

Starting Conversations with Parents

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Working with parents in schools is “in” – I am getting this impression looking at the multitude of publications, renowned projects and programs in the individual federal states of Germany, Parent Academies and Parent Universities, conferences and many initiatives of the educational sections of newspapers and magazines. Yet if we take a closer look we see that the practice of a constructive interaction between teachers and parents truly intended to benefit the children is unfortunately quite underdeveloped. Furthermore, such dialogue is not necessarily part of the focus of the school board and the teaching staff. What might be the reasons that teachers rarely take the competence of parents seriously and fail to integrate them? Why are parents in many places excluded from an active and creative participation in school life and the developmental processes in schools? In the following I would like to focus on aspects of communication that can contribute to the success or failure of the teacher – mother/father – child communication-triangle.

A Case Study

As an introduction I would like to critically investigate the traditional division of roles that teachers and parents play. For that reason I am referring to experiences I have made myself in order to exclude the accusation of exaggerating.

Example: Role Play

Location: Seminar on “Interview and communication”

Participants: Teachers in their position as members of teachers’ associations and as teacher trainers; many of them also parents of children in school age.

Role play addressing the following problem: Student continuously refuses to participate in class; attempt to resolve the problem

Setting: One teacher plays himself, another teacher plays the mother. The set goal of the conversation is the creation of methods to reintegrate in child into the class.

Progress: After the welcoming, the teacher informs the mother about all “inacceptable” behaviors her son is displaying during class. The mother who had been inclined to cooperate and show understanding prior to the conversation becomes increasingly indignant during its progress. The meeting ends in dissonance and without a common agreement. The mother is angry, the teacher surprised.

A note that is worth mentioning: The teacher had welcomed the mother with: “Hello Mrs. Troublemaker. Please have a seat.”

Please examine for yourself: How is it possible that the scene developed as it did despite prior “input”, i.e., many hours of preparing for a dialogue “at the same level” which the seminar instructor tried to illustrate via

exercises of perception, repeated emphasis on listening closely and by pointing out the importance of mutual respect. The scene described may serve as an example for the different perspectives and interests that the teacher and mother had when they met and how these differences led to a quick dissolution of their dialogue with each other. They did not manage to reach a point where they could have asked each other serious questions and listened to each other carefully. Watching this role play I reached the following conclusions:

- 1) The seemingly spontaneous welcoming words reveal that the teacher’s behavior is influenced by his concept of the parent as the “enemy” .
- 2) The “conversation” pursued the purpose that everything should remain as it was or rather return to the status quo as the teacher imposes it.
- 3) The gift to listen actively and to be aware becomes superfluous here.

I regard these conclusions as the result of *déformations professionnelles*, which can be translated as professional blindness. Such blindness can lastingly disturb the cooperation between school and home since it distracts from those who should be at the center of support and benefit within the system of the school. Empathy, open-mindedness and a change of perspective are the skills that can help avoid the blindness on both sides, i.e. the parents’ and the teachers’ lack of understanding. Repeated questions and questioning will be extremely helpful in this process in order to understand the context that influences the actions of the other and to communicate with each other respectfully while searching for solutions.

Who is in the Same Boat?

I would like to analyze the role play described above on a more general level using the questions listed below. I expect that these questions will cause some opposition. Simultaneously, I hope that they will stimulate some thoughts about how to change or remove perceptual patterns that are blocking the way, or change feared behavioral patterns both on the side of the teachers and of the parents.

- How can we explain that teachers often display a basic attitude that seems to be saying: “Please ensure at home that YOUR child does not cause ME trouble in class”?
- How is it possible that when parents want to share worries to explain a certain behavior of their child, the teacher often does not notice or does not want to hear these comments?
- What are the reasons that parents feel at the mercy of the teachers because of their assumed power and eloquence?
- Why do teachers feel confronted with what they regard as unjustified accusations and excessive expectations of the parents?

These questions evoke the image of the iceberg. Since its larger part remains below the surface of the water it is hard to see and for that reason especially dangerous. Using this image for parent-teacher communication suggests an influence of other parties not present during the conversation.

Who is in the same boat, i.e. invisibly taking part in the conversation? In the following I am presenting a list of the potential “passengers” without claiming to be exhaustive here:

- One’s own experiences from school days
- “Teachers always have the last say; they have more pull anyway.”
- Siblings who are very good in school or don’t attract a lot of attention.
- “We never have such problems with him/her.”
- Implicit requests by the family, the school board or the colleagues: “Could you fix that, please?”
- The advisors, i.e. the school psychologist, social education worker, speech therapist etc. “We tried/did all of this before.”
- Experiences with parents of other children – who appear aggressively, are over-protective or invading,
...
- “I’m afraid of them.”

Prior to a conversation these invisible “passengers” cannot be determined since they are joining the speakers on an unconscious level. To become aware of their attendance and their influence serves in this context mainly one purpose: Make sure that a conversation is not about being right or wrong. Rather the “inner map” of subjective experiences determines which positions the partners adopt in a dialogue.

Listening and Asking Questions

Because of the unconscious influences it is crucial to approach the conversation with empathy. Asking serious questions requires good listening skills, which includes making additional inquiries if something is not immediately clear. The result of such an effort is an understanding and a mutual attempt to find a solution acceptable for the parties involved. After all, the goal is to do the best for the child and not to emerge as the “winner” from the conversation. The motto should not be: “See? I told you this before!”

Last but not least it is beneficial to depart for a moment from a tense communicative situation to gain some distance if one has reached a gridlock and no progress is being made. Just allow the question (either out loud or just for yourself): “How would the child feel if s/he could watch us adults right now? What would s/he say about our tone and behavior?” Such a change to the child’s perspective can help to direct the conversation back “on track”, that is to realize what is actually at stake.

Serendipity – Sometimes Works Wonders

Accidental encounters between parents and teachers, e.g. on the street or at the supermarket, can result in interesting conversations. The informal exchange happens unintentionally and hence it is not biased by any agenda. For that reason it can become a moment of contact that “tells” something about the worries and concerns but also reveal positive news from the school or family life.

Such “serendipitous” situations that do not focus on the (mis)behavior or the performance of the child can also be created in the world of the school. Traditionally, the performance issues can be discussed in detail during parent days, through “pink slips” or on the day when the report cards are handed out. The art of communicating serendipitously is, however, quite underdeveloped. Why do we not take the child’s birthday as an occasion for a conversation between teacher and parent? On such a day the focus would be the child with his or her desires, successes and his or her wellbeing at school.

An approach that is a bit more labor intensive would be a parent-teacher day to chat over coffee, tea and cake. Even if not all teachers agree to participate in this admittedly quite time intensive effort, it could be the class teacher of a class or grade level who initiates such an innovation. Especially parents from a different culture might feel invited by such an informal gesture to enter the school.

I know of one example where the parents suggested such informal and relaxed conversations and everyone was very pleased with the successful outcome. The teaching staff spontaneously agreed to incorporate such an alternative “meeting day” into the curriculum of the year. Creating such a culture of discussion enhances the development of an atmosphere at school that welcomes parents as partners. They find open ears for their questions, worries and suggestions and might be more willing to share the responsibility for the education of their own child but also the development of the school. Parents get involved by showing their expertise as parents of their children but also as professionals who know a world that teachers and children not usually have access to. After such informal meetings a dad might agree to serve as a tutor for reading; a mother might offer to explain the secrets of the health insurance system, just to name two examples of many resources that parents have in contrast to teachers and children. The following example might illustrate how even parents can grow by assuming such tasks in the school.

A mother took on the task to explain the issue “healthy nutrition” in her son’s school. As a trained dietician (expert for housekeeping and nutrition), she was not only able to freshen up her specific knowledge for the sessions with the children but also discover a new area to implement her skills. She is now working as a self-employed nutrition counselor in a support program with regional schools.

Culture of Praise versus Problem-Trance

How beneficial praise is! Teachers need it just as much as children; children need as just as their parents do. We all need some positive feedback for our personal commitment and the tasks that we successfully complete. We have achieved a milestone if we center our conversations on strengths and progress rather on than mistakes and deficits. The results are encouragement and stimulation to move on: “Keep on going!” Simultaneously, the joy about the praise creates a bond: “Together we created success.”

In this fashion the one-way transfer of information school-to-home, so often positing the “problem-trance” concerning only failures or bad news, is transformed into a focus on strengths and successes, even small ones, and thus the downward spiral of accusations and demoralizations represents no longer a threat. Communicating at the same level also means one must avoid making judgments and to abstain from hasty categorizations such as “wrong” and “correct”. Finally, why should the parents not give some praise to the teachers at the end of the school year presenting a speech or hosting a little reception rather than quickly dropping off some flowers? This “alternative look” at people enables a friendly (or friendlier) look into each other’s eyes.

Creating Structures

Creating structures—not leaving communication to chance—will build in small steps a culture of transparency and exchange in both directions: school – home and parents – school. Even if such a structure might initially mean more work and effort, the increased openness and trust will make it worthwhile, as the success of many schools illustrates where the teachers have started “agenda-free” visits at the home of children who are new at the school.

What Stands the Test

Interactive Parent Evenings

- In classes with non-German speaking parents: Write invitation also in the foreign language;
- Organize interpreter during the parent evening for the conversation;
- Whispering groups discussing a set question/keyword;
- Parents report on their children’s strengths (table groups), students present results of their work;
- Invite experts from among the parents or from elsewhere to give input/report;
- Include a content issue on the agenda: e.g. changes or requirements of the lesson plans, introduction of the subject teachers, language support, parents planning a project with the class, homework, puberty, “boys and girls related” questions, addiction, career choices, etc.

Keep Parents Informed

- Concise briefing of those parents who could not participate in the parent evening;

- Monthly newsletter for parents (ca. one page long containing reports from the learning groups and school life, written by students and teachers); Motto: “what worked well”, “what you should know”;
- Organization of translation/interpreting for participants who do not speak German;
- Coordinate with parent representative the dates/appointments for the (half)-year.

Create Opportunities for Conversations and Set up Structures for Continuous Dialogue

- Birthday conversations;
- Class teachers offer fixed telephone office hours, also to provide praise and say thank you;
- Coffee/tea with teacher for an informal conversation: ca. every two months an alternative to the regular meeting time (30min are already sufficient);
- On a voluntary base: distribute telephone and address lists for spontaneous events, quick coordination and transfer of information;
- Fixed appointments for conversations (either in school or via telephone), e.g. once a month for the teacher and parent representatives.

Guideline (not only) for Disputations

- Listen to all parties involved!
- Listen to an “attorney” of the opposing parties!
- Do not evaluate the facts presented!
- Do not devaluate! Avoid humiliation!
- Change your perspective: “How would X or Y consider the matter?”
- Develop solutions and act accordingly! Opposing parties suggest solution and steps towards its implementation.
- Come to an agreement and determine time period for implementation!
- Have a post-conversation and, if applicable, make modifications to agreement!
- Perhaps take minutes of conversation and have opposing parties and “attorney” sign the document!
- W-questions are useful. They exclude yes/no answers and aim for motifs, judgments, opinions and conclusions.

A list with literature recommendations, initiatives and projects on work with parents and parent-universities can be found online with the additional material to the article under www.foerdermagazin.de (in German).

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