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Chapter

Multi-Family Groups in Schools: A Systemic Approach to Support Students at Risk

Lena Varuna Wuntke, Joachim Köhler and Kathrin Mahlau

Abstract

Educational opportunities are still heavily dependent on the parental home. For this reason, support concepts are needed that not only focus on the child but also its environment. With the so-called multi-family groups in school, a schooling approach has been found, in which at-risk students can develop social and emotional skills and experience self-efficacy in their learning. The book chapter comprises three parts. First, it provides an overview of the development and international dissemination of the concept. It then describes its implementation in Germany, looking at how it is actually put into practice in schools, identifying institutional measures and resources. Finally, the chapter provides an up-to-date overview of the research situation and discusses current research findings and needs. The outlook points to a promising innovative support system that can strengthen the academic performance and mental health of students in a holistic way by promoting cooperation between different stakeholders.

Keywords: student performance, at-risk students, mental health, multi-family groups, social and emotional learning, epistemic trust, mentalization

1. Introduction

Ideally, the school should be a place where children achieve knowledge, skills and important competencies for life. However, up to 20% of school students struggle with difficulties, such as learning and/or behavioral problems. These students, often at-risk of failing school, require temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically. Causes for underachievement and school problems are often multifactorial [1], whereby the parental home—still—proves to be a strong factor in terms of children's educational trajectories and opportunities [2]. With a view to an increasingly inclusive school system, there is a need of effective prevention concepts that not only focus on the child but also its environment.

With the so-called multi-family groups in school [3], a schooling approach has been found, in which students with particularly complex risk constellations can develop social and emotional skills, build self-confidence and experience self-efficacy in their development and learning. With a complex structure, multi-family groups aim at having a lasting influence on the relationships between all involved

participants (children, parents, teachers). The central view is that education and upbringing are more successful when all those involved in the children's education work together as partners. In multi-family group programs, family and group therapy approaches are implemented. The methods of peer feedback and change of perspective used here are primarily based on the development of mentalization skills and epistemic trust [4, 5]. The origins of the support approach lie in the psychiatrically and psychotherapeutically oriented multi-family therapy (MFT) [4], the positive effects of which have been proven in numerous studies [6]. Since its adaptation for the school setting in England in the 1990s, school-based multi-family work has spread throughout Europe [3, 7]. As the approach is still new, it is important to consistently demonstrate its effectiveness in educational settings. Initial results from quantitatively and qualitatively collected data show that the concept has great potential to initiate a variety of change processes [3, 8, 9]. However, scientifically sound statements on the impact factors, effectiveness and sustainability of this approach are still lacking [10].

This chapter gives an overview on the history and development of the multi-family groups in schools and shows their international dissemination and concrete implementation in Germany. Main theoretical and methodological foundations of the concept are introduced. The chapter concludes with the current state of research and an outlook on the potential and further development of the multi-family groups in school model.

2. Development and international dissemination of the concept

The support approach multi-family groups in school is based on the concept of MFT, which has its roots in the clinical field. Since the 1940s, family therapy has developed against the background of a systemic perspective. Based on an interdisciplinary, systemic approach developed by Walter Lorenz, social work and psychology were combined in order to support disadvantaged families [11]. The idea was subsequently transferred to the school context [12].

The concept of MFT assumes that mental disorders are not to be sought in the individuals themselves, but arise in dynamic interactions and communication processes within the close psychosocial environment. Around 60 years ago, Laqueur and his colleagues [13] initiated therapeutic interventions for schizophrenic patients and their families. The families were involved in discussions about home life and treatment issues in order to improve communication within the family. Several families took part in the sessions and developed ideas for solutions together. These meetings were called "protected family communication workshops" and took place regularly, with families benefiting from the experiences of other families. Positive changes in communication and in coping with family crises could be observed, both during the sessions and afterwards [11, 12].

In the 1970s, the ideas of MFT work were transferred to the clinical school sector and adapted to the needs of multi-problem families [14, 15], who are confronted with problems, such as violence, school failure, mental illness, substance abuse and social exclusion. These families were accompanied over several months and a therapeutic community was created, in which the families supported and learned from each other. The therapists took a low-key role so that the families were encouraged to develop their own coping skills. This marked a paradigm shift in the role of therapists, who no longer acted as authoritarian helpers, but as supporters and companions [11, 12].

From the 1980s, the Marlborough Family Day Unit was established in London [14], in which therapy was initially very intensive and lengthy (8 hours a day for up to a year). Over time, the program was shortened so that the families stayed in the facility for an average of only 12 weeks. During their stay in therapy, the families experienced a structured daily routine with frequent transitions and tasks that promoted their ability to help themselves and cope with crises. A key component was working with videography, which gave the families a meta-perspective and helped them reflect on their communication patterns. The videos were used not only within the family group but also in the home environment to work on changes and improvements [11, 12]. Another innovative element was the so-called “Reflection Meeting” [16], where the family support workers met every 2 weeks to share their observations made within the families. These meetings were also videotaped and allowed the professionals to view the dynamics of the families from an objective perspective and identify strengths and weaknesses. Through the use of video footage, families were able to independently decide which parts of the conversation to reflect on, allowing for an active dialog about the dynamics observed [11]. This circular reflection process contributed significantly to transparency and openness and strengthened the trust between the families and the professionals [12].

In recent decades, the Marlborough Family Day Unit has set standards in working with multi-problem families and contributed to the development of a model that has also been applied in other European countries. Particularly noteworthy is the successful transfer of the approach to school contexts in Germany. The aim of multi-family work in schools is to support children who should be excluded from attending regular school or who have already been excluded. The focus was on involving parents in order to achieve long-term changes in both the children’s behavior and the family dynamics. This model has been further developed in various European countries, established in different types of schools, continuously adapted to the needs of parents and children in order to strengthen families in difficult circumstances [12, 17].

Another important element in the international dissemination of multi-family work is international exchange and research. There are numerous scientific networks and conferences at which practitioners and researchers from different countries exchange their experiences and results. This contributes to the further development and adaptation of the method to the respective social and cultural contexts. For example, the “Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Multifamilientherapie,” based in Wetzlar (Germany), is an important forum for the exchange of specialist knowledge and cooperation between European countries. New scientific findings and best practice models are regularly presented on these platforms, which further strengthen the international use of multi-family work [4].

3. Implementation of multi-family groups in Germany

Since the 1990s, the methodology of MFT has been further developed by Michael Scholz and spread throughout Germany [18]. Initially, it was only implemented in clinical school settings. Under the name “Familie in Schule” (“Family in School”; FiSch), it was first introduced as a prevention program in schools in Schleswig-Holstein in 2009. Individual projects were subsequently also established in Hesse and Bremen with names like “Familienklasse” (“Family Class”) and “Familienklassenzimmer” (“family classroom”) in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania [3, 7]. Various multi-family group programs now exist throughout Germany, with

the exception of Saarland and Bavaria. The programs vary depending on the region in terms of funding, organization and implementation. Many of these services have grown out of the project phase and have long-term implementation with secure funding [3].

A central feature of all projects is that several families are actively integrated into the school context as part of a joint group program in order to promote the children's academic development. The aim is to motivate families to support and help each other. All services focus on achieving behavioral goals, continuous support and presence of parents within the school environment. The work in multi-family groups in schools is primarily carried out through a combination of teaching situations, proven multi-family therapeutic methods and exercises. These are implemented by teams that usually consist of a teacher and a multi-family coach.

The application of MFT approaches requires a training, which is offered by specialized providers. However, there is currently no standardized, specific qualification for implementing multi-family groups in schools in Germany, which leads to significant differences in the services offered. In some projects, the multi-family groups are accompanied by family therapists who often come from the field of youth welfare and have systemic training. In other cases, teachers and other educational staff undergo joint and/or further training to enable their cooperative implementation. In addition, certain projects focus on the classroom situation in conjunction with targeted parent coaching, while other programs focus on family dynamics and MFT cooperation exercises [3, 7].

There are also clear differences in the structural design of multi-family groups in schools. While some offers are firmly linked to individual schools, others bring the families together regionally. The federal state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania plays a pioneering role as the "family classroom" established there are an integral part of the state's inclusion strategy. The first "family classroom" was introduced in 2010 at a clinic school, and from 2013 the offer was gradually implemented at elementary schools in the region, leading to the development of numerous projects over time, many of which are now firmly established. In 2023, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania had just under 60 "family classrooms" at its 350 elementary schools.

The implementation of multi-systemic support at regular schools in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania involves up to eight children spending once a week a morning together in the "family classroom" with a caregiver (often a parent) and a systemically qualified coach team consisting of a teacher and a supporting educational specialist (e.g., social or special education worker). The aim of this format is to use various methods based on systemic theory as described in the next chapter [4]. A central element in many "family classrooms" is also a learning theory-based approach using token systems (reinforcement systems). The reinforcement plans are developed jointly by the children, parents and the coaching team and are based on the child's individual behavioral goals. These plans accompany the child's development both at school and at home.

4. Theoretical and methodological foundations of multi-family groups

Participation in multi-family groups has the overarching goal of coping with the demands of everyday school life. This includes learning new patterns of behavior, acceptance of rules and structures, a positive change in learning and social behavior and better integration into the regular school class [19]. By using different methods,

the multi-family group approach aims to create a protected space, in which mutual counseling, support and sensitization to patterns of experience as well as the recognition and practice of alternative behavior are possible. In this way, resource-oriented perspectives are to be developed among all those involved [4]. Successful cooperation between children, parents and the coaching team is intended to strengthen relationships within the system and create the basis for the joint development and implementation of problem-solving strategies. Building on this, the multi-family groups in schools model aims to promote children's learning success, further develop parents' parenting skills and, by transferring the strategies to the home environment, have a lasting positive influence on children's development across contexts and systems [20]. The following key concepts are at the forefront when working with multi-family groups in schools: voluntary nature of participation, appreciation of all participants, the promotion of self-help and self-reflection, the creation of an environment conducive to learning, the joint definition of development goals and accompanying parent coaching by multi-family coaches, de-stigmatization, elimination of isolation, experience of success, learning, reflection and change processes [3, 8, 18].

The theoretical foundations of multi-family group work at school are based on systemic and group therapy approaches, with the mentalization concept playing a central role in the structure and methodology. This concept was developed in the early 1990s by Fonagy and Target [5] and combines elements from psychoanalysis, attachment theory and empirically oriented developmental psychology. Mentalizing describes the ability to recognize the grounds for one's own and the behavior of others, such as emotions, desires, thoughts or goals [21]. Limited mentalization skills often manifest themselves in limited problem-solving skills, a rigid perspective and little curiosity about the views of others. These deficits can lead to difficulties in regulating emotions and communicating effectively [3]. Research suggests that poor mentalization skills are often related to inadequate attachment experiences in early childhood. On the other hand, difficulties in perceiving one's own mental states and those of others can also impair attachment relationships. Mentalization-oriented therapy [5] addresses these challenges and aims to specifically promote and develop mentalization skills. In addition to improving these skills, the MFT methodology places great emphasis on strengthening attachment relationships and building epistemic trust [3]. The latter describes the fundamental trust in a person's reliability as a source of information [21, 22]. A loss of this trust can impair social learning [23] and have a negative impact on academic success. In the multi-family groups in schools model, a variety of systemic and group therapy techniques and methods are in use in order to promote mentalization skills and epistemic trust. Selected key characteristics and skills of coaches that should underpin their implementation are described below, along with examples of some concrete methods [3, 4].

Central to the success of multi-systemic work is the paradigm shift in the role of the therapist. The coaches have to take a step back and hand over responsibility to the parents. In doing so, they, so to speak, put themselves in the back seat or in the co-pilot position, respectively. Key questions for the coaches are: "What should we as coaches do so that the parents can take responsibility for their child? How can we achieve that the group can work actively and independently?" The coaches flexibly assume different positions in the group (multi-positionality). For example, after an interaction has been introduced (coach as "context maker"), the coaches first take a step back and gain an overview of the group interactions that are taking place. In doing so, they adopt a flexible meta-position between closeness and distance [24].

Using the so-called five-step model [25], a basic systemic technique, the coaches then begin to steer the interactions within a multi-family group, for example:

1. Observation (“I notice that...”): Conspicuous or problematic intra- or inter-family interactions are formulated neutrally and without judgment.
2. Comparison of perceptions (“Did I understand that correctly?”): Observations are compared with the family’s perceptions; no insistence on observation if this is not shared.
3. Evaluation (“Is that okay for you?”): Affected family and its members are invited to compare assessments.
4. Change request (“How would you like it to be?”): Family members are invited to share their ideas about possible changes.
5. Action (“What would you say or do to make this happen? What would be the first step?”): Family members are asked to think about how to achieve this change.

Other methods coaches use to initiate group therapy processes are e.g.:

- The “mentalization loop” [21] works in a similar way to the five-step model. However, the focus here is more on mentalizing in a recursive process of continuous reflection and review (“loop”) so as not to focus too early on changing behavior.
- In the “role reversal/play” method, mini-role plays are carried out that reflect realistic situations at school or at home. It is exciting and amusing, for instance, when children play adults (e.g., the mother/teacher) and adults play children. The method opens up space for discussion and reflection.
- “Speed dating for problem solving” is a quick interview format that is convened at short notice in order to initiate quick and direct problem solving and to develop different perspectives on issues. For example, children (in the outer circle) advise parents (in the inner circle) and vice versa. The respective mini-consultations should not last longer than 2 minutes [3].
- The “fishbowl technique” is a Reflecting Team method. In an inner circle, individual members (e.g., the children) discuss a specific topic, while the other group members listen in an outer circle. After a while, the positions are swapped and the group members in the outer circle (e.g., parents) reflect on what they have heard in the inner circle. After another change, the children in turn reflect on the parents’ reflections.
- During the “flashlight,” an interaction is temporarily stopped to stimulate mentalization (Coach: “The atmosphere here is quite tense. I think we should take a short break and think about what just happened.”)

Good group cohesion is fundamental to multi-family work. At the very beginning, the topics of confidentiality and respect for privacy are therefore discussed together

and rules are laid down. Various icebreaker exercises and other techniques are used to build mutual trust and break down the feeling of stigmatization/isolation. The coach also plays a central role here, for example by encouraging the group to share feedback and “aha” moments and to talk to each other about problems or resources (Coach: “You talked about how you once solved this situation at home. What did you do again to make it work?”).

Multi-family groups in schools are usually organized according to a similar basic structure. At the beginning of the family class, the child, parent and coach agree on three or four behavioral goals for the child that are achievable and measurable. The goals are based on what needs to change in order for the child to behave more appropriately and to be happier and more successful at school. Based on the reflection of the past week’s achievements, topics and specific objectives for the multi-family group meeting are identified. As part of a joint activity, exercise or game, the families should experiment with the new ideas, develop different perspectives and practice new skills. During a joint reflection on the experiences and insights gained during the activity phase, the focus should be on intentions, needs and feelings (mentalization skills), in addition to observable behavior. Reflections about the goals set or their transfer can take place during an activity or afterwards. In the transfer phase, considerations are made about how the new ideas, behaviors, skills and experiences can be transferred to the family and school environment [3].

The objectives, methods and structures described in this section outline the underlying concept of multi-family groups in schools and can be understood as its theoretical framework. A look into and out of practice shows that MFT initiatives in school are largely based on the principles described here. When it comes to the specific content and focus, however, educational institutions sometimes take very different paths.

5. Current research findings

The multi-family group approach has already received widespread research attention in the clinical-therapeutic field. Numerous studies confirm the effectiveness of MFT, even if there are still research gaps [6, 26]. In contrast, there is much less research in the education sector [7], where multi-family work has been evaluated in isolated cases and mainly through qualitative studies to date.

Various studies on school-based multi-family work have been conducted in German-speaking countries. The evaluation studies by Bischoff-Weiß [27], Erzinger and Disler [28] and Schwenzer [29] used guided interviews to capture different perspectives. Parents, class teachers, special needs teachers and employees of the youth welfare office were interviewed. In addition, observations were made in order to observe the application of the concept in everyday school life. The results of these studies show a high subjectively perceived effectiveness of multi-family work in schools. It is particularly emphasized that the exchange between all stakeholders involved is intensified. This helps to break down existing communication barriers between school and home and promote greater cooperation. In addition, the relationship between children, parents and teachers improves, which is seen as the key to positive changes in children’s learning and social behavior. Other studies concluded a positive change in the children’s learning and social behavior. It was reported that children increasingly develop greater self-confidence, resolve conflicts more constructively and better integrate socially into the classroom community. Also parents

seem to benefit from participation, as they report to have learnt new educational strategies and improved their communication with the school, which then led to a more stable and supportive learning environment for the children [3, 8, 9].

Most studies have so far primarily focused on the perspectives of teachers and parents [27, 28]. In order to illustrate possible mechanisms of action from the children's point of view, the subjective experience of students was surveyed in a recent study [30]. The study focused on how students experience the "family classroom" in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The sample consisted of 12 elementary school students—six boys and six girls—from first to third grade. The episodic interviews [31] followed a semi-structured guideline and were evaluated with the content-structuring qualitative content analysis [32]. This resulted in a differentiated category system that divided the children's experience into four main categories: conceptual experience, emotional experience, social experience and learning and development experience. The analysis shows that the children perceive the "family classroom" as a fundamentally positive and enriching place to learn. Many students reported a pleasant atmosphere, being calmer and safer than their regular school environment, enabling them to try out new behaviors and become more comfortable in social situations. The students were very positive about their individual support, which manifested itself in small-step assistance, a slower pace of work, tasks tailored to their learning level and regular reinforcement and encouragement from parents and coaches. The children particularly appreciated spending time with their parents, which for many was a new and valuable experience in the school context. A key finding of the study is that various elements of the multi-systemic concept can be found in the children's statements. They explicitly perceived aspects of learning theory, such as the target point plan, token systems and natural reinforcers. The children's comments also provided evidence of the development of self-efficacy and positive beliefs. The statements of the children show that they benefit from the supportive measures, encouragement and recognition from adults and other children. In addition to the positive experiences, some students described initial insecurities, personal failures or social conflicts that they had experienced. Some students had difficulties clearly stating their own learning goals or the reason for their participation in the "family classroom." This suggests that the concept is not always sufficiently transparent for the children. Based on these results, the study suggests that there is a need for action to increase the transparency in multi-family group models and thus empower the students to be more self-directed. This could help children to better understand their role in the program and take responsibility for their own learning process. Overall, however, the results of the study support the conclusions drawn so far about the impact and effectiveness of the multi-family group model. At the same time, they provide important new insights into how the concept is perceived by the children themselves.

There has also been little research into the construction and reconstruction of the roles of teachers in "family classrooms" and their view of students and parents. To highlight the relevance and potential of this research, a brief overview of the theoretical background will be provided. The "family classroom" provides an interesting basis for analyzing the institutional role of schools and their actors. As a social institution, schools fulfill various functions [33], which are expressed in their mandate to educate and raise students. In Germany, this mandate is organized by the legislator in the form of compulsory schooling, whereby children and young people are assigned the social role of students. They must take on this role and act accordingly. In this sense, school as an institution not only has an educational effect, but also constructs the social role of students. It acts as a socializing authority that makes the child identify as a student and

behave in accordance with institutional expectations [34]. Teachers play a central role in this process. Their task as part of the school's mission is to establish and consolidate the role of the student in children and young people. In doing so, they are not only guided by curricular requirements, but also by socially defined standards of what "teaching" means and what behavior is considered acceptable at school. These standards directly influence how teachers perceive and assess student behavior. The "family classroom" offers a crucial perspective in this context, as children's behavior there is often perceived and labeled as "disruptive," but this depends heavily on teachers' subjective assessments. These assessments are not only based on professional expertise acquired during their studies and further training, but also on individual constructions and meaning-making in relation to the behavior of students [35]. The teachers' understanding of their profession—i.e., their understanding of what teaching means and what goals they pursue with their teaching—plays a decisive role in their motivation for pedagogical intervention. Teachers actively intervene in students' behavior in order to steer it in the direction they want [36]. The self-construction of the teacher role, understood as the individual way in which teachers develop their professional identity and pedagogical stance in the educational context, has long been the subject of research. Fuller and Brown [37] and Hubermann [38], for example, describe various developmental phases of the teacher role, while more recent studies have increasingly shed light on the power structures and institutional framework conditions that influence this self-construction [35, 39, 40]. The "family classroom" can thus serve as an indicator for the self-construction of teachers and specialists in elementary school due to its concept and its embedding in the inclusion strategy of the federal state to successfully implement inclusion. As research on this specific aspect of teachers' self-construction in connection with the "family classroom" is not yet known either nationally or internationally, a study was conceptually prepared as part of the evaluation measures of the nationwide project "Qualitätsoffensive Lehrerbildung" in 2022 [41]. Due to the subject of the research and the exploratory nature of the study, it was decided to follow the interpretative paradigm of qualitative social research [42] and to conduct narrative interviews in order to record the subjective views of the teachers in detail. Two groups of respondents were selected for the study: The first group consisted of 10 teachers who teach at schools where the "family classroom" is offered but are not actively involved in the concept themselves. The second group consisted of 12 specialists who work directly in the "family classroom" and have already completed systemic training. The latter are therefore familiar with the principles of the systemic approach and apply them in their daily practice. The selection of these two groups enabled a comparison between the perceptions and self-constructions of teachers who tend to view the concept from the outside and those who actively implement it. The data collected were analyzed using the content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz [32]. This method makes it possible to develop a category system and compare the statements of the two groups. Initial interim results indicate that the systemically trained specialist staff have a differentiated and appreciative perception of the students, particularly in their attitude toward them, which relates positively to the students' strengths and their biographical backgrounds in order to create a pleasant atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

6. Conclusion

Students who show learning and behavioral difficulties early on in their school career and are therefore at risk of school failure need early, preventative support.

Causes and problem situations in the areas of emotional and social development and learning are multifactorial [1, 43], which is why environment-centered approaches can be more effective and sustainable than child-centered approaches.

The multi-family groups in schools model appears to meet these requirements due to its systemic orientation. First research results show that it is a promising innovative support system that can strengthen the academic performance and mental health of students in a holistic way by promoting cooperation between different stakeholders. The fact that not only teachers and parents can identify positive effects, but also the students themselves, is therefore highly relevant [30]. Larger-scale studies with a wider spread of respondents could increase the validity of the results. However, the implementation of multi-family groups in schools differs not only between the federal states in Germany, but also internationally from location to location [44]. It would therefore be interesting to conduct comparative studies on the experience of students, parents and coaches in different locations and countries. Additional information on the concrete implementation of multi-family work should be collected as a basis for the evaluation.

The presented results also point to causal changes in measurable constructs such as self-efficacy as well as internalizing and/or externalizing problems. In order to investigate possible effects and effectiveness factors of school-based multi-family work in more concrete terms, quantitative, standardized methods should also be used in future research efforts.

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Conflict of interest


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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