

Fathers work – heterogeneity as a principle

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After I was approached by the “Men in ECEC Centres” Coordination Centre to write an article for their publication on “Diverse fathers work in ECEC centres”, I spent a long while wondering what my contribution for the handout would look like. This is because, for me, fathers appear to be far too heterogeneous a group to be able to make general statements about *the* fathers or *the* fathers work in ECEC centres. It seems to me that attitudes to fatherhood are just too heterogeneous and the way many men see themselves just too different. They are simply connected by virtue of the fact that they have either fathered a child at some point, one or more times, or that they have come to social fatherhood in other ways. But being a father in itself also seemed to me to be so varied. There are as many endless variations as there are individual fathers with demands and their own claims on how to be a father. I experience this personally as a father of three daughters and I see it repeatedly in the fathers we support at *mannigfaltig e. V.* This is why it is not possible to come up with any general strategies for ECEC workers as to how they can involve *these* fathers more in ECEC centres.

In this respect, I do not want to give a lecture here about research on fathers, nor do I want to present a practical fathers project. I would rather offer a perspective which allows critical comments on a homogenising approach to fathers work, nevertheless one that also enables us to consider fathers as a target group for educational efforts. The point is to identify the reasons why many fathers seem to be inaccessible for ECEC workers in ECEC centres. In my opinion, we need to name factors which will actually make it possible to address fathers as a group. When organising fathers work, I think it is especially important to raise awareness about the fact that fathers always exhibit several different social characteristics (intersectionality) and always belong to several groups at the same time.

Do fathers represent a social group?

Sociologically, fathers do not represent a definable group. They come from all backgrounds, all regions, all areas of work, etc. They are indigenous or have immigrated due to family history or personal reasons. Some may feel foreign. They may, or may not have, a disability, or something in between. Just the act of being a father is possible over almost the entire range of the male biography. Being a father is then for the rest of your life - in one way or the other. The extent to which fathers feel responsible and behave is extremely different. In answer to the question, what makes a father, there is no answer or very many answers. – So how could you reach this heterogeneous group of men? The solution lies largely in confining fathers to a group using a criterion that is “situation oriented”; expectant fathers, separated fathers, men of (other) faith, men with immigrant backgrounds, fathers of children in a school class, fathers of boys on an assertiveness course, fathers of girls in a football team, fathers of victims of abuse, fathers who have been victims themselves, abusive fathers ... But here it quickly becomes obvious that as much as men are “summarised” as a group who have one thing in common due to the one event they have all encountered, they also already strongly differ in the way they deal with the situation. This is most clearly seen in the mutual interests of the group for separated fathers. Here there are legal decisions

to be made that obviously affect mothers and fathers differently. In addition, dealing with the separation, the changes in custody rights and access law, and particularly, dealing with everyday living arrangements for the contact with the children, all present similar circumstances for all separated fathers. Yet even here it is clear that the interests of individual fathers vary so greatly (depending on self-image, practice in bringing up children, economic situation, education expectations, residence status, etc.) that what we offer can only reach a certain portion of the separated fathers.

Consequently, the way fathers are addressed must be extremely clear. If we need to approach men with an immigrant background, then we must also address what aspect of this background is important. (And that makes sense, such as for example for those fathers who do not have a secure residence status in Europe.) This clarification is important, as the experience of immigration impacts differently depending on the region of origin, reason for immigration and the time of immigration. In fact, the religion needs to be explicitly named if we intend to reach the immigrant fathers in the facility that are Muslim.

The only thing that unites, in my opinion, with the vast majority of fathers, is the necessity to reconsider their own masculinity on the basis of being a father. Having a child enter your life - whether by birth or by accepting the responsibility in the sense of social fatherhood - presents, for most fathers, a quantum leap in their assessment of themselves as a man and father. Therefore, I think that the only viable core of an educational approach of fathers is to deal with their masculinity(ies). Implementing opportunities for fathers is then only linked to the reason to address them. This means that fathers work focuses on all the different ways men deal with fatherhood. The educational experience in fathers work always takes the form of a personal type of educational work. In this way, men's educational work is made use of methodologically.

Fathers feel reduced

According to my observation, in the practice of public and private ECEC centres, after-school clubs and schools many genuine attempts are made to involve fathers in the everyday care of children in these facilities. However, these appeals are often ineffectual and invariably people then revert to making assumptions about fathers that are reductive. Thus, fathers become involved in a way that the educational institution considers to be typically male, and this approach towards "typical male" abilities always refers to those men who thus become self-assured in this role. However, it also refers to men who want to be approached differently.

One example here illustrates this, in that fathers are frequently sought after for their manual and handicraft skills, particularly from the infancy to primary school age of children. Some fathers report that this gives them a tangible task to do, allowing them to get involved because they (can) use their own skills. Others describe it as carrying out tasks that need to be done, and they just get on with it like they do at home. And a third group, which accounts for the largest share, indicates that they do not just want to be seen as, and reduced to, the role of handymen but also want to be involved in educational discussion and planning. The same also applies to more active recreational activities.

Indeed with such gender-typical roles in these institutions, it can produce a real working opportunity in which fathers can participate. Many fathers can contribute to these gender-typical environments

because the patterns are known and practiced. Even if I, as a father, have another definition of myself, I can help shape the role-play because I am recognised and appreciated. However, this then raises the question of how we can avoid reducing fathers to their supposedly uniform interests and skills. How can a secure role for fathers be created which still leaves room for a variety of interests and forms of participation?

Fathers with immigrant backgrounds

It is often stressed that fathers with an immigrant background are more difficult to reach. This might seem to be a logical assessment of the situation drawn from everyday experience. But on closer inspection, the same mechanisms are revealed - complex relationships are reduced in simplistic ways. Here, men are meant, who obviously do not share the same educational ideas of the respective facility or who are not able to participate in them for various reasons. It appears easy for the analysis when a lack of German knowledge is introduced as the main cause of communication difficulties. It becomes difficult if the targeted fathers are still not accessible, even when a translation is provided. The “culture template” is then often pursued. An attempt is made to substantiate the unclear category of “fathers with an immigrant background” with a much more nebulous concept of culture. In everyday life, I usually experience a two-fold reduction of men who (want to) accompany their children and at the same time seek opportunities to get involved as immigrants in a German institution - namely, a reduction to a stereotype of the “immigrant father”, for example, the image of the “patriarchal Muslim”. This might sound too harsh and rather reductionist, but the educational experience from schools, children and youth institutions unfortunately confirms this again and again.

Fathers work as an education of unifying heterogeneity

What can we now constructively gain from this knowledge? The view of fathers work presented here focuses on the heterogeneous composition of each group of fathers. I place the educational aspect at the core, and therefore the relationship of “the world and I” as well as “subject and person”. On the basis of providing for and concern for their own children, phenomena which are specific to the facility are brought into the exchange (for example, low-level conflicts at a private ECEC centre or discussions about how to allocate space in a school yard or the participation of fathers in a youth centre or uncertainties the fathers are experiencing themselves, etc.). As a unifying moment, “coping” with masculinity is considered in active fatherhood without always being made explicit. Here, in my experience, the educational and economic differences in status must be given special attention. I think that projects dealing with fathers work should prioritise the recognition of the differences at the beginning of all educational efforts. An appreciation then grows in the educational space which is organised by the participating fathers themselves. In this respect, I think it is a central aspect to ensuring that typical opportunities to get involved in ECEC centres and schools and the corresponding barriers are looked at conceptually. In particular, the aspect of multiple group identities provides an opportunity to activate resources by reflecting productively on differences between fathers, and differences between the educational professionals and fathers, and bringing it into the exchange. Fathers have their own biography beyond their fatherhood. Fathers with their own experiences of immigration have learned to adapt in many situations.

A few examples are introduced here which have allowed the chance to carry out appreciative fathers work in my opinion.

■ Example of inter-cultural fathers work

Many fathers with histories of immigration experience a devaluation of their origins, since what was important in their countries of birth, is hardly given any attention in their new world. They scarcely enter into conversation about it even with their own children. But there is a need to talk about experiences and to highlight the self-defined differences. Here, I have found the space of an inter-cultural meeting helpful. For example, in the form of an inter-cultural fathers breakfast, fathers talked about what they experienced when they were as old as their children, and where they lived at the time. Here the histories of immigration are also an orientation resource for the children. The differences are illustrated in this way through biographical details, and it becomes clearer who meets who and how (inter-cultural meeting place of the fathers relationships).

■ Example of trans-cultural fathers work

Whilst inter-cultural access begins with the difference in the origins thereby generating the valuable process of commonality, trans-cultural access begins with a shared existence to enable an exchange of individually different experiences which are mutually appreciated. Their common ground can best be identified by exploring the common aspects of their lives. Their origins may be very different but with a closer look, what the fathers want in the ECEC centre, in the neighbourhood or in the town is often very similar. In one project, the home - defined as the living space in which I now feel at home - is the focus, and fathers are given a chance to present their idea of fatherhood. For example, following an accompanied visit to the exhibition "*Baba zeigt Gesicht*" (cf. www.stv-holzgerlingen.de/nika-projekte.php5), many fathers presented their views on the opportunities and limitations of fatherhood in the neighbourhood. Desires, goals, morals and exclusion, social and institutional barriers and sometimes even racism, sexism, etc. are expressed. Their searching revealed here relates to their own ability to act in and contribute to the real life of the neighbourhood.

■ Example of male-reflecting fathers work

Fathers work that focuses its efforts on the heterogeneity of the addressed group picks up on the different aspects which strongly influence being a father. "Coping with masculinity" is always at the heart of this. Just glancing at the so-called work-life balance illustrates specific differences in the courses of action available to the fathers. I experience this particularly intensely in fathers groups with children who have severe disabilities. The everyday stress of accompanying and supporting a "disabled" child and the changes in social relationships and partnerships, are generally managed in a typically male way depending on the "processing programme". In this case other resources and barriers are raised; educational, economic, regional and family-specific conditions. Frankly put, fathers need to "come to terms with the fact" of having a child who "obviously does not function". Here I experienced encounters which I have never come across before in any other men's training courses; desires, hopes, vulnerabilities, taking responsibility also in the couple's relationship and political aspirations, all of which can be openly discussed by fathers with this kind of background. It is my goal to also allow fathers the experience of these proficient meetings who are denied access to them because they lack the experience of a "disabled" child.

Fathers work can therefore start with the mutual points of contact. Whether that means choosing an option that is more active, such as father and child going on a canoeing trip, or one that is based on decision-making, such as an event on the subject of what will be my child's first language, or one that is child-centered, in the form of a fathers evening on a self-assertiveness course with their children,

or just an open event for a fathers group, is up to the facility and, in my opinion not integral to the success of the above. The only point here would be that fathers work is understood as a meeting place for men from very different backgrounds and affiliations and that it emphasises the manifold affiliation dealing with masculinity in a critical way.