Informal staff visits

Ideas for professional development from practice and for practice

Verena Plutzar

# 1. The concept

Informal staff visits are a way of finding out about the work of the other institution at the transition from nursery to primary school. Nursery teachers gain an insight into preschool and primary 1, appreciate through dialogue with the schoolteachers what is important for children when they start school and why, and are therefore better able to prepare their children in the final year of nursery for what follows. At the same time, teachers gain an insight into children's preparation for school and can learn about what children know and are used to, and are thus able to facilitate the transition.

The best option for partnership between nursery and school teachers is through "tandems". Each partner in tandem learning is both learner and teacher, and the partners alternate between these roles. Neither is in charge of content or organisation. Each is an expert on their work and their institution. The tandem structure also promotes the development of a relationship between the learning partners. Learning together can build trust, on which basis even the difficult aspects of the partnership can then be discussed.

# 2. Chances and development opportunities

Informal staff visits are the best way to learn from each other. The opportunities are as follows:

## For the guest/visiting teacher

* You get to see something new in action
* You get to see something familiar in a new form
* You see other options and can compare and assess your own work on that basis
* You can observe how others approach situations that you may find challenging
* You gain a whole host of impressions and insights
* You can decide what you want to observe and pursue your own questions
* ...

## For the host/teacher visited

* You see yourself with new eyes and are able to detach yourself from your own actions
* The feedback gives you a new perspective on what you do, on the children or on a given situation
* You can get specific feedback on specific questions
* ....

# 3. Potential concerns associated with "classroom observation"

The idea of being visited by a colleague can give rise to the following concerns, especially when the visit is termed "classroom observation":

* Control and judgement
* Showing weaknesses or not being as good as you would like
* Gossip or criticism behind your back
* More preparation required – extra work
* A different atmosphere in the classroom affecting work with the children
* ....

Guidelines E 5.1 and 2 are designed to deal with these concerns by providing a clear structure.

# 4. Important aspects of informal staff visits

* Individual, in tandem partnerships: one person visits another person and the visit is then returned (no visits to one person by an entire group!).
* The visits are discussed before and after, offering an occasion and starting point for informal professional discussion.

# 5. Possible structure of visits

**1. Organising visits**

* + Find a colleague whose teaching interests you
  + Explain and establish the objectives of the visit
  + Exchange contact details
  + Agree a date and exchange addresses
  + Arrange a time for the pre-visit and post-visit discussion

**2. Conducting visits**

* + Preliminary discussion
  + Visit
  + Post-visit discussion

**3. Organising the next, return visit**

# 6. Guidelines for structuring visits

We have developed two guides to provide help with and reassurance during visits, address any concerns and focus attention. These two sets of guidelines are as follows:

**E 5.1 Guidelines for preliminary discussions on informal staff visits (for the host)**

*This is a guide to what can be discussed with the host teacher to ensure that the visit is as stress-free as possible for them.*

**E 5.2 Guidelines for observation during informal staff visits (for the visitor)**

*This is a guide to what can be observed during an informal staff visit and how you can constructively structure the subsequent discussion.*