between the schools and the parental homes should be built.
- Many misunderstandings between parents, pupils and teachers could be cleared up if teachers knew more about the home circumstances and parents knew more about the teaching.
- Teachers understand much more of the behaviour of a child if they witness him/her in his/her own home interacting with his/her family.
- The home atmosphere is often essentially better suited particularly for confidential conversations. Difficulties in the family which are brought to school or conflicts with teaching staff are more freely discussed in familiar surroundings.
- Home visits can foster contact with the parents. They are particularly meaningful in situations in which usual school communication with parents is not sufficient.
- Home visits can reduce parents’ fear of the schools institution as they benefit from being in their “home quarters”.
- Through “Reaching out to parents” parents are reached who otherwise would seek no advice.

“Reaching out to parents” is valid particularly as a process of getting parents with an immigrant background involved. This is the finding of research into increased home visits for example in an educational paper of the German-Turkish forum.

“Children of Turkish origin often have a different family life to their classmates of German origin. Teachers of pupils of Turkish origin frequently know little of the behaviour of the children at home or the relationship of the children with their family. Since this aspect however plays a major role in the further development of the children, teachers should know more about the home life of children of Turkish origin. Consequently it would be useful if teachers made home visits to their pupils and their parents more often.”

↪ <http://www.dtf-online.de/bildungspapiere.htm> - accessed 25.09.08)

Parents from foreign cultural milieus have for the most varied reasons frequently “contact anxiety” if active participation in the school life of their children is called for. Many avoid school giving their lack of language as a reason, others feel unsure if their presence is really desired. Reasons for staying at a distance are many and hard to get to the bottom of. Therefore today schools must use the well known saying “If the mountain won’t come to the prophet, the then prophet must go to the mountain”, and find new ways to inform parents and get them involved.

In contrast with other countries, home visits are not part of the German Federal Republic teacher's job description. One exception is the state of Bremen. In their "conditions of service" home visits are specifically mentioned. Here it states, "The teacher must make him- or herself so familiar with the living conditions of his/her pupils that he or she is able to educate them in an appropriate manner. To this end, home visits, visits to educational agencies and work placements and working with their cooperation in solving family social and health problems relevant institutions and advisory centres and with positions of professional advice are important components of the access to the living conditions of the pupils.

➔ www2.bildung.bremen.de/sfb/dienstordnung.pdf - accessed 25.09.08

In this module teachers should be qualified to understand parents and their fears and reservations about active participation in the school life of their children and also to act sensitively and purposefully. In allaying such fears and reservations the participants learn to instigate cooperation with the parents gradually in order to break down immigrant-specific reticence and non-participation of the parents and to make use of the competences of the parents' as yet untapped resources with regard to the cultural and social backgrounds.

Target group

The project is aimed at teaching students, probationary teachers and teachers in all kinds of schools and stages.

Aims

The most important aims of the project are

- to embed long term intercultural competences as key competences for teachers in initial training and continuing professional development
- to train future and practising teachers on the level of communicative interaction and intercultural dialogues and so to develop a communicative competence
- to sensitise future and practising teachers in dealing with parents from other cultures and with other cultural backgrounds and thereby to contribute to democratic and egalitarian education
- prevention of misunderstandings in contact with parents and pupils

to strengthen the cooperation with parents of immigrant backgrounds

How do I get parents to take an active part in school life?

Subject

Can home visits contribute to mobilising parents to take an active part in school life?

Participants

The number of participants is variable but should not exceed 12.

Instructions

Fictitious statements of parents and teachers made on home visits will be presented to the participants via Powerpoint presentations. (Alternative: showing of a film sequence in which different people talk on the subject of home visits.)

Statement 1: *Mrs Schmidt, mother of a son and 2 daughters*

"I think it is good if teachers know a bit about the home conditions and in what sort of family circumstances their pupils grow up in. This way teachers can better appreciate many problems and have an effect on them educationally."

Statement 2: *Mr Gentner, father of 2 sons*

"Big Brother is watching you! Is it not enough that millions have nothing better to do than to catch intimate glimpses into the private lives of complete strangers on reality TV shows. Now teachers believe they have the right to their own reality show in which they intrude on the private area of pupils and their parents."

Statement 3: *Mr Kaufmann, Secondary teacher at a school with a high immigrant population.*

"Because the majority of parents of our pupils in the past neither came to parents' nights and open days nor to other school events, we were forced to rethink and to explore other avenues. True to the motto, if the parents won't come to me, I'll go to them. Through this new concept not only has personal contact with the parents improved but also their engagement with the school."

Statement 4: *Mrs Kramer, secondary school teacher*

"Since we started home visits at our school much has changed for the better. However we all had to be clear about the following: home visits are demanding. They take much energy and above all much time. To carry out home visits to almost 30 children per class without becoming overburdened timewise means at the same time reducing the daily amount of preparation and follow up work."

Statement 5: *Mr Karimov, father of four children*

"We know about school visits from teachers in our native country of Russia. However I was very surprised that the school in Germany was interested in how we live and what we expect from the school. We found out many important things and were able to say what matters to us about our children's education."

Statement 6: *Mrs Hagen, single parent of six children*

"Have teachers actually considered that home visits could be embarrassing for the child and also for the parents if they come from particularly poor circumstances? Can teachers actually stay free from prejudice when they see that my six children must share two rooms?"

Statement 7: *Mrs Lindner, head teacher of a comprehensive school*

"In many countries home visits are a daily occurrence. They have long since realised that home visits are important to observe certain structures which help teachers to better understand the child and his behaviour. They have also realised in most countries that lightening of the teaching workload for teachers who carry out these visits is just as essential."

Statement 8: *Mrs Meistermann, mother of two daughters*

"When the home visit of the class teacher was coming up we had a house clean up. The children cleared their rooms and I baked a cake. As well as that we passed round sandwiches. And then the teacher left after only fifteen minutes."

Statement 9: *Mr Jansen, GEW-worker*

“Home visits have a mainly positive effect on the relationship between parents and teachers. We have observed that it is clearly easier to make contact – if it is about that, talking about problems or arranging meetings – both for parents and for teachers. In plain language: the better parents and teachers know each other the sooner they pick up the telephone when they have something to say.”

Statement 10: *Mr Tegenkamp, university professor*

“I find myself in a quandary regarding the integration of home visits as part of school life. On one side it is not disputed that such visits can help to get to know and understand the student as an individual. Possibly the opportunity arises to have a quiet conversation with parents who were previously reticent. On the other hand I have reservations about an overzealous adoption of socio-pedagogic exercises by teaching staff who have absolutely no training for this. Even with regard to home visits to migrant families I detect a growing insecurity in teachers about unfamiliar cultural behaviour.”

Finally the participants are given the task of gathering arguments for and against home visits. Each participant is given three yellow and three red cards on which s/he notes the pros on yellow and the cons on red. The results are collected in a plenary session and stuck to a magnetic board.

Then the participants are asked to discuss the listed arguments in the plenary, to complete and to categorise in clusters by organising them on the magnetic board and provide a title card for each category. In the next stage the participants are given a conversation theme for home visits. The theme contains only headings (keywords) The task for the participants is now to script the conversation working with a partner (by lot)

Keynotes to remember when talking to parents¹

1. School Profile

- Objectives and duties of the school or the current school system

2. Possible parental involvement

- school parents’ advisor
- parents’ representative
- project work
- school events

3. Education in the school or parental home

- duties of the parents or school
- values and norms

4. Career guidance

- schools and parents work together

5. Expectations, wishes and experiences of the parents

6. Personal Engagement

- How can parents get involved?

Guidance for the evaluation phase:

The participants present and comment on their conversations with help of posters. After the presentation of each structured conversation it will be discussed in a plenary. At the end the participants will vote for the best structured conversation and improve it should the need arise.

¹ it may make more sense to do without the bullet points and give the participants only the six headings

Sessions in Practice

Session 1: Role plays on reaching out to parents

Aims

Fears, desires and prejudices are vividly portrayed in role plays. Through active conflicts with different requests and needs participants become sensitive to their problems through intensive exploitation. In addition the role plays demand much communicative skill from the person who is acting the role of teacher in the simulated intercultural dialogue.

Instructions

Scenario: Class teacher Mr S. is making home visits at the beginning of the school year to all of his year 5 pupils.

The following three scenes (role plays 1, 2 and 3) will be played out.

Participants

The number of participants is variable but should not exceed 12.

Step 1: Role play 1

Denise is one of three children of a German middle class family. Her older siblings Lennart and Diana are in years seven and eight at the same school. Previously the parents have not take an active part in school life. Parents' evenings, open

days and school celebrations have been avoided by them. Mr S made an appointment for a home visit by telephone. Present are Mr S and Denise's parents.

Role play cards

Class teacher

- indicates to the parents how good communication between parents and school is highly valued
- points out that their collaboration in school is desired
- informs the parents about the ways in which they could become involved in school
- shows interest in the family situation (the parents' work, house, other children etc)
- asks about any anxieties and the wishes of the parents with concerning school

Denise's mother

- appears stressed and nervous
- makes excuses why she and her husband have not been active in school life so far
- would like to be informed straight away if problems arise

Denise's father

- appears suspicious
- feels uncomfortable in his home setting
- does not see the point of the visit
- emphasises he has little time to bother with school problems of the children

Step 2: Role play 2

Viktor is one of two sons of a Kazakhstani immigrant family. The family has been living in Germany for seven years. Mother and father understand and speak good German. Their older son Vladimir was at the same school until the summer holidays. After Vladimir repeatedly physically attacked his fellow pupils he was transferred to a school for children with

behavioural difficulties. Viktor's parents previously visited the school if they were invited to meetings or conferences in connection with the misbehaviour of their son Vladimir. Mr S made an appointment for a home visit by telephone. Present are Mr S and Viktor's parents as well as his older brother Vladimir for some of the time.

Role play cards

Class teacher

- indicates to the parents how good communication between parents and school is highly valued
- points out that their collaboration in school is desired
- informs the parents about the ways in which they could become involved in school
- shows interest in the family situation (the parents' work, house, other children etc)
- asks about any anxieties and the wishes of the parents with concerning school

Viktor's mother

- is trying hard to be hospitable yet at the same time embarrassed because of the incidents which occurred during the last school year with her son Vladimir being removed from the school
- lets it be known that she kept herself at a distance from the school authorities because she was ashamed of the various incidents leading to the expulsion of her son Vladimir
- has heard how parents of children in Vladimir's former class made malicious remarks about him
- wants Viktor to take advantage of the school's afternoon options

Viktors

- is likewise hospitable
- appears a strict father
- is critical of the failing discipline in the German school system
- wants pupils to be more strongly kept in order
- wants immediate notification and hard punishment for his son at the first infringement of the rules

Viktor's brother Vladimir

- appears very ignorant
- listens quietly to but is obviously stressed by the reprimands of his father
- answers Mr S's questions with short sentences

Step 3: Role play 3

Ludmilla is the daughter of a Georgian immigrant family. The parents and their six children only moved to Germany two months ago. The father and mother only understand a few words of German. Ludmilla has no German at all. The parents did not appear at the first parents’

evening in the new school. Mr S has written a letter with the help of a colleague in school who comes from the same background informing the parents of the home visit. Present are Mr S, the school colleague, Ludmilla and her parents.

Role play cards

Class teacher

- indicates to the parents how good communication between parents and school is highly valued
- points out that their collaboration in school is desired
- informs the parents about the ways in which they could become involved in school
- shows interest in the family situation (the parents’ work, house, other children etc)
- asks about any anxieties and the wishes of the parents concerning school

School colleague

- translates for the class teacher
- translates the questions and answers of the parents

Ludmilla’s mother

- seems rather at a loss
- is pleasantly surprised at the interest and involvement of the school
- wants her daughter to make new friends in her class quickly

Ludmilla’s father

- wants Ludmilla to learn German as quickly as possible so that she can move up to a better school
- appears impatient and wants to know if Ludmilla will be able to change to a another type of school
- asks Mr S about extra help in German for his children

Ludmilla

- appears shy but interested
- explains that she is worried about sitting alone in the class

Guidance for the evaluation phase

At the start of the role plays all participants who are not taking part in the current role play are given a card with observational tasks as well as a observation form on which they note their results. There are various teacher competences to be observed (see the observation form) in teachers undertaking home visits. Within the scope or content of the role play the participants who are observing may concentrate on one or several competences. At the end of the role play all those involved in the action have the chance to express themselves freely in order to detach themselves from their role and to be able to distance themselves for the evaluation. Then they form

pairs from the previous actors and the designated observers. The observers are required to state at what points they would have reacted differently and where there were problems. They discuss key scenes with the actors.

The participants who were acting as observers finally are given an evaluation form on which they put a cross against competences seen in the role play and make judgements. (see the evaluation sheet)

The evaluation sheets will be validated and the results discussed in a plenary in the framework of a reflective contemplation of the various role plays.

Observation record sheet

Role play No. _____ Names: _____ Group: _____

Observation notes:

Communicative ability:

Ability to deal with conflict:

Problem solving ability:

Preventative ability:

Evaluation sheet

Role play No. _____ Names: _____ Group: _____

Relevant Competences

Communicative ability	
Ability to deal with conflict	
Problem solving ability	
Preventative ability	

Objectives	Were more than met	Were completely met	Partly met	Seldom met	Never met
The teacher excelled in a suitable communicative approach					
The teacher reacted suitably in a conflict situation.					
The teacher was able to solve an existing problem.					
The teacher was able to avert problems or clear up existing problems.					

Evaluation converted to points

Exceeded: 20 P. / completely met: 15 P. / partly met: 10 P. / seldom met: 5 P. / never met: 0 P.

Points achieved: _____ points