

How to engage and recruit migrant parents in the school

By Jeane Parker

1. Parent participation and parent engagement. Based on my experience I would like to look at migrant parents from another point of view than usual used in schools.

In general we tend to measure parent involvement in terms of how much they participate in school activities. Perhaps it is necessary to distinguish participation from involvement.

Parent participation is about activities in the school, e.g. helping out with school trips, assisting during lunchtime, assisting reading groups, attending parents evenings. In Holland parents can also take place in more formal institutions like the Parents Board and the Participation Board.

Although these activities are of course very important, they are not the only indicators that parents are engaged and not the only possibilities parents have to support their children's learning. Parents also can do this actively at home, in the street, in the neighborhood and the district where they live. Learning is not only about school learning. There can be all kinds of activities in and outside the school building to support children's learning, that are organized by self-organizations and migrant organizations, but also by the parents themselves. All these activities refer to parent engagement.

The motivation, interest and involvement of parents in the development of their children's learning is far beyond the parents presence in the school building.

Parents engagement contains all activities that parents undertake to support and stimulate the development of their children at home, outside on the street and at school.

2. Problems: Different values and lack of skills.

Parents are very concerned about the developmental process of their children, but specially migrant parents lack the skills to effectuate this concern. Migrant parents are very much aware of the fact that a good education is the opportunity for their children to acquire a better position in society. They also often have very high expectations of school education. Parents of this target group feel often pressed by their surroundings to exchange their own educational style and practices for those of the new society they started to live in. As a consequence they become insecure. The support they were used to offer from their own perspective and frame of reference no longer satisfies. They therefore tend to withhold this support, in spite of the high expectations they have for their children. An Antillean mother complained: "I don't know what to do; how do I deal with my children, how do I deal with school and my neighbours? I want the best for my child, but how can I reach it?" Migrant parents often have a lot of worries and doubts about raising and educating children in Dutch society. The educational goals in the social surroundings of the migrant child tend to differ a lot from the educational and pedagogical goals of the school. Emphasizing autonomy, individuality, independency, taking initiatives, making decisions and choices - as valued in West European society - still are not very much appreciated and therefore not stimulated by migrant parents. And even when they accept these values, parents lack the skills to support their children in their development to self-regulation and self-control. This is by the way also the problem of a lot of professionals in education.