Creating Dialogue

Strengthening trusting partnerships with parents

Imprint

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CREATING DIALOGUE

Contents

Introduction

Trusting and respectful relationships with parents and other primary carers[1] provide the groundwork for successful pedagogical initiatives and are essential for a child's development. The importance of educational partnerships, therefore, is also stressed at the policy level, and recognised in *Bridging Diversity*: "The parents are the child's first and most important attachment figures and, thus, crucial partners for the early years centre concerning the child's education".[2] Children are acutely aware of how other people approach, view, value, judge and relate to other members of their family, and this awareness has a substantial effect on the relationships they build with other people. Practitioners in early years centres, thus, can have a positive impact on children's wellbeing and self-image by ensuring that families feel accepted, valued and appreciated.

The increasing levels of diversity and the changes that are taking place in today's society are also reflected in early years centres. Monolingual and multilingual families, migrant families and refugees, rainbow and patchwork families, families that are directly affected by poverty, parents who need more extended periods of care for their children than are usually available, and children with disabilities all come into contact with each other in contemporary early years centres. Nevertheless, dealing with such diversity continues to be anything but a matter of course. Therefore, in order to build trusting relationships, it is essential that practitioners show interest in and recognise each family as unique. People's understandings of family constellations, customs, values, languages, dialects, faiths and beliefs depend on their socialisation. As such, relations between practitioners and parents are often complicated by views that have been shaped by society, including stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices. Dealing with and developing awareness of our own opinions, feelings and behaviour, therefore, is essential if we are to be in a position to understand parents' diverse realities, views and ideas.

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1 In the following, 'parents' should also be taken to refer to legal guardians and other people providing primary care to the children.

2 Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family (ed.) (2019): Bridging Diversity. An Early Years Programme. Weimar, p. 49. (in the following cited as 'Bridging Diversity')

Parents and practitioners want the best for the children who attend early years centres. However, very different views about *Bildung*[3] and education can complicate and place a burden on relations between practitioners and parents. As such, it is essential that practitioners regularly speak to parents to learn more about the families and their ideas. Moreover, instead of merely developing our own hypotheses and explanations, we need to begin to ask questions.

What notions do parents have of the early years centre as 'an institution'? What expectations and hopes (and this includes any that are not being openly addressed) do parents have of us as practitioners? What concerns do the parents have about their children growing up? What kind of views do they have about education?

Questions such as these often remain unanswered. In many cases, parents and other members of the family who care for the children lack information, and this leads to a feeling of insecurity: What does my child do all day in the early years centre? How is my child coping? Is the centre laying the foundations for my child to find an appropriate place in society? Does the education that my child receives actually reflect what our family wants for our child? And, do the things that are important in our family play a role in the early years centre?

Research projects as a gateway

The ISTA conducted two studies that were grounded in educational practices; both provided valuable information about parents' hopes and expectations of the early childhood educational system in Germany. The first study, Children Crossing Borders (CCB), was undertaken in five countries between 2004 and 2009. The second study, Creating Dialogue (CD), was conducted between 2012 and 2013. The studies chiefly focused on the experiences of parents with migrant heritage. The aim was to provide these parents with a voice and to ensure that their understandings are taken into account in new approaches towards working together with parents.

3 The concept was coined by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the elder brother of the explorer Alexander von Humboldt. *Bildung* involves 'appropriation'—a person creating an image of the world and contributing responsibly to shaping it, and, thus experiencing self-efficacy. This means that *Bildung* is a process that takes place over the course of a person's entire life.

In the CCB study, parents were asked to discuss in groups their expectations, hopes and experiences of early years centres as institutions.[4] The study also employed group discussions to establish the views of the practitioners in the early years centres participating in the research. The aim was to develop an understanding of practitioners' opinions of their relationships with parents and how they dealt with diversity in their centres. A number of issues that were important to parents and practitioners crystallised out of the discussions. Moreover, the discussions also helped identify topics that were viewed as underrepresented in work with families in the early years centres, as well as issues that needed to be tackled including in areas where less-obvious misunderstandings had occurred. The CD study involved semi-structured interviews (see Lamnek 2005, pp. 356-401) with parents who had come to Germany as refugees. The results from the CD study supplement the findings from the discussions in the CCB study.

The studies focused on the following topics:

- dealing with linguistic and ethnic-cultural diversity
- identity and belonging
- differences in ideas about education and expectations of learning
- developing good relations and working with families

More detailed research was conducted into some of these topics and the findings were published in Tobin et al. (2013) – *Children Crossing Borders. Immigrant Parent and Teacher Perspectives on Preschool* – and in Tobin (2016) – *Preschool and Im/migrants in Five Countries*. Further results from the CD study can also be found in Jungen (2013) and in the dissertation *Sprachlos gemacht in Kita und Familie. Ein deutsch-französischer Vergleich von Sprachpolitiken und -praktiken* (Thomauske 2017).

Although some of the discussions took place more than ten years ago, the findings and most of the topics raised are still relevant. Ultimately, the studies found that practitioners and parents have very different perceptions, interpretations and views about the same situations. Moreover, they established that it was difficult for parents and practitioners to talk about their views and, therefore, to understand each other's opinions.

Finally, the studies also demonstrated that instead of furthering understanding, attempts to comprehend other people's actions or views tended to lead to further ascriptions and to strengthen prejudices. Importantly, however, although parents and practitioners spoke of their helplessness in this situation, they also expressed a desire for closer contact and improved relations.

4 Group discussions were conducted in line with the methods used for focus groups developed by Macnaghten and Myers (2004).

Training programme: Creating Dialogue

This training for practitioners was developed out of a desire to ensure that the insights gained from the two studies were applied in practice. As such, the training is based on the premise that communication grounded in dialogue can contribute towards common understanding, which, in turn, can help establish a new quality of relations between practitioners and families.

The following questions were considered during the development of the training:

- How can we establish a relationship based on dialogue to provide children and their families with a feeling of certainty that they will be accepted for who they are, and, therefore, lead to greater levels of understanding and trust between practitioners and parents?
- How can this be done in the face of the inequalities that exist in society?
- How can we develop a dialogue based on equity and respect despite practices of discrimination and the unequal distribution of power in social relations?

The training consists of four modules, each of which is followed by a practical stage. The course provides in-service training to practitioners with the aim of helping them to strike up equitable relations with parents and establishing dialogue groups in early years centres. This, in turn, should help practitioners build lasting relationships with parents. During the training, groups of practitioners from various early years centres (two to six practitioners from each centre) are introduced to the views of the parents that they work with, before learning how to conduct a dialogue with these parents. The training is based on two aspects: the ideas of the parents and practitioners who took part in the two studies mentioned above; and the principles of Anti-Bias Education and Prejudice-Aware Education.[5] The practical element involves practitioners reviewing the pedagogical activities that they have conducted with parents and families and highlighting topics that are particularly relevant to the families they are currently working with. This is followed up by dialogue-based discussions with the parents in their early years centre. Their experiences of these dialogue groups are then integrated into future training modules.

This handbook is based on the experiences and insights developed by practitioners during the training and during their actual work. It is aimed at practitioners who would like to anchor dialogue with parents in their work and is intended to support practitioners in building relations with parents.

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5 For more details about Anti-Bias Education and Prejudice-Aware *Bildung* and Education, see: https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/anti-bias-education/overview and 'Fachstelle Kinderwelten für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung' available at: https://situationsansatz.de/fachstelle-kinderwelten.html.

Structure of the handbook

The first chapter 'Parents and practitioners in dialogue' defines how the term 'dialogue' is used in this handbook and the training. The first chapter also focuses on the barriers to developing dialogical relationships associated with the inequalities that exist in contemporary society. Social inequalities are clearly reflected in the asymmetrical relations of power that exist between practitioners—as representatives of a particular institution—and the families of the children that practitioners care for.

The chapters 'Building better relations with parents', 'The concept of *Bildung*', 'Language(s)' and 'Identity and belonging' pick up on the issues raised by parents and practitioners during the two studies, and they provide the mainstay of this handbook. Each chapter is divided into the following sections: 'Links to the studies', 'Findings from the studies', 'Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice' and 'Reflection and suggestions for educational practice and practical examples'.

Links to the studies

These sections focus on the study findings, introduce the issues that the studies identified and briefly outline key aspects. They also describe the central ideas behind each specific issue and the arguments on which they are based. This helps provide an understanding of why a particular topic was selected and demonstrates its importance for work between parents and practitioners.

Findings from the studies: the parents' and practitioners' views

These sections illustrate each topic using excerpts from the discussions that took place during the studies. The examples provided are taken from the group discussions that were conducted in larger cities (those that took place in rural areas have been left out to ensure that the situations described within the early years centres are comparable). The transcripts have been anonymised and the language edited for clarity. However, the participants' speech has not been completely transcribed into formal written language so as to retain its authenticity. Other experts from the field of early childhood education and prejudice-aware education (see Acknowledgements) who were involved in the studies, and, therefore, were already familiar with the material, were consulted for the analyses. The transcripts illustrate the topics that the participants (parents or practitioners) spoke about, reveal the dynamics of a particular group discussion, and underscore the socio-political framework and the discourses within which the discussions took place. The

transcripts are analysed using methods gleaned from interpretive social research (see Kleemann et al. 2013). The aim is not merely to provide illustrative examples, but also to demonstrate the ways in which these topics come about, the issues from which they emerge, and the perspectives that they involve. A dialogical approach (see the chapter 'Parents and practitioners in dialogue') is also beneficial in this case: What views do the parents have? What views do we have as practitioners? What impact does the socio-political framework have on these views? The analyses are not (only) aimed at providing a description of the current social framework but (also) understanding it.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that excerpts from group discussions can only ever portray one part of reality, namely the views that a particular group of participants expressed during a discussion that took place in a single moment of time. No claim, therefore, can be made as to the completeness of the analyses presented here.

Finally, in order to provide a better overview, the issues that the participants raised are divided into four subject areas. However, it is important to remember that these issues should not be addressed in isolation as they are interdependent and interlinked.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

These sections are intended to help develop a better understanding of the issues at hand. They are followed by a discussion of the experiences of the participants during the training and in the early years centres. A comprehensive analysis of different situations is used to develop strategies that can help practitioners to take a proactive approach. The examples illustrate the processes that participants go through as part of the training and in their early years centres. This draws on practical insights into how specific topics were discussed and dealt with in early years centres. The examples are not intended to demonstrate how one should act in situations such as these, at least not in the sense we expect other institutions to adopt the solutions proposed in these cases; rather, the aim is to enable practitioners to benefit from other colleagues' experiences. Moreover, they are intended as encouragement and inspiration with which to develop own approaches that reflect the particular situation in the centre in which one works.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice and practical exercises

These sections set out proposals for practice that offer practitioners the opportunity to observe and analyse own work in more detail. The questions aim to facilitate self-reflection and reflection about pedagogical practices. The practical exercises can be used in

early years centres by teams for group reflection and to help practitioners develop better relationships with parents.

The concluding chapter 'Dialogue groups in practice' contains methodological proposals drawn from experiences gained during the Creating Dialogue training sessions (carried out between 2015 and 2017) and their implementation by practitioners in early years centres during the training sessions. These ideas are intended to provide guidance on how to organise dialogue groups with parents. The early years centres provided valuable insights into their work ranging from challenges and stumbling blocks to successful experiences and encouraging situations: we hope that this handbook does justice to their experiences.

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Parents and practitioners in dialogue

Defining dialogue

The term ‘dialogue’ is derived from the Greek word ‘dialogos’. ‘Logos’ is Greek for ‘word’ or ‘reason[ing]’, whereas ‘dia’ means ‘through’. Dialogue, therefore, can be understood as the process of ‘arriving at knowledge through speaking to one another’. Clearly, dialogue can take place between two people, but it can also take place within a group or with oneself.

Dialogue, then, primarily refers to people sharing their thoughts, feelings, experiences, worldviews and questions. It is based on the assumption that there is no single truth or universally valid worldview; instead, there are as many worldviews as there are people. Dialogue is aimed at deepening knowledge, creating something new and doing so together with everyone involved. Thus, dialogue provides people with the opportunity—encouraged by what other people are saying—to think about themselves and to develop and discover new points of view.

Dialogical speech is always an open-ended process. When people enter into dialogue, they have no idea about the end result. This is where dialogue differs from other forms of speech. During discussions, participants use arguments and counterarguments to convince other people to accept their opinions. In contrast, different points of view are not treated as opposing during dialogue, but as forming part of the mosaic that encompasses reality. Other people’s views need to be heard so that everyone can better understand a situation and each other (see Gonzales-Mena 2008, p. 4). Janet Gonzales-Mena, a US-based consultant for early childhood education with an emphasis on infants and toddlers, who is committed to the promotion of respectful and appreciative relations between practitioners and families, aptly argues that “dialogues occur when the people involved begin by listening to each other instead of judging each other” (ibid., p. 26). Thus, dialogue requires participants to listen, to pause, and to adopt a fundamentally open and inquisitive approach combined with a sincere interest in what the other people have to say. Nevertheless, merely because everyone accepts and expresses appreciation of each other need not mean that they share each other’s opinions: dialogue gains its vibrancy through a diversity of experiences and views.

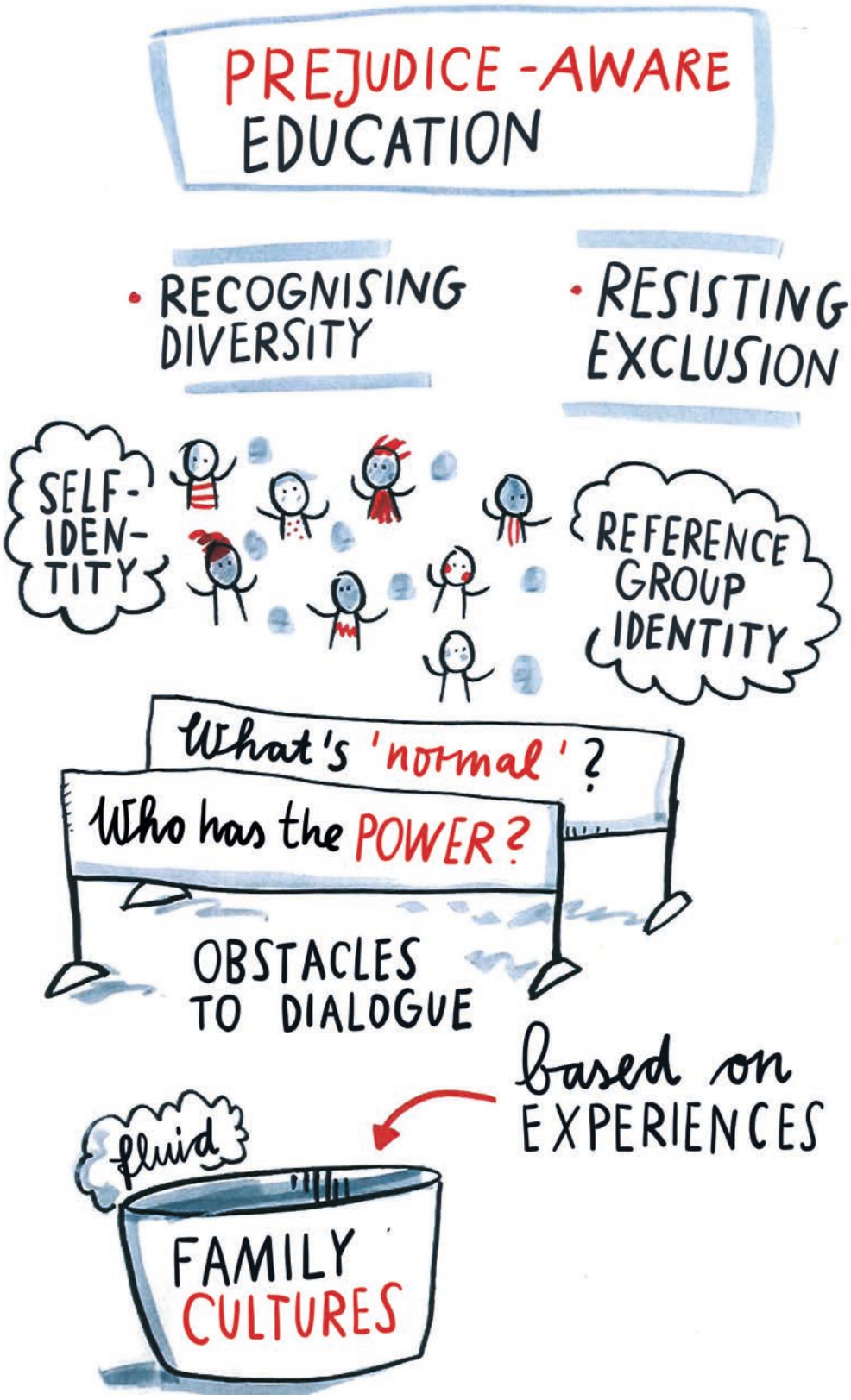
The philosopher Martin Buber has provided some inspiring thoughts in this context. Buber (1999) views 'what happens between people', namely 'social relations', as the essence of dialogue. Buber suggests that participants approach and view each other as human beings with different life stories. Therefore, instead of relying on ready-made speeches, they should aim to develop a form of communication that enables everyone to contribute authentically, as it is in relations such as these that dialogue emerges.

Dialogical relationships—relationships based on dialogue—require people to treat and view each other as equals. This means that neither side should gain the upper hand through factual superiority or dominance.

Power and social inequality

Questions about the quality of dialogue in relationships between practitioners and parents/families inevitably lead to issues that go beyond the immediate situation. In part, this is due to the fact that participants bring with them experiences from within their particular social contexts.

With this in mind, the training course also incorporates principles of Anti-Bias Education and Prejudice-aware Education. Both approaches aim to ensure that inclusion is properly implemented, focus on issues such as 'What do people need to be able to recognise the diversity of lifestyles, experiences and values that exist in society and to enable them to stand up against exclusion and discrimination?' Questions such as these are based on the assumption that people have different levels of access to social resources and that society accords different social groups varying degrees of recognition. As such, access to social resources and recognition depends on a person's social position (gender, gender identity, geographical origin, language, skin colour, physical and mental constitution, level of formal education, religion etc.). People clearly experience inequalities during social interaction. However, social inequalities are also inscribed and embedded within social structures and institutions. Structural inequalities mean that people involved in dialogue (and this also applies to dialogues conducted in early years centres) do not necessarily meet on equal terms. The privileges that a person brings with them and their experiences of discrimination influence, for example, whether they can expect to be taken seriously or how assertively they will participate in the conversation.


PREJUDICE -AWARE EDUCATION
• RECOGNISING DIVERSITY
• RESISTING EXCLUSION
SELF-IDEN-TITY
REFERENCE GROUP IDENTITY
What's 'normal'?
Who has the POWER?
OBSTACLES TO DIALOGUE
based on EXPERIENCES
fluid
FAMILY CULTURES

Practitioners need to be aware of the role that power plays in relationships with families. The same can be said of the structural differences in power that exist between the early years centre as an institution and families. Practitioners have a clear power advantage over parents. In any event, practitioners—as representatives of an early years centre—embody and represent a facility's rules and norms. This may mean that practitioners' opinions are given greater weight during dialogues than those of the parents.

Paths towards a prejudice—aware culture of dialogue

One of the aims of the training programme is to ensure that children's primary caregivers are involved in the day-to-day life of the child's early years centre. However, if primary carers are to be actively involved in early years centres, practitioners need to welcome families as equal partners, express interest in their views and respect their opinions. Clearly, practitioners should be prepared to put forward their own views of a child's development, and they can base their opinions on their professional experience. However, even if practitioners are convinced that their assumptions are correct—after all, they can rely on knowledge and experience that have been acquired over many years—activities aimed at developing dialogical relationships between practitioners and parents still need to reflect the view that different opinions about education can coexist and that all are valid.

When working together with parents, therefore, a dialogical approach involves developing awareness of one's own viewpoint and the ability to explain and put forward arguments to support it, while, at the same time, remaining open to the parents' views. Gonzales-Mena describes this in the following manner: "If you continue to follow just your own ideas about what's good and right for children and their families, even if those ideas are a result of your training, you may be doing a disservice to children whose parents disagree with you." (Gonzales-Mena 2008, p. 6)

Clearly, certain principles and values remain non-negotiable when dealing with children: if practitioners believe parents' actions are endangering the wellbeing of a child, for example. While in such a case it is still important to attempt to understand the parents' position, practitioners need to adopt a clear position and to take action (see the chapter 'Dialogue groups in practice').

Prejudices can make it difficult for practitioners to remain open to a family's views. Prejudice-aware education assumes that no-one is free of prejudice. Moreover, people are viewed as using their prejudices to classify the wealth of information and experiences that they constantly receive during their daily lives. This explains why the approach is referred to as 'prejudice-aware' and not 'prejudice-free' education. People are encour-

aged to develop awareness of one-sided opinions and to prevent patterns of prejudice from becoming entrenched.

Prejudices can lead (groups of) people to become divided into 'us' and 'them'. This leads people viewed as belonging to what majority society considers 'normal' to mark everyone else as 'Other'. Privileged groups, therefore, have the power to define what is considered 'right' and 'wrong'. Clearly, these mechanisms can result in discrimination, even if it may be unintentional.

Therefore, an important aspect of a dialogical approach involves practitioners reflecting on their own prejudices and stereotypes. In the specific context of daily interactions with parents and other caregivers, participants need to set aside time for in-depth reflection. For example, if, during a meeting about settling-in, a family in receipt of benefits mentions that it rarely shares meals together at the dinner table, it is important to stop and think about how we are viewing this family and to ask ourselves where these opinions come from. Do I believe that this indicates that the family lacks structure during the day or that this is a form of 'self-incurred immaturity'? Would I take the same view of a family whose parents were civil servants? Am I concerned about the child's wellbeing simply because I have a biased image of benefit recipients? Am I able to take the parents of this family seriously? Can I accept that this family also has the necessary competencies to cope with everyday life?

Once these questions have been posed, it is important to adopt the perspective of the parents and attempt to find 'good' reasons that explain their behaviour. This process needs to be conducted with as little reservation as possible and, although it can be done initially without the parents, it is important to speak to the family to check whether your assumptions are actually correct.

This process, which can help place the participants in a dialogue on an equal footing, turns communication into dialogical communication. However, this should not be taken to mean that professionally trained staff are now more restricted in their actions—you still need to respond to the wishes of all of the centre's parents. Therefore, this aim is to ensure that we do not place ourselves above other people. Instead, we need to find paths towards a particular goal, and, in doing so, involve everyone in the process.[6]

6 For more information about equality, see Dreikurs (1971).


DIALOGUE
• EXCHANGE
?
• OPEN OUTCOME
• EQUITY
• ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
We are all different.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

The implementation of a dialogical approach

The implementation of a dialogical approach in the daily work of early years centres is process-based, which means that it can never be considered complete. Part of the training involved asking the participants where they could imagine seeing changes in their daily work and about the experiences that they expect to take with them and to apply in their early years centres. In addition, half a year after completing the training, the practitioners were asked whether they believed that they were implementing a dialogical approach during their day-to-day work. The practitioners mentioned 'Changes to the team', 'Showing appreciation and avoiding value judgements', 'Actively approaching parents' and 'Sharing views and developing understanding instead of focusing on results' as the areas that they viewed as particularly relevant in this respect.

Changes to the team

The practitioners noted that the dialogical approach had helped them to develop their work continually. Depending on how intensively an entire team had participated in the training, the positive impact noted by the practitioners was not merely limited to communication with the parents, but also influenced their work as a team:

> *"The dialogical approach also influences our meetings. The whole team has used it as a tool to work through topics. It enables all of us to have our say and stops us from becoming tied down in discussions."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Showing appreciation and avoiding value judgements

The issues of mutual appreciation and taking a more insightful approach to value judgements were also mentioned particularly often:

> *"We no longer tend to be so quick to judge what other people say and do. Instead, we listen to what they say and let it sink in."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"Appreciation of the parents. There are parents who express a lot of criticism. But we accept their criticism now and talk to them about it instead of just saying to each other: 'The parents are moaning again'."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Actively approaching parents

Actively approaching parents requires practitioners to take the time during their day-to-day activities to talk to the parents.

> *"This also happens when the parents come and pick up their children; when we tell them what has happened during the day. If they ask us a question that takes a bit of an effort to answer, now we take the time we need to answer it."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Practitioners recognised that the way they communicate with parents has an impact on how parents respond to them.

> *"We noticed that parents are more open-minded towards us when we speak openly to them and explain why something has happened. That's why we make an effort to speak with them."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Sharing views and developing understanding instead of focusing on results

Practitioners learnt to respond more calmly and empathetically to the needs of parents rather than drawing up or merely implementing their own ideas. They also provide more space for parents to share their ideas.

> *"We are no longer so strongly focused on results. We try to leave the results open."*
> *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

> *"Now it's easier for us to listen instead of reacting immediately to what people say."*
> *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"We plan and carry out parents' evenings differently. We are more focused on sharing ideas, rather than organising an informational event. It's important for us to find out what the parents are interested in, what they think is important, and to take their views into account."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

These examples show that a dialogical approach implemented at the day-to-day level can provide the foundation for successful dialogue with parents. Moreover, it also prepares practitioners for interactions with parents, helps them avoid making premature judgements, and affords parents more time and space. As such, relations between parents and practitioners become more equitable because practitioners enable parents to express their (critical) opinions without feeling that their views are being devalued or

that there is a need to justify themselves. Therefore, a dialogical approach can help bring about positive change in early years centres, especially when its vibrancy is particularly expressed through interactions between parents, practitioners and children.

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Building better relations with parents

Links to the studies

The studies identified a number of important aspects and the first one that is discussed here has proven to be important for other areas: contact between practitioners and parents. Jungen (2013) found that parents and practitioners would generally welcome improved relations and stronger communication.

Findings from the studies: the practitioners' views

The practitioners who took part in the CD study emphasised the importance of trust in developing better relations with the parents. Moreover, they stressed that trust is built over time, such as when speaking to parents during drop-off and pick-up times, admission meetings and development talks. At the same time, the practitioners described trust as indicative of good quality relations with parents. They noticed that families were placing a growing level of trust in them when, for example, parents begin to ask for advice about non-child-related matters—this can range from filling in applications to translating official letters (see Jungen 2013, p. 97 f.). In contrast, they stressed 'language barriers' as a fundamental aspect of unsatisfactory relations. The practitioners reiterated that they are not always able to deal with the 'barriers' that result from cases where families speak languages that the practitioners do not understand (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 237-239). And they also highlighted a lack of knowledge about a family's heritage as detrimental to relations with the parents.

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

The following excerpt from the group discussions with practitioners that took place as part of the CCB research project is indicative of practitioners' views of relations with the parents.

PR1[7]: "In some cases, we have been caring for a child for two or three years, but it is still not really possible to communicate with the parents because of [shrugs shoulders] language barriers."

PR2: "Language difficulties."

PR1: "Language barriers."

PF2: "Hardly any of the parents ask us anything. You rarely meet parents who really care about the daily routine and all that it involves."

PF3: "OK. Not all of the parents are like that, but lots of them. They don't really care. Well, they don't really care very much. Most of them at least."

PF4: "Most of the time they just ask whether their kids have eaten or slept well. They never ask us anything about the daily routine or about the activities we've organised. Even parents who speak a bit of German usually just ask: 'Eating? Eating well? Drinking well?"[8]

This excerpt clearly demonstrates that the practitioners are unhappy with the situation in the centre and that this particular situation even places a burden on them. In the following, examples from the transcripts are used to emphasise the reasons why practitioners and parents may face difficulties in building better relations.

Different language(s)

After a slight hesitation, the practitioners repeatedly stress language as the primary reason for the lack of better relations with parents. Perhaps the limits of a relationship are particularly tangible when it comes to language, especially as lacking a common language would seem to be a self-explanatory reason for being unable to communicate with one another. In addition, the public and professional discourse at the time the group discussion was undertaken (2005)—and this continues to be the case 13 years later—suggests that German language skills remain central to participation in public life and provide an essential basis for a successful educational path (PISA Study 2015). Therefore, it should hardly be surprising that the practitioners view the parents' lack of German language skills as the cause of unsatisfactory relations. However, it is unclear from the excerpt whether the practitioners are able to use various languages when communicating with the parents. In the final part of the excerpt, a practitioner does imply that some parents either do not speak German or have very little knowledge of the language: 'Even parents who speak a bit of German usually just ask: 'Eating? Eating well? Drinking well?'' Therefore the practitioners appear to elevate German to a norm and expect parents to be

7 More details about the transcript and the abbreviations used here can be found in Annex 1.

8 CCB, practitioners from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

able to express themselves in the language. The practitioner's use of simplified language structures to imitate the parents underscores the power they hold when it comes to German and, therefore, in relations with all non-German speaking parents.

Recognition/appreciation

In addition to language, the practitioners also stressed issues such as the parents' lack of interest in their work, and feelings of being left alone, poorly understood and undervalued by the parents as hindering better relations. The practitioners are clearly frustrated. They would like their work to gain greater standing among the parents, and for the parents to ask them more often about the daily routine instead of just about eating and drinking. At the same time, the practitioners also seem to expect parents to make an effort to find out about the activities that are taking place in the early years centre.

The transcript suggests that practitioners view their discussions with parents as reduced to banalities. As the parents 'only' ever ask whether their child has eaten or slept well, the practitioners believe that parents undervalue their professional role. Furthermore, the practitioners treat questions about the children's basic needs, such as eating and sleeping, as secondary to those about the educational activities that they have organised with the children during the day. Finally, they repeatedly express a desire for greater recognition and stronger appreciation of their pedagogical work.

It is possible that this latter situation is also related to the level of recognition that early years practitioners receive in German society. Practitioners are currently under a lot of pressure in the public and professional discourse. Moreover, the expectations of and demands placed upon them have increased tremendously over the past decade, and this is echoed in early years educational programmes[9] and recent publications on educational and training partnerships.[10] However, these expectations and responsibilities are rarely reflected in changes to practitioners' working conditions. Neither their remuneration nor their professional standing equates to the responsibilities and expectations placed upon them. Thus, it would be understandable if this lack of recognition were to be reflected in their statements and thus be projected onto the parents.

Distance to the parents

The views expressed in the transcript suggest that the practitioners distance themselves from the parents. Instead of including the parents as a joint 'us' (the practitioners and parents), the practitioners refer to the parents as 'them' (see the chapter 'Identity and belonging'). The line of demarcation drawn between the parents and practitioners could

9 See, for example, Bridging Diversity, (2019).

10 See the analyses of this issue published in in TPS 9/2016.

be linked to their varying social positions and the families' experiences of migration. This suggests that the families' living environments, lifestyles, languages and traditions probably differ from those of the practitioners. It is unclear to what extent the practitioners (are able to) gain access to the families' living environments in order to better understand the families and their actions. However, it is very important to take these aspects into account in order to focus on the children's living environments and help the practitioners to provide better support to the children.

The practitioners' position of power

During their work, practitioners adopt the role of a professional. We can assume, therefore, that these practitioners have an idea not only of how education 'should' be conducted but also of what society expects from parents, and how families should care for, educate and support their children. The practitioners state that the parents 'don't care' about and are uninterested in what happens in the early years centre. Statements such as these are based on the interpretive models that the practitioners use to make value judgements about the parents' actions. Furthermore, the excerpts demonstrate that their knowledge and experience tends to place practitioners in a position of power in relations with parents.

Findings from the studies: the parents' views

When parents speak with practitioners, they do so mostly through inquiries about their child's behaviour and wellbeing (and mainly through questions about whether their children are eating or sleeping well). The fact that parents require reassurance that their children are happy in the centre, however, could provide a basis on which to build better relations between parents and practitioners. The studies show that parents hardly ever bring up issues related to the centre's pedagogical approach or its underlying pedagogical concept. Moreover, the studies show that parents generally have very little knowledge about the educational processes that take place in early years centres. Jungen (2013, p. 86) established a link between the level of knowledge that families have about an early years centre, the quality of contact between parents and practitioners, and parental satisfaction with the centre. In other words, parents who know more about the day-to-day care in a centre tend to have a more positive view of their relations to and contact with the practitioners. At the same time, the stronger the relations between parents and practitioners, the more that parents know about the processes that take place in the early years centre. In turn, this increases the likelihood that they will feel able to ask questions about the activities in the early years centre. Therefore, parents who have

better relations with practitioners and who feel informed about what is happening in a centre are more likely to appreciate the activities undertaken by the institution.
The studies indicate that families with very little knowledge of German feel at a particular disadvantage when it comes to contact with practitioners. These families receive less information than other parents, do not understand any information that they may be provided with, and feel excluded from certain activities (see ibid., pp. 89-91). Nevertheless, most parents find it challenging to address practitioners when it comes to voicing criticism and dissatisfaction. The parents in the studies explain these difficulties in terms of a lack of information about the processes that take place in the early years centre, a lack of information about their rights as parents, their respect for the 'authority' of the early years centre, and their fear of negative consequences for their children (see ibid., p. 93). Parents who view their relations with practitioners as unsatisfactory are also often unsure whether practitioners even welcome their involvement and the questions they ask. Moreover, parents link their uncertainty in these cases (and this particularly applies to migrant heritage parents to the feeling that they are inferior. Unfortunately, some parents even report the practitioners having actually treated them as such (see ibid., p. 104).

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

In the following passage, parents cautiously express criticism of their practitioners' behaviour and their relations with them.

Trans: "She [M1] wanted to speak to the practitioners about communication, so she said that she had particular problems with the third floor. ((M2 laughs)) She [M1] doesn't speak German very well so she went [to the third floor] with the Turkish practitioner—but even then she felt like that she wasn't being taken seriously; that she wasn't being listened to. She says she gets on well the others, that she has good relations with them, but [not] with those on the third floor."

Trans: "This makes her [M1] feel inferior. She tries to learn German, but if she is not taken seriously—and she feels like they are not taking her seriously enough. [...] She says she has already spoken about this with her husband. He doesn't think there's a problem. He thinks they are really nice. But she doesn't think she is being taken seriously at all, she just doesn't feel happy."

M2: "I felt like that for years. I was on the third [floor] for four years ((makes a gesture that she is fed up with the situation)). If I think about it now, I'll start crying again ((laughs))."

M3: "I'm also [on the third floor], but I don't see it like that. Maybe you are right about certain people, but not everyone."

M2: "I agree. I was surprised that [M1] complained. I thought, [that we had problems,] because my son is a boy."

M3: "Maybe you've ((points to M1 and M2)) got advantages and disadvantages, depending on your situations. Your children have been on several floors, so you can compare the situation. I've only got one child. I haven't got anything to compare to. But I haven't got any problems at the moment either."

M4: "Sorry ((soft voice)), but I'm a young mother, I—like I said, I'm 25 years old and I've got two kids. I feel like Mrs S. and Mrs C. talk down to me a bit because I'm still young. But I don't have a problem with that ((M2 laughs)). I think that they have more experience with children than I do."[11]

In this excerpt, the parents express different views about communication with the practitioners. The following focuses on the most important aspects of the transcript: language(s); recognition, appreciation and trust; self-confidence and self-esteem; and adaption.

Language(s)

The excerpt demonstrates that it was not just the practitioners who mentioned the issue of language. The fact that the first mother speaks about her lack of German language skills demonstrates that she is well aware of what is expected of her in the early years centre: she must be able to speak German. Moreover, she realises that she does not conform to the norm and blames herself for not doing so. As the transcript clearly demonstrates, majority society primarily exercises pressure to 'integrate' through a requirement to learn German; this is particularly clear in this case. Importantly, the mother is left with the responsibility of developing strategies to communicate with the practitioners by herself. She turns for help to a Turkish-speaker but still feels like she 'is not taken seriously'. The indication that she 'tries to learn German' suggests that it is not easy for her to do so. Finally, she seems worried about the situation in the early years centre, but has no way of expressing her concerns to the practitioners.

Recognition, appreciation and trust

The fact that the mother feels like she is 'not taken seriously' suggests that this situation is not just about language, but also about a lack of recognition and appreciation on the part of the practitioners. The mothers can hardly be expected to place their trust in an

11 CCB, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

institution that does not listen to their views. The first mother 'doesn't feel happy', and even states that she feels 'inferior'. The second mother supports her by describing similar experiences that she has had in the same part of the building. But speaking about the situation in too much detail would probably make her cry. However, when she said this, she also laughed, which could be viewed as providing an outlet to express her (repressed) feelings. The mothers seem to believe that the practitioners neither provide them with recognition nor appreciate their concerns.

The excerpt shows that the situation in the early years centre strongly affects and upsets the mothers. It also underlines the unequal position between the parents and the practitioners. Unlike the practitioners, who can rely on their professional experience and who embody institutional authority, the mothers merely represent themselves and their children. Moreover, they are always personally affected by situations in the early years centre and are unable to adopt a professional distance. This means that they are likely to take personally any signals from the practitioners that could be deemed as criticism. Families with a migrant heritage are rarely regarded as equal partners by majority society. As such, their abilities and skills remain undervalued. Families who are treated in this manner over an extended period may internalise these experiences and adapt to the role of the oppressed. At the same time, the feeling of not being 'listened to' can deceive families into believing that they are unable to change this situation. This may lead them to become passive and no longer attempt to participate.

Confidence and self-esteem

In addition to their views about how other people treat them, confidence and self-esteem are further essential factors that can help explain the parents' views. The fourth mother appears to be unsure of herself. She begins by apologising in advance for her inability to contribute properly to the discussion; after all, she is only a 'young mother'. Furthermore, she expects to be spoken down to by professionals as they have 'more experience'. This excerpt clearly illustrates the different relations of power that exist between the mothers and the practitioners, who represent the centre as an institution and whose professional qualifications and experience lend them a sense of authority.

Adaption

The third and fourth mothers distance themselves from the others by stating that they do not share the same worries or levels of dissatisfaction. The third mother states that she cannot compare the practitioners' behaviour because her child has only been in one group, whereas the fourth mother uses her young age to avoid making judgements about the practitioners.

These two mothers stress that they do not have 'problems'. They may well clearly understand what is happening in the early years centre, but have not considered the fact that things could change and that they might be able to help do so. Instead, they simply adapt to the circumstances and attempt to avoid problems with the practitioners and, in turn, negative consequences for their children.

Conclusions for the training

The transcripts reveal a discrepancy between the views of the practitioners, who feel that parents do not fully acknowledge their professional skills, and those of the parents, who distance themselves from the practitioners and the early years centre precisely because of these skills. This results in a situation in which practitioners have very little understanding of the parents' actions, and parents feel powerless and without a voice (see also Thomauske 2017).

These interpretations of the two group discussions highlight a number of factors that hinder the development of better relations between practitioners and parents: a lack of a common language; a lack of appreciation and esteem for one another; a lack of trust in the institution by the parents; distance; a lack self-confidence; and adaption to and acceptance of a given set of circumstances. Furthermore, the excerpts also show that unequal societal and institutional positions and the different opportunities that these are linked to, as well as the parents' and practitioners' different capacities for agency, can influence the way in which contact between parents and practitioners is established and maintained. The training for practitioners focuses precisely on these issues.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

The fundamentals: coming into contact

Parents and practitioners inevitably come into contact with each other as part of everyday childcare. Parents and practitioners meet one another when children are dropped off or picked up and during parents' evenings and children's parties in the centre. However, dialogical relationships imply a certain quality of relations between families and practitioners. In this context, therefore, 'contact' refers to:

- Relations that are based on mutual recognition where each side values each other's experiences, opinions and knowledge
- A development of common interests accompanied by a desire to understand each other's views
- A readiness to share experiences and to do so honestly and openly

Coming into contact, therefore, involves building relations that reflect these qualities and that pave the way towards establishing and maintaining trusting relations.

What prevents practitioners from coming into contact with parents?

Building on the findings from the studies, the training focuses on helping practitioners to establish and maintain better relations with parents and families. This also includes reflecting on the role of practitioners in their positions within the early years centre (whether as principals, specialists in language education, trainees etc.) and the impact these positions have on relations between practitioners and parents. Importantly, the obstacles to contact are discussed with a view to developing solutions. In one exercise, the participants in the training sessions consider the question: 'What prevents us from coming into contact with parents?' While doing so, they are asked to focus on the following areas:

- Structural conditions of the early years centre—time/space
- Language differences
- Own ideas, assumptions, ascriptions, prejudices
- Negative experiences, fears, insecurities

The participants are usually quick to find solutions to problems associated with structural conditions or language requirements. However, they find dealing with their assumptions, prejudices and fears far more challenging as these have to be tackled step-by-step as part of a process.

Shaping structural conditions

The structural conditions within a centre provide it with its own particular framework. The training course poses questions about the areas in which existing structures help or hinder practitioners from coming into contact with the parents. The participants often lament the lack of time available during their everyday work to enter into more profound conversations with parents. Parents and practitioners both often describe drop-offs and pick-ups as demanding situations. Nevertheless, it is important that practitioners and parents feel comfortable in these situations and provide each other with recognition. An essential aspect of doing so is expressing a sincere interest in the other side. During the training, practitioners often realise that they enjoy the feeling of being 'noticed' by other people, such as when their colleagues ask them how they are feeling during the day. How, then, could they show interest in the parents' concerns during the limited time available when parents bring or collect their children? When parents appear to be tense, asking them how they feel at least signals that practitioners are interested in them and want to understand why, for example, the parents may have forgotten to bring nappies with them in the rush to leave home. At the same time, practitioners also realise that smiling sincerely to the parents and expressing appreciation is not something that takes them very long. Importantly, they usually finish the training with an intention to include short questions such as 'How are you?' as part of their daily repertoire when speaking with the parents.

The training also requires the participants to think about the spatial and temporal opportunities that an institution provides and how these can help reduce the stress linked to dropping-off and picking-up children and make the situation more relaxing. The participants discuss a wealth of suggestions and variants during the training, some of which include:

- Could we invite the parents for breakfast to have a chat?
- Would it be possible to let the parents play with the children in the garden for a while in the afternoon, instead of just sending them home with the children?
- Could a 'parent's corner' be set up so that the parents can meet each other?

It is important to remember that practitioners need to establish good relations not only with the children, but also with individual parents. If a particular parent is worried that their child might not be eating well enough at the early years centre, it could be worth inviting them to have breakfast in the centre instead of inviting all of the parents at the same time.

During the training, one participant reported that although a group of mothers often talk to the children in the early years centre, they hardly ever speak to the practitioners. The training focuses on examples such as these as they encourage the participants to consider how they might build better relations with these parents. Would it be feasible to offer a round table or some other opportunity in the morning when these parents seem

to have time to speak? Do they need space in the early years centre that they could use to meet each other? Which issues are they concerned about and how can they be supported by the early years centre? The early years centre in question already had a parents' corner, but questions arose during the training about whether it had been a good idea to place it in front of the principal's office. Discussions such as these encourage the participants to approach the parents, ask them about their concerns, and to provide the parents with the time and space they need to address their issues in the early years centre.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

Observe what happens at your centre when the parents drop-off or pick-up their children and consider what could be done to make these times more enjoyable. Approach the parents and ask them what might make the situation more relaxed. What is the best time to speak with the parents about what their child likes doing in the centre? Are there any additional rooms or spaces (for example, in a neighbouring family centre) that you could use if your centre does have the necessary space to do so?

Finding common language(s)

In line with findings from the studies, participants at the training sessions often report that they find it difficult to communicate with parents who do they do not share a 'common' language with. This situation can be particularly challenging in large early years centres where a great variety of languages may be spoken: just as someone has been found to translate into Arabic, in comes a new family that only speaks Bulgarian. The first step towards dealing with situations like this is to realise that society is becoming ever more diverse. Children are growing up multilingually in many families, and the adults in these families often speak several languages or dialects (see 'Language(s)'). Multilingualism, therefore, belongs to many people's everyday lives. Although a team of practitioners cannot be expected to speak ten different languages, this is not even necessary in order to develop good relations with parents.

Practitioners come to realise that even if no-one in the team can understand a particular language, as long as the barriers are 'merely' linguistic, they will always find ways of communicating with the family. During the training, the practitioners consider numerous strategies that enable them to develop good relations with these parents despite the lack of a common language.

- Do we know which languages we all speak? This includes team members who only speak a few words or phrases of a particular language

- Do we really know which languages the parents can speak or understand?
- Which families can communicate and, if necessary, speak to each other?
- Would it be possible to collate all of the greetings and relevant expressions from the languages spoken in the centre and ensure that everyone knows them?
- Is it possible to include more symbols, pictograms or imagery that are understandable to everyone on notices and in invitations?
- Can we record a message or invitation to attend a meeting in the family's language and play it to these parents?

Parents and children who do not speak German will usually welcome the use of even individual words or greetings in the languages spoken in their home settings. However, detailed discussions about confidential matters require support from professional interpreters. Interpreting services are available in all major German cities, and some organisations even have their own pool of language professionals.[12]

12 Berlin, for example, a community interpreting service exists that can provide interpreting services (www.gemeindedolmetschdienst-berlin.de).

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

Which languages are spoken in your centre? Which languages are spoken by your team? When does a lack of a common language make it difficult for you to come into contact with a family? Would an interpreting service be helpful, or are there any families within the centre that can provide help with languages? Don't rely on written language; not everyone can read the Latin alphabet. Speakers of languages that are related to one another can often understand each other, especially when speaking. If you do not feel able to read messages aloud in another language, could you make a recording of a parent or other practitioner doing so and play it to the parents who need the information?

Reflection about personal ideas, assumptions, ascriptions and prejudices

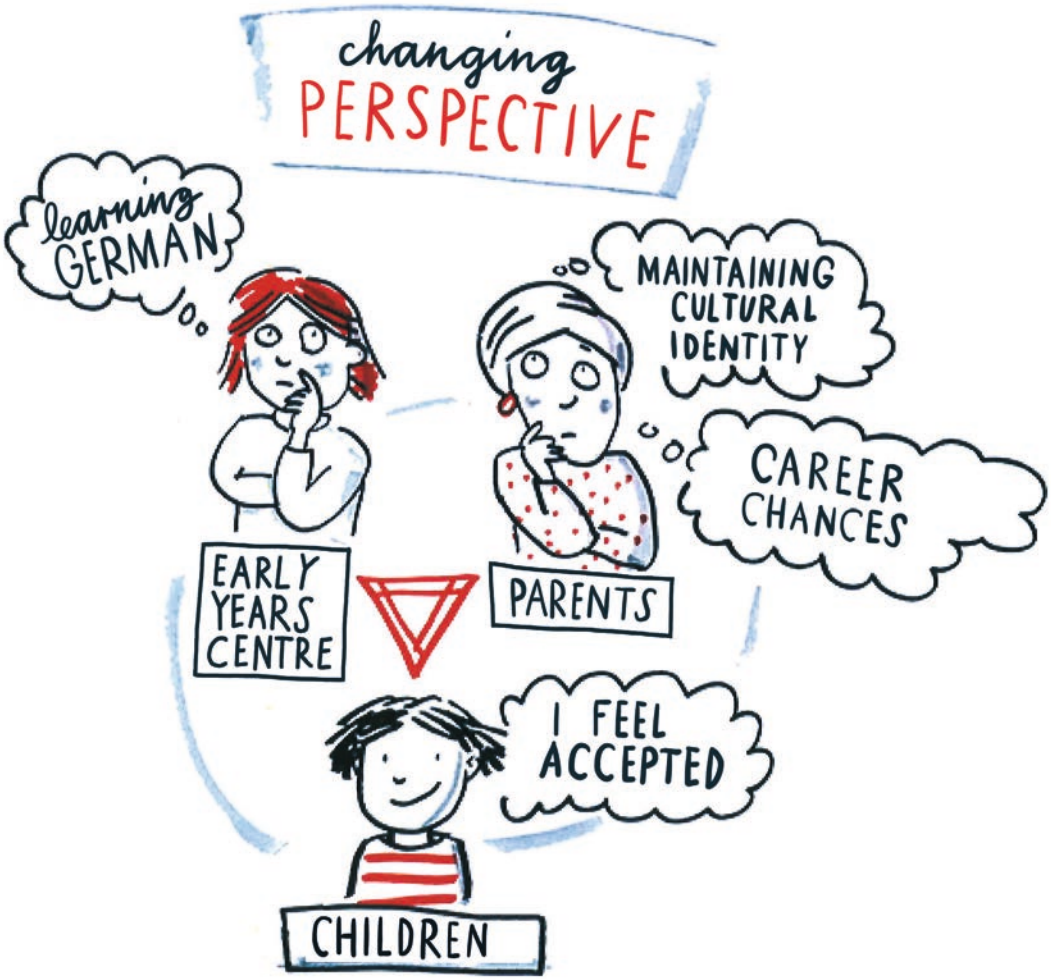
During training sessions, practitioners come to realise that psychological 'barriers' often prevent them from coming into contact with parents. The participants report that particular characteristics hinder their contact with some families. Certain (family) names, for example, can evoke certain—negative or positive—associations. This leads to the emergence of particular imagery that can become reified and which may be mediated by media or social discourses. It is very important to think deeply about these views and to prevent them from leading to exclusion.

Prejudices are based on assumptions about how certain (groups of) people behave or what can be expected of them—despite the fact that these views have never been confirmed through experience. Practitioners may have ideas about how parents should behave in the early years centre without having considered what the views of the parents may be. What can be done to break through processes such as these and enable people to approach one another on more impartial grounds?

Self-reflection by the practitioners is crucial. It is very difficult to free ourselves from prejudice, but once we become aware of our prejudices we can at least constantly question them (see 'Identity and belonging'). At the same time, the views that we hold of other people speak volumes about ourselves, our experiences, values and attitudes. As such, dealing with what is perceived to be 'different' provides a good opportunity to get to know ourselves better.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

Think of a specific family from your institution who you have not been able to develop good relations with. Imagine how this family might live: what do the parents and other relatives do? What do they like doing together as a family? What position does the child have within the family? What do your views about this family say about you? Thinking about these issues can help you to develop awareness of your ideas about family life, about the things that you view as important, and the experiences on which your opinions are based. Keep in mind that your point of view is not universally valid but merely your own opinion. Now strike up a meeting with the family you have in mind and look for the aspects that you can appreciate about the family (despite perhaps having very different lifestyles and opinions).



Dealing with uncertainties and negative experiences

If practitioners feel insecure, they may also feel unable to approach parents. Practitioners also need time to establish trust and to develop healthy relations with parents and other caregivers. At the same time, if there has been a conflict in the past with a particular family, how can good relations be re-established?

During one training session, a practitioner described a particular mother as very shy and reserved. The practitioner stated that a dispute had occurred in the past and that a decision was taken that the mother did not agree with. The mother's reaction, therefore, was understandable; she may now feel rejected and undervalued and, therefore, no longer want to participate in activities at the centre. In order to resolve the situation, the practitioner suggested inviting the mother on a day out to the theatre with the children. The invitation signalled that the team still wanted the mother to participate in the centre, despite the fact that they had different views about a particular issue.

Examples such as these demonstrate the importance of joint undertakings with the parents. Shared experiences strengthen relations between practitioners and families, provide everyone with an opportunity to portray themselves in a new light and to apply their skills. Once everyone has enjoyed themselves together, they soon leave the 'fear of getting in touch' behind them, which is important as this often acts as an obstacle to good relations.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

What opportunities exist to meet parents informally in your centre? What do you enjoy doing? What are your strengths? Could you imagine offering an activity for the parents in one of these areas (such as cooking, painting, gardening or sewing)?

It is worth taking a closer look at the situations in which you feel insecure in relations with certain parents. What can help you in a specific situation? Take up the perspective of the parents; think about how they might choose to come into contact with you. Maybe you could talk about your thoughts and strategies with a colleague to gain another point of view?

Exercise 1: What are we already doing to establish and promote better relations with the parents?

Introduction

This exercise invites you to think about your past experiences with parents in your centre and to share them with other participants. In strengthening your team in an early years centre, it is important that you become aware of what your team has already achieved, and the resources you have and use in your work. If participants from several early years centres or specialists from different departments take part in this exercise, the experiences they share can also provide inspiration for other practitioners' work. This exercise uses symbols and pictograms to prompt you to think about non-verbal communication. The aim is to encourage you to use symbols, imagery and pictograms as part of your communication with parents as this can make it much easier to develop stronger relations with parents who are either unable to speak German or who cannot read and write.

Focus

- Reflection about previous practices linked to working with parents
- Sharing experiences about contact with parents
- The use of non-verbal communication (symbols, pictograms and imagery)

Materials and preparation

- Flipcharts (or large sheets of paper) for the posters, markers, facilitation cards, cards with symbols (from the facilitation case), chalk, scissors, glue, wool and other similar materials.

Time

- 1 hour 30 minutes
- Introduction: 10 minutes
- Small groups: 40 minutes; 20 minutes per question
- Follow-up group discussion: 40 minutes

Procedure

Introduction

The participants get into small groups. It makes sense to form groups with the people that you normally work with in your centre: if there are multiple facilities, by each facility; larger facilities can be divided by department or into groups of twos. The groups should consist of between two and six people. The material is then provided to the participants (for example, by placing it on the floor in the middle of the room or on an extra table) and the exercise is explained.

Work in small groups

Each group is provided with the following text:

- Share your views about the question: 'What are we already doing to establish and promote better relations with the parents?' Make a poster depicting this issue without using words.

The poster should be able to speak for itself, which means the practitioners should depict their ideas using symbols and pictograms, instead of words. The groups should work in separate rooms so that they do not disturb each other and cannot see other posters before they are finished.

Presentation and discussion

After the small group work has been completed, the participants reassemble to discuss the results in the whole group. They present their posters, and these are discussed in turn. The first group places their poster in the centre but does not comment on it. The other participants and the facilitator describe the issues that they associate with the poster (they can stand up and look at the poster from different angles) and the things that the poster makes them think about. The group that designed the poster listens to the other people without passing comment. Once the other participants have finished speaking, the group that designed the poster takes to the floor and explains the poster in detail. The process is then repeated until all of the posters have been presented.

The posters are then hung up side-by-side to emphasise their similarities and differences.

Notes

It is important that the participants demonstrate appreciation of each other's work. It is not about whether a poster is 'beautiful' or 'ugly', but rather the aim is to develop awareness of the fact that people perceive and interpret symbols differently depending on their own experiences.

The creativity involved in designing the posters usually provides the participants with a lot of fun—particularly once they realise that there is no need for the posters to be a piece of artwork.

Exercise 2: What prevents us from coming into contact with the parents?

Introduction

In early years centres, practitioners often find that they have very little or no contact at all with some parents. However, if parents are to be invited to a dialogue group, prior contact with them is essential. Nevertheless, it can still be difficult to take the first step towards approaching parents. The purpose of this exercise, therefore, is to focus on the issues that may hamper contact and to reflect on what prevents practitioners from talking to parents. This exercise is also intended to enable practitioners to develop strategies to change this situation.

Focus

- Identifying obstacles to contact with the parents
- Developing strategies for establishing contact with parents

Materials and preparation

- Facilitation cards, markers, pin board, pins

Time

- Total: about 1 hour and 40 minutes
- Introduction: 10 minutes
- Small groups: 30 minutes
- Follow-up group discussion: 1 hour

Procedure

Introduction

The obstacles that prevent practitioners from developing good relations with parents can be very different. The structural conditions in many early years centres are not particularly conducive to doing so: there may be very little time to speak with the parents or the building might not provide a particularly pleasant atmosphere in which to do so. However, people's experiences, assumptions, ascriptions and prejudices can also hamper good relations with parents. As such, it is helpful to think about specific issues and experiences instead of focusing abstractly on the topic.

Work in small groups

The practitioners form small groups (of between two and four) and are asked to consider the following question:

- What prevents us from coming into contact with the parents?

Specific examples that the participants can speak about make it easier to identify the issues that make contact with the parents more difficult. Every time an obstacle is identified, it should be written down on a different card.

Presentation and discussion

The practitioners come back together and present their results from the group work. The cards are pinned onto the board and grouped according to similar aspects. The practitioners discuss whether they agree with the way in which the cards have been grouped. The participants decide which topics they would like to focus on and provide examples of specific problems from these topics that need to be resolved. The topics should be

discussed in a collegial manner as a team. Any differences between perspectives (parents/practitioners) need to be noted, and everyone's ideas and experiences should be included. The aim is to draw up short-term, medium-term and long-term solutions for their early years centre.

Literature and further reading

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The concept of *Bildung*

Links to the studies

The Children Crossing Borders and Creating Dialogue studies placed parents' and practitioners' understandings of education and *Bildung* at the heart of their research. The group discussions that were conducted as part of the studies focus on the participants' opinions about what and how children should learn in early years centres. This enables them to provide a comparison of practitioners' and parents' views about this issue.

Findings from the studies: the practitioners' views

The studies found that parents and practitioners have very different ideas about how educational processes should be structured in early years centres. The practitioners who took part in the CD study recognised that many parents want to see more academic-based learning in early years centres. Although the practitioners expressed understanding about the parents' wishes, they stressed that it was not their job to teach the children to read and write (Jungen 2013, p. 63). During the CCB group discussions, the practitioners discussed how children should learn and they particularly emphasised the need for child-centred learning strategies. They stressed the importance of strengthening children's autonomy and independence, and, therefore, on focusing on children's own learning processes. They also saw themselves not as directing, but as accompanying these processes (see ibid., p.64). Nevertheless, the CCB study did not clearly demonstrate how parents find out about practitioners' views about education and *Bildung*. The study demonstrated that practitioners tend to see parents as lacking certain competencies, believing that parents know very little about 'modern' pedagogical approaches or about what their children really need with regard to education (see Tobin et al. 2013, p. 57 f.).

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

The practitioners' image of children and their concept of *Bildung* and education are reflected in the pedagogical approaches adopted by their centres. The following excerpt from a group discussion demonstrates how a group of practitioners explained their particular approach.

Int: "What approach do you use? Which concepts guide your work?"

PF1: "Well, (3) assisted learning and learning during free play."

PF2: "And role models [practitioners], acting as passive role models."

PF3: "The contextual approach[13], we often pick up on something that a child does or says and build on it. It's not always like that though, we do plan some things, but there are just a lot of things that we pick up on (3) spontaneously and build upon, as it were."

PF2: "The children learn a lot from each other. And with each other."

PF3: "Yes, because of the mixed age groups."

PF2: "This stops things from becoming too rigid. When we ask the children something like which car they would like to play with, and one says that he or she wants the red one, and reaches for the red car. If other children see this, they realise 'that's a car', 'it's a red car'. Children just pick up things like this without needing any explanation. 'This is red', 'that colour is so and so'."

PF4: "To a certain extent, they teach themselves."

PF3: "They teach each other things."[14]

In this excerpt, a group of practitioners provides a spontaneous explanation about their pedagogical approach. The following aspects are important.

13 The underlying pedagogical concept behind Bridging Diversity is the contextual approach. Developed in the early 1970s in what was then West Germany, it builds on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and strongly supports his idea that 'pedagogy should treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge'. Following this vein, adults are responsible for supporting children through reliable and trusting relationships, and for providing a stimulating environment in which the children can strive towards further development of their potential.

14 CCB, practitioners from an early years centre in Berlin, 2006.

Educational approach

When the practitioners were asked about the approach they implement in their early years centres, they paused briefly to gather their thoughts. They began by searching for terms to explain their actions, and named a few such as 'assisted learning', 'learning in free play', 'role model function' and 'passive role model function'. However, it is not until the third practitioner starts speaking that one of them mentions the 'contextual approach' and tries to explain it. It is, of course, impossible to differentiate the contextual approach from the other procedures provided up until this point, as these practitioners also stated that although they did 'plan some things' there were just 'a lot of things that we pick up on spontaneously and build upon, as it were.'

Importantly, the practitioners seem to have difficulty explaining their approach in detail, as well as the framework conditions that they (need to) put in place in order to promote learning processes. The same applies when they attempt to provide details about their exact role within these processes. Nevertheless, the practitioners have probably internalised their approach to such an extent that they are entirely able to implement it, but are not used to talking about it with each other or with the parents. This probably implies that no-one—and this includes the parents—ever asks the practitioners to explain their approach.

Children as competent actors

Although they do not state this explicitly, the practitioners appear to view children as competent actors[15] and to stress the children's self-reliance, self-efficacy and agency. The references to their rather limited pedagogical interventions, which they put down to their function as 'passive role models' (enabling the children to teach each other and to learn by themselves), suggests that they view the role of a practitioner as someone who accompanies children during their own learning processes. The practitioners emphasise their reliance on mixed age groups, which further underscores their view of children as competent actors. They also appear to place their trust in children's own abilities to learn 'from each other' and 'with each other'. Moreover, it seems that the practitioners view learning in mixed age-groups and the importance of peers in children's educational processes as common knowledge, and, therefore, do not seek to explain their importance. However, the examples the practitioners chose, their views of children as able to 'teach themselves' and to 'teach each other' during everyday life, could easily sound arbitrary: children are viewed as learning the names of objects from one another 'as it were' without the practitioners having to explain them to the children. This could lead to the impression that the practitioners are simply seeking to avoid the responsibility for children's education and, instead, are passing it on to the children themselves.

15 This contrasts with earlier views where young children were viewed as incomplete and lacking. See, Andresen and Hurrelmann 2010, p. 8.

Social skills

In the next excerpt from the same CCB group discussion, the practitioners are asked about their views of what children should learn in early years centres.

Int: "What else is really important to you? What do you think that children should learn in early years centres?"

PR2: "To take care of each other."

PR5: "To be considerate."

PR4: "Good social behaviour."

PR3: "To accept differences."

PR2: "Social behaviour, defined broadly."

PR3: "Yes. It includes all sorts of things: conflicts, arguments."[16]

This excerpt demonstrates that the practitioners are particularly focused on social competencies: they do not even mention cognitive learning processes. Recent pedagogical discourses and curricula (see, for example, Bridging Diversity 2019) position self-competencies and social skills as ever more important; as such, the practitioners have probably come to view these skills as a key aspect of children's learning processes. In contrast, cognitive competencies are more related to extrinsic performance-related demands and, therefore, play a subordinate role. This could indicate that the practitioners distance themselves from a focus on performance and, instead, concentrate more on children's social skills.

However, it is also possible that the practitioners' experiences led them to focus on social skills precisely because these skills are underdeveloped in the children that they are caring for. Moreover, the practitioners particularly stress the need for children to take each other into consideration and to be able to deal with 'conflicts' and 'arguments'. As such, they view social skills as an essential aspect of everyday life. It is also possible that their emphasis on social skills is an expression of the importance they place on the values of consideration and acceptance; values that are also considered crucial in wider German society.

16 CCB, practitioners from an early years centre in Berlin, 2006.

Findings from the studies: the parents' views

Jungen (2013) states that parents tend to be not very well informed about what happens in early years centres or about what and how their children learn in these institutions. Instead, the group discussions demonstrate that the parents based their expectations on their own experiences of education (whether in Germany or abroad) and that they also reproduced specific social discourses (such as about an 'achievement-oriented society'). Parents' expectations about what their children should be learning in early years centres also depend on how well informed they are. However, most parents still share the belief that early years centres should prepare their children for school.

The studies found that many parents expect their children to learn reading, writing and arithmetic in early years centres and are unhappy when they find out that this is not the case. When asked about learning, parents often speak about academic learning and believe that children in early years centres should play less and spend more time gaining an education that is relevant to school. In addition to their desire to see a stronger focus on academic learning, many parents not only expect that their children will learn German in early years centres but also stress the importance of learning German grammar. This view is particularly founded on a concern that their children (especially when it comes to language) may otherwise be at a disadvantage when they start school (see Tobin et al. 2013, pp. 40-44; Thomauske 2017, pp. 263-266).

Alongside their narrow understanding of education, many parents expect early years centres to educate their children to follow behavioural norms and to provide children with a good level of care and attention (see Jungen 2013, pp. 65-67).

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

The following excerpt shows that parents from the same early years centre as the practitioners quoted above emphasised different priorities when it came to learning.

Int: "What would you like to see your children learning, and how should learning be conducted in early years centres?"

M1: "The main issue is, who of us is in the centre long enough, really long enough, to see what's going on. We leave our children in the centre and pick them up in the afternoon. But we don't find out anything about what they are doing during the day!"

M2: "That's why I think we should have a daily schedule."

M3: "That won't help very much: schedules don't tell you what your child has learned."

M2: "But you can always ask. (3) Theatre is only supposed to be on a Thursday. If that's written in the schedule, then I know I have to pay € 3.50, but what about next week? I haven't got a problem with paying € 3.50, but I want my child to be encouraged [to learn] and I also want to do this myself. I do puzzles with him at home and that also counts as encouraging him."

M4: "But they do things like that in the centre too."

M3: "They also play games with the kids. Things like board games."[17]

This excerpt demonstrates that the parents have very different insights into everyday life at the early years centre. Moreover, the parents seem to be focused more on what the centre does not provide—and they mainly speak about the things they would like to see implemented in the centre—than the activities and opportunities that it actually provides. The following aspects are important in this context.

Transparency in the practitioners' work

The parents do not directly answer the question as to what they would like to see their children learning, or how the children should learn. Instead, they focus more on transparency with regard to the practitioners' pedagogical activities. The parents seem to know very little about what is happening in the early years centre. In fact, they do not even seem to consider that the institution might be run in accordance with a particular approach—perhaps because this has not been explained to them (properly) or they have not understood that this is the case. It is also possible that the approach implemented in the centre may have very little relation to their own lives, experience and understanding of what actually constitutes learning.

At the same time, their lack of knowledge about these issues may also come with a sense of guilt. There is no suggestion in the excerpt as to who is responsible for the parents' lack of knowledge about the centre's approach: is it the parents who are not properly informing themselves, or should the practitioners take the initiative and ensure that the parents have the information they need? Clearly, parents can hardly be expected to speak about their views of what children should be learning in early years centres if they do not know what their children are actually doing during the time they spend in the centre.

The second mother broaches the idea of a 'daily schedule' as providing direction. It seems like the centre either no longer has a schedule or never had one; whatever the case, the mothers believe that a plan could help resolve the problem. They clearly appear

17 CCB, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2006.

to be searching for direction and in need of a better structure in the centre. Importantly, a schedule is very similar to a timetable—something that is found in the vast majority of schools: It's Thursday! Time for theatre. Even if schedules do not provide information about everything, the second mother believes that they provide a basis for asking questions about the activities that her child has been involved in during the day.

Encouraging and supporting the children

The excerpt demonstrates the importance that parents place on ensuring that their children are being encouraged by the practitioners to learn. This also clearly demonstrates that they view early years centres as educational institutions. It seems that parents particularly view certain activities such as 'theatre', 'puzzles', 'playing games' and 'board games' as 'encouraging' learning and that they want these activities to be part of the centre's daily routine. The fact that they compare the activities that they undertake with their children at home to those conducted in the centre suggests that they expect something more from the early years centre than which they can provide at home, something extra that only the centre can and should provide the children.

In addition, it is possible that the parents assume that encouraging children's learning processes costs money: 'Theatre is only supposed to be on a Thursday (…) then I know I have to pay € 3.50'. The parents are quite willing to pay extra if they are convinced that the activities they are paying for will enhance children's learning: 'I haven't got a problem with paying € 3.50, but I want my child to be encouraged [to learn]'. This view is probably based on a desire that their children are provided with the best start in life, a desire that, in this case, is reflected in material terms. It is also possible that the parents require tangible evidence that they really are doing enough to ensure that their children are being encouraged to learn.

Academic learning versus free play

A further excerpt from another group discussion with parents that took place as part of the CCB study illustrates some of the expectations that parents with experiences of migration have of early years centres.

> *M1: "She said something before ((to M2)) that is extremely important. She said that the practitioners should run a full schedule of activities for the children ((M3 nods)). But instead, the children talk to each other for long periods—they talk to each other or play by themselves ((makes a hand gesture)). So they are left to their own devices. They are not with [the practitioners]. But if they were doing activities with the kids, [the practitioners] could speak German [with the children] (3). And the children would be able to talk to each other and they would speak German and have a full schedule of activities."*

M2: "It's not just about language though; it's about education, and this includes things like learning the alphabet."[18]

Once again, this excerpt emphasises that parents attach great importance to academic learning, and would like to see the practitioners run a 'full schedule of activities'. In contrast, the parents do not seem to view play as particularly significant. Moreover, it is very important for these parents that their children learn German and the alphabet. This is probably related to the fact that migrant heritage parents have very little access to resources, participate in society much less than other people, and have limited German language skills (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 265-268).

Trust

An excerpt from another CCB group discussion with parents illustrates a further aspect of the views of parents with a migrant background. An interpreter explains the parents' cautious approach in the following manner.

Trans: "Yes, that means that the children are still young. At the same time, they [the parents] are not experts in the sense that they know what the children should be learning. That's why they rely on the practitioners to teach the children. The parents simply assume that the practitioners will teach the children what they need to know."[19]

Clearly, parents, especially those who are unable to communicate verbally with practitioners, often (have to) rely on practitioners to make decisions for them in early years centres. Furthermore, since they have very limited opportunities to influence what happens in early years centres, they accept the situation as it is. Moreover, as non-pedagogues, they may feel overwhelmed when asked to judge practitioners' work. However, their reservations could also be based on the fact that these parents recognise the practitioners as experts in their fields and place trust in their work.

Conclusions for the training

The comparison of practitioners' and parents' views clearly demonstrates that both have very different priorities when it comes to early years education. Moreover, the excerpts

18 CCB, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

19 CCB, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2006.

reveal a number of apparent contradictions. Whereas the parents want more structure and direction and greater certainty that their children's learning is being enhanced, the practitioners want more openness, flexible planning that reflects the children's current needs, and more confidence and trust from the parents that they are experts in their fields who know how to enhance children's learning. Similarly, whereas parents strongly emphasise the need for more cognitive learning, practitioners distance themselves from it and focus on social skills and self-competencies; topics that the parents regard as less important. Notably, neither the parents nor the practitioners recognise how well these seemingly contradictory positions could complement one another.

The practitioners have a clear head start over the parents in discussions about these issues as they can substantiate their views by appealing to pedagogical concepts. Be this as it may, although the practitioners seem to have internalised their approach and are able to implement it in practice, they are not used to speaking about it with a team of colleagues or explaining it to parents. Nevertheless, the explanations that they employ have little chance of convincing parents who seem to know very little about the early years centre's educational approach. This situation is complicated by the fact that the parents favour very different approaches to education, all of which are based on their individual experiences. Moreover, because parents have very different approaches to education, and very few opportunities to share their experiences, practitioners face a multitude of different expectations from parents in the same early years centre.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

The educational concept paper as a foundation

Each centre needs an educational concept paper that anchors its approach to education and underpins the principles behind its educational activities. Practitioners should regularly share their ideas about and help develop their centre's pedagogical approach (Busuleanu et al. 2015). Changes in society or to the framework of an early years centre (such as personnel changes, people joining the team after a change in their career path or multi-professional teams) mean that practitioners regularly need to think and share ideas about the foundations of their work. Moreover, the training course demonstrates that practitioners need to discuss their understanding of education on a regular basis. It is far easier for practitioners who are aware of the principles on which their pedagogical activities are based and who can convey these ideas appropriately to explain their approach to parents.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

Think about your centre's pedagogical concept. What is most important to you in your educational work? Which aspects of your everyday work demonstrate that you are applying your early years centre's pedagogical approach? Think up a number of specific examples or situations that could be used to illustrate your centre's approach to other people (parents). Share experiences with other members of the team and find out which aspects of the approach your colleagues view as particularly important.

Speaking to parents about the factors that underpin the centre's pedagogical approach

Practitioners still face challenges when attempting to explain their pedagogical approach to the various families who attend the centre; the same can be said of their attempts to understand parents' views. During the training sessions, practitioners considered how to use dialogue groups with parents to find out more about each other's views about education. The participants suggested focusing on the example of 'play'. This choice was based on the assumption that parents tend to underestimate the importance of play and, therefore, that it would be useful to share experiences about this topic. At the same time, the practitioners were also interested in finding out which games the families knew about and play with their children, and about the parents' own experiences of play. Similarly, early learning centres involved in the training sessions often select this same topic or a modified version of it and pose questions such as 'What does play mean to children?' or use 'Play and movement' as a focus for a dialogue group with parents from their centre. The following describes their experiences so far, structured according to various aspects.

Selecting a topic that is relevant to everyone

Even at the stage of choosing a topic for a dialogue group with the parents, it is important that all of the participants' voices are heard. The issue of 'play' seems to be well suited to an initial dialogue group as it sets a low threshold for sharing experiences with the parents. Most practitioners state that the dialogue groups that they have conducted on this issue met their expectations, and that both parents and practitioners were able to share their experiences in a positive atmosphere. Practitioners are often surprised about the openness with which the parents talk about their experiences, as this may include speaking about very personal stories from their childhood. Similarly, it is also a new experience for the practitioners to tell the parents about their own personal experienc-

es—in as much as they feel able to. This situation helps establish common ground which, instead of being based on theory or a particular pedagogical approach, is based on the authentic experiences of the people involved; this places everyone on an equal footing.

Insights into pedagogical activities

The practitioners can also use dialogue groups to explain their pedagogical activities and their centre's approach. However, this should not imply that they need to hold the floor about these issues; rather, they can simply incorporate short examples into the discussion—such as how the children play in the early years centre—to explain their work. This can provide for a more authentic discussion of the activities that the practitioners conduct with the children in the centre.

The links between play and exercise are very important in early years centres, and they should also be anchored in the centre's pedagogical approach. Therefore, practitioners often choose a game that involves movement to begin a dialogue group with the parents so that they can share experiences and views about the subject of play through direct experience. Playing a game with the parents clearly demonstrates the activities that their children conduct in the early years centre, and this helps the parents to understand what their children experience. Even the introduction and invitation to participate in the game illustrate important aspects of practitioners' work: the practitioners explain the game to the participants, participation is voluntary, and everyone can withdraw from the game at any time. Importantly, the practitioners also take part and do not restrict the parents' actions. The feedback that the parents provide is normally very supportive.

> *"The parents said, 'We had so much fun playing that game!' And we really noticed how much fun they had. In fact we all enjoyed ourselves, and we laughed a lot (...) Although the parents didn't know each other very well, they all got on well; that was also very important to us."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

New insights into the families at the centre

Dialogue groups demonstrate what the parents regard as important in terms of their children's development, but they also provide insights into the parents' own educational backgrounds. For example, during one of the dialogue groups, it became clear that the parents viewed experience with the natural environment and, above all, being able to play outside in a natural setting, as extremely important. This was due to the fact that many of the parents had grown up in the countryside and had had different experiences from those of their children growing up in a large city. This led the parents to feel that their children were missing out on opportunities that they had had to play outside and wanted their children to have the same opportunities.

> *"Actually, the parents were quite concerned about how society has changed. When they were children, they used to go outside a lot and play in the natural environment; they made this clear. One of the fathers said that environmental sustainability is so important these days and he was really aware of this."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Another dialogue group demonstrated that playing promotes children's social competencies. The parents were told who their children play with in the early years centre. The resulting discussion led to a realisation that very few connections existed between the families and that children (who do not have any brothers or sisters) had no other children to play with of their own age in the afternoon. The parents were unhappy about this situation and wanted to do something about it. The parents who took part in the group discussion had mostly grown up in families with siblings and had spent a lot of time with children of a similar age. Now that they had moved to a large city, they explained, they found it almost impossible to offer their children the same experiences. This expressed a desire to get in touch with other parents and to get to know each other better.

After several dialogue sessions, the practitioners reported that the theme 'play' had shifted to 'dealing with media'. The parents spoke about the dilemma they faced about how much time they (should) let their children play with digital media. During the discussion rounds, the practitioners realised that they had not drawn up a clear position on 'digital media'. Recent developments mean that media skills have become increasingly important in childhood and this should also be taken into account in early years centres. Therefore, the practitioners decided to focus on this issue as part of further dialogue groups.

Improving the transparency of pedagogical activities

During the training course, the participants discuss how to improve the transparency of their work, how to design notices providing information for the parents and when they talk to parents about the focus of their educational work. During one of the dialogue groups, practitioners from an early years centre realised that the daily routine, which the team took for granted, was unclear to the parents and that they had no way of finding out about the activities the children were engaged in. Although every family was provided with a printout of the schedule at the beginning of the year the parents soon forgot about the information that it contained. The practitioners then decided to hang up a colour poster depicting the daily routine, which included a timetable, in the corridor of the early years centre. The practitioners were positively surprised by the parents' reactions. Parents began asking them more often about the activities that they had undertaken during the day. One practitioner described how a mother had told her that she always felt stressed when having to bring her child to the early years centre before nine o'clock. Now that she knew that planned activities began at ten, the practitioner explained, the mother had decided to enjoy breakfast with her child at home and take her time getting to the nursery. The practitioners also noted that there had been fewer misunderstandings with the parents since they had displayed the poster and that the parents now also tended to bring and collect their children on time.

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

How can you improve the transparency of the educational activities undertaken in your early years centre (for yourself, the children and the parents)? How can you ensure that parents understand what their children do in the early years centre and the skills that they are acquiring? What do parents speak about in discussions about their children's development? What points can you use to strike up discussions with parents about your educational work and their children's development?

Exercise 3: Improving the transparency of educational activities

Introduction

Practitioners and parents often have different ideas about how children should be educated and supported in their educational processes. Parents often base their views on their own childhood experiences and, assuming that they are not practitioners themselves, have very little knowledge of current debates about early childhood education. This often causes parents to react to what they do hear about with concern and to worry whether their children are being properly prepared for later life. When this occurs, they need support so that they can understand what their children are doing in the early years centre, as well as information about the pedagogical basis for practitioners' actions. However, it is not easy for practitioners to pass on their professional knowledge in a manner that everyone can understand.

The purpose of this exercise, therefore, is to provide practitioners with the space to develop joint strategies that can increase the transparency of their pedagogical activities and ensure that the parents are able to understand them.

Focus

- Confirming professional knowledge and educational goals
- Adopting parents' perspectives in order to understand them
- Developing strategies to increase the transparency of pedagogical work to the parents

Materials and preparation

- Worksheets for working in small groups
- Statements made by parents; each statement is to be written on a different piece of paper
- Flipchart paper and markers

Time

- 2 hours
- Introduction: 10-15 minutes
- Small groups: 45 minutes
- Follow-up group discussion: 60 minutes

Procedure

Introduction

The topic is introduced and the exercise is explained to the participants. It is important that the participants realise that the aim is not only to practice explaining the professional foundations of their educational work to the parents but to do so in a manner that everyone can understand. The exercise uses statements that have been made by parents. The statements are read out and shown to the participants who are then asked to group the statements into various categories.

Work in small groups

Each group chooses a statement to work on in more detail as well as a worksheet to help them develop the successive steps of an imaginary conversation with parents. The tasks on the worksheet are explained and the worksheet is distributed to the small groups. Each group presents its results to the other participants in the discussion that follows.

Presentation and discussion

Each group performs a scenic presentation of their results to the whole group. The other participants provide them with feedback.

- What did they find most noteworthy?
- Was something unclear? Do any questions still need clearing up?

The group that gave the presentation then has the opportunity to speak about its experiences. The facilitator can accompany the discussions by asking questions such as:

- How did you feel about the exercise?
- How easy or difficult did you find the change of perspective?
- How well were you able to agree on important pedagogical principles?

After the presentations, tangible links are drawn to the practitioners' experiences in their early years centre:

- Are you confronted with similar statements by the parents in your early years centre?
- What further experiences or ideas might help provide the parents with greater transparency when it comes to your work?

Worksheet

Statements of parents regarding the concept of *Bildung*

"I want the early years centre to provide my child with enough activities: music, dance, theatre etc. I can pay for them, but I do want my child to be encouraged to learn."

"The children are left alone too much; the practitioners should look after them more, talk to them, speak German, teach them the alphabet."

"The kids should learn something new every day; fill out a worksheet, and then take it home so you know—Ahh! that's what you've been doing today. That's what preschool education should be like. It should prepare children for school."

"Learning in early years centres is OK. But it should only take place through play. Otherwise it'll take up too much of their childhood. Children should just play and be allowed to be children. There's nothing wrong with a bit of drawing—with chalk or things like that, but nothing more. They'll learn everything else at school."

"Something should be planned for the kids to do all day. They should learn something. They only play in the early years centre. That's not good enough. The schools will send the children back to the early years centre because they won't have learned anything."

"I would like to see children in the early years centre learning numbers, a few letters, a bit of reading and maths, how to hold a pen properly."

"I don't expect them to learn the entire alphabet in the early years centre, but they should learn to make their own decisions: 'Do I want to cut the yellow or the red card?' I want them to have enough space to be able to think independently."[20]

20 The statements are based on those made by parents during the Children Crossing Borders (2004–2009) and Creating Dialogue (2012–2013) research projects.

Worksheet

Speaking to parents about the pedagogical activities

1) Exploring your own perspectives. Share experiences about the following questions:
   - How does the statement make me feel? What feelings does it bring up? What do I think about it?

2) Change in perspective. Now try to focus on the issue from the point of view of the parents:
   - What does the mother/father feel/think? What could these feelings/thoughts be based on?
   - Try not to judge the parents. Instead, try to understand the experiences, desires, needs, but also uncertainties and worries, on which their statements might be based.

3) Exploring the professional level. Think about the following statements together and collect your ideas:
   - What aspects are important to you when it comes to working with the children? What professional and conceptual considerations are these aspects based on?
   - Describe your thoughts using keywords.

4) Develop ideas for a conversation. Develop ideas together using the following questions:
   - How can we explain to the parents what is pedagogically important to us? How can I justify my pedagogical activities? Start with the idea: What does the mother/father need in order to be able to understand what I am trying to explain?
   - Write these ideas down.

Draw up an imaginary situation in which you discuss a specific issue with a parent and prepare it as a scenic presentation.

Literature and further reading

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Language(s)

Links to the studies

Language(s) plays a crucial role in the results of both studies. The findings are particularly relevant to families with migrant heritage and those that have experienced forced displacement. The studies found that parents and practitioners emphasised the importance of children having German language skills but that they also discussed the function of the language(s) spoken in the children's families.

Findings from the studies: the practitioners' views

Whenever the practitioners involved in the group discussions broached the issue of language they immediately associated the topic with learning German. Although they recognise that the language(s) spoken by the families are important for the development of the children's identity, they had very few ideas about how these languages could be promoted in day-to-day work in their early years centre. Moreover, the practitioners stressed that structural and financial reasons (and in some cases an unfavourable ratio in terms of the number of children compared with the number of practitioners) made it difficult for them to tend to the children's linguistic diversity (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 324-328). Furthermore, they emphasised German as the language of communication for everyone in the early years centre (Jungen 2013, p. 55; Thomauske 2017, pp. 197-204). During the group discussions, the practitioners stated that additional languages would confuse the children even further (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 313 f.). This could also explain why multilingual practitioners also fail to use their language skills actively as part of their work.

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

Int: "What would you like to see for the children when it comes to language?" (7)

PR1: "They should have a healthy mother tongue –"

PR2: "Yes, exactly." ((Agrees with a laugh))

PR1: "A good, healthy mother tongue, which we can build on. I think that it's really important that practitioners speak with the children. This should happen at least once during the daily routine. That's enough though, it could be done when we are all sitting together ((emphasis)) at the dining table or when we are doing something together where the [children] can experience language. I think that would be a good start." (...)

PR3: "Yes, of course, but there's also a problem with that. Many parents don't speak German very well. Some just speak a few phrases. And, as you said earlier, they mix German with their own language causing the children to speak badly. This is particularly noticeable when they come back from holidays or when the centre has been closed for a while. (...) When I come back from holiday I don't understand a word they say. I really have to listen to them carefully again and to adapt."

PR4: "Yes, and the same thing happens to the children. If they've been in Lebanon or Turkey for two or three months ((PR3: 'Obviously')) they have to adapt to being here again."

Int: "What do you think about this? How does this situation affect the children?"

PR3: "It messes them up."

PR1: "Yes. It messes them up. They can't express their needs. Sometimes they try anyway. There's one little girl, she does it, she tells us what she wants. But in Arabic. (...) And she always looks at us with those big round eyes. (...) I'd really like to help her, but (3) ((shrugs shoulders))."

PR5: "It's frustrating for her and at some point she just stops speaking for a while."

PR1: "She withdraws and eventually she'll probably just stop coming to the centre."

PR3: "But we continue to preach the principle of 'Speak your mother tongue at home'. (...) We always assume they do so. They need to be able to communicate with each other at home. (...) So we keep saying: 'Speak your mother tongue at home and German here' ((emphasis)). We have to remind them about this almost every day, even if it's during a brief conversation in passing in the cloakroom, or if they have a question or something. ((Whispers)): 'Speak your mother tongue at home; speak German here now.' They always reply with 'Yes, of course.' I'm like, of course you will."[21]

21 CCB study, practitioners from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

This excerpt shows that the current situation places a burden on the practitioners. Nevertheless, children's linguistic competencies continue to be important in contemporary discourses; they form an essential aspect of pedagogical practices and are also assumed to be vital for success at school. A number of important aspects that were raised by the transcript are discussed in the following section.

The importance of a child's first (family) language(s)

Although the practitioners stress the importance of children's native languages, they use the term 'mother tongue'[22] to describe them. The notion of a 'mother tongue' is questionable not only because it suggests that children can only have one native language, but also because it implies that they only learn it from their mother (see Bereznai and Albers 2016). This term, therefore, ignores the possible existence of other languages that other attachment figures in the family may use. Therefore, their use of the term suggests that the practitioners overlook the fact that the children may speak or use several languages at home. At the same time, it also disregards the fact that the children's first language, just like any other languages which they may speak, is learned successively, and the language skills they develop depend on their age.

The practitioners' expectations that the children will have a 'healthy mother tongue' suggest that they neither consider the children's first language(s) to be sufficient nor 'healthy'. Nevertheless, they view the children's native language as providing a foundation 'which we can build on'. The first practitioner provides an explanation of how language is learned in context: 'at the dining table or when we are doing something together where the [children] can experience language.' This explanation echoes the approach emphasised within everyday integrated linguistic education.[23] However, the practitioners' statements indicate that they assume that families do not follow this approach at home. Moreover, they seem to view approaches to language learning that families may practice at home as unimportant—especially if practitioners do not know about them or if they do not reflect their own ideas; in this case, they even devalue them.
Furthermore, the practitioners seem to be drawing on a theoretical model in which the children are required to acquire a first language to use as a basis to learn a second language in the centre (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 301-303). It is unclear how this model should be or is implemented in practice. At the same time, the practitioners do not seem to establish any links between a child's first language and German. Finally, when children use their first language: 'There's one little girl, she does it, she tells us what she wants. But in Arabic. (...) And she always looks at us with those big round eyes', the practitioners react with helpless: 'I'd really like to help her, but (3) ((shrugs shoulders)).'

22 See Thomauske 2017, pp. 60-68 for more about the role of the 'mother tongue' in German national state education and the discourse of the 'purity' of the German language.

23 For more information about this concept, see https://sprach-kitas.fruehe-chancen.de/themen/sprachliche-bildung/alltagsintegrierte-sprachliche-bildung.

The importance of the German language

The excerpt clearly demonstrates that German constitutes the shared language in the early years centre. The practitioners believe that they are responsible for teaching the children German in the centre (and especially to children who do not speak German at home). However, the practitioners do not seem to think that they are being particularly successful in doing so and, therefore, attempt to explain and justify this situation. At the same time, they seem to view periods when the children do not attend the centre, such as holidays abroad or because the centre is closed, as not conducive to learning German: 'This is particularly noticeable when they come back from holidays or when the centre has been closed for a while. (...) When I come back from holiday I don't understand a word they say. I really have to listen to them carefully again and to adapt.'

They maintain that the parents do not speak German very well ('Some just speak a few phrases') and that this leads them to mix the languages they speak, and that this has a negative impact on the children's own language competencies. In so doing, the practitioners also imply that the parents lack certain skills.

German language skills are particularly valued in public-political discourses. They are said to provide access to primary school, education, and to the labour market. With this in mind, it should not be surprising that the practitioners feel under pressure to teach the children German. However, they are not in a position to do so by themselves due to their current working conditions. It is quite understandable that they should feel unhappy about this situation. However, it is wrong to the look to the families as the cause of this situation when the focus should be on social structures, and, therefore, political decision-makers, as well as changing practices in early years centres.

Dealing with multilingualism

The excerpt suggests that the practitioners think it would be useful to separate the language(s) spoken in the family from those spoken in the home (for more on language separation, see Thomauske 2017, pp. 298-300). The early years centre even has a rule about this that is conveyed to the parents every day: 'Speak your mother tongue at home and German here'. It seems that this rule not only applies to the children, but also to the parents. The parents are also asked to speak German at the centre when they bring or pick up their children. It is possible that this rule is intended to provide the children with clear direction and strengthen their German language competencies. However, it is unclear whether the practitioners have considered the ways in which a rule such as this could overwhelm parents who speak very little or no German at all. Moreover, it will also have a negative impact on authentic interactions between children and parents.

The excerpt makes it clear that multilingualism is not actively promoted in the early years centre and that, instead, the practitioners attempt to separate languages. Therefore, the practitioners reject the common strategy used by multilinguals of mixing languages (see p. 66 f. in this text). It is possible that they lack a theoretical background in this field and experiences of how multilingualism can be developed and supported. However, it is unclear from the excerpt whether multilingual practitioners work in the centre and, if so, how they use their skills. Nevertheless, the practitioners who took part in the group discussion do not believe that it is their job to support and promote the children's multilingualism.

Findings from the studies: the parents' views

The two studies found that parents generally want their children to have a good command of both German and their family language(s). The parents are aware that German is very important for the future of their children and expect early years centres to teach their children German. Some parents even view this as a centre's most important role, as this is a task that they are unable to undertake themselves. The parents directly link mastering German to success at school and later life. Many parents fear that their children will fail at school if they do not have sufficient German language skills (see Jungen 2013, p. 56 f; and Thomauske 2017, pp. 258-267).

However, parents still want their children to use their own language(s) when they speak with their close family members, at home and with other relatives. Many parents worry that their children may forget their language(s) and, therefore, are concerned that a certain distance could develop between them. Clearly, the loss of family language(s) goes hand in hand with the loss of identity. However, not all families are worried about this to the same extent. Some families view learning the family language as something that occurs 'naturally' and as their own responsibility (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 268-274). Nevertheless, the predominance of German leads some parents to view early years centres and schools as competing with their efforts to teach children their language(s) (Jungen 2013, pp. 46-49).

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

In addition to the practitioners' statements, the transcript of the group discussion with parents from the same early years centre shows that parents actively live their multilingualism. Nevertheless, they are still worried about their children's language skills.

Int: ((Directed to everyone)) "Which languages do you speak at home with your children?"

M1: "My mother tongue ((shrugs shoulders)). Sometimes German."

M2: "One answers in Arabic, the other in German ((laughs, turns to M3))."

M3: "A mix ((laughs))."

Int: "If you try to speak Arabic with your children ((directed to everyone)), which language do they answer you in?"

M3: ((Shakes head)) "Only in German."

Int: "Do the children really only answer you [M3] in German?"

M3: ((Shakes head again)) "Only German."

M4: "My children ask me 'What does this word mean in Arabic?' So I explain: 'That means so and so.' But I ask my children 'How do you say XY ((states the name of an animal in Arabic)) in German?' We always do this together: I say a word in Arabic and my son always tells me how to say it in German. But you have to speak Arabic [with the children] at home ((emphasis))—if you don't speak Arabic at home, you can't live with the children. But here ((emphasis)) in the early years' centre, I hope that they speak German. (...) I always say to the practitioners: 'Please speak to my children in German.'"

Int: "What about your family?"

M5: "What should I say? Sometimes we speak German, sometimes Polish. She [the daughter] answers better in Polish. But she also understands German. The teacher said my daughter can speak German and understands it well, but at home—my husband also speaks a bit of Polish—we also speak Polish sometimes. That's why we sometimes speak Polish and sometimes German. But that's why I sent her to the centre—so that she learns German ((emphasis)). She always has problems. Do you know why? She speaks three languages and hears three languages at home: Polish, German and Turkish."

Trans: ((On behalf of M6)) "They also speak three languages, Turkish, Kurdish and German. Her husband speaks more German with the children, she says she also occasionally tries to speak German with the children, and learns German from them, some words at least. She also asks her children how to say things. So she doesn't have any problems either, apart from with her middle daughter, who speaks German here, but doesn't want to speak German at home."

Int: "What do you think about the future? Do you want your children to continue speaking two or three languages? Like when they are older and go to school. Will it still be important for you that your children remain bilingual or multilingual?"

M1: "Yes. [I want them to learn] English. German, of course, and Arabic as their mother tongue. But English. That would be really good."

M2: "Turkish would be too ((laughs))."

M1: "If it's possible, why shouldn't they? Languages are great." (3)

V1: "But you should master a language; not just learn a bit. They should master all of these languages. It's not good enough if they can just say a few things."

M3: "I'm not worried about my mother tongue; they'll speak it anyway. I'm worried about German. It's our children's future; their lives are here, they have to be able to speak German. They won't pick it up naturally; it's something they need to learn, just like their mother tongue."[24]

The excerpt is illustrative of the various views that parents hold about their children's language skills as well as their ideas and hopes as to how practitioners should speak to their children in the early years centre. In addition, the excerpt also demonstrates that the families' have different language practices. The analysis that follows focuses on a number of the aspects brought up in the transcript.

Lived multilingualism

In contrast to early years centres, where languages are separated, the families practise lived multilingualism at home. However, they do not seem to follow a consistent approach to developing their children's language skills, nor do they seem to know which language practices they can rely on in their family. Furthermore, the families also appear anxious about the situation—something that their non-verbal expressions testify to (laughter, shrugged shoulders). However, the group discussion provided them with a space to share their experiences and to think about their strategies.

Families intuitively come to express lived multilingualism including the ability to swap back and forth between languages without thinking, and to and from functional language use (see Thomauske 2017, p. 229). However, the ability to move fluidly between languages is not just a characteristic that children experience who sometimes respond in German and sometimes in the family language(s); it is also common among adults who use languages pragmatically: 'That's why we sometimes speak Polish and some-

24 CCB study, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

times German.' The excerpt also demonstrates that the families have established diverse language practices and strategies. For example, the fourth mother explains how she promotes her first language with her children while learning German from them: 'We always do this together: I say a word in Arabic and my son always tells me how to say it in German.' As such, the parents present themselves as learners and try to build a bridge between the family language(s) and German.

Learning German

The parents view the early years centre as directly responsible for the level of German that their children speak: as the fifth mother puts it, 'But that's why I sent her to the centre—so that she learns German ((emphasis))'. Nevertheless, they remain concerned that their children might not learn enough at the centre. Therefore, some of the parents also try to help their children learn German: 'Her husband speaks more German with the children, she says she also occasionally tries to speak German with the children'. In the excerpt, the parents reproduce the societal discourse in which German is viewed as key to education: 'It's our children's future; their lives are here, they need to be able to speak German. They won't pick it up naturally; it's something they need to learn'. This statement makes it clear that the families' lives and, above all, the children's futures are firmly rooted in Germany.

The parents view learning German as more of a duty and an effort than a pleasurable or fun activity that could accompany children's learning processes: 'they have to be able to speak German'. The parents probably base their views on the experiences they made while learning German in adulthood. However, they probably still lack information about how children learn language(s).

The importance of the language(s) spoken in the family

The standing that German has among the parents pushes the language(s) that they speak at home into the background. The children's 'mother tongue' is presented as something 'natural' that does not have to be learned—it develops automatically: 'I'm not worried about my mother tongue, they'll speak it anyway'. Similarly, as their family language(s) seem to have no place in the early years centre, this suggests they accept that their languages belong to private spaces. The parents seem to subordinate their language(s) to German and view them as less important. This could also be a consequence of the pressure that majority society places upon them to integrate—in this case, the pressure to learn German. Moreover, their family languages are viewed as the source of problems and as having a possible negative impact on the acquisition of German: 'She always has problems. Do you know why? She speaks three languages and hears three languages at home: Polish, German and Turkish.'

This hierarchy of languages clearly reflects the relations of power in society. The second mother reproduces the dominant discourse by defining the order of the languages her child should master: 'Yes. [I want them to learn] English. German, of course, and Arabic as their mother tongue. But English. That would be really good.' English as a 'lingua franca' is stressed as the most important, followed by German (which provides access to education and the labour market), with the family's own language in last place (for more details about this issue, see Thomauske 2017, p. 91).

However, the existential need to use the family language(s) in communication at home is clear from the fourth mother's statement: 'But you have to speak Arabic [with the children] at home ((emphasis))—if you don't speak Arabic at home, you can't live with the children'. She even questions whether it would be possible for children and parents to live together if they did not share a common language; this emphasises the fear she feels of becoming alienated from her own children. In this case, the parents do not expect the early years centres to take on any responsibility for their children's language learning whatsoever; rather, the families view themselves as entirely responsible for ensuring that their children learn the languages(s) spoken in their families.

Conclusions for the training

The transcripts from the group discussions show that practitioners and parents have different experiences and perceptions of multilingualism and language learning. Moreover, the statements are reflections of power relations in society and of the unequal relations that exist between parents and practitioners.

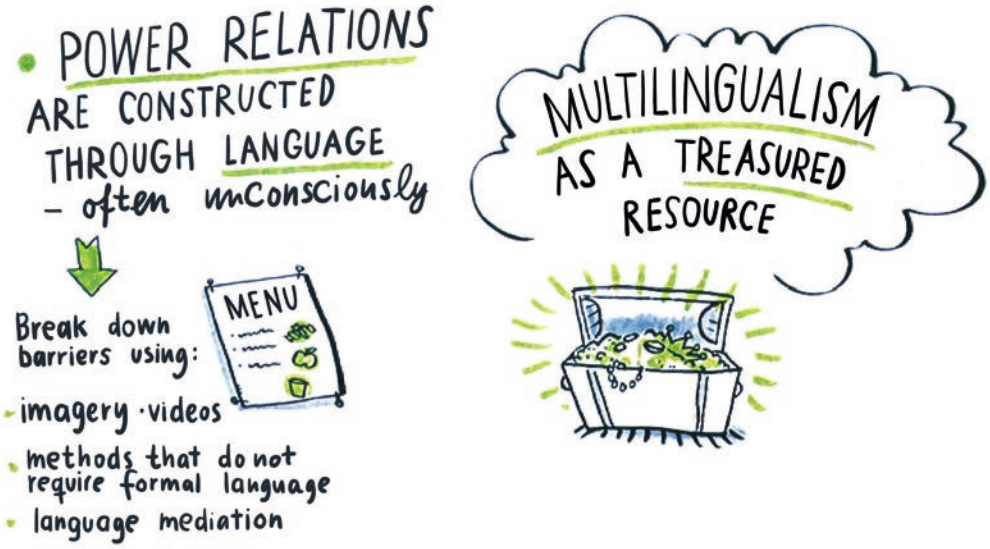
As trained professionals and as members of the majority society, the practitioners have the power to define reality. This also enables them to define how the language skills of children and their parents should be assessed. However, the practitioners' views are based on assumptions, which, in turn, are partly based on a lack of experience and knowledge, on dominant social discourses as well as the pressure excerpted by educational policy. In contrast, the parents' statements reflect a pattern that is typical of internalised oppression (see Derman-Sparks and Olsen Edwards 2010). The low level of esteem in which society and, therefore, the practitioners, hold their family language(s) leads the parents to question the importance of their own languages. This is reflected in the dominance of German language skills in current discourse.

The models that the practitioners apply (such as language separation) are of little use when it comes to ensuring that children enjoy speaking and in encouraging them to learn German. The ability to switch between languages is still not particularly valued in broader society and, therefore, these capacities are not drawn upon or stressed in the early years centre. Finally, parents often lack awareness of their children's multilingual skills and resources, and do not know how to help their children develop their language skills.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

Linguistic diversity in early years centres

An increasingly diverse range of languages are spoken in early years centres. This has led the topic of language(s) to become ever more important in the work undertaken in early years centres. New theories and models of child language acquisition and multilingualism are appearing in the literature (see García and Wei 2014; Gogolin 2015; Panagiotopoulou 2016; and DJI/WIFF 2016). Initiatives such as the German federal program 'Sprach-Kitas' are helping practitioners to meet the needs of and provide competent support to children's linguistic development. The training, therefore, can only address some of the aspects associated with children's languages in early years centres and focuses on those that are relevant to developing better relations with families.



Debates about 'how to approach multilingualism' can take place on several levels in early years centres:

- The practitioners' awareness of their own language practices and reflection of their own language use plays an important role in this respect. It is worth remembering that everyone can be considered multilingual. Even if practitioners are only able to express themselves reliably in German, this does not necessarily make them monolingual. Regional dialects and accents are as much a part of multilingualism as the different registers that are used in different situations. For example, most people speak differently

with a salesperson than they would with a doctor or a friend. Multilingual children also learn to and realise that they also speak differently with different people.

- It is useful to ensure that the diversity of languages that families bring to early years centres are made clearer and gain greater recognition. However, it is also important to make sure that people's assumptions about a particular family do not result in decisions being made about the relevance of a particular language to them without their involvement. This is especially important if the assumptions on which these views are based reflect the presence or lack of particular characteristics (such as surname or ethnicity).

- Parents' concerns should be taken seriously. Parents' evenings can also be held on multilingualism. Parents are not necessarily aware of the differences between how (multilingual) children learn languages compared with adults, and how they can support their children's language learning. In addition, a dialogue group on this topic can provide a space for parents to speak to each other about their own experiences and their experiences with their children, and about the language strategies that they apply in everyday life.

- Many parents' concerns are linked to the question of whether their children will be well-equipped linguistically for the transition to school. It can be worthwhile ensuring that the parents are informed about schools' requirements with regard to children's linguistic competencies. Parents who already have children in school can share their experiences with those who are preparing their children for the transition. The more that the practitioners explain to parents face-to-face and the more that they show them how their children are progressing, the more relaxed the parents will be.

- Numerous specialist publications and programmes offer valuable information about the professional debates linked to this topic, and they also provide suggestions that can be implemented in early years centres. For more information, see the federal programme 'Sprach-Kitas' (https://sprach-kitas.fruehe-chancen.de).

Reflection and suggestions for educational practice

How does your early years centre fair in terms of the linguistic diversity of families and the team? How are the family languages taken into account as part of daily life in the centre? How are children supported in the active use of their languages? What wishes and concerns do parents express regarding their children's language development? How can you empower parents to develop their children's multilingualism as an important resource? To what extent do you consciously think about your own use of language(s)?

Focusing on the issue of 'power'

The analysis of excerpts from the group discussions demonstrated that the way in which different languages are dealt with is closely related to unequal relations of power. This issue is also taken up in the training course, as it provides an opportunity to focus on power in relations with parents. The following exercise is designed to raise awareness among practitioners about unequal power relations and about their own positions in society.

Exercise 4: The issue of 'power' in work with parents

Introduction

This exercise invites practitioners to reflect on the power that they have in relations with parents. 'Power' is used here exclusively in the positive sense. Therefore, the aim is encouraging practitioners to recognise their own agency. In addition, this exercise serves to provide for reflection on the extent to which power and influence are related to social relations. People have different levels of access to resources and different opportunities for participation and influence, all of which depend on their position in society. This can lead to an imbalance in power in relations with other people who, for structural reasons, have less access to power. For example, practitioners have more power than parents who are refugees with insecure residence statuses. As people who are accepted as citizens of German society, practitioners can help shape developments in Germany and make decisions more freely about their own lives. In addition, as staff members of an early years centre, they decide how much influence they are willing to afford to parents. This societal imbalance has an impact on interactions between practitioners and parents. This exercise, therefore, involves developing awareness of these constellations in order to shape relationships so that no one exercises power over others.

'Power' is commonly equated with the concept of domination, and the exercise of power often has negative connotations. However, power can also be viewed positively. Hannah Arendt developed a positive concept of power by distinguishing between power and violence. Arendt viewed power as dependent on the consent of those who submit to power (see Hansen et al. 2011, p. 32 f.). She explained this in the following manner: "Power corresponds to the human ability not only to act or do something but also to align oneself with others and to act by mutual consent." (Arendt 1970, p. 45)

The term 'power' is historically related to the word 'being able to' in the sense of capacity, ability, or having the power to do something. In its negative sense, power can be abused—it can involve the exercise of domination, which, in turn, restricts and harms other people. A further aspect of the negative sense of power can be seen in social structures because people who are placed in a privileged position are automatically able to exercise power over others.

In this context, it is important to focus on the constructive side of power, because power is needed to bring about change.

Focus

- The concept of power
- Reflection on the power that practitioners have over parents
- Raising awareness of the options that exist with regard to change

Materials

- A collection of about 50 small objects such as everyday items (cutlery, lighters and keys etc.), figures and toys. The objects are laid out in the middle of the room on the floor.
- Flipchart, marker pens

Time

- Total: about 2 hours
- Introductory group discussion: the concept of power: 30-45 minutes
- Small groups: power in relations with parents: 30 minutes
- Follow-up group discussion: 50 minutes

Procedure

Group discussion: Introduction to 'power'

The first sequence explains what is meant by the term 'power'. Both the negative aspects, such as the abuse of power, and the positive aspects, in the sense of being able to do things and having agency need to be outlined at this point.

The participants are invited to choose an item from the floor that they symbolically associate with the question 'What do I associate with the term power?' (Participants do not have to select an item, and they can even choose two.)

The participants present their thoughts about the concept of power using their chosen object. The associations that they mention are written down on the flipchart.

The subsequent conversation focuses on the realisation that power can be interpreted differently; the participants are also asked to consider the positive meaning of the term. The explanations set out in the infobox on p. 71 f. can provide a basis for this discussion.

'Power' in relations with parents

The aim of this stage is to focus on pedagogical practices and relations with parents. Power factors play a role within the early years centre as an institution, and this includes the role undertaken by practitioners of a particular institution. Factors such as these have an impact on interactions and relationships between practitioners and parents.

Small groups: sharing experiences of power in relations with parents

The participants form small groups of between four and five and are provided with the following exercise.

- Share experiences about some aspects or features that demonstrate your power as a practitioner in relations with parents.

The participants are asked to note the aspects that crop up during the discussion on facilitator's cards.

Follow-up group discussion

The small groups present their results to the group.

The way in which power relations can become entangled with one another can be addressed during the main discussion round. The power that practitioners with a migrant background have in relations with white German parents, for example, may be limited. This is particularly the case if the parents' prejudices lead them to reject a practitioner's professional competencies in cases such as these. In addition, power entanglements may also occur in situations where practitioners feel insecure towards parents with a higher level of formal education. The multi-dimensionality of social power relations plays a role here and needs to be addressed explicitly during the discussion.

Constructive use of practitioners' power to influence relations with parents

The participants are asked to form groups of three ('a buzz group') and to consider the following question.

- How can we use our power constructively when working together with parents?

The small groups explain their ideas to the larger discussion group and they are written down as keywords on the flipchart.

At the end of the session, it can be useful to point out that practitioners can also use their power when they hear and experience parents expressing prejudices and discriminatory comments about other parents or children. Adopting a clear position in such situations underscores the fact that power provides practitioners with the space to act and that they can do so wisely (see ISTA/Fachstelle Kinderwelten 2018, p. 67).

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Identity and belonging

Links to the studies

Analysis of the discussions undertaken with parents and practitioners led the authors of the international CCB study to identify (children's) identity as a central issue in early years centres, as well as related topics such as migration, prejudice and belonging (see Tobin et al. 2013; and Tobin 2016). Creating Dialogue (Jungen 2013), on the other hand, the in-depth German follow-up study, provided greater focus on 'cultures of origin'. This study defines culture in the narrow sense of the word, and links it to nationality and 'ethnicity' or equates it with religious belonging.[25] Moreover, this study stresses the importance of the families' natio-ethno-cultural diversity as well as their different outlooks and values. Finally, it also underlines the discrepancy between the families' diversity and the make-up of practitioner teams, which tend to view their own origins as less diverse than those of the parents and children who attend early years centres.

Findings from the studies: the practitioners' views

The group discussions indicate that practitioners would like to know more about families' 'cultures of origin' so that they can better meet the needs of families. In addition, practitioners realise that their vocational training has by no means prepared them to deal with the diversity present in early years centres. Although they are aware of the families' diversity, practitioners do not systematically engage with it as part of their work. Rather, they believe that emphasising families' varied 'cultures of origin' and their particular characteristics might jeopardise the common ground shared by all (Jungen 2013, pp. 74-76). This is also reflected in the fact that practitioners only take certain aspects of diversity into account during specific situations, such as in the general avoidance of pork consumption by the majority of early years centres (ibid., p. 76).

The CD study also considers the issue of whether more practitioners with a migrant background are needed. Some practitioners would welcome having more colleagues

25 See other sections of the chapter for a more detailed discussion of the term 'culture'.

with migrant heritage in their teams because they believe that this would provide them with greater access to certain families than is currently possible. However, not all practitioners view this as useful. They fear that this will exclude them from contact with these families, who will then only speak to practitioners in their common language. Jungen (2013, p. 77 f.) concludes that practitioners in early years centres have very few concepts and strategies with which to deal with diversity and that this often leads them to feel overwhelmed.

Analyses of transcripts from group discussions

The following excerpts provide examples of practitioners' views of the development of children's groups that are based on a shared language (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 126-129).

PR1: "We've seen tendencies ((exhales, sighs audibly)) towards children saying things like (3): 'You can't play with us, you're Turkish' or 'My dad said I can't play with Arab children.' (3) Things like that. Where we, where I've actually said something like: 'What your dad says at home, applies at home, what happens here ((uses hands to point to the floor)), is up to us ((laughs)). Here you can (emphasis) play with each other' ((shrugs shoulders)). Children don't understand what this is all about, but things happen quickly (3). When three girls are together and who argue with each other anyway, and two of them are looking for a reason to do so (...) then they just say 'She's an Arab' or 'She's Turkish' ((waves)) or something else like that ((sits up, crosses arms)). So this issue is already being picked up by the children."

PR2: "Not in our centre ((PR4 also shakes head, PR3 does too)) (...) it actually works quite well ((PR5 nods clearly)). And the kids are a colourful mix anyway. Turkish children, Arab children, Croatian children—it's quite a mixed group. We haven't got that many German children. of the 33 children that come to the early years centre, only two are really pure ((emphasis)) German."

Int: "What do you mean by 'pure German'? Are you referring to nationality?"

PR5: "Both parents being German."

PR2: "Both parents being German—well [not always]. In one case, one parent—the father—is an Arab and the mother is German."

PR5: "Otherwise, they've all got German citizenship. ((Begins speaking quietly)) But they can't speak German. ((PR4 nods)) ((Continues. Looks at everyone)) Only very few can. ((PR2 nods))."

PR1: "I think that if the family speaks really good German at home, then we call the kids German, right? ((Stretches slightly)) What do you think?"

PR5: "If they both come from Bosnia and both speak German –"

PR1: "Yes. Like [child's name] in our centre, for example. (…) The nationality of the parents is actually really completely ((emphasis)), and totally irrelevant, but the children really ((emphasis)) must be able to speak German—damn it! ((laughs sarcastically)) ((PR4 laughs too))." [26]

This excerpt shows the situations in which the practitioners notice that diversity exists among the children and how they respond to or ignore these differences. At the same time, a discussion develops among the practitioners aimed at defining the meaning of belonging. The following, therefore, draws on a number of aspects that are brought up by the transcript.

Dealing with exclusion

The practitioners describe a situation in which children, especially in conflict situations, use their belonging to a particular ethnic group to distinguish themselves from others or to exclude others. However, it is clear from the transcript that, in cases such as these, the practitioners actively intervene with the intention of preventing exclusion and that they adopt a clear stance: 'Here you can (emphasis) play with each other'. The child is told that the early years centre has different rules to those in place at home. This avoids devaluing the parents—the father in this case—in the eyes of the children by merely separating contexts: 'What your dad says at home, applies at home, what happens here ((uses hands to point to the floor)), is up to us ((laughs))'. The way in which the first practitioner speaks about the situation may indicate that the practitioners are unsure about how to broach the issues of discrimination, prejudice, ascription and ethnicisation,[27] and, therefore, avoid using these terms. It is also possible that they lack theoretical and practical engagement with this topic. Nevertheless, they indirectly address the issue of 'exclusion' due to external ascriptions of identity and prejudices, and do so by citing the children's point of view: 'Children don't understand what this is all about (…) but this issue is already being picked up by the children.' A defensive position is even more visible in the other practitioners' reactions: 'Not in our centre ((PR4 also shakes head, PR3 does too))'. These practitioners either do not notice, or they overlook and water down the significance of conflicts that arise due to discrimination and belonging to certain ethnic groups.[28] It is also possible that a lack of awareness and the widespread assumption that small children are not prejudiced also play a role here (see Preissing and Wagner 2003; and Richter 2016).

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26 CCB study, practitioners from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

27 See other sections of this chapter for more about this term.

28 See, for example, Ogette 2018 for more about defence mechanisms.

The current difficulties and political conflicts in the countries of origin of some families can also result in parents and their children expressing similar discourses in early years centres and, thus, the prejudices and experiences of being devalued that are linked to them. These issues may overwhelm the practitioners, and this could explain their reluctance to deal with them.

Attributing ethnic identity

It is not just the children but also the practitioners who group children according to certain criteria, whereby both the children's nationality and the languages they or their families speak play decisive roles: 'Turkish children, Arab children, Croatian children'. The practitioners describe the children as a 'colourful mix', which stands in contrast to 'really pure ((emphasis)) German'. This indirectly expresses the view that these children are 'different' and that they do not conform to the practitioners' notions of what constitutes a normal social group—the group that they view themselves as belonging to. The choice of words suggests that there is an (unconscious) rating or hierarchy at play here whereby the practitioners subordinate the 'colourful' to the 'pure'.[29] Moreover, using such language objectifies the children, who have no say in whether they want to be assigned to a particular category and who are not asked whether they feel comfortable about being compartmentalised in a particular way.

This reduces the children's identities to a single aspect—their (assumed) ethnicity. As part of this process, the practitioners rely on categories that are relevant to and have an impact on society. These are reflections of dominant social patterns of interpretation and action, including processes that judge and condemn families, leading them to be constructed as 'Other'. Constructions of whether someone is Turkish, Arabic, Polish or German have meaning in society and result in the evocation of (stereotypical) imagery. Importantly, these categories are further reproduced and will become reified if they are left unchallenged.

The power to define belonging

The interviewer's question 'What do you mean by 'pure German'? Are you referring to nationality?' led to a discussion that can provide information about who makes the decisions about which groups the children and their families are ascribed to (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 177-181). Practitioners—as is the case in wider society—do not view German citizenship as automatically conferring a family with the status of being 'German'. The practitioners are very clear about the fact that the people who they are talking about 'they've all got German citizenship'.

29 See the discussion about speaking German 'properly' in the chapter entitled 'Languages(s)'.

The practitioners are representatives of majority society and, as such, have the power to define who belongs to it and who does not. In this case, the practitioners develop two explanatory approaches to do so. On the one hand, descent plays a role: if 'both parents being German', the child is German. However, this theory is built on fragile ground, as the second practitioner soon argues that children should be considered German if 'the father (...) is an Arab and the mother is German'. Another states that a person whose family speaks 'really good German' at home should also be recognised as German. This point could be related to the debate on integration, in which (error-free) mastery of the (German) language is viewed as key to successful integration in German society.

How absurd yet effective these attributions are becomes particularly clear by the way in which the first practitioner rounds off the discussion: 'The nationality of the parents is actually really completely ((emphasis)), and totally irrelevant, but the children really ((emphasis)) must be able to speak German—damn it! ((laughs sarcastically))'. In order to avoid the need to provide explanations or justifications of when someone can be considered German, this practitioner focuses on children having to speak German in order to be considered as such. This statement makes it very clear that the nationality of the parents is indeed extremely important.

Findings from the research: the parents' views

The parents who participated in the studies would like the practitioners to know more about their religious and traditional festivals and their practices so that these can be conveyed to the children in the early years centres. The parents notice that German holidays and Christian festivals are highly present in early years centres, whereas their own festivals and traditions are rarely considered. The parents believe that this leads their children to lose interest in their family's origins (Jungen 2013, pp. 68-70).

Some parents would like practitioners in their early years centres to have similar origins or speak similar languages to their own; however, other parents fear that this could put the German language skills of their children at risk (ibid., p. 71 f.). Some parents stress the need for a 'German' socialisation in early years centres in order for their children to succeed in society. Others maintain that the pressure exerted by majority society leads parents to set aside their own values and, for example, their family language(s) in order to adapt to the majority culture (ibid., p. 79).

Tobin et al. (2016, pp. 129-133) stress that conversations with parents display a mix of idealism and pragmatism. Parents often idealise their countries of origin, especially with regard to maintaining values in families, such as respecting elders. This strategy, combined with nostalgia, has been described as characteristic of people with migrant her-

itage (Tobin et al. 2013, p. 90). As pragmatists, parents want to secure the benefits and opportunities that a new country may offer their children, such as access to education and the labour market. However, the differences between the values of their country of origin and those of the new country often place parents in a predicament. Their personal experiences of discrimination can lead them to withdraw or to hide their own identities[30] so as to protect their children from harm (see ibid., p. 115 f.).

Analysis of excerpts from group discussions

The following sequence demonstrates the parents' views of belonging and identity and what they wish for their children in this regard.

M1: "Well, first of all, my biggest wish is that my children learn to speak German properly in the centre before they go to school. Second, I'd like them to experience the other side of society. We live a more Middle Eastern life at home, and I want my children to be aware of German society as well. I don't want them to grow up thinking, 'What's that?' ((derogatory)), when they see German food for example (...)"

M2: "The [German] way of thinking."

M1: "Yes, exactly. Like eating and sitting and playing and all these things. communication in general. I don't want them to say: 'I don't know how to say this or that, or how to deal with people.' Even as a toddler it's all different. It's the German way of doing things (...) we have a different way of doing things."

M3: "Social spaces."

M1: "Yes, different social spaces. Because in our house, we have a different way of being –our own way. And I don't want my child to go to school without even knowing what German is. It's really interesting. I wish they would be a bit more extreme about this. Even in the early years centre. Like real German."

Int: ((Asking for understanding)) "A bit more extreme? Is that what you said?"

M1: "Yes, in the sense that the children should really experience German [culture] during the day. They should see all of the things that you can experience in this country: on excursions, the language. There are some things that we—that we don't do, that we don't even think about doing; but the practitioners, the German practitioners, in the early years centre, they should just say: 'Well, that's how it's done here!'"

30 This phenomenon is known as 'self-silencing' (see Thomauske 2017, p. 194).

Int: (To everyone) "Do you all think the same as she does [M1]? Do you share her opinion?"

M2: "Well."

M1: ((In Arabic with M4; M4 nods; M5 shakes head)) "I don't want the children to be surprised [later] about what Germans are like. I mean, when they grow up, I don't want them to say: 'What are Germans actually like?', and then not be able to deal with them." M4: "It's good for school too, (3) it will make things easier. (...) My son has to go to the centre first and learn German for a year or two, because when he goes to school—where everyone speaks good German—he also needs to be able to speak good German. ((Arabic to M1)) Don't you think so?" ((M1 nods)) (7)

M1: "I think that it's really good in the centre because they don't speak Turkish, Arabic or Polish, (3) and they don't set up groups [based on language]. They really have an influence over the children; they say: 'When you are here, you are all children, and we all play with each other, there are no groups: none of this 'We are Turks', 'We are Arabs' and so forth.' It used to be like that with my son, and that was difficult, really difficult. Because they carry on like that at school later too. If you ask them at his school now, you'll see that there really are Turkish, Arabic and Polish groups. That makes things really difficult."[31]

The excerpt demonstrates that the discourse of language(s) forms part of the discourse of culture and belonging. The mothers appear to agree that it is not only language skills that contribute to the success of the children, but also knowledge about interactions between people and particularly the, sometimes unwritten, rules of German society.

Language as an indicator of belonging and as essential to a successful career

As was the case with the practitioners, the parents also focus on the children's language skills. The mothers understand the level of social recognition that language has: people who are unable to speak error- and accent-free German are not accepted as part of the majority society. Language marks who automatically belongs to society. The first mother emphasises the importance of German: 'Well, first of all, my biggest wish is that my children learn to speak German properly'. The fourth mother also views German as essential if her child is to be accepted into school, because at school, 'where everyone speaks good German', her child also needs to be able to speak good German. The emphasis on being able to speak 'properly' and 'good' German are noteworthy because these notions

31 CCB study, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2005.

imply that the children are not currently able to. Maybe the mothers believe that their children's language skills are not as developed as those of 'German children' and that, therefore, their children will be disadvantaged at school. This implies that their children will also have to catch up on their German language skills in order to be part of German society.

Finding out about 'the German way of doing things'

In the excerpt, the mothers search for a word that describes what they—or their children—lack; they are searching for a word to define what makes them different from majority society and what they want to achieve by sending their children to an early years centre. They explain this as gaining access to 'the other side of the society', as a 'way of thinking,' a 'way of doing things,' or 'social spaces.' This establishes a dichotomy between the families who, according to the statement of the first mother, live a more 'Middle Eastern life' at home, and public space, which includes the early years centre, where the children experience 'the German way of doing things' (see Thomauske 2017, p. 126 f). Parallel worlds seem to exist that are characterised by hierarchies: home is private and plays no role in the future of the children, and it is contrasted with the 'German' way of doing things, which is of great importance for the children's future.

The mothers distance themselves from majority society—they know that they do not belong. They may see signs of this in public discourse, in their local environments or in the early years centre and they have adopted and internalised them. This makes it all the more important for them to ensure that their children are equipped to deal with the future. However, the mothers do not rely on their own resources to do so; instead, they pass on this responsibility to the early years centre. In early years centres, therefore, children should learn about majority society and how to do things such as 'eating and sitting and playing and all these things'; they should learn how people in the majority society communicate with one another be able 'to deal with [such] people'. By calling for a 'more extreme' 'German way of doing things', and for things to be done 'how they are done here' (in the early years centre), they subordinate their own family culture to that of the majority. As such, the mothers are not merely attempting to ensure that their children are well prepared for the future, but also trying to protect them by ensuring that they will not be 'surprised [later] about what Germans are like'. The fourth mother also brings the school setting into play, which is, she argues, the reason why it is very important to understand the unwritten rules that govern majority society: 'It's good for school too, (3) it will make things easier.'

The parents' rejection of forming groups based on ethnicity

The parents seem to welcome the fact that the practitioners do not make any obvious distinctions between the children in terms of their family language(s) and background: 'I think that it's really good in the centre because they don't speak Turkish, Arabic or Polish, (3) and they don't set up groups [based on language].' As such, they support the practitioners' strategy of avoiding, relativising and disregarding the differences between the children: 'When you are here, you are all children, and we all play with each other, there are no groups.' However, this could reflect a concern that children will otherwise be marked as belonging to a specific (ethnic) group and therefore these constructions of belonging might also lead to conflict (see Thomauske 2017, pp. 126-130). The parents describe their experiences with older schoolchildren, where 'there really are Turkish, Arabic and Polish groups. That makes things really difficult'. The parents seem to approach the issue pragmatically without broaching the children's ethnic or linguistic belonging in the early years centre in order to avoid labelling the children (see ibid., p. 323). This could also be an expression of the parents' desire that their children should not be seen as part of an ethnic group that is outside of, but, instead, naturally belongs to today's society.

Conclusions for the training

Both perspectives clearly show that practitioners and parents assume that there are different unwritten rules and regulations in families and early years centres (part of majority society). As such, it is important to reflect on and share experiences about where these rules come from and the meanings that they have.

The diversity of family cultures and identities goes unnoticed in the institution; the children's multiple belongings are not taken up in the excerpt and the parents do not discuss how children's identities could be strengthened. It is clear that the families are not being (sufficiently) valued and therefore can and do not feel that they belong. In addition, the early years centre lacks a positive view of the families and their resources. Even the parents do not recognise the resources that they have and, instead, pass on the task of strengthening their children and providing them with good educational opportunities to the practitioners. In their desire to prevent exclusion by treating all children as equally as possible, the team does seem to have thought about the fact that each child (as well as their family) is unique and therefore the practitioners need to build individual relations with each of them.

All of the statements made during the studies are clear reflections of the way in which society is organised. Whereas the practitioners speak from the perspective of the dominant society and have the power to define belonging, the parents focus on the aspects

that they lack and the problems this causes; problems that they are trying to ensure that their children can overcome. This highlights a particular arrangement in which members of the majority society define the norm and the families (as members of a minority) try to adapt to it in order to prevent their children from facing disadvantages. Intensive deliberation and discussion about the concept of prejudice-aware education, therefore, is indispensable in order to ensure that these mechanisms can be properly tackled.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

Dealing with the term 'culture'

The training sessions emphasise the need for the participants to engage with their own identity and their belonging to different social groups. It is crucial that people come to recognise just how much importance they place on the fact that the social groups to which they ascribe gain social recognition. This can help raise awareness of the vulnerability of people who are marginalised through ascription and stereotyping.

Discussion about culture is a key aspect in this regard. The term is often used in its narrow sense, and linked to nationality or equated with religious belonging. In this view, culture is understood as a static, homogeneous, unchanging entity. However, this rigid understanding of culture means that neither people's individuality nor the diversity that exists within social groups is recognised. Reducing individuals to their national origin or ethnicity also masks the fact that people move within different systems of orientation and (un)consciously participate in shaping them (see Bostancı and Bovha 2018). Furthermore, it also ignores the fact that people take part in cultural practices that are constantly influenced by new situations, influences and understandings. Reducing the concept of culture to national origin, therefore, also results in the production of stereotypical imagery of (groups of) people. This leads people and their actions to be constructed as unitary and homogeneous. Furthermore, it leads to the construction of social groups that are viewed as different and, as such, are treated differently. This process, called 'Othering' (see Reuter 2002; Powell and Menendian 2016), involves the naming and exclusion of groups of people and the construction of an 'own' and an 'us'. Although this 'us' is often left undefined, what is viewed as 'normal' is linked to the familiar and the certainty of being on the 'right' side. Othering is also associated with assumptions and value judgements whereby the 'cultural' 'Other' is viewed negatively or as inferior (see Bostancı and İkiz 2013, p. 50). This occurs, for example, when the 'Turkish family' is constructed as backward and unwilling to adapt to German society. The point of reference used to make such value judgements is the culturally 'own', which, of course, itself is a social construction.

In line with cultural studies (see Leiprecht 2012), culture is described as a 'repertoire of patterns of meaning and systems of signs (values, norms, customs and other rules of conduct, general knowledge and 'self-evidence', traditions, rituals, routines, beliefs, myths, (...)) which groups or societies possess' (Leiprecht 2004, p. 16 in Bostancı and İkiz 2013, p. 37). What constitutes the culture of people and groups, therefore, is much more differentiated, complex and flexible than aspects that are encompassed by reducing culture to national origin.

In order to help people broaden their view and to develop awareness of the infinite aspects of diversity, prejudice-aware education uses the concept of 'family culture'. Following Petra Wagner (2014), family culture constitutes the unique mosaic of habits, values, norms, interpretive patterns, traditions and perspectives of a family, which also includes their experiences with geographical origin, language(s), physical and mental constitution, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, change of place of residence, discrimination and privilege. Families bring their own family cultures to early years centres. Whereas the national cultural view would view two German, white, metropolitan families as indistinguishable, when they are viewed in terms of family culture, it is quite possible that their culture differs significantly: they may have quite different lifestyles, political views, parenting styles, premises on which their lives are based, eating habits, and rituals that are associated with these differences.

The same applies to people who work with children. Every institution, including early years centres, has its own particular culture that is determined by the family cultures of those who work in it, by societal understandings of what education involves, and by professional knowledge and values.


Soennecken
family culture
changing residence
religion
clothes
Physical & Psychical condition
family type/ size
everyday situations
sexual orientation/ identity
experiences with privilege
language(s)
rituals/ traditions
socio-economic status
[...]
values
experiences with discrimination
What significance does the family have for each of these aspects?

Exercise 5: 'My reference groups'[32]

Introduction

This exercise invites participants to reflect more deeply on one aspect that influences interactions between parents and practitioners, and thus also the wellbeing of children in early years centres: the significance of belonging to a particular reference group. This exercise is based on the understanding of identity that underlies prejudice-aware education.

Identity—a person's uniqueness—includes the self-identity as a perception of a person's individual particularities and the consciousness of their own existence. Social identity—integration into social groups and society—is a further determining factor of a person's inner unity or what they experience as their 'self' (Derman-Sparks and Olson Edwards 2010, p. 12). In this context, reference is made to 'group reference identities' (Cross 1991). As human beings, we form an idea of ourselves through and as part of the reference groups to which we belong—these can be chosen or ascribed to us by others. The primary and most important reference group for children is usually the family (in the wider sense of the word that includes family carers, regardless of whether they are related). The social identity of family members is also determined by their belonging to other social reference groups and the categories that other people ascribe to them.
As such, reference groups form part of human identity. People may feel that they belong to a particular group, or their group affiliation can also be ascribed to them by others due to (perceived) common aspects of their identities, such as social and geographical origin, occupation, family constellation, and political allegiances. People like to be associated with some groups. However, although people also belong to certain groups due to aspects they share, they may not feel as if they belong to them or not want to be associated with them. This can also be influenced by the level of recognition that the particular reference group receives or is denied in society.

If the family reference group goes unrecognised or is even discriminated against in an early years centre, this can have a detrimental effect on the child's self-image. Children are astutely aware of whether their parents are respected or laughed at, for example, or whether the practitioners welcome them openly or whether are relieved when they leave the early years centre. Children use these experiences to draw conclusions about how to judge themselves.

32 This exercise can be found in ISTA/Fachstelle Kinderwelten 2018, p. 129.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that reactions from our environment have on our own reference groups and feelings, this exercise invites practitioners to consider all of the facets of reference group belonging. At the same time, it is intended to demonstrate the experiences that ascription to a particular reference group entails. A special challenge in this respect involves considering the groups in terms of the level of social recognition that they receive.

Focus

- Reflecting on your own affiliations to reference groups
- Realisation that these are interwoven with social positions
- Reflection on the dangers of belonging based on an identity formed through ascription
- Developing awareness of the power relations associated with belonging to a particular reference group

Materials

- A copy of the worksheet 'Overview of my reference groups' for each participant; one worksheet 'My reference group' for each small group
- Pens and paper to make notes, facilitation cards, markers, kraft paper or flipchart paper

Time

- Total: 2 hours
- Introduction: 10 minutes
- Description of participants' reference groups, individual work: 10 minutes
- Formation of issue-based small groups: 20 minutes
- Sharing experiences about reference groups in small groups: 30 minutes
- Reporting to the whole group: 50 minutes

Procedure

Introduction

The content, purpose and stage of the exercise are explained. This part of the introduction can be based on the introductory text in the box above.

The participants are told that the aim is to develop awareness about the reference groups that they belong to. The worksheet 'Overview of my reference groups' is handed out and the next step is explained. The aim is for the participants to write down their own reference group affiliations on their worksheet. The participants are told that the sheet does not have to be filled out completely and that the information need not be shared with other participants: the worksheet is only for individual use.

In order for the participants to better understand the tasks and the term 'reference group', the facilitators can provide examples of their own reference group affiliations. Often the question arises as to whether the participants should only write down reference groups to which they feel that they belong in a positive sense, or even those that they reject. The practitioners should attempt to find examples of both groups.

The exercise can produce emotional responses among the participants to varying degrees depending on the reference groups that they assign themselves. The participants should be reminded to exercise self-care and to divulge information only if they really want to.

Description of participants' reference groups, individual work

This stage enables the participants to work quietly and to concentrate on filling out the worksheet.

Issue-based small groups

The following process takes place in several phases and it makes sense to ensure that the participants understand that patience will be needed.

The participants are asked to name two reference groups that are currently relevant to them. They can rely on the worksheet from the previous stage if they want to and to decide which group they would like to share their experiences about in more detail as part of a small group. The following question can help to facilitate this stage.

- Which reference group is currently important to you and which do you want to focus on during the exercise?

The participants name two reference groups in turn and these are written on the flipchart.

Occasionally, participants may name reference groups that have had very little continued existence over time or that have no relevance for wider society; this can lead the exercise to become superficial. Therefore, it is important to focus on the fact that this

exercise is about reference groups that have links to current society and that enable in-depth analysis of ascriptions of belonging. If necessary, the participants are provided with a reasonable explanation why a particular reference group should be omitted: 'optimists', for example, is not associated with any particular social position. Be wary of providing examples, however, because different reference groups have different experiences. It is just as important to avoid making generalisations.

This phase is followed by a process of narrowing down the selection: the participants are asked to select the reference group on the flipchart that they would like to focus on during the exercise. They are provided with two dots to mark the favoured groups. This should narrow down the number of reference groups that are available for selection.

The participants are invited to choose one of the reference groups and to get together in small groups of no more than six. If a larger group of participants chooses the same reference group, the group can be divided.

Before the small groups take up their work, the questions that will be the focus of the next phase can be explained (the questions are on the 'My Reference Group' worksheet) so that the participants understand how to proceed. This can help participants to select a particular group, which, in turn, supports the process of establishing the small groups. If questions arise, they can be answered now.

It is important that all of the participants have chosen a small group before they start sharing their experiences.

Sharing experiences in small groups

The small groups are asked to begin their work using the 'My reference group' worksheet and to discuss issues related to the reference group.

The groups are told towards the end of the ten minutes that they should agree on which lessons should be learned from their experiences and to present them to the discussion group. Once again, the participants are told that they can decide for themselves how much they would like to reveal about their experiences and stories.

Reporting their experiences to the whole group

The small groups briefly present their findings and experiences to the discussion group as well as any specifics of the conversation about their chosen reference group.

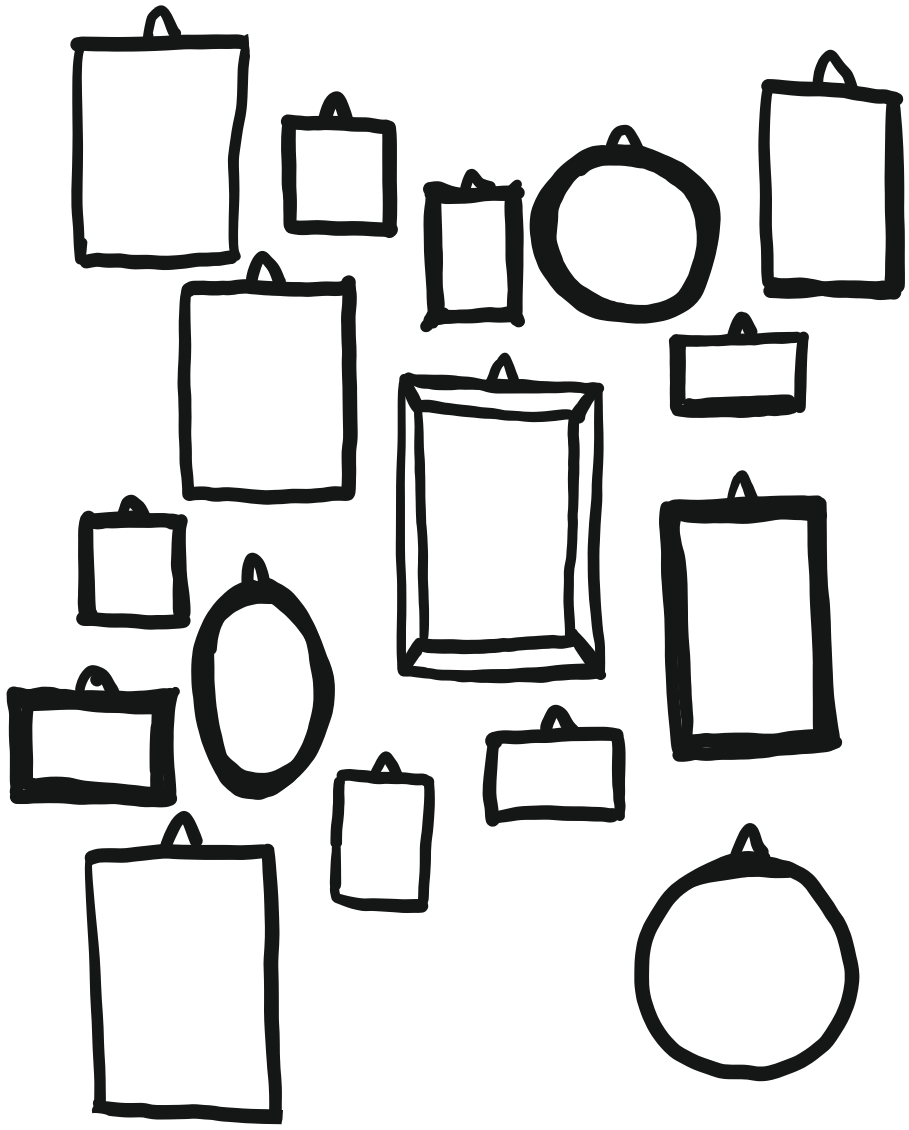
The next stage involves engaging in conversation with the group and making it clear that people experience society differently and that this is due to their reference group affiliations/ascriptions, to the value that a particular group is accorded within society, and to relations of power and dominance. Social recognition or rejection can lead to stereotyping or even differences that are associated with prejudice or ascriptions of foreignness. All of this can lead to disadvantages, unequal treatment and discrimination.
In this stage, the facilitator accompanies the discussion of power relations during the practitioners' work with parents and the way in which these are interwoven with a person's own social position, as well as open or hidden generalisations, prejudices, stereotyping or ascriptions of foreignness.

Worksheet

Overview of my reference groups

Write your name in the picture frame in the middle.

Which reference groups do you belong to? Add them to the worksheet.



Which reference group is particularly important to you at the current time?
With which reference group do you feel the strongest affiliation?

Worksheet

My reference group

Please share experiences about the following questions:

- What kind of features does your reference group have?
- What do you enjoy about being a member of this group? Why?
- What do you dislike about being a member of this group? Why is that?
- What remarks about your reference group do you never want to hear again?
- How should other people treat your group?

Please write down the insights, experiences and noteworthy aspects that you come across on the facilitation cards; they will then be presented in the main group discussion.

Show consideration for each other; every participant decides how much they want to reveal. Nobody should face questioning here.

Exercise 6: Family game[33]

Introduction

Prejudices influence our perceptions of other people and can also affect our work with families if additional assumptions are made based on actual or attributed individual characteristics.

This exercise can help practitioners to develop awareness of their own imagery in a 'playful' manner. One danger is that participants may feel vulnerable and, therefore, no longer wish to participate. Others, on the other hand, may be reluctant to reproduce prejudiced images. Therefore, the intention of the exercise needs to be made clear in the introduction and participants should be invited to embark on this balancing act together.

Focus

- Developing awareness of one's own prejudices about families
- Reflection about social norms in relation to families
- Envisaging a variety of family forms and cultures

Materials and preparation

- Family Game (Azun 2010)

Time

- Total: 1 hour 15 minutes
- Introduction, distribution of cards: 10 minutes
- Reflection on the children's card, individual work and groups of two, group discussion: 30 minutes
- Reflection on the family card, groups of two, plenum: 20 minutes
- Evaluation: 15 minutes

33 This exercise can be found in ISTA/Fachstelle Kinderwelten 2018, p. 111.

Procedure

Introduction, distribution of cards

This exercise is about dealing with images of families and internalised notions of 'normal families'. The participants are informed that these images will initially be reproduced in the context of the exercise, but deconstructed later. With the view in mind that it is impossible not to be influenced by social norms, the intention is not to lecture the participants, but to identify our own prejudices in order to develop a conscious way of dealing with them.

After this, either one children's card is provided to each participant or the cards are laid out so that the participants can choose them for themselves.

Reflection about the children's cards

The participants look closely at their card. They are invited to use their imagination to answer the following questions:

- What is the child's life like?
- Who does the child live with?
- What does the child's home look like?
- What does the child like to do?
- What does the child do with their parents?
- (Optional: What will the child's further educational path be like?)

The questions can be written on the flipchart.

Afterwards, the participants present their imaginary child in groups of two to the person sitting next to them (10 minutes).
Depending on the size of the group, some or all of the participants briefly talk about the child on their card.

Questions can be asked such as:

- Why did you choose this child?
- Why do you think that the child would be like X?
- Does this child remind you of a child that you know or which other associations do you have?

Reflecting on the family's card

The family cards are laid out openly. Everyone searches for a card that fits best with the children's card. In the same pairs as before, the participants then discuss whether something is surprising about the depicted family and whether this throws into question their previous assumptions.

Some or all of them present their family cards and report on what surprised them and which of their assumptions they feel have been confirmed. It may happen that new assumptions about families are made here. A reference to the surprise in the previous step can help challenge that.

Evaluation and application to participants' work in early years centres

Finally, the participants share their experiences to the round using the following questions:

- Was it easy or difficult for me to develop ideas? Why?
- What are my assumptions based on?
- Where is this topic found in my/our everyday work? How do I/we manage it?

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Dialogue groups in practice

Understanding dialogue groups

During the training, the participants consider the ways in which the dialogical approach can be applied in practice. This process, which is undertaken jointly with practitioners, involves drawing on the experiences, insights and suggestions that have been gained from other projects that use dialogue groups in their work; the aim is to reach out to parents using a form of dialogue that places all participants on an equal footing.[34]

Creating Dialogue uses the term 'dialogue group' to describe this process. Dialogue groups involve groups of people coming together to speak with one another as part of a dialogue round. Communication in dialogue rounds follows the principles of dialogue (See 'Parents and practitioners in dialogue'. The participants sit in a circle together with a facilitator, who is responsible for setting the framework, facilitates the group, but who also participates in the conversations. Dialogue groups are based on the assumption that everyone can provide an important contribution to the conversation; this enables everyone to gain new insights and to find out new information. It is important to note that this approach conceives of thoughts and feelings as part of the same whole. A practitioner from Hamburg described dialogue groups in the following manner: 'It involves treading a new path, displaying openness to a particular topic and attempting to discover how it makes us feel'. As such, dialogue groups provide inexhaustible sources of diverse viewpoints, opinions, experiences and feelings.

34 See for example Manitonquat 1997; Schopp 2006; www.circleway.org.

The aim of dialogue groups

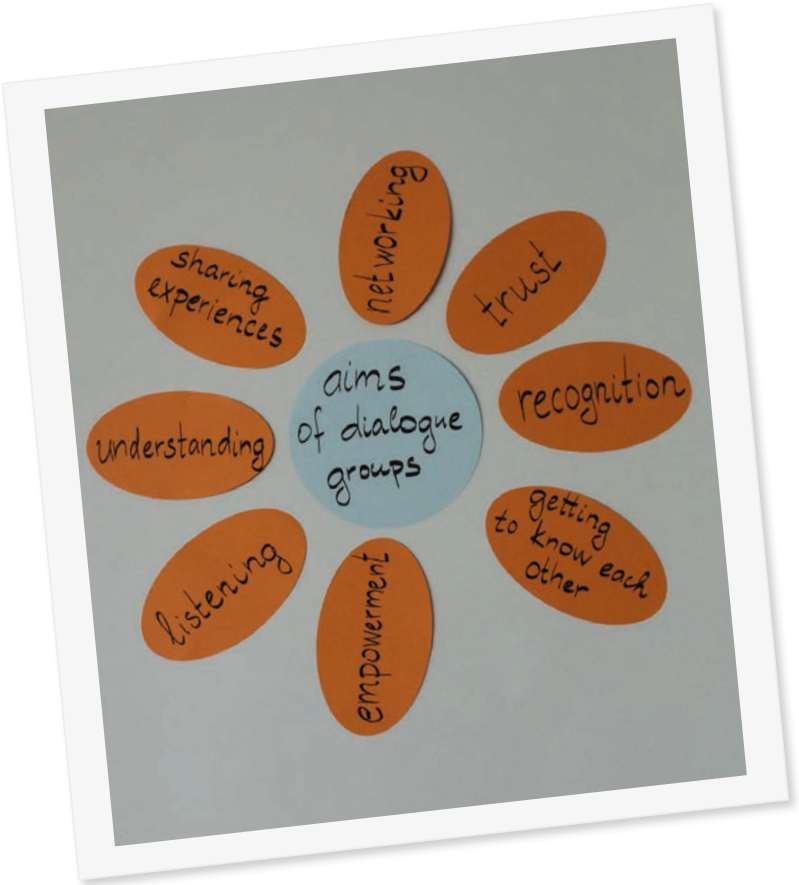
The following describes what dialogue groups aim to achieve.

Sharing experiences

Dialogue groups are primarily spaces in which participants can express their experiences, feelings, thoughts and views and share them with others. It involves the participants providing contributions that are not judged by others. This is confirmed by the participants' experiences:

"That was a very intensive round and I learned a lot." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

"Everyone spoke openly and personally about their experiences."
(A mother from Berlin.)



Listening

Dialogue groups rely on people listening to each other. People who are willing to express themselves should certainly be able to expect that they will actually be listened to. As such, the other participants need to focus their attention on the person who is speaking, express empathy with them, and resist the impulse to react immediately or to indulge in speaking about their thoughts about what has been said. Taking a step back can prove challenging to many people. However, it can also relieve the pressure to respond as the participants are initially only expected to focus on listening. This enables people to perceive what they are hearing better and to let it soak in, instead of preparing the right answers immediately:

> *"Holding myself back, not reacting immediately, letting go. These were new experiences for me."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

> *"You don't have to react to direct questions immediately; in the beginning, it's just about listening."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Understanding

When the participants in a dialogue group listen attentively and are able to express themselves authentically, they begin to develop empathy for one another and become more open to other people's views. The understanding of other people's perspectives that this leads to broadens the participants' horizons as it provides them and the group with new experiences:

> *"I learned a lot about the background of one particular family. We often judge parents and pretend that we know better. But we don't always know a family's motives."*
> *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"Actually, I was quite nervous about coming here. I wondered whether my German would be good enough: 'How would the other people react, if I say something wrong?' But I really liked the rounds. We were able to express ourselves very well. People listened and understood each other."* *(A mother from Hamburg.)*

Getting to know each other

The participants in dialogue groups do not necessarily know each other particularly well. This also applies to parents from early years centres who often have very little direct contact with one another. Dialogue groups provide people with the chance to get to know other parents better and to develop closer a relationship:

"We don't really know each other so well, so I thought it was really nice that everyone was able to talk about themselves and about their experiences." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

"You get to know the other parents much better." *(A mother from Hamburg.)*

Trust

Dialogue groups provide trusted spaces. It is not always possible to expect that everyone will have the confidence to open up and speak about their personal feelings at the beginning of a round. However, trust grows when people experience that they are accepted and valued as they are. Moreover, trust in the group grows when participants express themselves with the intention of making themselves understood and listen to other people in order to understand their views:

"Well, I felt a bit nervous about speaking in front of other people. I had a strange feeling about it at first. But I thought it was brilliant—especially to hear about how the other parents felt, and their views. I thought that was really interesting."
(A father from Hamburg.)

"We generally have good relationships with the parents, but this took things to a completely different level." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Recognition

Recognition develops out of a culture of conversation that emphasises the perception of each other's views and understanding. A culture of recognition is characterised by the fact that everyone is provided with the space to express themselves, and that they develop the realisation that they are being heard by other people. Accepting a person's point of view as it is does not mean agreeing with them. However, it should be clear that everyone can remain part of the group, even if the things they say do not appeal to others or even if they lead to disagreement (see 'Stoppages to the dialogue group', p. 109). Dialogue is impossible without mutual recognition and appreciation:

"Everyone was accepted as they are." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

"Everyone has different views, but they all make you think." *(A mother from Hamburg.)*

Empowerment

Dialogue groups empower individuals by providing everyone with the experience of all that it entails to belong to a group. When they experience trust, participants practise expressing their views and developing capacities that they can later apply in other situations. This strengthens their abilities to represent themselves and their own interests:

> *"I got to know other day structures and worked out how I could implement them myself."* *(A mother from Berlin.)*

Networking

Dialogue groups provide the participants with the feeling that they are not alone—even with their problems and worries. Regular group meetings enable new contacts to be made and in some cases new friendships may even develop:

> *"You realise that you are not alone with certain things."* *(A mother from Berlin.)*

> *"It was really nice, especially because I haven't got any friends with children. So that was one of the first rounds in which I began to share experiences with other parents."* *(A mother from Hamburg.)*

In order to distinguish dialogue groups from other forms of conversing, it can be helpful to demonstrate the limits of dialogue groups and what they cannot achieve. Dialogue groups are not about presenting knowledge in the form of a lecture, nor are they about 'teaching' other people. At the same time, dialogue groups do not focus on gaining results: the participants do not make decisions during dialogue rounds or search for solutions—the results remain open. This enables participants to focus on their own thoughts and to put in the necessary effort to understand other people's views:

> *"I was allowed to think aloud because the dialogue group was not focused on getting a result."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"I was totally calm and relaxed during the dialogue group, although I wouldn't usually be. Normally, I'm nervous because we always need to have a result at the end of the discussion."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

How are dialogue groups organised?

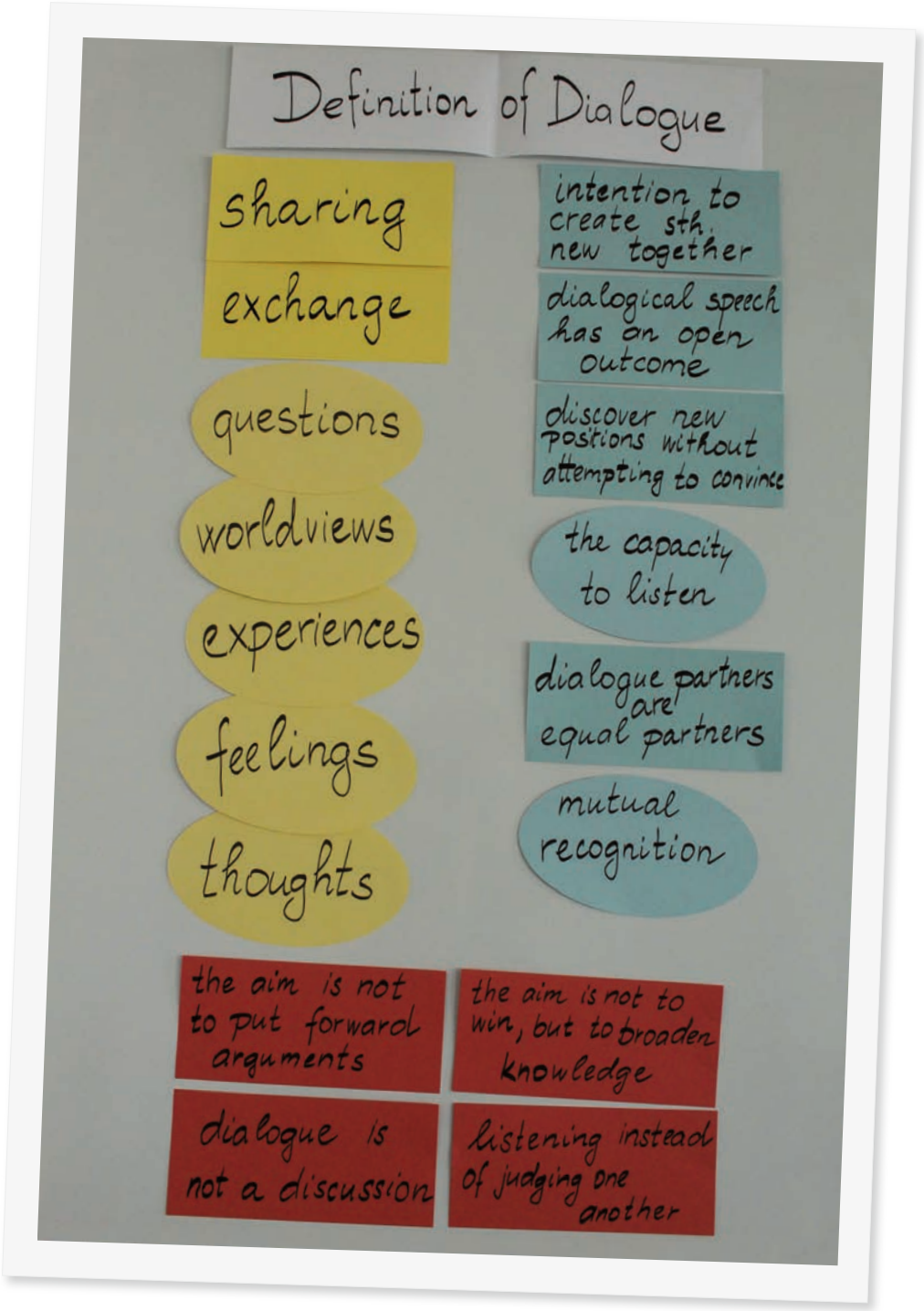
An introduction to dialogue groups

Dialogue groups can be used in many ways in early years centres and can be conducted with parents, teams of practitioners or children. The participants sit in a circle. The person who facilitates the round uses index cards to demonstrate the form of dialogue that underpins the round, and what the round involves (see also, 'Defining Dialogue', p. 12 f.). The details that will have to be explained about the principles of the dialogue depend on the participants who are taking part.

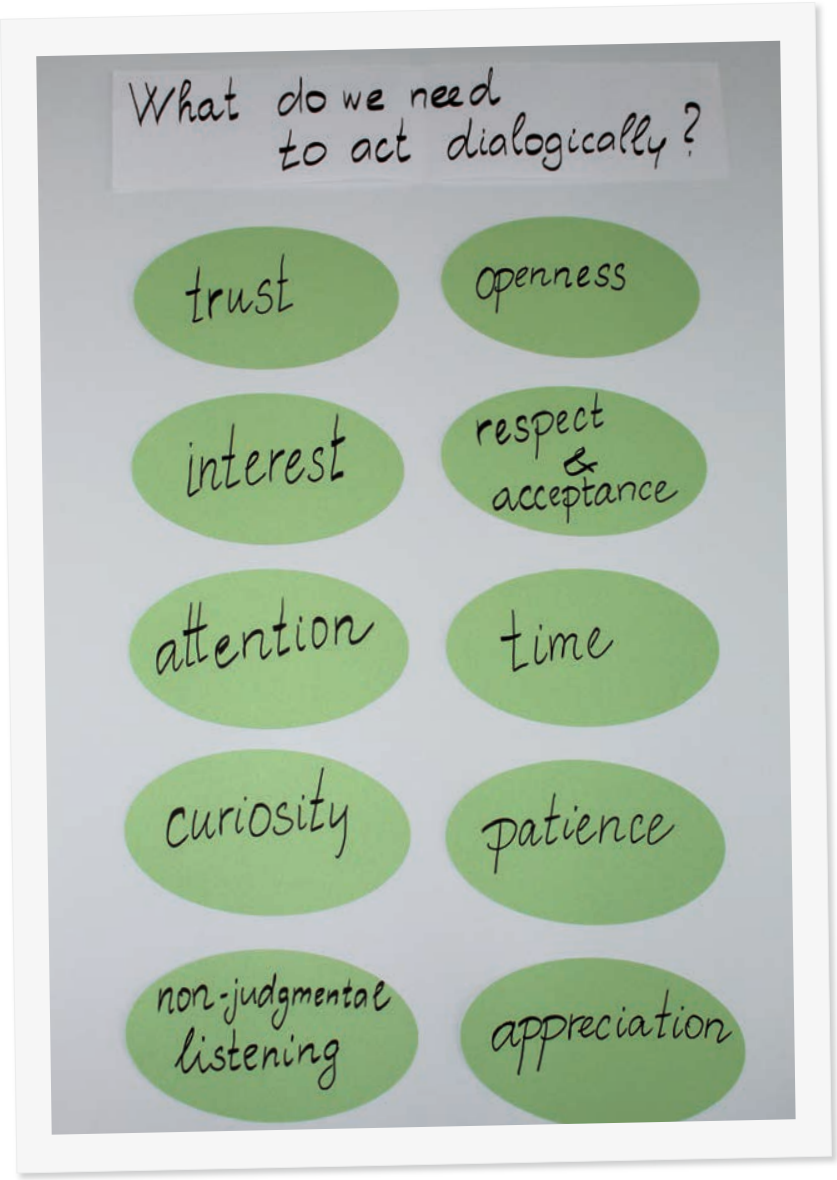
The individual terms are explained and everyone is provided with an opportunity to ask questions. This is particularly necessary when a dialogue group is conducted with practitioners. It is important that the people who, in future, will be facilitating dialogue rounds themselves also uphold these principles. In contrast, it may not make sense to introduce all of the terms in the same detail to a group of parents (see 'Introducing the principles of dialogue', p. 115).

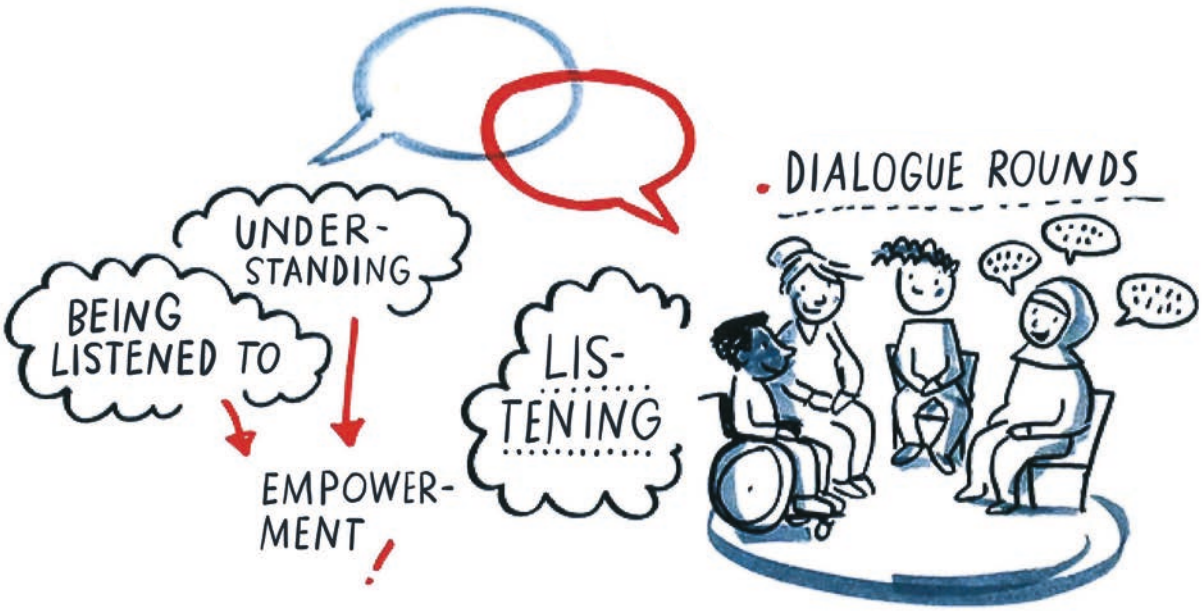
The facilitator points out that the participants should always focus their attention on the person who is speaking. It is important to make the variety of perspectives, experiences and feelings visible and audible. Moreover, listening and exploring are essential aspects of a dialogue round: What are my reactions to a particular statement? What emerges? Where do I feel resonance, what do I struggle with? Experience shows that most people are very focused on getting results; this makes it all the more important to underline the openness of the dialogue over and over again.

In the actual dialogue rounds, a 'talking piece'—(such as a stone or a ball)—is circulated around the group by the participants. The person holding the talking piece is allowed to speak about the topic or the question, describe the experiences they associate with it, or what they are currently feeling. The person speaks for themself. When someone has finished speaking, they hand the talking piece to the person sitting next to them. The next person can now speak, but does not have to and can simply pass on the talking piece to the next in turn: participation in the dialogue round is always voluntary. Moreover, there are many ways of participating in the circle—through listening as well as speaking. Since the experience of 'being heard' is crucial to dialogue rounds, the value of someone 'merely' listening should not be underestimated. The talking piece needs to be passed on to each person in the round. This makes it clear that everyone can speak and that they belong to the round, even if they do not want to participate by speaking. The talking piece will probably pass around several times, which means that everyone will have the opportunity to continue speaking or to say something in the next round.


Definition of Dialogue
sharing
exchange
questions
worldviews
experiences
feelings
thoughts
intention to create sth. new together
dialogical speech has an open outcome
discover new positions without attempting to convince
the capacity to listen
dialogue partners are equal partners
mutual recognition
the aim is not to put forward arguments
the aim is not to win, but to broaden knowledge
dialogue is not a discussion
listening instead of judging one another

The participants can be inspired by the impulses provided at the beginning of the round (such as reading out a quote) and the things that other participants are saying. The aim is not to conduct speeches that have been thought out in advance, but for participants to let their thoughts develop during the round and to express themselves. Everyone speaks for themselves; not about other people; and the aim is not to argue a case but rather to 'think out loud'. Dialogue rounds provide a space in which everyone's views are present and everyone is perceptible in their own uniqueness. And everything that someone says forms part of the group process through which something common and new arises.





If participants have very little experience with dialogue groups, it is always a good idea to introduce the rules governing the dialogue group and, if necessary, to use visual formats to do so:

Rules for dialogue groups

- The person holding the talking piece is the only one who is allowed to speak.
- Everyone else should listen to what is being said. They should focus their attention on the person speaking.
- The person holding the talking piece can speak but does not have to.
- Everyone speaks for themselves and not about anyone else.
- It is possible to leave the room during the dialogue round.
- The participants can expect to be supported by the facilitator.
- Dialogue groups are trusted spaces. Personal information should not leave the room.

Implementing dialogue groups

The facilitator provides an impulse to start the round. This could be in the form of a question, a picture, a quote, a story or even a film (see 'Getting started', p. 115-118). The facilitator then picks up the talking piece and, in the case of a quote, asks the question: 'Now that you have heard the quote, what did it make you think about? How did it make you feel?' The facilitator then passes the talking piece on to the person sitting next to them. The participants express their thoughts one after another or pass on the talking piece without speaking if they do not want to say anything at the moment. The facilitator also participates in the dialogue round and provides their own contributions to the conversation.

The talking piece continues to be passed around the circle until no-one wants to say anything more about the issue. It is often clear that this point has been reached when more and more participants simply pass on the talking piece without speaking. If the facilitator feels that everything has already been said, the allocated time is over, or the participants seem tired, the facilitator should say: 'I feel like we are coming to the end of the round. I'll pass the talking piece around one more time; anyone who wants to say something more can do so; otherwise please pass the stick on.' When the talking piece has been returned, the facilitator finishes the round and places it in the centre of the circle.

It is important for the facilitator to follow the principles of dialogue and to internalise and exemplify the rules that apply to the dialogue group. Facilitators are also part of the group. They also contribute by providing their opinions, expressing their emotions, and explaining their experiences. Facilitators should remain authentic and true to themselves, and they will come across as credible when their feelings and thoughts correspond with what they are saying. It can be difficult to take on both roles at first. However, it is important that facilitators learn to separate these roles, and to act both as a facilitator and a participant.

The facilitator's role:

- Provide the participants with direction and a feeling of security:
  - Ensure that everyone involved follows the proposed course of action.
  - Ensure that the participants show appreciation and consideration of each other when speaking.
  - Ensure that no one expresses views that others might find hurtful.
  - Intervene supportively.
- Consider in advance how to start and end the dialogue group.
- Briefly and succinctly describe the rules and assure people that they will be supported if other people break the rules.
- Keeps to the rules and to the time that has been allocated.

Stoppages to the dialogue group

Each dialogue group is different, and when disruptions occur it is sometimes better to take a break and stop the round. These situations are very rare, but people who have little experience in facilitating dialogue groups are sometimes unsure how to deal with them. The following, therefore, provides a number of suggestions on how facilitators can respond to situations that disrupt dialogue groups.

What can we do if a person leaves the group?

It is possible that a person might leave the group or the room for a moment or even for the rest of the dialogue rounds. This need not be viewed as a cause for concern. It is possible that the person cannot remain seated for a long time or they may just be tired after having listened to other people speaking for a while. However, sometimes participants find it difficult to deal with certain things that they might hear during a dialogue round. It is worth explaining during the introduction that the participants have the opportunity to leave the dialogue group whenever they choose to, as this helps ensure that the participants do not feel uncomfortable or do not feel unclear about whether it is even possible to leave the group.

If a facilitator believes a participant has left the group because they feel uncomfortable, they can stop the dialogue round in order to provide the person with support or to ask someone they trust to do so.

What happens if participants do not follow the rules?

If someone talks too long or says something hurtful, facilitators can intervene and pause the dialogue group. One way of avoiding situations such as these is to spend time explaining the principles and rules at the beginning. Participants need to recognise that people use diverse ways of expressing themselves. Some people express themselves very briefly and succinctly, others do not want to say much about a particular topic, others still express themselves rather verbosely and supplement their contribution with examples.

However, if facilitators feel that someone is taking up more time and space with their speech than other participants are comfortable with, they can address this at the meta level when the talking piece has been returned. There are two options here. Facilitators can state that: ‘I have the feeling that the group becomes impatient when people speak for a long time. I would like to ask you all to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to express themselves in the time available to us today.’ Or—and we recommend this option—facilitators can ask for feedback from the participants by stating: ‘I feel that the

group becomes impatient when people speak for a long time. Does anyone else feel the same way?' A good understanding of how people communicate is clearly an important part of facilitating a dialogue group.

Another breach of the rule could occur if one person says something harmful to another participant. In some cases, this could be the signal to pause the round and to address the situation immediately: 'I would like to pause the round now because I have the impression that someone may have been hurt by what was just said. I'll like to pass the stick around and find out what you think about this matter.' The facilitator points out here that their role is to protect all participants in the dialogue group. Once the talking piece has been passed around and the question answered, the group can continue speaking about the original topic. However, the intervention may lead the topic to move in a new direction. This, too, is part of the process and can lead to a deeper understanding among those involved in the dialogue group. The form of the intervention always depends on the level of urgency required to protect the person involved.

Experiences from the training and pedagogical practice

How do dialogue groups come about and how are they carried out?

The practitioners from the training sessions have conducted dialogue rounds in their teams, with parents, and, in some cases, with children. The following focuses on dialogue rounds with parents and the experiences gained in establishing a dialogue group.

It makes sense to be clear during preparations which parents you intend to reach with a dialogue group and which existing resources can be used to do so. It is particularly worthwhile establishing a dialogue group if you plan to make this more than just a one-off event with parents and, instead, intend to build long-term trusting relationships with parents, and especially with those whose children have recently joined the centre. This may lead to a process in which the way practitioners work with parents is fundamentally reconsidered.

Which parents should be invited?

The participants from the training sessions describe various experiences and strategies related to how they approached parents about forming a dialogue group. The experiences demonstrate that different criteria may be applied when choosing which parents to invite, especially when practitioners do not have much experience in facilitating dialogue groups. Aspects such as the level of trust that practitioners have with particular parents or how well they can communicate verbally can provide a basis for this decision. However, it is still important to provide transparency about the criteria used in order to ensure that parents do not feel excluded if the practitioners only invite a small number to the dialogue group.

A team in one early years centre started a dialogue group by outlining 'Creating dialogue' and presenting the idea of dialogue groups to the parents' representatives. The parents' representatives were interested in the idea and passed the information on to the other parents, some of whom stated that they would like to participate in the group. Similarly, a different team in another early years centre invited the parents' representatives—with whom they already have good relations—to a dialogue group. The practitioners described their choices in the following manner:

"We first focused on the parents that we already work with. We deliberately got the parents' representatives involved so that they could pass the idea on. That was our intention. We wanted to have them on board first. They were the parents' representatives who are most involved in the centre, and mainly parents who spoke German, but parents with various nationalities and ethnicities were present too."
(A practitioner from Berlin.)

Another centre already had a 'parents' café', which enabled parents to meet once a month in the early years centre to keep in touch with other parents. The practitioners decided to use the café to speak to the parents. Cooperation with the neighbouring family centre has also proven to be successful. The approach was presented by the staff of the neighbouring family centre, where parents meet for a family breakfast.

It is perfectly justifiable to focus initially on contacting parents with whom good contact already exists. Dialogue groups with these parents can provide good practice before turning to parents with whom the practitioners would like to develop closer relations. It is important that practitioners do not become overburdened by this new experience and to start by taking small steps—otherwise, people may lose interest in working in this manner.

How can we approach the issue of different languages?

Many of the participants wonder how they should approach the issue of different languages in dialogue groups. This often leads to a decision only to invite parents who speak and understand German for the initial dialogue group, so that interpreters are not needed. At the same time—depending on the situation in the early years centre—different strategies have been developed to involve parents who cannot (as yet) express themselves fluently in German. One early years centre specifically invited a multilingual practitioner who was to act as an interpreter for Turkish-speaking parents in the future:

"We asked one of the practitioners who speaks Turkish to attend this time because next time we really want to conduct a round that includes the Turkish-speaking parents. But then she'll be interpreting for the parents. So she needs to understand the system, and how a group like this is run. So we asked her to take part this time."
(A practitioner from Berlin.)

Another early years centre began a dialogue round after the 'family breakfast'. Part of the group culture during such breakfasts involved parents helping each other with language. However, languages that are neither spoken by the team nor by other parents pose a great challenge. In these cases, it can make sense to engage the services of a linguist or interpreter (see 'Language(s)').

If someone from the centre is asked to take on the role of interpreter (a practitioner or parent), it is important to define their role in advance (see 'Language(s)'). For example, it is usually quite difficult to reconcile the roles of being a mother and an interpreter during a dialogue round. Simultaneous interpretation into several languages should also be well thought through so as to ensure that the situation does not get out of hand. It is important to ensure that, when interpreting is used, all languages receive the same level of recognition and space. Whisper interpreting, therefore, is not recommended, as it can disturb dialogue rounds and does not provide the speakers with an appropriate level of recognition. Experience shows that parents who are otherwise too shy to speak German in a large group develop the confidence to speak during dialogue rounds. One mother stated that she was ashamed of herself because her German language skills were not perfect, and, therefore, she had never attempted to speak with the practitioners in the early years centre. The discussion round helped her realise that she could indeed communicate and be listened to.

Invitation to the dialogue group

The invitations to the parents should convey the fact that the practitioners are genuinely interested in meeting them. Speaking individually with the parents has worked well in all facilities. A notice can serve as a reminder but should not replace personal contact. One team developed a more creative format:

> *"We were wondering how to invite the parents. And because we had chosen the topic 'movement', we made a football out of paper and used it as an invitation. When we presented it to each of the parents, explained things briefly and it came over really well. All of the parents came to the group."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

The practitioners realised that it would be essential to provide childcare (including for siblings) if the dialogue group were to be able to take place:

> *"It was important for the parents in our centre to know that their children were being cared for—and this includes their other children. Doing so meant that the first hurdle that might have stopped them from taking part had already been overcome—otherwise they would have just said that they can't take part because 'Who's going to take care of the children?' We told the parents that childcare was available when we invited them."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

It is important to remind the parents about the upcoming dialogue group before it takes place. Instead of blaming parents, accepting the fact that they may forget appointments with the practitioners due to their daily commitments prevents frustration and also helps to take the burden off practitioners:

"It's not enough to just put up a notice; we really need to speak to the parents individually and provide them with a reminder—on the day before or on the same day. That's what the parents here are like; we know that, so that's what we do."
(A practitioner from Berlin.)

Preparing the room

When selecting and preparing the space, it is important to create an atmosphere in which the facilitator also feels comfortable. Taking care of the facilitator's needs provides a foundation for being able to pay close attention to the needs of others. In the training course, the practitioners come to understand that the layout of the room constitutes an important aspect of establishing a dialogue group. The practitioners often decide to arrange the seating in a circle, and to ensure that the middle of the circle is welcoming. It is a good idea to offer drinks and snacks on an extra table. Sometimes practitioners decide to have the participants sit at tables.

A flipchart can be used to draw up a plan that provides the participants with guidance. Practitioners have had useful experiences with groups of up to ten; often six to seven parents and three to four practitioners are involved in dialogue rounds in early years centres. However, it can also be useful to use the dialogical approach to share experiences with 'just' one mother or a father. Whether parents and practitioners can be open as part of a dialogue always depends on the context. It is very important to select a room where no disturbances are expected for the duration of the group as this helps develop the necessary level of trust and provides the participants with a sense of security.

Introducing the principles of dialogue

Before starting the dialogue round, it is important to set out the principles of dialogue and the rules that are to be applied in the round. Experience shows that parents need guidance. However, too much input, which the participants may consider as overly theoretical, can lead them to limit their level of participation. Early years centres have had different experiences with these issues:

> *"I explained the rules to the parents first, as we did in the training, with the flipchart and all that. But it didn't come across very well. I think I'll just announce them next time and only very briefly."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"We limited ourselves to three cards, which we put on the table in the middle: openness, listening to each other, respecting each other—that was enough."*
> *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Getting started

During the training sessions, the participants discuss and try out the various ways in which dialogue rounds can be started. This includes providing an introduction to the topic and encouraging participants to share their experiences. The aim is to ensure that everyone feels able to share their thoughts with the group.

Statements by parents

Selected excerpts from the group discussions with parents from the CCB and the CD study can be used to provide inspiration (see Annex 2).

Children's books

The training sessions use children's books about specific topics.[35] A book can be read out before the facilitator starts the round.

Photos

Photos about a specific topic are also well-suited to initiating a dialogue round. The participants from the training session have had good experiences with the following examples.

35 See, for example, the children's book recommended by Fachstelle Kinderwelten: https://situationsansatz.de/vorurteilsbewusste-kinderbuecher.html or a source for English language literature https://socialjusticebooks.org/.

Joint activities

A joint activity can be offered right at the beginning. One early years centre chose two games to open a dialogue round:

> *"We got together and because we had chosen the subject of 'movement', we started asking each other: 'How do we want to begin, how do we want to get started?' Well, we agreed to start with two games, that was our idea, and then we thought up two questions and asked them to the parents."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

A game in which the participants portray three different characters helps to ensure that everyone comes into contact with one another. Another game in which the participants construct a statue in groups of two out of natural materials demonstrates the pedagogical principles behind the early years centre. These approaches were very well received by all of the participants:

> *"The mixer game makes it easy to get in contact with each other. It was also very important to us that the parents also get in touch with each other a bit. We all had fun and laughed a lot. In the second game, two participants use newspaper to transport natural materials to the other side of the room and then build something out of them. The parents really got involved and so did we. The parents got together and soon started the activity; it was so much fun that they didn't want to stop. They wanted to keep on building."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Having breakfast together also constitutes a good joint activity, as a practitioner describes in the following:

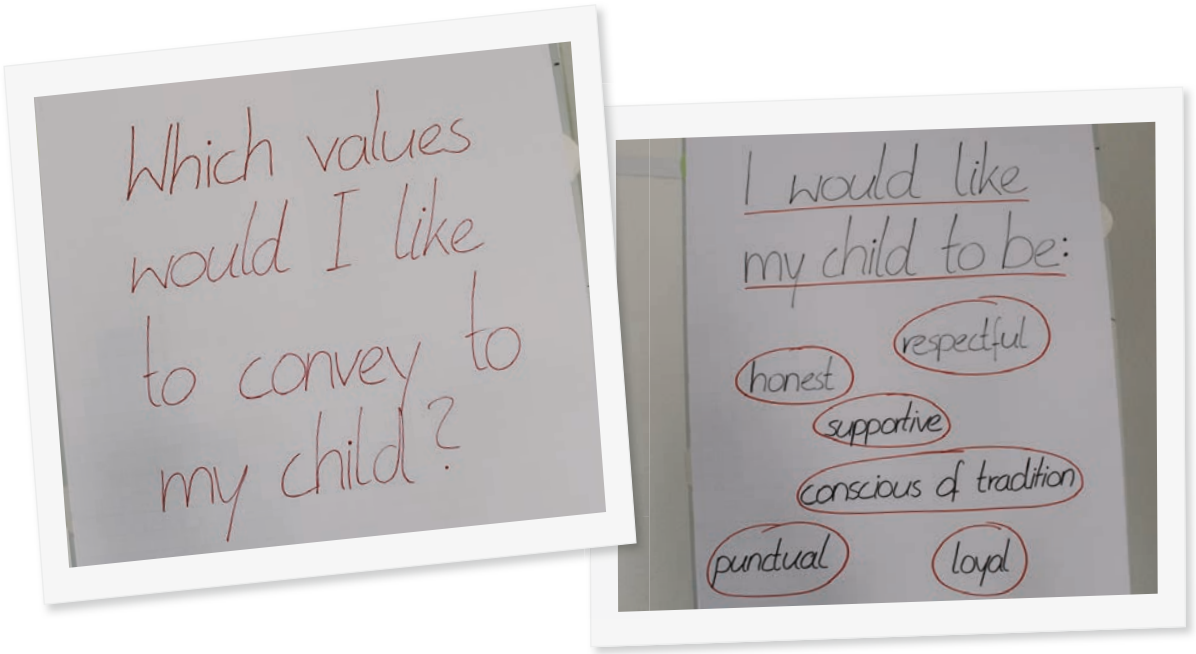
> *"We started in a really relaxed way—with breakfast, as usual. We have also joined them for breakfast in the past. This time though, I talked a bit about the dialogue round, but did so really quite casually, and explained that we were really happy that we would be able to do it with them. But we said to ourselves at the beginning, 'breakfast is here in this room, and we'll change rooms later', so we prepared ourselves beforehand."*
> *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

A dialogue round can begin with a small task. For example, one group of practitioners decided to begin a dialogue group on the subject of 'Our children's nutrition' by placing different foodstuffs on a table and asking everyone to take something that they associated with the topic. The practitioners at another early years centre chose the subject 'What shaped me in my childhood and what do I want to pass on to my children?' They placed different objects on the floor that people might associate with their childhood:

"We set them the initial task of selecting an object from the middle, the creative middle that reminded them about their childhood. When everyone had an object, we started sending the talking piece around the group, so that everyone could explain why they chose what they did and what they associated with it. That's how we introduced our general topic, 'What shaped me in my childhood?'" *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

A question

A dialogue round can also be introduced with a question.



Starting a round with a talking piece

For practitioners and parents alike, the use of a talking piece (or other object) that is passed from person to person is generally a new, previously unknown form of directing a conversation. However, experience shows that the method can be practised well.

"It worked quite well with the stone. We had to get used to it, as did the parents. At first, they spoke when other people were speaking, but then we said, 'Only speak when you are holding the stone.' Once everyone had practised a bit, it worked."
(A practitioner from Berlin.)

"At first, the parents found it strange to hold a stone, and only being allowed to speak when they had it. But I have to say that later it became really natural. And if someone didn't want to speak, they just passed the stone on to the next person. That was fine."
(A practitioner from Berlin.)

During the feedback round that often takes place after the dialogue round has finished, parents often explain that the stone provided them with guidance and a feeling of confidence.

"It was good that the stone was used to decide who was allowed to speak and when."
(A mother from Berlin.)

"Everyone could say something without being interrupted." *(A mother from Hamburg.)*

The practitioners noticed that rounds that use 'talking pieces' provide everyone within the group with recognition and encouraged all of the participants to express themselves, something that they would not necessarily do by themselves in everyday life.

"There were two parents who didn't take part in the first round. I didn't really expect them to come at all because they don't speak German very well. They didn't speak during the first round but they did during the second one. They probably would not have spoken at all if we hadn't used this method." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

How can you deal with worrying remarks?

In the training sessions, participants learn how to respond to statements that suggest that a child's wellbeing may be at risk. For example, practitioners would be alarmed if a child's caregiver were to maintain that 'Slapping doesn't harm my child'. Moreover, they would have to intervene in order to protect the rights of the child. Practitioners have a statutory duty to protect children's wellbeing. At the same time, however, dialogue rounds are to provide a place of trust, and this should never be called into question. When discussing this problem in the training sessions, the participants generally come up with a variety of ideas.

It is very important for the facilitator to adopt a clear position by stating, 'When I hear that, it makes me feel uncomfortable. I am convinced that children should never be hit.' In cases such as these, it is also important for the other parents that the facilitator represents these values. Practitioners should be aware of their role in such situations and be clear about their goals. Intervening should not involve attempts to shame the parents, but to encourage them to look for nonviolent solutions: 'I can understand what you are saying because I am confronted by situations with the children that overwhelm me. In such situations, I try to get someone else to take over, or I even leave the room before the situation escalates.'

The action taken depends on how severely the child's wellbeing may be at risk. It might make sense to speak with the person right after the dialogue round—to thank them for their openness and trust. Showing understanding does not automatically mean agreement, but it prevents the person from feeling as if they are being judged by others. At the same time, it may be important to signal that their behaviour is unlawful and could have consequences. Does the family need immediate help? How can the early years centre as an institution support the family or provide them with information about people who can help? The practitioner should make it clear that they will continue to observe the situation and must inform the youth welfare office in cases of suspected maltreatment.

How much should facilitators reveal about themselves?

One of the questions that frequently crops up in training sessions is how much facilitators should reveal about themselves, how much they should say about their private life during the round. It is important that everyone thinks in advance about which aspects of their private life that they feel comfortable sharing and where they place the limit. Everyone should be comfortable with what they are saying in the round, and everyone places different limits as to what they are happy about saying. Nevertheless, experience shows that opening up and providing personal information can help place practitioners and parents on an equal footing:

> *"The point where we started speaking about our childhood was when the parents gradually began to open up. Dialogue rounds provide another setting. I'm normally present as the centre's principal, which is why I don't reveal anything about my childhood, where I spent it and so on. But doing so somehow enabled the parents to speak openly as well. And they also noticed how relaxed they were."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

> *"I didn't find it difficult to talk about private matters. But I also considered what I would say—as a practitioner—before the round took place. I decided what I could I tell the parents and would I prefer to keep to myself. In retrospect, this led us all to feel a bit closer somehow. There were a lot of things that I didn't know about the parents before."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Closing the round

It makes sense to set a time limit for dialogue groups, because it provides the participants with direction. The group can be brought to end smoothly, without causing an abrupt interruption:

> *"We had a final round. I introduced it by saying 'Before we say goodbye, we would like to know how you felt during the group and what you thought about it.'" (A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

In rounds that include a team of facilitators, it can be helpful if the team coordinate in advance and for one person to take responsibility for timekeeping. This enables the others to relax and for the last round to be started on time.

In retrospect—evaluation and reflection

It is important for practitioners and parents to think briefly about what they experienced after a dialogue round has finished. A feedback form for parents (see Annex 3) has proven an effective way to do so, as it allows parents to provide anonymous feedback. Feedback from parents is very helpful as it provides practitioners with an idea of how to shape future dialogue groups and about the topics that parents are particularly interested in. It is worth ensuring that the parents complete the feedback form immediately after the dialogue round. It takes about five minutes to do so and people still have a clear picture of their experience. There is a risk that only a few of the feedback forms will be returned if they are taken home. However, it is important to stress that completing the form is voluntary. If someone does not want to comment on the dialogue group in writing, they should not have to.

It is also important that the practitioners reflect on their experience. The reflection form for practitioners helps in this respect (see Annex 4). It is best to fill out the form soon after the dialogue round has finished when experiences are still fresh. The form can help ensure that the knowledge gained in the round is applied in the centre. Practitioners can use the forms to help them plan the next round. However, they can also be used to share impressions and insights, which is important because different people may perceive the same situations very differently.

How often should dialogue groups take place?

During the training sessions, the question often arises as to how regularly dialogue groups should take place in early years centres. This answer depends on the centre's

structure and capacities. However, people's views and motivation also play a major role in this decision. If the feedback from parents is positive, the practitioners will be encouraged to offer more rounds:

> *"We are definitely going to continue the rounds, because, I have to say, it's fun working in this group. But we'll just have to wait and see whether we offer it monthly or only every two months or so."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Including regular dialogue rounds as part of the yearly schedule has proven useful in some early years centres, as has ensuring that enough time is allocated for preparation and post-processing:

> *"I associate dialogue rounds with developing a structure in which these rounds can take place; we make sure we set enough time aside to prepare for them and for follow-ups. And then we all know that this time will be made available to do so."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

> *"We actually have a relatively rigid structure and view of how these groups should be conducted, at least in terms of the timetable. For example, we make sure that each dialogue group aims to conduct a dialogue round at least twice a year. This means that a dialogue round takes place in the centre every month. This is what should happen as an absolute minimum."* *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

The impact of dialogue groups on cooperation with parents

Dialogue rounds with parents in early years centres also have an impact on everyday life in the centre and on relationships with parents. The practitioners note that contact and everyday communication between them and the parents changes after dialogue groups have taken place:

> *"And I think you also build up a completely different relationship with the parents. In retrospect, you realise that the parents seem to look at you a bit differently, that they are friendlier and want to talk more. Whereas before—obviously, we greeted each other, we knew who we all were—but I think this personal aspect is something really special."* *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Practitioners also find that dialogue groups have an impact on existing structures in early years centres in terms of their work with parents:

"We considered the extent to which the work with parents could be restructured and asked ourselves whether the approach that we had been using actually made sense." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

"I don't view dialogue rounds as something additional, but as something that belongs to work with the parents. And I intend to keep viewing it like that. This is what work with parents means to me." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

The practitioners realise that the investment that this kind of work entails is worthwhile. Positive feedback from the parents can serve as a strong motivating factor for practitioners:

"I spent a lot of time and energy on the whole thing at the beginning, but I realised a lot of positive things are happening. I was getting something back, and that makes it easier, and it eventually just seems natural to do all of this." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

Dialogue groups can also encourage reflection about our own attitudes. The parents' views of the actions and activities undertaken by the practitioners reflect the practitioners' perceptions of the parents:

"Finding out about how parents think about this issue and just how much they think about their children in these contexts was new to me. It is surprising how quickly you can end up in a situation with the parents where someone is providing instructions, presumably with good intentions. But the way that they are conveyed to the parents, and the ways that these situations are perceived by the parents can really be astonishing." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

As dialogue groups can also help promote the development of specific educational approaches, it is important to ensure that the experiences gained from dialogue rounds are applied in practice:

"I also noticed that there's a lot that I don't really know. One mother said that she cried at home because she did not know about white bread (that white bread was unhealthy). White bread was not permitted in another early years centre. This is when the point arrives at which I say that I don't want to put pressure on the parents and that, instead, I want to take the pressure off them." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

"It is important to talk about nutrition, to provide the parents with inspiration and to think about it sometimes. And, as a practitioner, it is important to think about how

I can work on the topic of nutrition with the children and, ultimately, with the parents. Perhaps as part of a project." *(A practitioner from Berlin.)*

Feedback from parents

The feedback provided by parents after a dialogue round is particularly important. On the one hand, it is usually clear from the chats that take place after the rounds whether the parents felt comfortable. Some dialogue rounds include a feedback round in which the facilitator asks for direct feedback at the end. Experience shows that despite initial scepticism and fears of negative experiences, the parents normally speak highly about the dialogue rounds. Their statements usually reflect the intentions behind the rounds such as sharing experiences, listening, understanding, getting to know each other, providing each other with recognition, and trust and empowerment (see 'Understanding Dialogue Groups', pp. 99-103):

"We got on well right from the beginning and we all felt comfortable very quickly, even though we were all a bit sceptical in the beginning." *(A practitioner from Hamburg.)*

The evaluation forms that have been returned until now clearly demonstrate that dialogue rounds have really helped people to share experiences. The evaluation forms show that the parents feel comfortable in dialogue groups, that they understand the process, that they feel able to participate and that their contributions are understood by others. When asked what they liked most, some say that they most appreciate the open, laid-back and quiet atmosphere found in dialogue groups. In addition, many mention that they like the way that dialogue rounds are run—using a talking stick:

"I liked the procedure, as it meant that everyone could speak, one after the other."
(A mother from Hamburg.)

"It was good that we were not able to ask questions when the others were speaking."
(A mother from Berlin.)

Exercise 7: Dialogue carousel

Introduction

Dialogue carousels can be used as introductory exercises for dialogue groups. They enable participants to come into contact with one another and to share experiences about a particular topic informally. Dialogue carousels also help people to practice listening to each other and refraining from making comments; these are essential skills for dialogue rounds.

Focus

- Coming into contact with each other
- Introducing the day/the topic
- Consciously perceiving ourselves and other people
- Listening

Materials and preparation

- A room without chairs (or the chairs are placed along the walls)

Time

- 15 minutes

Procedure

The facilitator invites the participants to stand up and form two circles—an inner and an outer circle—so that there are always two people facing each other. The facilitator then reads out the first question and asks the people standing in the inner circle to answer it; before asking the people in the outer circle to listen to what is being said without commenting. After about a minute the facilitator provides a signal for the roles to be reversed. The people in the outer circle are now asked to speak, with those in the inner circle listening. After another minute the facilitator provides a further signal. The people in the inner circle take a step to the right so that they can speak with a new person. The facilitator now asks a further question and repeats the process. This can be done a number of times with different questions.

Possible questions:

- Describe a recent experience with the parents that you particularly liked.
- Who have you been able to talk well with recently and about what?
- What have you laughed sincerely about recently and when?
- What are you looking forward to when you think about today?

Literature and further reading

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Annex

Annex 1: Abbreviations and the rules applied during transcription

The following rules and abbreviations are based on Dresing and Pehl (2018) and Kuckartz (2010). They are used in the transcriptions provided above.

- Int: = Interviewer
- PR: = Practitioner
- M: = Mother
- F: = Father
- Trans: = Interpreter
- The language and punctuation used have been adapted to reflect written language.
- Expressions demonstrating agreement or corroboration by the interviewers (mhh, aha, etc.) have not been not transcribed unless they interrupt the flow of the interviewee.
- Numbers are written out in full.
- [] = Comments by the person who made the transcription.
- (...) = An omission by the person who made the transcription.
- (3) = Pauses of three seconds or longer are noted in parentheses.
- ((laughs)) = Nonverbal activities and statements made by the interviewee or interviewer.

Literature

- Dresing, Thorsten and Pehl, Thorsten (2018): Praxisbuch Interview, Transkription und Analyse. Anleitungen und Regelsysteme für qualitativ Forschende. 8th edition, Marburg: Dresing.
- Kuckartz, Udo (2010): Einführung in die computergestützte Analyse qualitativer Daten. 3rd edition, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag. pp. 38-47.

Annex 2: Impulses for dialogue groups: excerpts from the group discussions with parents from the two studies

Section 1: Parents and practitioners sharing their views (CCB study, parents from an early years centre in Berlin, 2007)

F1: "There is too little cooperation between practitioners and parents. Parents are hardly ever informed about their child's behaviour in the early years centre—whether it's good or bad. But parents should also know what's going on. It's important for all parents to know whether their child behaves well or badly in the centre. The parents hardly ever receive any information."

Int: "How do you get into conversation with the practitioners?"

F1: "It happens once or twice a year, as part of a development talk or during a parenting evening, something like that. But they don't really lead to much. You just sit together and drink coffee and speak about positive things, how the child plays and so on. Okay, that's maybe ten per cent of the day or even less. It's important to know how the child behaves in the centre during seven or eight hours. Children do a lot during this time. And if a practitioner isn't happy about something, then they should speak to the parents about how to change the situation. They should tell us 'We would do this or that.' Sometimes it might be too much for the parents to try to change their child's behaviour. If that's the case, then the practitioners could talk to the child's mother and provide her with advice: 'Try doing this or that with your child.' That would be a good idea."

Section 2: Dealing with multilingualism (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Hamburg, 2013)

"My children now have many problems with their mother tongue. My youngest child can't even speak our language anymore. And my eldest—before she went to the centre, she could speak a bit of our language. But since she goes to the centre she has completely forgotten how to speak our mother tongue. And my parents are really, really worried. What should we do with the children? I always try to speak Persian to the children at home and tell them, 'No, at home please speak Persian.'"

Section 3: Dealing with Multilingualism (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Hamburg, 2012)

"Of course we want our children to speak German well because they are growing up here and should be able to solve their own problems and so on. But I also expect them to learn their mother tongue—Dari—well. But it isn't working out like I imagined. It doesn't work. And this leads to discussions, which lead to worries and problems. It's difficult for the children and it's difficult for me. And the bigger and older they get, the more trouble we'll have understanding each other."

Section 4: Providing appreciation of the family's languages (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Hamburg, 2012)

"I think it would be best if there was a practitioner in the centre could speak at least a bit of the children's mother tongue, then the children will at least feel like they are accepted. I want them to realise, okay, my language is also valued. Maybe that would stop the little ones thinking, 'My language doesn't count', because over time they will learn: 'Oh, people are speaking my language here. There is someone from my country who works –' how should I put it, 'not just as a cleaning lady, or who is not just my mother or someone from my country, but—a practitioner—someone who can teach us something.' That would be really important."

Section 5: The image of the child (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Frankfurt am Main, 2013)

"In our centre, my daughter, who is already two and a half, tries to put on her own shoes. She says she is already a big kid, independent, and she wants to learn how to do it herself. I understand this, but sometimes it upsets me as a mother. Because I do this for my children at home until they are five, I put their shoes on. But they let them do it by themselves in the centre when they are two and a half—they put on their own coats and shoes when they go out, for example."

Section 6: Participation (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Hamburg, 2012)

"The children are not forced to take part. They come at 9 o'clock anyway, and breakfast is served until 9:15. They have breakfast and are then provided with little cards so that they can choose what they want to do during the day. They are allowed to decide for themselves. And if the kids, even when they are as small as this, already feel they can decide for themselves, I think that's a lot better than forcing the kids to do something: 'You have to go outside now.' 'You have to go down! You have to go up!' That helps the children to decide what they want to do by themselves, and then they actually do it."

Section 7: Preparation for school (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Frankfurt am Main, 2013)

"When our children ask us questions, such as about language and grammar, my wife and I can't answer these questions. We rely on the early years centre, but what are the kids doing there? They play outside all the time and the practitioners just wait for the kids to be picked up. That's it. But we thought we would send the children to the centre, and that the practitioners would teach them language, the alphabet and so on. Instead, when the children go to school when they are six years old, they can't read, write or do arithmetic; their language level is also very bad. The teachers will just send them back to the early years centre. So I ask myself: 'What did they do for so long—for three years—during their time in the centre?'"

Section 8: Belonging (CD study, a parent from an early years centre in Hamburg, 2012)

"There are many difficulties. I can't say that it is good or bad, but there are customs, rituals that the parents really want to hold on to because they are afraid that their children will eventually lose their roots, for example. It's nice that the children go to school here, hopefully they will study something, and so on, which is what every parent wants. But this makes us worry a lot that we'll lose our children. That's what we are concerned about, that they will turn their backs on us."

Annex 3: Feedback form for parents

Evaluation of the dialogue group in the early years centre—parents

Centre: _____ Date: _____

Dear parents,
We would like to ask you to provide us with your feedback about the dialogue group that took place in your early years centre. Dialogue groups serve to strengthen relations between parents and practitioners and to help them share experiences. Your feedback is anonymous. It will help us to develop appropriate ways of working with parents in your early years centre. Thank you very much for taking part!

Evaluation: Dialogue Group	yes!! +++	yes! ++	yes +	no –	no! ––	no!! –––
The invitation to take part in the dialogue was understandable.						
The topic of the dialogue group was interesting.						
The group's composition was appropriate (parents, practitioners, group size).						
The room and seating were suitable.						
I felt confident during the dialogue group.						
The procedure used in the dialogue group was explained in a manner that I could understand.						

I was able to understand the other parents and practitioners well.						
I was able to participate well.						
The dialogue group was motivating. I learned something new.						
I feel like other people understood my opinion.						
I would like to participate in other dialogue groups in the early years centre.						
I think dialogue groups are a good way of working in partnership with my child's early years centre.						

I particularly liked ...	**I didn't like ...**
I think these topics would be interesting for future next dialogue groups ...	**I'd like ...**

Annex

Annex 4: Feedback form for practitioners

Reflection about dialogue groups in the early years centre

Name: _____ Centre: _____

The dialogue group took place on _____ .

After conducting the dialogue group with parents, please take a moment to answer the following questions. The questions provide for an evaluation of the dialogue group and should help you to record its most important aspects. Please note the things that are applicable to your group, and that are helpful for your further work with dialogue groups.

Preparation of the dialogue group	
Briefly describe how the group was established: Which parents did you invite? How did you contact them? Did anything noteworthy happen when attempting to contact the parents?	
Which topic did you choose for the dialogue group and why?	

The dialogue group's atmosphere	
How did you set up the space used for the group (the setting)?	
Were the parents who came the ones that you were expecting to come? How many people participated in the dialogue group?	
Did you have the impression that the parents felt comfortable? What makes you think that this was the case?	
Procedure	
What role did you play in conducting the dialogue group (facilitator, supporting facilitator, observer) and how did you play out this role?	

What was the work with your colleagues or the interpreter like?	
How did you start the dialogue group (providing inspiration/with a question)? And which methods did you use to implement the dialogue group (a talking piece; openly, with facilitation, creatively)?	
What did you enjoy? What were you pleasantly surprised about? In which areas did you feel that your ideas were confirmed?	
Was there something that unsettled, irritated or annoyed you?	
How did the parents participate in the conversation? Did all of the parents participate? Did some of the participants speak a lot? Did some of the participants say very little or nothing at all?	

What did you learn from the parents? What influence will this have on your future work?	
How long did the dialogue group last? Was enough time provided for the dialogue group?	
What feedback did you receive from parents?	
Suggestions for the future	
Which things would you do in the same way next time?	
Which things would you do differently next time?	

About the authors

Štěpánka Busuleanu is a psychologist and cultural scientist with degrees in both subjects. Since 2012, she has been working as a researcher at the Berliner Kita-Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung. Between 2013 and 2015, she coordinated the German-Polish project 'Young Children as Active Learners Exploring the/ir World—YALE' in Berlin and Poznan, before conducting training on 'project work and explorative learning' in early years centres in accordance with the approaches set out in Bridging Diversity—an Early Years Programme. Between 2015 and 2017, she coordinated the 'Creating Dialogue' pilot at the Institut für den Situationsansatz (ISTA), and was involved in the development of the training concept and subsequently worked as a trainer for 'Creating Dialogue'. Since 2018 she has been working as a trainer for Prejudice-Aware Bildung and Education.

Evelyne Höhme has a degree in educational science, and is also a psychodrama trainer and trainer for the Contextual Approach. Between 2000 and 2005, she participated in the development of the approach to prejudice-aware Bildung and education as part of the Kinderwelten/ISTA project. Between 2001 and 2008, she directed the project 'Living Democracy in early years centres and primary school' in Eberswalde (Brandenburg), and subsequently worked in in-service training and further education. Between 2012 and 2014, she worked as a coordinator for the 'Project Inclusion in the Practice of Early Years Centres and Crèches' at ISTA. After 2015, she was involved in the development of the 'Creating Dialogue' training concept and subsequently worked as a trainer for the project. Activities: training, consulting, publications. Focus: inclusion and Prejudice-Aware Bildung and Education, cooperation with parents, approaches to nonviolent communication.

List of illustrations

Dorota Niewęgłowska-Köhler: p. 11, 29, 32, 53, 72, 92, 111
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Ka Schmitz: Drawings p. 1, 14, 17, 34, 69, 107

Notes

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