

## **The activation of disadvantaged mothers and fathers with a migration background in Berlin. Suggestions taken from field- and casework for the kindergarten and primary school**

### **Abstract:**

Innumerable political and institutional statements made in the Federal Republic concern the paradigm of "integrated concepts" in education, child-raising, child-support and child-care - in particular in the interest of socially disadvantaged young people. At the same time, complaints accumulate about the practice in kindergartens and schools: that families who come from a very poor social background do not sufficiently support institutional education and child-raising. It is also suggested that parental duties and parents' acceptance of responsibility for child-care are widely neglected. Likewise, for years experts have pointed to the insufficiency of concepts for promoting the integration and the participation of migrants in education. The "double diagnosis" "poor" and "migrant" designates the target group with which this article is concerned. The key institutions "kindergarten" (kita) and schools are considered bearers of hope, in which disadvantages and the social segregation of children and young people from a tendentially discouraging poorer environment can be broken down. Parent-activated approaches can increase participatory chances for both boys and girls and in addition provide better prerequisites for living together in the city. Up until now, the education and child-care system of the German Federal Republic has not succeeded in reacting to social, educational and socio-political issues to an sufficient extent. Through research into the practice (Expert/insider interviews in kindergartens and schools; questioning parents; analysis of the concepts), the expertise gained from past attempts to inquire into the activation of parents was applied in order to find supplementary ways of developing the support of parents for their children in the area of Berlin's Southern Tiergarten. The construction of suggestions for approaches for the future was accompanied by research into "good practices" in Berlin and its surrounding federal area.

**Key terms:** migration background, poverty, school, kindergarten, education, child-care, parental activation, social space.

### **Introduction**

In the Federal Republic, child care, child raising and education have developed differently and are therefore also differently distributed between the family, the school and youth welfare according to region. Whereas there were (and are) traditionally few pre-school child-care places in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, in Berlin available facilities have developed according to need. More than 90% of 'under six year olds' are accompanied, encouraged and educated in public child care (Kitas, Kindergartens), in which the last year is designed to be preparatory for school, including compulsory

language support for those children from families with a migration background. However, in the Federal Republic, youth welfare (day care, public child and youth work, family counselling, help with child raising etc.) and (primary) school still operate largely unaffiliated alongside each other on the basis of their own rules, financial responsibilities, purposes and culture. For some years there has been demonstrable movement, not least in view of the unfavourable performance in the PISA study, especially with regard to disadvantaged sections of the population: concepts for education and its promotion have been formulated in the area of pre-school youth welfare. The school increasingly accepts extension, child-raising and residence functions and has developed public, extracurricular as well as curriculum, compulsory all day attendance for all students in co-operation with extracurricular partners. The assigning of supplementary child-care staff - that is, to after school care affiliated with the school system- took place at the same time. In total, better structural pre-requisites were created for educational enrichment, in particular by laying the groundwork for a multi-professional school which would deliver an integrated and needs-oriented performance. While some experts have seen the arrival of the beginning of child-oriented social schooling in this new co-operation, others warn of a 'scholarisation': child and youth welfare need to remain recognisable and differentiable in their specific performances in the elementary (Kita) and primary (e.g. day care centre, public work with children) area and also to appeal to parents 'on the other side of the school'.

Independently of these structural movements and professional discourses, disadvantaged, often poor children (approximately 20 to 25% of all underage Berlin children) go through kindergartens and schools without, for the most part, a realistic chance at upward mobility. Their social origin determines the path of their education and future participation in the Federal Republic more than it does in other European societies. Migrants in particular have been dependent on individual strategies to assist the integration and participation of their children. Above all, the large and quantitatively difficult to estimate section from the disadvantaged/poor milieu has not been successful in this, effecting a vicious circle of worsening marginalisation with every generation. Integration and training offers for parents have been recently introduced to loosen up the solidity of fringe groups. In this way, the places intended to accompany growing up - day care and primary school - have taken on a central position in considerations to activate parents with a foreign-language background. This is particularly difficult where isolated migrant colonies have formed. These lead, to a large extent, to an independent existence and their children learn in ethnically and socially imbalanced mixed Kita groups and school classes.

### **The family's education and child-raising contribution**

The development and promotion of life and integration competences first takes place incidentally and in the family. Parents are in this sense the first 'teachers' of their children. They initiate their contact to the world. The most important contribution to education takes place in the interaction of parents with their children in everyday life.

They depend completely on the routines of family communication. This is where the personality first develops and a basis is created for school learning, interests and motivation to achieve. The great value of the pedagogic quality of the family milieu in preparation for school is evident. The formative influence of family conditions for (school) educational success proves to be twice as great as the potential that can be achieved by qualitatively more favourable performances of the Kita and the primary school together. *'This is equally true for all four types of education: school performance, language development, social competence and the mastery of everyday situations. Variation in the types of education which the pedagogic quality of the family shapes is in all four types around twice as large as those variances shaped through the institutional settings kindergarten and primary school; or less technically: the educational success of a child can be (primarily) traced back to the family; the quality produced by the kindergarten and primary school together is only half as meaningful.'* (Tietze in Diskowski et al. (ed.), 2006: 208).

These results require further clarification. Parents have already influenced their child for some time when their girls and boys enter the Kita. Impulses from the home shape the child parallel to the routines of the institution. The parents themselves have a completely different emotional meaning to professional 'paid child carers'. One must therefore assume that the family and the institution are strictly differentiated 'powers'. Educational differences stemming from the family can only be compensated for in a limited way, although this judgement does not need to lead to pessimistic idleness. There is no evidence that the conceivable potential for compensation in the institutional area has been exhausted. International comparisons demonstrate the opposite (see Tietze in Diskowski et al. (ed.), 2006).

Parents are regarded internationally as a primary education and support resource. It is agreed that the realisation of possibilities and a successful school career for children is based on their mothers and fathers taking on an active, responsible role. However for this parents must possess certain competences (cf. Levold, 2003):

- ✓ Everyday competences: a daily structure, money husbandry, nutrition, being able to handle administration...
- ✓ Educational competences: talking to their child; listening; being able to explain their actions to him/her; being able to incorporate his/her view of the matter into their behaviour...
- ✓ Social competence as the ability to build personal relationships and social networks, not to become isolated, as being able to get advice and support from other parents or professionals...
- ✓ Cognitive competence as the ability to gather experience and knowledge and use it, for example, to stimulate their children...
- ✓ Mastery competence as the successful handling of critical life situations with disorientation, loss and limitations without falling into resignation...
- ✓ Assessment and the ability to change which is demonstrated in the recognition of reality, in realistic judgements and not least in the conviction that they can influence the scheduling and course of things.

Favourable for all this is a self-image which is characterised by self-confidence, the value of life and optimism for the future. No-one would contradict such an ideal. However, childhood and youth exist only in the plural. Familial, social and regional variables of origin are not only scenery, but also centres of power. A number of children and young people do not have a relationship with their parent, which enables them to unburden themselves and gives backing. I wish to name a few points we have to take into account when we talk about the reinforcement of parental competences and want to develop supporting professional concepts (cf. Levold, 2003).

Competences can only develop in social contexts. Often, external attitudes are not adequately taken notice of, just as strongly supported, consistent, empathic attitudes are assisted or impaired by economic and social, physical and mental resources. In this way motivating education for children is in some respects still a question of class. The more time and internal space available to parents and the more money they have at their disposal, the more they can invest. The more social capital and successful models for education they have around them, the greater the distribution of engagement onto several shoulders and subsequently the more they can invest.

Parental competences can only be demonstrated in a concrete relationship. They are dependent on the history, the quality and the interplay in relationships. It is therefore inadmissible to understand competences as a solid possession which can be practiced independent of the situation and the other person. The use of competences is related to motivation. Is a relationship with children full of conflict and ambivalent? If unhappiness dominates the behaviour of children, and rejection, hostility and unconquered tensions exist in the family context, then there are weighty hindrances against optimally implementing theoretically existing abilities.

### **Families with a migration background in precarious situations and the effect of this on child care and educational institutions**

Of the migrant families, three groups are particularly difficult to reach according to educational specialists:

- a. Those which live under extremely unfavourable psychosocial conditions and have difficulties structuring basic everyday life in their family;
- b. Refugee families without attested rights to a place to stay, which are part of a wider family clan structure and which secure basic living conditions partly through illegal activities;
- c. Resettled families who are Christian, partly Free Church, that is, differently religiously bound, and live spatially as well as culturally in ghettos and avoid contact with their German social environment.

A considerable number of migrants in the poverty milieu under examination drew strongly on their own ethnicity. The functions of the 'colony' are help for recent immigrants, personality stabilisation in a foreign world, self-help and socialisation in the sense of communicated cultural identity. Despite subjective short term profits, the costs of

this are considerable. *'The existence of ethnic structures frees one from the necessity of seeking contacts outside one's own group, spares one the education for necessary communicative activities, impedes 'intermarriage', in short strengthens factors which reproduce the system of ethnic stratification.'* (Heckmann, 1992:114).

At the height of segregation and disintegration, the school, the Kita and social work are also fairly helpless. In these cases, it is not possible to estimate the resistance of the opponents high enough. Worldly opponents include: the burdens of everyday poverty; language problems, retreat into one's own primary group and community; defensive attitudes to the role of the Kita and school (quote from a parent's conversation: 'We won't let you tell us how to raise our children. You can be content when we leave you alone.');

difficult situations in the hierarchy of the sexes with results such as the tendency to see the woman's place as the home and the over-average occurrence of domestic violence against women; understandings of marriage and respect that prevent boys as well as girls from entering the 'modern age'; a generally reserved or resistant attitude to the dominant German culture.

Unfavourable family and social conditions have a negative effect on children and teenagers. Professional experts conducting interviews named: learning difficulties, performance problems, deficiencies in social competences (behaviour in conflict situations, standard of communication, team ability, the ability to follow rules...); the prevention of integration because of inherited gender roles, reduced tolerance and ethnic-cultural delineation; behaviour in free time reinforces fringe status. These clear integration and participation deficits are embedded in poverty, residence status, the family, the job market and delinquency. A text from a district organisation in Tiergarten read: *'The children who we look after grow up predominantly in extended families with up to fifteen siblings. Little German is spoken at home and patriarchal structures with clear discrimination against women and girls prevail. School education and vocational training are not seen to be of primary importance. For example, letters and important communications of the school are not understood and signed without knowledge of their contents or passed onto the older siblings 'for processing'.'* (District Tiergarten south, no place or year given).

It is particularly difficult for families who are on the fringe to interest themselves in their children's education. *'This leads in many cases to a family climate characterised by violence, in which the children experience the uncertainty and helplessness of their parents and are not presented with viable models for the resolution of controversy and conflicts. The frustration of the parents at their inadequate social participation often leads to their presenting their children with a negative, devalued image of themselves. The children adopt this image and don't see their parents as people who provide support or education. This causes the parents to place increasingly aggressive and loud demands on their children.'* (Brixius; Koerner; Piltmann, no time or place given).

Amazingly, there are no scientific studies on the relationship of parents with poverty and migration backgrounds with schools. It is only known that parents conceal the behaviour of their children who are difficult at school, in order not to have to reveal their own shame, feelings that they are responsible, powerlessness and helplessness. The

parents of children who have and create problems at school must often overcome their resignation before their goodwill towards and interest in their children can be awakened again. Initial investigations into everyday practice demonstrate that deficits in the education and accompaniment of children are remarked on from the side of the school without, however, the addressed parents finding themselves to be competent and able to cope with the situation identified by the school. The school's learning objectives, which demand a high level of self-initiative and knowledge, alienate both parents and children who are not capable of 'pulling themselves free'.

The incorporation of parents into the school requires attitudes and means of contact (prompting parents not only to do what the teachers suggest but also to show own initiative) without which parents become isolated from everyday school life in which they are involved through their children and implicit expectations.

Against a background in which parents are difficult to reach, whether they have a migration background or not, different ways have been thought up and tried out in pilot studies in the past. The practice is, of course primarily interested in answers to the questions 'how can it work?' and 'who should do it?' However thinking these questions over and deciding is the primary purpose and hoped result of parent activation. Several directions deserve attention:

- a. The school career should be optimised by working together with parents
- b. The danger of social disintegration through the children's impending drop-out careers can be minimised by working together with parents
- c. One would like keep parents responsible for at least the future of their children after school, since the effect of the public professional education will be finished for all time when they are sixteen or seventeen.
- d. Finally, in a forth direction, working together with parents should at least ensure that they disturb and impede public education through school and youth welfare as little as possible.

### **Field of investigation and methodology**

Around 8500 people live in the section under examination in 4600 households. 35% of the residents have a migration background. Around 1600 children and teenagers under 18 live in the area. The primary schools contain to roughly 90% children who grow up in a family context with a non-German origin. Although only every fifth employable person in south Tiergarten is reported unemployed, around 40 to 50% of pupils live in households which are dependent on transfer incomes or a small salary.

The economic destabilisation of the area through shop and company closure, fluctuations, the high level of unemployment and integration problems means the declining attractiveness of south Tiergarten as a living area. Bourgeois elements -middle class families with children - are turning their backs on the district. Newcomers stem primarily from the migrant milieu. The 'needing attention status' of parts of the district can be established through the following indicators, without separating cause and effect:

the tense co-habitation of different cultures, ethnicities and communities; the geographical concentration of partly estranged families and their associates; the uncertain residence status of many families and individuals; an abundance of children who, socially and materially, can not be adequately supported; distrust and reserve between citizens and officials; partly illegal ways of surviving in which children are involved; a relative high propensity to violence; conflict surrounding the use of public rooms by children and teenagers.

The district office in Berlin Mitte has functioned as employee for this study. The goal of this investigation into the practice is to improve the activation of difficult-to-reach parents in kindergartens and schools so that families are able to better their ability to support their children. In total, 14 conversations with 18 experts from the school, youth welfare (youth welfare department; kindergarten; assistance with child-raising) and community work took place. They lasted between one and three hours. It was decided against recording the interviews, so they had the character of a two-sided dialogue. In this way, on the one hand useable data could only be gathered to a lesser extent and at the cost of its value. On the other hand, conversations took place which had a good flow and were founded in an atmosphere of trust.

Since recommendations for action should be taken on where possible (that is research into the practice should not be seen as the opposition), a loss of scientific quality was taken into account. In addition, 16 parents were interviewed, whereby ten of these interviews which took place in the district of Neukölln were part of a postgraduate thesis (Cömert 2007).

A comprehensive insight -which may even lead to surprising discoveries for the facilities examined- could only be attained through a mix of methods. For my intentions this necessitated: oral interviews of different target groups in great numbers; written interviews, the evaluation of statistics; document analysis; the observation of participants. A deficiency in the investigation was the fact that discoveries were based almost exclusively on conversations and partly on the examination of documents (concepts). A second deficiency is that only a small number of people were questioned. This means that individual opinions assume an inadvisably strong weight. Moreover, three important fields, which for resource reasons were not included in the inquiry, are missing: all day school care with the occupational group child-carers; child and youth welfare; people who are active in the context of district management; the public health department; key people in the district etc.

### **Results of the interviews<sup>14</sup>**

The primary results of the interview with Kita educators and teachers are: the preconception-confounding heterogeneous composition of the Kita groups and school classes, the different knowledge and language levels, the way the variety of life situations create numerous problems for the child-carers and teachers which they can only overcome

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<sup>14</sup> Part of the results is worked into the other excerpt.

with widened goals, changed concepts and corresponding provision of materials. Burdens in the Kita and everyday school routine are, according to the perceptions of the educational staff, particularly characterised by:

- ✓ Often, basic communication possibilities with children and primarily with parents do not exist;
- ✓ Many parents do not keep simple arrangements;
- ✓ A great number of children with sensational socialisation deficits need their attention;
- ✓ Increased demands are placed on them through 'additional tasks' in the areas of administration, documentation, evaluation, planning, cooperation...without their being given (fresh) resources to deal with them.

The quality of the results from the school, Kita and social work can, according to the tenor of the questioned employees, not be viewed independently of the structural quality (for example, the provision of resources for going through material pre- and post 'class', that is 'indirect' work alongside lessons and kits groups) and the entrance quality of the clientele (input quality). In this way, the school and Kita are concerned with setting themselves modest targets and prefer given decisions, knowing they have little chance to change anything on the part of parents and therefore only invest in what is absolutely necessary (such as measures of child protection). The interviewed teachers unanimously agreed that basic social abilities like punctuality, regularity, order etc. often need to be taught and practiced before the transfer of knowledge can come to the foreground at school. The most important discovery that arose from interviews with the staff was that kindergarten and school can only devote themselves to the activation of parents with conviction and engagement when they are supported by experts from outside (advice faculties: youth welfare department, intercultural moderation...). An 'inclination for parents' was not felt in the Kita or the school.

On the one hand, the interviews show the articulate interest of many migrant parents in the educational winnings of their children, on the other hand mother and father demonstrate themselves to be in many ways sceptic and reserved towards the foreign German child-care, help and school institutions. The following conversational remarks are particularly striking and help us to understand the mutual reserve between school and disadvantaged parents: *"I only ever hear bad things..."*, *"I'm not brave enough to ask..."*; *"I don't understand what's said..."*; *"That's nothing to do with me/not my responsibility/not my matter"*; *"When it comes to instructions I switch off...."*

Such subjective working examples from parents with a non-German origin correspond to explanatory approaches out of a preparatory study:

- ⇒ *'-The contact of the parents with the school only reminded the parents of their own school experience when there were conspicuous learning and/or behaviour difficulties. If there were no notable peculiarities, a strict division between school and family was maintained.*

- ⇒ *School performance and demands on children could not be improved through their own knowledge, so the repeated wishes of the teachers that the parents help their children could only be disappointed.*
- ⇒ *Often, inadequate German knowledge permitted conversations with parents only through children (or relatives, K.T), who serve as translators. Conversations are avoided in order to prevent conflict between the generations and their having to experience humiliation in front of their children. (...)*
- ⇒ *Because of economically difficult living conditions, parents avoid social contacts. Parents are afraid of further disappointing experiences with the school (...). The things which stood out in the children at school point to unresolved inner-family conflict which they try to hide and partly by using school conflicts as a cover (correspondences, K.T). (...) The disappointments experienced by the parents in previous communications between them and teachers lead to a decline in the parent-teacher relationship' (Leonhardt and Schnabel, 2006:136).*

A further hypothesis to be read out of the interview remarks is an ambivalent relationship towards the German education system and the fear, based on experience, that children will become culturally alienated from their parents, that the parents will then only be able to exercise a diminishing educational influence and that unconditional loyalty will be shaken. This interpretation would explain the contradiction between articulated education aspirations and hesitant sponsoring of participation in education. That which appears as self-sabotage, can then be seen as the attempt to protect one's own social and cultural order under aspects such as identity and security (cf. Geogheganes, 2006: 65).

Interviewing parents demonstrates: a promising way forward would be to enable contact independently of problem situations. The Kita and school need to provide more and other meanings for underprivileged parents. What needs to be asked is: how can the Kita and school more actively tap into the knowledge of parents about their children? No-one knows so much about one's own child than mothers and sometimes also fathers. Could Kitas and schools fetch parents as profiting users into their institutions if they were extended socio-cultural education centres? Do the Kita and school want to win parents (as partners) over for their education, child-care and support programmes? Many parents have information and contacts, ideas and time, labour power and unaddressed potential free to be engaged.

Remarks in the parent interviews suggest that a number of parents seem prepared to help when they and their problems are taken seriously and the co-operation proves helpful – both in regard to questions and fears about their children as well as in regard to their own life and child-raising situations. Work with the family proves to be particularly successful when it succeeds in wakening the parents' pride in their child and provides a positive impetus.

The interviews show that parents need school and kindergarten to be places:

- ✓ in which they can have an effect,
- ✓ where they understand what is meant,

✓ where they, as parents, get something useful out of them.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to implement principles of resource orientation and 'normalisation' on the level of attitudes and offers. That means approaching parents where they can do things and seeing them as 'normal people' and not as problem causers and carriers. Otherwise, contributions wished and expected of the parents should (also): give them pleasure; increase their social contacts; offer possibilities to show their abilities; offer chances to learn something from others (other parents); offer the opportunity to exchange experiences with the school and their children; serve as substance for co-operation.

## **"Good practice" for the activation of parents in Berlin**

The existence of the following initiatives to activate parents in Berlin schools and Kitas was demonstrated:

### ***Parents' information***

An information evening for parents could include topics such as 'the school system in Germany'; 'the meaning of sexual education'; 'how do I get help when I have child raising problems?' etc. Experience in Berlin shows that these will reach a maximum of 40 to 50% of parents in 'areas with special development needs'.

### ***Incorporation in the Kita/school life – the observation and co-operation of parents***

Elements of this could be: the preparation and execution of school functions; going on excursions with the children; contributions to project weeks etc. *"The integration of pupils and parents into our school project already has a tradition. Since the successful redesign of the school playground as a games court, we have got to work on the design of the stairwells and the corridors. This redesign of the school building was the clear expression of our efforts to achieve a close integration of parents and pupils at our school. Alongside wider learning objectives and processes in the artistic part of the lesson that provided our pupils with a stronger turn to practical design, this gave parents the opportunity to better integrate themselves into school life. Pupils and parents were included in the planning and execution of the artistic arrangement of the school from the beginning."* (School programme of the Fichtelgebirge Primary School, Berlin, 2006).

A Kita carer, looking at parents with a migration background, said: *"I think we need to use the competences of all parents more than ever before (...). That means parents not only implementing things planned by the educators, but also taking part in planning and organisation."*

### ***Parents supporting parents (godparents)***

In some places, parents have founded initiatives such as "parents support parents." A central supporting element is acting as interpreters.

### ***Seeking out parental support with minimal effort***

Good experiences through previous searches were reported by social education experts in tandem with a teacher. Successive coaching led here and there to the stabilisation of positive effects. One project sponsor who teaches at a Berlin school twenty hours a week, is putting the following into practice: *"The principal sent all parents a letter in which he announces work together with X association. Parents who do not wish to work with them should submit this in writing. A flyer from the sponsor came with the letter (in German, Turkish and Arabic). The project was announced by the principal to the staff; the people involved introduced themselves at a teacher's conference. A twice weekly consultation hour was established at the school, during which the teachers could describe problems. Making first contact with the family follows; subsequent action branches into different directions: conversations with or without staff and pupils, agreements, support of different kinds... A few months of work have revealed a great measure of social, mental and material misery to us, which exists despite youth welfare and as a rule doesn't reach it. In many cases, parents are grateful to find a non-school contact. In many cases it seems to be important to accompany the parents until they recognise their responsibility for the school: The teachers can't afford to do this work."*

Free help in dealing with offices, the arrangement of ongoing offers of help and the adjudication of conflicts are also attainable in these ways. The probation material of the youth welfare department should also be mentioned at the school.

### ***Parents café/parents' rooms***

In such rooms there is, for example, the possibility to lead informal conversations and arrange help from neighbours. The Fichtelgebirge Primary School writes: *« For the parents of our school we have enabled possibilities to converse and participate in the running of the school. For this we have established a parents' cafe at our school in which parents regularly meet. »* The Spreewald Primary School in Berlin's Schöneberg attributes a trust-building function to this confidence-building measure. *« Every day there is free tea. Once a week an Arabic-Turkish breakfast takes place. In the hours of public business, between 7.30 and 4pm, conversations are initiated about problems with child-raising, class trips, Ramadan, the performance of the children and swimming lessons. The cafe is also the place in which Muslim festivals such as the sugar celebration and the sacrifice are celebrated. Here either the native tongue of the parents is spoken or a translation is provided by us. We have a very good basis with five bilingual teachers and some bilingual child-carers. And we organise mothers as 'bridge staff'."*

One Berlin Kita writes: We have reduced the number of children from 136 to 116. *“During the selection and rebuilding of the rooms gained through this, we paid attention to the following criteria: a central position within the facilities; separate entrance and utilisation possibilities; multifunctional utilisation. Two former group rooms were altered into a small family room. Among other things this included an ‘open parents’ meeting point’ in which a small sitting corner enabled the parents to take up contact with each other and also with the staff. In addition, the individual can take a small break here or inform themselves through hung up or left out materials. This offer quickly proved itself worthwhile, particularly in the acclimatisation phase for waiting mothers and fathers.”*

### **Parents’ training**

As a prerequisite, before they can register their child in the seventh grade at school with a special profile, parents need to go through a parents’ training. This course for parents is based on the STEP-Program and covers topics of puberty in ten double periods. For example, the difference between praise and humiliation, active listening and what effecting methods of raising your child are. The acting principal in this Berlin school writes: *“When we tried out this parents’ training for the first time, I naively assumed that the parents would learn how one raises children properly. I thought they would learn the essentials and subsequently apply them as comprehensively as possible. In the meantime I have learned that this sort of learning is also a process that needs its own time. At the same time, numerous unexpected effects that were never planned included:*

- ✓ *Parents actually developing a readiness to open themselves to the programme.*
- ✓ *Parents have ideas, they’re prepared to invest time and energy in our school.*
- ✓ *Parents discovering weaknesses in our school.*
- ✓ *Parents being grateful for what we do for their children.*
- ✓ *They support our ideas, become more present.*
- ✓ *They can make much clearer ‘statements’ to other parents than we can.*
- ✓ *Parents conquering their part of the school space.*
- ✓ *They experience, often for the first time inside the school, being at the same level as teachers.*
- ✓ *Our recognising prejudices that we have against parents. Because we make an effort at our school to follow the principal of doing without accusations, we have the chance to get to know something new and to develop, together with our parents, new things in the area of “communication between school and parents”. It is certain that our school has gained unbelievably from the additional strength of parents.”*

Parents’ trainings are offered by youth welfare in other locations in Berlin especially for those parents who have problems with regular school attendance. Topics include parental presence, communication ideals in the family; calming strategies; useful family rules and rituals; coping with destructive family dynamics; dealing with problems such as drugs, criminality, debts...; leading effective conversations.

## ***Language learning***

While their children are in lessons or in play a child-care group, mothers could learn everyday oriented speech in the mornings. A Kita wrote: *“A German course in the kindergarten that takes a true-to-life stance to the words used everyday in the kindergarten and which is also attended by bilingual parents, will be well attended in the kindergarten. Previous attempts over other classic educational institutions won over few participants.”*

## ***Specific gender orientation***

One sponsor of a kindergarten explained: *“We are planning a gender specific expansion of our work with parents on school locations. We distinguish between mixed gender events such as parent evenings and parent celebrations on the one side and specific father or mother events on the other. Through father-child activities we want to strengthen the engagement and presence of fathers in daily work. In working with mothers, we want to lighten their load. For this reason, the programme contains events without children to allow the often very young women time and room for an intensive exchange of views.”*

## **Suitable education approaches for disadvantaged parents with a migrant background**

In the meantime, there is a variety of programs for the development of parent competences. In summary: the “Parents’ school Bad Buchenau”; the “child raising course for parents – Fit for Kids” (Wiesbaden); the “Hammer Parents’ School”; the “Rendsburger Parents’ Training”; the “KET” (Cologne Parents’ Training); “Strong Parents – Strong Children” from the German child protection league; the Australian behaviour training program “Triple P”; the “STEP” training; Parents’ Coaching through dialog according to the “Borkener Model”; educational parental training according to Penthin; the Essen program “Backpack I and II”; FuN (“Family and Neighbourhood”) etc. Only a few trainings have been examined for their effectiveness.

After examination of the approaches on hand, I regard two approaches as particularly suitable for addressing difficult-to-reach target groups on education and integration.

## ***“Backpack” Program I, Essen<sup>15</sup>***

Backpack I come to the Kitas. For years international researchers have indicated that an integral support of the oral, motor, cognitive, emotional and social development of children needs to begin from the elementary stage. In Essen, according to the principal “mothers help mothers”, specially trained bilingual women with a migration background are brought in for six hours a week on a casual wage. These “district mothers” have the task of helping other mothers with a migration background to understand the so-called “Backpack” working material and show them how language for the small child (their native tongue and German as a second language) can be promoted through games and other impulses. The instruction of the mothers takes place in the Kita which their children attend.

In the context of the primary school project Rucksack II, one or more mother groups meet once a week at the schools involved. Their aim is to combine language support and parental education with the hoped result that mothers lose their fears about the school and can support their children in their learning, at least in the first classes. Every group is led by a district mother. For example, the topic “time” might be introduced, which is in the curriculum for mother and child. While, perhaps, a watch is made, the learning mothers talk among themselves on the topic – about going to bed times and setting limits or fears about school. In this way a mother learns though opportune educational impulses “of her own” which learning material is being covered by her child. From time to time a teacher drops in. At home, child and mother can work further on the themes planned for the week. In Backpack, there are six tasks for the week based around the school curriculum. The material provided for the mothers contains six topic-oriented categories and comes in German, High Arabic and Turkish: a. activities b. story-telling c. speaking and thinking d. practising German e. playing and learning f. getting to know children’s books<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> cf. E.g Fleischer / Hettgen: Mit dem Rucksack Brücken bauen ... In: Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe (Hrsg.): Jugendhilfe aktuell 3/2006.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Sozial.Extra 4/2005, S. 21.

## **II. "Family and neighborhood" (FuN)<sup>17</sup>**

### **✓ Central aims and target groups**

The FuN program is suitable for parents with children who are babies, in kindergarten and of school age. FuN is a preventative family formation group which is designed to increase and support parental competence and parental responsibility. This approach is particularly good for disadvantaged parents and follows a social spatial approach.

Central goals are: the construction of development, the initiation of child raising behaviour and the reduction of elements impeding it; prompting informal networks; entering into trusting raising partnerships with staff in the Kita and school. The program encourages work between parents and educational institutions. In this sense, FuN is suitable as a building block for the development of the Kita into a family and neighbourhood centre. In addition, FuN is designed as an intercultural offer so that families of different ethnic origins can be brought together.

### **✓ Program Structure**

Eight times a week, approximately eight to ten families meet for three hours in the late afternoon. The program consists of eight elements which are repeated in the same order at every meeting. Each family sits at their own family table. The exercises are explained to the parents and then carried out at their tables. The elements are: greeting with a song/ritual; a co-operation game; a communication game; eating together; parent time/child time; games in pairs; a surprise game and a farewell circle.

The FuN team consists of two workers, an employee from the Kita or school and an external educator who specialises in family work. The qualification for professionals is achieved through four days of seminars. In the self-organisation phase following the program, the focus is on work together with migrant clubs etc. FuN-baby includes networking with public health services. As to location, one could consider the sports room in the Kita or the parents' café.

### **✓ Working principles**

- The families are seen as guests.
- The atmosphere is free of a problem-focus and an attitude of instruction. Families learn through concrete, transferable experiences.
- The program is not a burden for lower language levels. Singing, games and a meal appeal to mothers through the application potentials they offer.

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<sup>17</sup> FuN is a Program developed and tested by the Country's Institute for Qualification in Hagen / NRW in co-operation with the Institute for preventative Pedagogic in Detmold / NRW. At present it takes place in 100 locations in Nordrhein-Westfalen. First qualifications are also in carried out in Berlin in the Social education Training Institute Berlin-Brandenburg in Glienicke for the kita. The principal of „FuN – the name is the program – Family learning with fun“ is orientation. It was founded by Brixius / Koerner / Piltmann, and appeared in Sigrid Tschoepe-Scheffler: Concepts of Parental Education– A critical overview. Opladen 2005.

- Cultural features are taken into account.
- Interpreters make it possible for parents whose knowledge of German is not yet adequate to participate without support.
- Learning takes place as a dialog through model learning and coaching, through trying things out and comparison.

✓ *Examination of effectiveness*

An evaluation of the Technological University in Cologne (pilot study with control group comparison 2004/2005; N = 52 parents) shows that: on the whole FuN reaches its target groups. More than 80% of families took part in the meetings until the end of the program (eight meetings) and approximately 60% of families attended the additional meetings in the self-organisation phase (self-report of the FuN “inventor”). 87% of the participations questioned in the context of the Cologne evaluation were women. 34% of the participants had a migration background. To my knowledge, no other family education program has attained these statistics.

Effects when the course goes well: the development of a constructive basic attitude; an increase in child-raising confidence; an increase in child-raising responsibility (among other things greater skill with regard to the recognition of (playing) behaviour and increased interest in the world of their children; improvement of the parent-child relationship; an increase in readiness and capability to speak about personal problems (particularly significant for socially isolated parents); an increased readiness to speak with other people (e.g staff members such as child-carers) about child-raising problems. These effects were established immediately following the training. There are no long-term analyses of these effects.

### **Children at risk as a topic of school development in the Federal Republic of Germany**

Which ways of positively influencing the life journeys of children and teenagers from a poorer milieu are favoured in the German child-care and educational institutions? The PISA study established that a fifth of all young people in the Federal Republic of Germany must be regarded as participation endangered. This result is dramatized through the discovery that their social origin determines their social background more than it does in almost all other European countries. In short: PISA attests to performance and justice problems present in German schools. There were various political-educational and education specialist attempts to address the problems raised by the study. The ramifications for our topic have been elevated within the last few years and at least selectively interfaced with concepts:

1. (Linguistic) Support concepts for migrant children/children at risk
2. Data supported development dialogs with schools (about school visits)
3. All day school attendance

4. The enrichment of schools through additional social, special pedagogic, social work and psychology personnel.
5. The design of school as a part of life
6. A financial improvement for schools in disadvantaged regions
7. Increase of pressure/incentive for schools to look after difficult pupils
8. Learning support programs for those in danger of failing at school (emphases: social learning; motivation and strategies to learn; the building up of knowledge)
9. The co-ordination of learning goals and extension plans for disadvantaged pupils e.g through planning and development dialog with parents, teachers, pupils – building up a feedback culture
10. The involvement and activation of parents

Clearly, a change in mentality is necessary: a culture with the positive expectation that every child can learn and every teacher wants fundamentally to support them. When it comes down to it, the school is the last public place in which the life chances of young people can really be influenced. All named development steps point in the right direction, but have shown only limited effectiveness up until now. The latest enrolment report of the Berlin health administration 2006 showed that where the number of migrants in the living area was very high, 10% of Turkish born children, even after more than two years at a Kita, hardly spoke German - and 34% spoke it very badly. This finding corresponds with research results that state that the unfavourable performance of children from migration backgrounds is due primarily to the concentration of these children in “schools needing attention” (cf. summary Geoghegan, 2006:46).

## **Conclusion**

For years, scholars and experts have pointed out that the insufficient education of the educators makes them unable to cope with new demands (language extension; development diagnosis; co-operation with parents...). For just as long, the widespread employment of bilingual personnel with a migration background has been demanded. Such useful suggestions have a long-term effect and they have been left out of possibilities for designs in the examined district south Tiergarten. What has to be done there? From the interviews, the concept analyses and good practice research, one reaches the conclusion that in order to activate parents in Kitas and primary schools and mobilise them at the level of staff one must:

Firstly, I suggest “attitude work”. Hankering after the solution must be abandoned. Moreover, a message of “please enter!” needs to be hung over the institution’s door. A “Pre-requisite for success is the creation of a communicative climate that gives parents the assurance that they are welcome with their questions, problems, ideas and

insecurities as communication and cooperation partners” (Knauf and Schubert in Diskowski et al. 2006: 167).

Secondly, necessary pre-requisites for communication need to be created. The resolution of linguistic and comprehension problems is a necessary condition for the exercise of mutual influence. Thirdly, there is no alternative to directly addressing the problems and finding concepts. Fourthly, one must anticipate a differentiated “range of offers” for different parents. Talk of “the” parents needs fundamental revision. Instead, we need to distinguish between different groups. Distinctive characteristics could, for example, reside in:

- the degree to which the parents are integrated (this means approximately the competence level at which they can speak German),
- the basic motivation of the parents with regards to education, school, co-operation and engagement at their own initiative,
- the degree of the problems posed by their children.

Fifth, structural “concepts at numerous levels” need to be developed. These should also be developed on the understanding that not all parents are to be reached from the same approach and that the effects of activation and co-operation are to be reached through the interplay of complementary approaches.

The following action areas for the activation of parents are in my opinion trend-setting:

1. Meeting and exchange: parents meeting, roughly in the same way as the parents breakfast (e.g. once/week)
2. Thematic communication and information: moderated parents’ evenings (mutual expectations school – parents; what (doesn’t) belong in the schoolbag; homework; nutrition/eating and drinking at school; the media; bilingualism; sex education; styles of education; child problems; health; legal help structures...).
3. Inclusion, participation (on the other side of committees): the systematic planning of parents sitting in on classes and working with them e.g. class projects, excursions with the incorporation of parents; regular development conversations between staff and parents, particularly about “risk children”.
4. Celebration, sociability, a culture of public recognition: Sport, school and lantern celebrations; Performances/presentations; District and neighbourhood celebrations
5. Training that is useful for mothers and fathers: Courses such as computer, language, rights, dealing with authorities, sewing courses, health...
6. Further education for staff on the topic “intercultural competence and leading conversations”.

Variables that improve approaches to parents include: gender separate offers; systematic telephone calls and a “face-to face” mode of address; house visits; incorporation of the chosen parent representatives in the contact foundation; confidants and neighbours as godparents or bridging figures.

For the parents' meetings in kindergartens and schools the following quality outlines<sup>18</sup> arose:

- ✓ Invitations were given to the children (with RSVP slip) X days before or by word of mouth (Kita);
- ✓ X days before the meeting "shaky candidates" were reminded by telephone or personally;
- ✓ Child care is arranged;
- ✓ The seating plan is arranged communicatively;
- ✓ Experts from outside (police, health, nutrition...) were regularly invited (theme evenings);
- ✓ The institution takes care of interpreters;
- ✓ At every parents' evening there are organised communicative phases for talking among themselves;
- ✓ All parents have the possibility, before or after the meeting, to have a private conversation with the carers of their children;
- ✓ Before and after the gathering there is the offer of a quarter hour to "chat" in a random group;
- ✓ Every parent meeting in the school is led by a teacher and a child-carer;
- ✓ Parent gatherings are carried out in staggered time (watch out for time conflict for parents who have many children);
- ✓ From time to time "other places" and "other times" should be chosen;
- ✓ The school/Kita hands out telephone lists so that the parents can get in touch with each other.

A result of this investigation not to be ignored is that the activation of parents at kitas and schools can only be taken up as a systematic task when the institutions involved are supported by Kita counselling and social education services of youth welfare, by district management provisions for intercultural moderation, school social work and by free sponsors for help with child-raising and family counselling centres.

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<sup>18</sup> Valuable impulses out of the interviews with Canan Cömert could be worked on here.

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