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Dealing with Diversity: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Program Mentor Migration SALAM

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Abstract

In the project “Mentor Migration SALAM -Spielen Austausch Lernen Achtsam Miteinander (Playing-Sharing-Learning-Attentively-Together) students mentor a child from a migrant family for a period of 8 months. They spend about three hours of leisure time a week together. The students are assigned to only one child, so they can develop an interpersonal relationship to that child and its family. For the children the project helps to expand their horizons, gaining a wider knowledge of their surroundings, the urban neighborhood they live in, the city itself. The act of students and pupils coming together, offers in itself, lots of learning opportunities: the children are forced to communicate, they negotiate the choice of activities with the students; they explore new places and spaces; they learn something about student life. The students on the other, hand gain a better awareness of how to act in intercultural encounters; they gain insights into milieus they would usually not know or have the opportunity to enter. They can assist the families with any questions regarding the German educational system. 50-70 students per year have been involved since 2009. The Freiburg University of Education, the City of Freiburg and four primary schools are cooperating in the project. The University recruits and selects the students and supports them via supervision. The project is integrated into the curriculum, so that the students can also get credit for taking part. The whole project is regularly evaluated and scientifically escorted. Some of the evaluation results are presented here.

Introduction

Classroom diversity means differences in nationality, gender, religion, social status, income of the parents, capabilities *etc.* For teachers and other educational staff it is important to recognize the heterogeneity, and to respect and deal with each child as an individual. A difference in culture is only one attribute of diversity and is often over-emphasized. Children face disadvantages at school either because their achievements are not good enough or because they are considered to be weak or difficult pupils by the teachers. Supporting migrant and other disadvantaged children in our educational system is an important task towards enhancing their chances towards graduation. Mentoring programs (Mentoring.org, Heinzl, *et al.*, 2007) are one way of supporting and encouraging disadvantaged pupils. Simultaneously, the mentors involved, benefit greatly also. It is a great opportunity for students who wish to work in the educational field, to be confronted through the mentoring system with the reality of migrants and families of various social classes they are not familiar with. It can be an eye opener to learn about their needs, their economic and social situation, their beliefs and desires. The following article will present the Mentoring Program SALAM and its impact on the students involved. Data via interviews, student reports and student questionnaires have been col-

lected and evaluated over the past four years. Selected results are presented in this article, which focuses on the intercultural experiences of the mentors. Other professional skills and the impact on the children will be briefly treated. The theoretical frame is provided by the model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

The Mentoring Program SALAM

At the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany, the program: “Mentor Migration SALAM- Spielen-Austauschen-Lernen-Achtsam-Miteinander” (Playing-Sharing-Learning-Attentively –Together) was established in 2009. Students studying to become teachers or studying for a degree in Social Education, mentor a child for a period of 8 months. They spend 2-3 hours of leisure time a week together. The aim is to support children from migrant and other underprivileged families and to give the mentors the opportunity to use their pedagogical skills and to reflect on the experiences they have. Two aspects are characteristic for the program: Firstly, as the mentors are assigned to only one child, they can develop a good relationship with that child and its family. Secondly, the program helps to expand the child’s horizons, helping it to gain a wider knowledge of its surroundings, the urban neighborhood it lives in, the city itself. The object is not to do homework, in the classical sense, with the children, nor to do special language training. The act of mentors and pupils coming together and interacting offers in itself lots of learning opportunities. (Pietsch, Susanne, 2010; Garlichs, 2004) The children are forced to communicate, they negotiate the choice of activities with the mentors; they explore new places and spaces; they learn something about student life. The mentors on the other hand, gain awareness of how to act during intercultural encounters; they gain insights into milieus they would usually not know or have the opportunity to enter. They can assist the families with any questions regarding the German educational system. The participating children come from very diverse situations: several live in accommodations reserved for refugees; others are children whose parents are divorced; some children are from well-to-do families, but their German language skills need to be improved. When there are more pupils than mentors, the teachers select pupils with special needs (language, behavior, knowledge) or children for whom it is assumed that special help will increase their chances of furthering their education.

The basic idea comes from the Swedish town of Malmo, where the program was named “Nightingale” after the town’s mascot. We have extended the concept and now it runs under the new name SALAM. 50-80 students a year have been involved since 2009. The Freiburg University of Education, The city of Freiburg and four primary schools cooperate in this program. The university recruits and selects the mentors and supports them with supervision throughout. The program is integrated into the curriculum, so that the mentors can also get credit for taking part. The whole program is regularly evaluated and scientifically accompanied. (Wenzler-Cremer, 2010)

The Intercultural Competence Model of Deardorff

Managing diversity requires intercultural competence. Being able to interact successfully with people from different backgrounds, different cultures, different classes, religions, sexual orientations *etc.* should be a basic requirement for teachers. Learning to avoid misunderstandings, to be able to recognize a child's potential, and to reach a good understanding with their parents and families, being able to manage conflicts *etc.* are all essential qualifications for teachers, which enable children to have a successful academic experience and teachers to have a satisfying job. The Intercultural Competence Model of Deardorff (2006, 2009) distinguishes between five elements: (a) Attitudes like respect, openness, curiosity and discovery, which include tolerating ambiguity. These are a basic necessity for increasing intercultural competence. (b) Knowledge: that means: cultural self-awareness, cultural specific knowledge, understanding other world views and sociolinguistic awareness (c) The skills necessary to reach internal and external outcomes (component d and e) which are the aim of intercultural competence are: observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, relating. (d) Internal Outcomes: flexibility, adaptability, ethnorelative perspective and empathy. (e) External Outcomes: "the effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations." (Deardorff, 2006 p. 16). When you analyze these five elements, it is obvious that intercultural competence is a special form of social competence.

Impact on the Students: Improving Professional Practice

Gaining intercultural competence is only one of the possible outcome of this program. Therefore the questions we deal with in the evaluation are much broader: How can the children be supported by the students? Which images of migrants do the mentors have? What challenges will the students be confronted with when dealing with the children and the families? How can they develop professional competence in this program? How can they learn to reflect and question their own thoughts and action?

The impact presented here is focused on intercultural competence. The categories are obtained by coding and analyzing the evaluation data. Following the Model of Deardorff (2006, 2009) the above-mentioned attitudes, are on the one hand a condition for intercultural competence, on the other hand they can also be developed when participating in the program. For most of the students, this is their very first contact with a migrant family. They report that at the beginning they are curious, open minded and prepared to experience something new. But then they realize that skills like listening, observing, analyzing, evaluating and relating to others, *i.e.* basic pedagogical skills are needed in order to cope with situations and challenges they face during the program. During the tutorials, their experiences are discussed and reflected so that new skills, knowledge and competence can be developed.

Intercourse with cultural and other differences – Dealing with otherness

Differences are very often accompanied by strong emotions: they may make us happy, curious, interested, angry, anxious, disappointed *etc.* The need to belong and to feel secure is a very basic need, and mentors in this program can experience first-hand what many migrants feel: that they do not belong, they do not know the language, the rules; they feel excluded, restricted and often discriminated against.

Dealing with otherness is a great challenge. Different rules, different expectations, different ways of life make the meeting exciting, but also difficult. The mentors are shocked, surprised, curious and sometimes amazed to see the poverty, the way the children are brought up, the media consumption, the set roles in the families. When everyone present speaks another language, say Arabic, they feel excluded, because they do not understand a word. They are afraid of being rejected individually or just for being German. They feel out of place and uncomfortable. They fear the others will speak about them when using their own language. Those mentors who are from a migrant background themselves, fear rejection because they are not from the same ethnic background or because they have a different understanding of what it means to be a good Muslim. Their code of conduct, which is culturally imprinted may not be valid in this context. The mentors are wondering when a child, for example, is worried about her Muslim mother being seen without a headscarf when a man passes the open front door. They are confronted by the strict diets some families keep. Some mentors observe that the position of women is different in the family they visit than it is in our society. One child for example was forbidden to accompany her mentor to the tram. She did so anyway and was subsequently beaten by her elder brother, because he felt it was his duty to ensure that his sister behave correctly. The mentors question the sense of some rules and become aware of their own cultural background, because some differences are easier to recognize in contrast.

The mentors' expectations and beliefs

Most of the mentors have a middle class background, so that not only cultural, but also socioeconomic differences become salient. They enter a new world and are faced with otherness. After the first meeting with the child and its family, they often comment on how small and crowded the homes are and what poor quality the furniture is: no toys, little money, large television screens, mobile phones, play stations; that the migrant families of one ethnic group live in the same block of flats with other families from that ethnic group and are only interested in having contact with their own ethnic group. By emphasizing the cleanliness of the flat and the friendliness of the parents towards the mentors and the caring of the fathers towards their children, they give an insight into their expectations and their view of migrants. When asked what they expected, they usually deny having any specific expectations probably in order not seem to have a stereotype opinion. Some do, however, express their beliefs about migrants and their families

openly. These may be summarized in the following picture: migrants are dark skinned, poor, unable to speak German, avoid contact with Germans and are only interested in their own ethnic group. During the course of the program, the mentors' initial ideas start to change, and they realize that many things are not as they expected, and that they used attributes without questioning them. The mentors observe the way the children are brought up and how mass media is being used. They also observe how the eating habits and the handling of everyday objects is different from what they are accustomed to in their own background. Sometimes they do not dare to suggest certain activities and avoid talking about certain topics, because they expect the child or its parents would be against them: for example, visiting the Cathedral of Freiburg with a non-Christian child; going swimming with a Muslim girl. They are surprised when the child or its parents have no problem with the suggestions. In these situations they realize that they must question their preconceived ideas.

Perceiving the heterogeneity of life situations

At the beginning of the program, the mentors often have a very monolithic view of migrant families, but in time, they realize that the category "migrant" is filled very differently. They understand that it makes a difference how long the migrant family has been in Germany, what culture they come from, the religion they belong to, their status in Germany, their right of residence (temporary, or permanent or a rejected asylum seeker), the grade of education the parents have, the family situation. During the exchange with other mentors in the tutorials, they listen to very different stories and become aware, that it is important to perceive the individuality of each child and family. Also when they openly reflect their images of migrants they notice that they have to correct their own ideas about migrants. Being in contact with a single child and its desires, needs, fears and pleasures, they comprehend that, as a teacher, they need to see the individual child rather than just viewing it as part of the group.

Identifying stereotypes and prejudices and cultural attributing

The mentors face situations where "their" child is the target of prejudice. Mentors report of many such incidents, for example when they ride the tram together. People gaze at them or make comments like: "It is very nice of you to care for such a child". There are different strategies in coping with such a situation: ignoring it, leaving the situation, protecting the child by answering back. On reflection however, the mentors also often realize that they themselves are not free from prejudice. One mentor shared that "her" child was accused of being a thief at school. She was not surprised, and then realized that she herself held the assumption that because the child came from an immigrant background, she was more likely to be predestined to become a thief. Another mentor told of his feelings before entering refugee accommodations for the first time: he was afraid of being rejected, of being faced with aggressiveness and meeting criminals, and then he was overwhelmed by the friendliness he experienced. The Following interview quote shows the details:

Interview quote: Mike (Student, 23 years; Mentor in the project Mentor Migration SALAM)

Interviewer: ...prejudices (.)

Mike: (2.0) umm: (--) yes: naturally that was also there (.) umm (.) there were always some little ones= to give now a concrete example that is kind of hard for me (.) but umm: (.) naturally for example at the beginning as I had the first contact with the family, I felt a bit queasy (.) going by myself to the refugee housing (-) because there are different prejudices how people behave there (smiles shyly) kind of aggressive, criminal, so the current prejudices that are around (.) umm (.) naturally I had them at the beginning as well (.) but this for example was dropped completely during the project, so it was a completely different relationship to (---) umm (.) walking over there as it was before (.) it was NOT that all of them are criminal (laughs) but the people all of them were super kind, they were thankful, they were happy (-) umm: and yes such such little stereotypes emerged now and then during the whole project

Text analysis

- Depersonalization (“that was”; “there are”; “there were always”; “that are around”; “but this for example was dropped”) which is shown in using passive constructions and in rare use of personal pronouns
- Markers of uncertainty (umm; “so kind of”; “naturally”; nonverbal: “smiles shyly”) are used. The speaker does not feel at ease talking about prejudices.
- Connection to prejudices, supposed common ground of knowledge about prejudices to migrants (“Yes, aggressive, criminal”; “these naturally I had at the beginning as well (.)”) Mike confesses his own prejudices making his conversion more believable.
- The “current prejudices” have a direct effect on Mike. He does not feel at ease when going to the refugee’s housing for his first time (“at the beginning as I had the first contact with the family, I felt a bit queasy (.) going by myself to the refugee housing (-)”)
- Self-positioning of the narrator: at first he identifies with the socially predominant prejudices (“naturally I had them at the beginning as well”) but this changes during the project. After the experience of contact he presents himself as adaptive and willing to learn. (“but this for example was dropped completely during the project”)
- It strikes that so called “current prejudices” are diminished and belittled (“little ones”). A hedging language is prevalent (“kind of”; “that are around”). The word “naturally” suggests that prejudices are normal. They belong to human’s nature and are therefore excusable.
- Positioning of the inhabitants of the refugee housing as members of a homogeneous group (“all”) by assignment of generalized characteristics categorizing them as “aggres-

sive” and “criminal”.

- Mike puts the “current prejudices” in contrast to his own experience: “criminal” vs. “super kind”; “aggressive” vs. “thankful and happy. Using the superlative (“super”) and an accumulation of positive attributes appears like a compensation to Mike’s previous statements (“but the people all of them were super kind, they were thankful, they were happy (-)”).

Cultural attributes are one way of explaining behavior. In the process of culturalization, culture is used as a static category. When a mentor rejects the invitation for a meal and the father is disappointed, she may explain this by his culture of hospitality. When the mentors observe that the parents have difficulty in dealing with school matters they tend to explain this with cultural difference. Also a different way of rearing children and the distribution of tasks within the family are considered to be for cultural reasons. In general the mentors are careful in making definite statements and of judging the parents behavior. However, in regards to bringing up a child, they tend to view the differences as being of a cultural nature. For example, the fathers are sometimes described as being authoritarian and their Macho-behavior is criticized in subtle ways by being attributed to their culture.

Understanding the other’s worldview and adopting an ethnorelative view

It is difficult to distinguish whether mentors are using incorrect attributions or whether they are really being confronted with culturally bound behavior or rules. Understanding the worldviews of others requires the ability to listen and to observe. Understanding the role and impact of one’s own culture on behavior and communication includes analyzing and evaluating one’s culturally bound behavior and thinking. Mentors who are able to build a good relationship with the child and its family, gain cultural awareness through information transmitted through storytelling and through discussing similarities and differences of what they observe or experience together. By watching and talking they learn a lot about different cultural backgrounds. The mentors gain sociolinguistic awareness, for example, when they realize that although the parents understand literally a letter sent to them from their child’s school, they do not understand the concept of the role of parents the letter entails. Teachers in Germany expect parents to be involved in the day-to-day situation and learning of their children in school. Migrant parents usually expect the teachers to be responsible for the performance of the children in school. Most of the mentors are young women who are greatly surprised by the gender roles they experience in “their” families. It is often difficult for them to accept these differences and this leads to many discussions as to whether this is really culturally bound behavior. In this program, knowledge is not only related to culture bound rules and behavior, but also to information about the situation of migrant families and their reality, the legal status of refugees, social security issues *etc.*

Everybody interprets the world and what happens in life from his own point of view.

However, if one accepts that other people have a different view of the world, and therefore consider things differently, one has to conclude that one's own perspective is relative. In this program, the mentors have the opportunity to reflect on cultural bound rules and behavior. Whether the mentors are able to come to a deeper understanding of the new culture they are introduced to, depends on the openness of both the mentors and the family and also how fluently they can converse with one another. Feeling welcome is the primary condition.

Understanding the other's world view does not succeed in every case, especially when the mentors do not feel accepted by the child or the family or when they do not get enough feedback about their own behavior.

The results of Intercultural Competence: gaining adaptability, flexibility and empathy

In some tandems, one of the challenges mentors face, is the difference between their standard of punctuality and reliability and that of the family's. Mentors often complain that families forget they were coming. With time, the mentors usually succeed in learning to adapt to the situation as it is and in reaching a change, so that their appointments are taken more seriously. Hand in hand with learning to tolerate ambiguity, the mentors need to have a high degree of flexibility: like learning to deal with a situation, for example, when they have arranged to do something together in advance, but when they arrive the child has changed its mind. This could happen with any child, but learning to deal with such cases increases the mentors' professional competence. Empathy is enhanced when the mentors learn to question their own frame of reference and to come to a new evaluation of norms and values of both, their own and of someone else's culture. One mentor, for example, who herself had a migrant background, rejected the idea that women and girls should wear headscarves. However, after spending her time during the program with a nine year old Muslim girl, she rethought her ideas and in her report, she came to a more tolerant viewpoint.

Behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations

This goal can never be reached completely, because the acquisition of intercultural competence is a dynamic process, which does not develop in a linear way. There will be times when the mentors feel they have moved a step backwards and where they will need encouragement. Building a good relationship with children from different backgrounds, supporting them, and coming into contact with migrant families succeeds only when the mentors already have or gain the skills, attitudes and knowledge mentioned above. The term of reference changes and at the end of the program the mentors usually report that they are able to behave in a more culturally sensitive way. One way we observe the change is when the farewell party is being prepared and the mentors request

that a second barbeque table be set up in order to separate pork from other meats. Appropriate behavior means that the cultural norms of the different cultures are taken seriously. Difficulties arise when basic attitudes on both sides like respect, openness and curiosity are missing.

Professional Learning: the mentors have the opportunity to gain professional competence

In Germany it is part of the education of student teachers or social workers that they gain practical experience during the course of their studies. In this program, students learn special skills. The priority in this article lies on stressing the intercultural competence they gain. However, other professional skills attained should also be mentioned. When the mentors are asked what they have learned during the program apart from intercultural competence, they usually name the following: building up a relationship with a child, learning to break the ice, communicating and interacting adequately even when the child is shy, anxious, aggressive, impertinent *etc.*; setting boundaries, motivating the child, negotiating what activities they want to do together, supporting the child expressing its interests and considering what might benefit the child. They learn to understand better how a child thinks and feels. They learn to understand the impact of a child's background and that each child is an individual.

Impacts on the children: What they learn

In this article, the benefits to the mentors have had priority. Briefly, some of the impact this program has had on the children should be mentioned. The experience in this program is similar to what is described in the pedagogic literature (Pietsch, 2010; Heinzel *et al.* 2007). Although the data directly from the children are limited, mentors and teachers emphasize that the program has significant impact on the children (Wenzler-Cremer & Baquero Torres, 2012). In the tandem, the children have the opportunity to train attitudes like respect, openness and curiosity. They learn a lot about their surroundings when they explore places they have never been to before. Many of the children leave their section of town for the first time with the mentors, either because they have never had the opportunity before, or because they have never dared to do so. The mentors often connect this behavior with the attitude of the parents who do not feel at home in Germany, especially when their status of residency is insecure. The lack of fluency in German could also be a hindrance. The children enter whole new worlds when they accompany the mentors to their homes or to the university. Their language skills are enhanced through their learning to communicate with a young adult in German. Their vocabulary increases. Teachers report that the children participate more in school, as they now have more to talk about: they have experienced things outside of the school and what they watched on TV. They develop new ideas about how to spend their free time. The children's social competence increases as they learn to communicate adequately with someone who becomes a good friend and a mentor. Trust, self-confidence and openness are developed.

Conclusion

The SALAM program offers mentors the opportunity to gain knowledge and to develop competence. Learning by doing: surprises, positive changes, success, feelings of happiness, difficulties and disappointments are all part of the experience.

The program receives very good feedback from the mentors, the teachers, the parents and the children. In a few exceptions, difficulties have occurred when a mentor has not been reliable or has underestimated the responsibility she has taken on and then a child is disappointed. Mentors sometimes realize their own limitations and bad time management. These difficulties can however be dealt with in supervision in such a way that all parties can learn from them. Very rarely has a family cancelled its participation in the program because they were disappointed with a mentor or because they were afraid of giving an outside person too much insight into their family. The importance of good supervision for the mentors cannot be stressed enough. When that succeeds and the mentors are able to discuss openly all they are dealing with, then the program is indeed of great benefit to all involved. The benefits for the mentors and the children speak for themselves.

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Further information about the program you find under:
<https://www.ph-freiburg.de/salam/> [5.4.2015]