

Dedicated Fathers in a Society of Immigrants. The same and different!?

The editors interview Michael Tunç

We interviewed Michael Tunç about the background and practical approaches to cooperation between ECEC centres and fathers from immigrant backgrounds. Michael Tunç has a degree in social pedagogy and since January 2013 has been working in the project ‘Action research for the sustainable development of intercultural work with fathers in NRW (North Rhine Westphalia), a project of the Center for Turkish Studies and Integration Research (ZfTI) conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Labour, Integration and Social Affairs of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (MAIS). The two-year project will evaluate nine intercultural fathers’ projects in order to assess which factors lead to the success of this work with fathers. The project is intended to promote the further development of the participating fathers’ projects and the professionalisation of this field and to help to sustain the quality of intercultural work with fathers in the long term.

Editors: In developing concepts and practical approaches for work with fathers in ECEC centres, the ‘migration background’ (*Migrationshintergrund*) of parents is also an issue. Given the stereotypes associated with it, how meaningful is this term and with it a certain way of looking at an allegedly similar group of people?

Tunç: I would like to approach the question backwards, as it were. When people say ‘migration background’ it is always about a ‘life story’. The term *migrationsgezeichnet* or marked by migration, which was coined by the psychologist and pedagogue Paul Mecheril, suggests that migration has influenced one’s own life story in some way. The dilemma here is, is this something that somebody else attributes to me, or is it something that I can fill with content in a self-determined way? This distinction is subjectively relevant. Given the fact that one’s parents’ or grandparents’ migration exists in an increasingly distant past, it is my impression that the term ‘migration background’ is becoming increasingly ascriptive. People are increasingly being addressed and also invoked in terms of their affiliation. I am concerned that there are fewer self-determined spaces in which I have the chance to fill it with meaning. Instead it is assigned from outside, for example in ECEC centres. And it is precisely there that a gap often opens up: When is my ‘migration background’ meaningful for me, and when do I want other people to see it? And when is it only important for others, but not for me?

To speak of ‘migration background’ and to try to take account of it in pedagogical work is and remains paradoxical: Pat Parker, a Black lesbian poet and political activist, has said that sometimes it is important to take a migrant background into account and sometimes it is important to overlook it. In one of her poems she writes ‘The first thing you do is to forget that I’m black. Second, never

forget that I'm black.' And precisely therein lies the dilemma. It lies in the simultaneity of this task: forgetting and not forgetting. It is the many aspects of migration. For example, people of migrant background are often denied the right to think of this as their home. For them, migration then also means being part of a minority, and thereby also in certain ways subject to discrimination and stigma with varying effects. Often, they cannot escape them. This is already clear in the question 'Where are you from, actually?' 'From Dortmund'. 'Wow, really'? And your parents and your grandpa? And then I cannot escape the questions about my allegedly 'true' origins. This can be simply annoying, or serve as a plainly ethnicising ascription intended to exclude me.

This also applies to ECEC centres that work with fathers of migrant background: to have this sensitivity, to realise when it is important to see it and when it is important for me to simply be treated as a father, the father of a child in the ECEC centre, plain and simple. And I don't start by asking 'What languages do you speak?' or 'What do you eat?' There are always lots of points of entry: 'What other language do you speak' is the gentlest. 'Oh, so you speak several languages in your family.' – Sometimes that can create a positive connection. But what if that simply isn't an issue at all?

If there is some uneasiness, it is important to have the courage to pose questions. 'I'm a bit uncomfortable at the moment', 'I just mentioned your migrant background and language' or [...] 'Was that okay?', 'Was that stupid?' That is, simply to deal with your own discomfort or confusion so you notice something was going on there. And: What exactly was it that made me feel uneasy?

And I think this is precisely what staff members find the most challenging: Showing when they are uncomfortable and confused. Their own insecurity with 'foreignness', with 'How did I just address that?', 'Was that stupid?', 'I actually wanted to say something positive about his particular life situation and it came out wrong' or also 'it was well received'. The context is not always suitable and there is not always space to address such misunderstandings and uneasiness.

Editors: What images of masculinity and models of fatherhood have you discovered from your current research among migrant men? Would you say that there is currently a change in the way people live fatherhood, which is also noticeable among men of migrant background?

Tunc: I like the way you bring masculinity and fatherhood together in the question. Because if I look at men solely in their role as fathers I run the risk of only seeing them in relationship to their child and in the parental role. In order to get a more complete picture I must also look at their history as men. There are many different milieus in which fathers operate. In different contexts, the very same father can be confronted with widely varying tensions with his life script, his masculinity and his fatherhood. How is he in the family? In the workplace? With his child? In the ECEC centre? What group compositions does he operate in? Is he alone among German fathers,

together with two or three other fathers of migrant background, at home? As you see, there are many different contexts, which also change.

Basically I believe there are many changes. Many practice a rather egalitarian gendered division of labour, just like many white families of the German majority, sharing the work of earning money and childcare quite equitably as parents. There is a good portion of so-called new fathers among migrants; this is evident for example in the fact that similar numbers of fathers with and without a migration background take paternity leave and claim parental allowance (*Elterngeld*). Whether I see this, though, also depends on the attitude with which I approach a father. My central thesis is always that I approach the father with the assumption that he is interested in being an active father and I go to him and ask how things are. This applies even when there are concrete problems in a family of migrant background. According to the major representative studies of men, the majority of white 'majority-German' men live in the tension between traditional and modern attitudes. This appears to apply equally to migrant fathers.

It is therefore important on the one hand to keep an open mind, but on the other to ask questions. The dilemma is always that I already have an image of the person; that is true of all of us. But I can only recognise changes in fatherhood if I trust that the fathers are capable of making these changes, otherwise I won't see the change. That is the precondition. Then I have a basis for recognising the fathers' resources. This trust and acknowledgement are the prerequisites for any gender-sensitive pedagogy, which also demands a critical faculty above all else. That is being able to say, 'I was aware of something and I didn't quite understand it' or 'Can you help me to understand it?' I need an open, questioning attitude.

Editors: In connection with our model projects 'Men in ECEC' and with work with parents in ECEC centres people are always saying that it is hard to reach fathers with a migration background. Do you see it that way too, and if so, what might be the reasons?

Tunç: I believe it is important to adopt a dual perspective here, too. I think we are very quick to ask 'What is going on with the fathers that keeps them from coming to our events?' That happens quickly. And yes, perhaps they are somewhat harder to reach than members of the white German majority. But the most important thing is to look: Where are there barriers that prevent (migrant) fathers from coming to my facility, from showing up and addressing issues?

For the organisation it is an important perspective to check its own side: Where are the thresholds? What images do we have in our heads? I need to look at the father's side. What do I know about his everyday life, his family life? If I want to reach him, I also need to ask, to encourage him 'Talk

to me!' That means being open when conversations with fathers occur, or consciously grasping occasions that present themselves.

While I am critical of the terms 'paternal competence' and 'paternal sensitivity', I still think it is important for institutions to look at how we see fathers, what kinds of images we have, or where we see migrant fathers in everyday life. And then to really look. That means making a kind of organisational check, examining our guiding principles, public relations, how we address fathers, where I meet them, modes of work, the visual language of the ECEC centre etc. It is important to keep an eye on how fathers appear there. And there is probably more to be done. Which doesn't mean that I don't ask the fathers anyway.

This questioning attitude is the prerequisite for reaching fathers. I have discovered that it is important that I don't just say from the institutional perspective that there is a reason to work with fathers and that I would like them to come to my facility. It is equally important to get to know the fathers' needs. They also always have motivations and interests and I need to know what they are.

I think for instance that it is easy to make our offerings overly pedagogical. But it is also important to see that fathers enjoy educational activities involving games and leisure and also simply want to spend time with their child. Many approaches in the model projects I know of are not specifically geared to migration or intercultural communication, but simply start by creating space in the first place for fathers using games, fun and leisure activities, usually with offerings for fathers and their children. And I only find it important to go ahead in a second step and say 'Oh, wasn't that nice with the campfire and the tents. We can get together again.' And only then would I take it a step further: 'Why don't we meet without the kids.' To start with it is more accessible to begin with the children and enjoy fun and games together.

On the other hand, I don't believe that it is simply true that fathers don't come if I offer childrearing topics. If I say, we would like to discuss this or that topic, which we offer on theme nights or in various formats, and fathers don't show up, I would consider whether I had actually asked the fathers. 'Have I addressed them directly?'

One option is to post leaflets and posters. It is equally important to ask the fathers – 'Will you be coming?' or to speak to them directly: 'This or that event is taking place next week.' It is also important to ask: Who do I actually see in the facility — is it mothers, fathers? For example, I advertise via the mothers and tell them that the father should come. I know many providers who choose the direct approach and are quite successful. They have a list of people—in this case it is a provider with a father's project— and when I have the fathers' group, I ring them again two days before and say 'We're meeting the day after tomorrow.' 'You know that it is important to come, for

you and your child.’ And I go down the list. Do the facilities want this, can they manage it time-wise? And then maybe one of the fathers says, ‘Sorry, but I’ve been working the late shift this week and doing too much overtime and it completely slipped my mind.’ But then I choose to speak to the father directly, and perhaps the next time around I tell him we are continuing our work with fathers and I would be very pleased if he could come this time.

Addressing people personally this way is very labour- and time-intensive. The approach to building up relationships and trust, promoting events, speaking to fathers directly has to be very well considered. I can’t simply hang a poster saying ‘Come to a fathers’ event.’ It may work, but it may not.

The same applies to migrant fathers. I don’t think that they are impossible to reach. On the contrary, there are many ways to reach them. You have to try different methods and see which ones work and which don’t.

Okay, there may be some very religious fathers who belong to certain conservative organisations, and they are a target group who are quite difficult to reach. We also discuss that in our expert working group on intercultural work with fathers in North-Rhine Westphalia. But I would think that this is a reachable group for the broad majority of facilities, ECEC centres and family centres.

Editors: What have your own experiences been in working with fathers with a migration background? What obstacles have you encountered and what has proved successful?

Tunç: Let me begin by saying: The men can be role models, they can bring something new into the ECEC centre.

In order to tap this potential, an institution can invite an expert with a migrant background who has some connection to the topic of fathers. Under certain circumstances, non-migrant women can also do this, of course. But it can be a good way to look around and see whether there is a local migrant service provider or migrant organisation that might be able to take over this role. In North-Rhine Westphalia we have the RAA, the Regional Office for the Promotion of Children and Youth from Immigrant Families, or the municipal integration centres. But there are also other providers in Germany, that is, regionally diversely structured special services dedicated to issues of migration and integration that one could ask for proposals or cooperation.

For institutions, this can also mean searching for models of cooperation with migrant organisations. They don’t even have to be pedagogical professionals. Somebody who sends a different signal beyond the institution when he gets involved, that is, through a different provider

or someone who can offer us expert knowledge and professionals. The point is to scan the environment for organisations that I think might be resources with relevant experience.

It is also a matter of opening ECEC centres up to people and institutions that might become cooperation partners. Certainly a wealth of ideas and solutions exist in models of cooperation.

Editors: What would you say are the most important points for inclusive, intercultural work with fathers?

Tunç: I find a neighbourhood approach very good. Here I can build bridges to fathers by adopting a social environment perspective: Where are the fathers who I want to reach? If they aren't in the ECEC centre where are they, and where are the places they go to and feel comfortable and secure? For many of them a kindergarten is not that place. Many tend to feel insecure there.

Editors: Given the diversity and the many life scripts of people today: If we look at models of fatherhood and masculinity in the context of work with fathers, isn't there a dominance of the heteronormative gaze? Is there a critical debate about this going on in research on fathers?

Tunç: I know of very little in this direction and I can only share your assessment that this heteronormative framework has received too little critical attention thus far. We need to look at where there are non-heteronormative life scripts: gay fathers, trans fathers etc. I think this is quite separate from ethnic-cultural affiliations or migration or perhaps even social or class positions. I believe that this topic has been largely ignored in the debate about fathers up to now. I find it fascinating to take a closer look. I think this topic is neglected even more than migration. The majority of men who work with fathers—and I would include myself here—always proceed from themselves. You're in this heterosexual, generally middle-class father thing and can't see beyond it. I don't yet have a concrete idea of how we could change this, but a first step would be to at least recognise this in ourselves. I think that most of us are still not saying this is a heteronormative event and actually we are leaving quite a few people out. It would be important to signalise that we are open to the topic and to seek out allies, for example gay fathers, in order to address other groups of fathers. How can I reach all fathers with an inclusive approach and how can I put this into practice? And how do I do this without scaring off others and marginalising myself politically?