

Taking an interest – the bridge between parents and teachers

By Christof Wiechert, April 2015

Christof Wiechert, for many years head of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum in Dornach, gives some practical suggestions for structuring a relationship which is not without its tensions.

When many years ago the doctor and special needs teacher Bernard Lievegoed was asked what constructive collaboration between parents and teachers might look like, he described for his colleagues the “golden triangle”. At the top are the pupils, at the bottom right the teachers and left the parents. Only if the three legs of this triangle work properly can educationally constructive work be done. If even just one is faulty the whole educational process is disrupted.

Everyone who has anything to do with school and education will immediately see how correct this image is. So what are the conditions for the positive collaboration between parents and teachers? It is clear that parents obtain their knowledge about what happens in school and in lessons always at second hand. That is why it is important to practice open door education. Parents and colleagues can come into the classroom at any time unannounced and attend part of the lessons. Some of our Dutch schools literally had open doors. The parents who looked in obtained an impression of the living pulse of the lesson, of the many processes which have to be managed at the same time. These experiences had a strong effect. Parents saw what was really going on.

But why should colleagues not also visit one another in lessons? Why not use this simple form of intervision and invite colleagues to sit in on a class? And afterwards go for a coffee together to discuss the question: why do you do it in this way? The old image of the class teacher as the solitary, unapproachable ruler who is always right in his kingdom behind closed doors is no longer valid. The king is dead, long live the king! The “new” king is open, transparent, comprehensible in his actions, accessible; he understands that he cannot do and know everything but he knows where to find help for what he does not know. He keeps one-and-a-half hours at the end of a weekday free each week. Parents can then drop in as in a kind of informal surgery. Low level, no advance notice. If no one turns up he can prepare lessons or correct lesson books. It is marvellous for the teach to be accessible for parents in this way to discuss things.

The “new” king holds three big parents’ evenings during the year which are announced well in advance and at which he expects all parents. The other parents can put subjects on the agenda via the class parents. At such evenings he asks the parents how the pupils are doing. Using sketches and drawings, he himself develops a developmental picture of the individual child and pupil in a way of interest to everyone without forgetting a single one and, of course, without a hint of negativity. Then he describes how he achieved the learning goals of the last few months and the ones which are to be achieved in the coming months.

Class trips should not be a main topic at parents' evenings. A waste of time! They can be discussed elsewhere, for example by letter or email. Problems are not, of course, discussed. If there are problems, they are resolved between the parties in a small group. You do not invite all the parents of a class to discuss some problem. That is resolved on the side with those involved. We should always assume that parents are just as busy as we are (or more so)! So we will ensure that the parents' evening is interesting and varied above all – actually as happy and good tempered as the lessons!

Neither will the “new” teacher use the telephone to complain to parents about the behaviour or conduct of pupils. Once the “new” teachers have arrived, Waldorf parents need no longer fear the telephone! The teachers resolve their problems themselves, that is part of the job. How many parents have not been under veritable siege from the telephone over the years!

No parents' evenings at home

But alongside that, the transparently acting teacher will organise informal parents' evenings with always different parents at their home. Anyone who wants to can come along and discuss (no lectures from the teacher!) what happens to be of concern to them. How late should class 3 pupils go to bed? How much pocket money is healthy for a class 5 pupil? What can we do to stop the “terror” of having to wear the right brand label? How do we deal with media in the home and elsewhere? From what age is it “essential” for a child to have a smartphone? Such evenings are refreshing above all because the class teacher does not appear there as the authority but develops perspectives with parents which might be useful in daily life.

And at the end of the year we organise a year-end party for the parents at parents who have a nice garden at which we do not speak about education but enjoy the fact that we can do things together and have a good school year for the children and pupils behind us. This creates a circle of mutual perception and trust. And if it should then happen that a fire breaks out somewhere, there are many who are available and willing to help to do what is necessary.

It is not even worth mentioning that the “new” teacher has all the means of communication which people use today. But at the same time he will ask the school to draw up an “email protocol” which is binding on the school and a protocol for the use of social media which sets out what is discussed between teachers and parents by electronic means and what is not. This acts to prevent great collateral damage in interpersonal communications. Keeping a regular eye on what appears about pupils and the school on social media is recommended for the protection of pupils and the school.

It will become superfluous in future to say that it is above all the virtue in the teacher of taking an interest which builds the bridge to the parents.

No understanding can arise before such a bridge is built and thus no collaboration. We should just consider that the “karmic will” of the child, our pupils, is expressed in the parental home: I want to be with these parents! Criticism of this means calling the pupil into question.

That is the new meaning of that terrible expression “work with parents”. Work with parents must not consist of wanting to convince parents that we are right. Work with parents, if we insist on continuing to use this phrase, should be the invitation to become partners in education via the bridge of interest – the parents out of love for their children, the teachers out of love for their profession and the children entrusted to their care. The parents are the natural educators, we the “societal” ones. A perfect partnership!

Now, disputes can always occur which might have a great variety of causes. It is important under all circumstances that the parents “learn” to articulate their concerns clearly and promptly. Once it has been said, a meeting is agreed. In so-called “difficult” meetings we ask the parents to agree that we are allowed to bring along an extra pair of ears, that is, a colleague. The parents are warmly invited also to bring someone along to the meeting. If serious consequences arise from the meeting, minutes should be kept which are signed by all the participants at the meeting.

If a colleague is fundamentally called into question by the parents, the school management should take him or her “out of the firing line” until the matter has been clarified. It is an important matter: parents can be right in such a matter, they can also be off beam. In other words: preconceived standpoints should be avoided. Power of judgement is required. We have to ask ourselves, is this a job for the whole of the college of teachers or do we find a group which will deal with such cases on behalf of the college? In all such cases level-headedness and prompt action are required. A significant aid is what Steiner called “moral imagination”. That means that in finding a solution for a problem I am always aware of both parties to the conflict, in my moral autonomy I place myself in all the opposing positions which exist and through flexible thinking and a sense of the matter find ways to a solution. Many things are too structured in schools in this respect. Approaching conflicts in a structured way can help but it can equally entrench the opposing positions and block a solution. The human measure should always apply.

Waldorf schools also have a social mission alongside their educational one. And that comes to expression in their attitude to social reality, to their social environment. The top of the list here is an open relationship with the parents. Even if parents contradict all our educational ideals: they do not become partners in education until they feel accepted by the school.

“Work with parents” can be a poisonous mixture of answers to questions which have not been asked, implicit demands and unspoken accusations. It would be best to drop this awful phrase. How about “communication based on partnership”? A lot of Waldorf future depends on this: let us find the way to the hearts of pupils and parents!

Summary of a lecture at the 2014 national congress in Dresden