

## CASE STUDY:

# AN EXAMPLE OF TAKING TIME TO RUN THROUGH THE DISCOVERY PHASE AND WORKING UP TO THE DELIVERY PHASE

**Liaison inside the school:** Supporting action development with a stable group of parents

**School type:** Primary education

**Country:** Belgium

**SIREE partner organisation:** City of Mechelen

### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Abeel School is a small, multicultural educational institution situated in a social housing neighbourhood (Gandhi district) in Mechelen, and is a branch of the primary school Maurits Sabbe. It has a high percentage of *“indicator students”* (over 90%) designated due to, for example, the mother’s low level of education or because they receive an education allowance. The migration background of parents is diverse and Moroccan parents are highly represented. Many parents are not familiar with Dutch, and have a lower economic status. The school reports some bottlenecks related to the diverse background of pupils, in for example music classes and school visits in which boys and girls are mixed.

### **INSTALLING THE FIRST LEARNING COMMUNITY (LC)**

Before setting up the first LC, ideas and expectations were exchanged with the school board and guidance counsellor. **Transparency** and **honest communication** were considered of vital importance for success, meaning all parties should be free to openly express their concerns to work constructively. Teachers were informed about the objectives of the project by the board, and the facilitator of the city of Mechelen, by being present at the school twice a week, gained the trust of teachers and the board.

She helped create the collaborative network with the partners, Samenlevingsopbouw (Community Development), Het Huis van het Kind (House of the Child) and the J@M child and teenager work group. Expanding the school’s network with these partners remains essential for the continuity and viability of the project. Parents were informally invited at the school gates one month before the start of the LCs, and the J@M group, located near the school, helped with distribution of flyers. This required quite some work but was ultimately a good way for the facilitator to meet the parents. Also, in the school corridors and on parent-teacher night, the facilitator was given the opportunity to introduce herself and explain the purpose of the SIREE project. These informal moments by the start of the first LC ensured most people had heard about the project, making it quite an intensive approach but certainly worthwhile in the end.

The LCs were held in the teachers’ lounge with free coffee and tea. When we first started, we noticed both the parents and teachers were not accustomed to this form of contact. At the beginning, some parents remained standing to make space for teachers, but gradually more chairs were added. Both parents and teachers were given the opportunity to get to know each other. They entered into a dialogue which encouraged a kind of mutual respect.

A bond was created in these brief but valuable meetings between parents and teachers when talking about topics such as fears and conflicts between students, as they worked towards the same goal of the future of their children. In the first session, we started with a group of nine parents, where we used the icebreaker of the ideal dream school tool.

Each parent, working in pairs, discussed their dream school. They were asked to explain drawings they created and through these the most important community needs were outlined, so we could then devise concrete actions. **The key topics mentioned within the LCs were education, communication, homework, and an open school culture.**

### **PROGRESS OF THE SESSIONS**

Parents were quite diverse in terms of education levels: some were illiterate, others only able to write in their own language and some were not used to using a pen. The ages of the mainly female participants varied between 28 and 48, and included those with Maghrebian, Russian, Iraqi, and Belgian roots. New parents were encouraged to join by teachers, the guidance counsellor, and through word of mouth. Some mothers were also invited by the city's Community Development team that joined our sessions after a few months via the school start-up project. Some had to leave the group due to pregnancy or relocation.

**The role of the facilitator is crucial within the LCs.** The facilitator had a migration background that lowered certain barriers for parents, as she could talk to them in their mother tongue. An advantage was she could frame and emphasise the added value of the project to parents, and this created connectedness and made them feel at ease. With these weekly sessions, the parents were given the chance to quickly become part of the group. This enabled us to begin a process, develop activities and create a school policy that would be wholly supported by the parents. The sessions were also translated for the whole group.

**It was great to see how parents really began to feel at ease in the teachers' lounge after several LCs.** The need to whisper during the sessions disappeared, and they gradually felt empowered and dared to ask questions. As a group, they were given a chance to participate in how the school is run and their opinions mattered. This was a key incentive for many parents to continue to attend sessions. Ideas were exchanged and implemented, and together we were able to contribute to school policy, which was not always easy.

**Sometimes the attendance rate was low.** We reminded parents about the LC sessions via WhatsApp. During one session, only three partners were present and none of the parents. A guidance counsellor linked this to an arts and craft activity. According to her, the parents had no interest in joining this activity without discussing their interests. Next to the content or programme of a LC, some statements could provoke indignation or friction among the parents, teachers, and partners.

Another situation that created friction were prejudices and misconceptions towards parents. Some of the parents had to move to a new house within a social housing district. This had impact on the attendance rate and provoked prejudices that they would only come if there was gain for themselves.

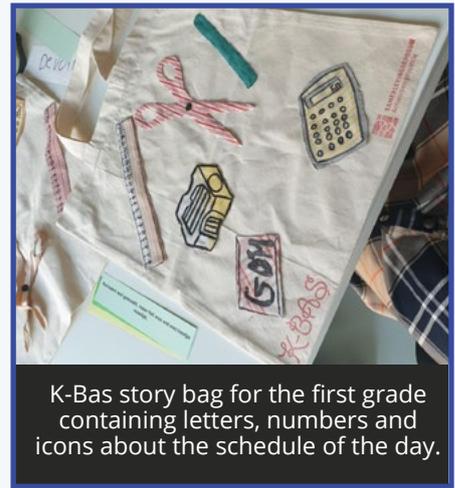
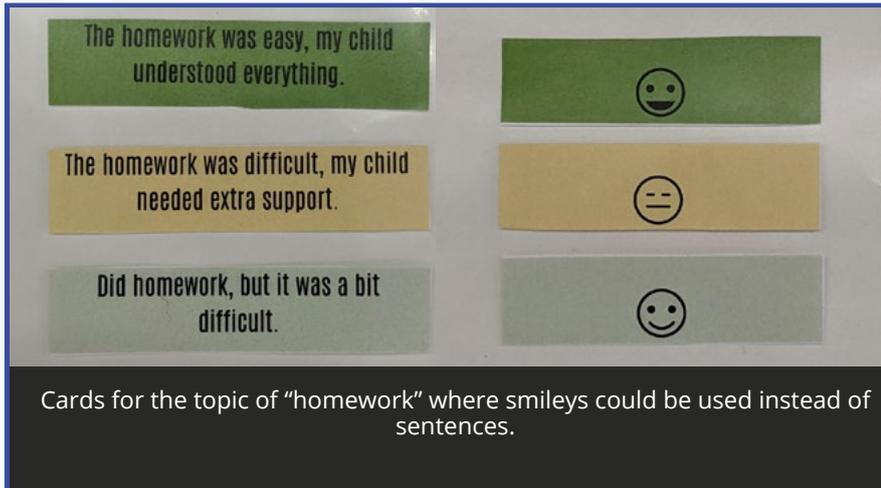
Everybody is looking from their own perspective towards a situation. At such moments, listening and reformulating goals are crucial to re-create a shared context. At the first session after the incident, we asked parents about the frequency and quality of the previous sessions. Together, we then decided that no one wanted to reduce the frequency of the sessions. This open and clear communication with all partners is vital. **Only by continuing to hold an open dialogue during these sessions were we able to build up trust and create an equal partnership.**

## **ACTIONS**

### **Action 1: K-Bas - story bags**

The story bags included the parents' valuable experiences, expectations, and concerns. During the sessions, the educational themes inside the bags were chosen and compiled by parents, and included healthy food, homework, school and parents, potty training and the smooth transition to kindergarten.

The bags helped provide a means to actively contribute to school policy, and were financed and jointly made possible by our valued partner, the city's Community Development team.



We started using the K-Bas story bags also in cooperation with the House of the Child organisation and J@M. Due to the Covid-19 virus, some bags were made by students and one of the partner organisations.

## Action 2: Vegetable market and fruit distribution

In February 2020, together with Ecoso VZW, the city of Mechelen started the Foodsavers food distribution platform. This platform was founded to support social organisations and initiatives that provide food support in various ways. During the weekly meetings with the parents, we decided to start up a vegetable market and fruit distribution programme. On the days of the sessions, the city (via Foodsavers) distributed snacks, vegetables, and fruit. Parents peeled the fruits to later distribute in classrooms, where they had never previously visited. The school, parents and facilitators were convinced this contributed to bridge the gap between parents and the school.



Parents cut fruit to serve in a bowl to pupils, and a vegetable market at the school.

## Action 3: Socratic method

Only pupils participated in the Socratic method, where children were seated in a circle and a subject is chosen in advance. The following themes were mentioned – halal, haram and friendship – this method stimulated pupils to exercise self-reflection and a critical attitude with the ultimate goal being to encourage children to seek answers to social problems on their own. A goal was to anchor this method within school lessons.



## Action 4: Playground policy

The unattractive playground and the conflicts that take place there gave a reason to re-evaluate playground policy. This shared concern became a point of action where parents, students and teachers all participated. Due to the Covid-19 virus, the teachers and managing board were not able to choose one of the playground designs created. The following pictures show drawings related to the pupils' ideal design of the playground.