

CASE STUDY: AN EXAMPLE OF HOW STUDENT VOICES CAN BE HEARD

How to create a better atmosphere for students and teachers in secondary schools.

School type: Secondary education

Country: Belgium

SIREE partner organisation: ARhus

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

MSKA and Burgerschool are both secondary schools located in the city centre of Roeselare. The first is part of the GO! Network and organises reception education and different tracks in the mainstream program, whereas the second is part of the Sint-Michiël group and only offers technical and vocational education. Both schools have a large number of pupils arriving from reception education as compared to other schools in Roeselare.

They struggle with a bad reputation carried from the past, which is reflected in the way their pupils are perceived by others, e.g. they are excluded from certain festivities that should be open to all pupils of the city such as prom night. Their engagement in the SIREE project was initially and mainly driven by the observation that many pupils have an opinion about or difficulties with their school that are never heard by their teachers, the school or somebody else. Both schools have a very diverse student population and want to bridge the gap between pupils and teachers, so it would be easier to pick up signals from the students.

INSTALLING THE FIRST LEARNING COMMUNITY (LC)

ARhus and the city of Roeselare were brainstorming about the opportunities SIREE could offer for the benefit of the pupils from MSKA and Burgerschool. Instead of restricting ourselves to a select group of students and teachers, we wanted to reach and question as many as possible. Accordingly, we piloted an extended Learning Community (LC) in two random classes at both schools, where teachers and pupils were separately questioned about their wellbeing, the quality of their classes and their relationship with each other. Due to the success, we decided to implement this in other classes during two consecutive days.

Every pupil received a letter from their class teachers, which explained the goal of the dialogue day and introduced the project staff of SIREE. Since the dialogue days took place during school hours we did not have any difficulties reaching the pupils. The practical organisation was taken care of by ARhus and colleagues from Groep Intro and youth workers from the City of Roeselare. Since Burgerschool has a student council, they were also involved in the organisation and lent us a hand during the dialogue days by asking pupils the questions, talking with them and helping them during the brainstorm. The days were organised at the skatepark, TRAX Roeselare, since most of the youngsters know this place and it is centrally located.

During the two days, every student and every teacher from the schools was questioned via Mentimeter – a presentation software app for lectures, seminars and training sessions. We made statements like: “I feel/don’t feel good at school”, or “I feel accepted by my school or peers”. In between the questions we discussed the answers more in depth. Following this, we had a brainstorm activity in groups of four to five students. Every group got to choose a predefined subject that they thought needed change.



Listening to the students and their ideas.

All their ideas were collected on large sheets of paper that we later summarised in a report and shared with the school principals, supporting personnel and teachers. This format was very successful since it provided plenty of information and ideas about how the school can do better for teachers and pupils, such as evaluate the sanctions policy or offer more recreation within the school walls. The next step was: how to transform these ideas into concrete actions.

PROGRESS OF THE SESSIONS

The group of participants changed every two hours, since we questioned every class from each school for two days. During these days, teachers were also involved and questioned. We chose to separate teachers from students as we wanted students to feel comfortable and be honest with us. Based on the report of the dialogue days it became clear that the sanctioning policy needed an evaluation. Students believed it was old-fashioned and not based on valid arguments.

By looking into it, we realised there is a stereotypical image of immigrant youngsters wearing tracksuits. Some pupils explained tracksuits are often cheaper than other clothes. Yet, both schools have strict rules about casual wear, which discriminate against low-income families who do not have the means to buy more expensive clothing. During the dialogue days we also came to the realisation there is ambiguousness among teachers when it comes to certain rules. Some teachers allow miniskirts, others do not. Some teachers have no problem with students drinking water during class, others threaten with punishments. Things like excessive make-up, fake nails and ripped jeans are also not welcome in school, while pupils see it as an experimental phase of their development. These are also things that help define their identity and allow them to feel like they belong somewhere. Since school is a place where you spend most of your time, students find it important to feel good, accepted and free to be themselves.

The biggest obstacle we bumped into was the fact students are often forgotten. When organising a meeting, they are rarely invited. Consequently, pupils do not feel they are taken seriously which had an impact on their participation during the dialogue days.

For some it was the first time they were asked to voice their opinion about the school, and many had little confidence that anything would actually happen with their input. One student who was asked why he did not want to participate answered: *"You can't do anything for us! Nobody listens to what we say anyways."*

This attitude was most common among students from the third grade up. Since they had the longest experience in school, they had become a little demotivated to participate. Apart from the fact they were not interested, we had difficulties to connect with them and noticed that peer pressure had a big influence on their willingness to cooperate. Some



were showing off or gave "funny" responses to our questions. As a group, earning their trust was a big task. But when we had one-to-one conversations during the brainstorm, the responses to our questions were more sincere. For example, when we asked a student what he meant by "no unfair punishments anymore" he told us sometimes teachers punish him when he is innocent. That makes him show more deviant behaviour and he often refuses to do his punishment duties. *"The more they punish me, the worse my behaviour gets"*, he said.

During the discussion of the brainstorm he told us teachers should talk to troublesome students more instead of sanctioning them for no reason. We also experienced an obstacle when trying to connect with girls from certain ethno-cultural communities. They found it easier to confide in our colleague who has a migrant background. Because we wanted to include their opinion, we offered to have an extra meeting with them during school hours and lunch breaks. Unfortunately, they kindly declined and wished no longer to be part of certain activities.

WHAT FACTORS FACILITATED THE PROGRESS?

We had the privilege to work with very motivated teachers and other staff in both schools. They were aware of the mistakes they sometimes made and were open to receive feedback. Since youth workers from ARhus and colleagues from Groep Intro had a lot of experience working with youngsters, their advice was taken seriously.

There is still some work to do but the willingness and motivation of the school is very pleasant to work with. It was also a huge help to work with a diverse group of colleagues who, from their expertise, were a positive addition to the project. The people from Groep Intro were already familiar with the schools, and their pupils thanks to their own projects and presence in the schools.

The youth workers from ARhus connected easily with the students since most had heard of them or followed them on social media ([HACK](#) – a youth work project ARhus run). One of the youth workers had a migration background, making it easier to connect with the pupils who had a similar background. Like there are prejudgements about immigrants, immigrants have prejudgements about native Belgians. Therefore, in LCs, having the target group represented among colleagues can create an extra added value.

ACTIONS

Following the pupil's recommendations in the report, the initiatives below were taken.

Action 1: Reform of sanctions policy

The school personnel of the Burgerschool listened to the arguments of the students and agreed that it was time for an update. Class hours were dedicated to brainstorm sessions with pupils. Certain bad behaviour was matched with the correct sanction based on the "4-layer model", a model that helps teachers find the right sanctions for certain bad behaviour and operate in a correct but human way.

After some meetings with the school staff and other stakeholders it was decided that the new sanction policy will be implemented in the school year of 2021-2022.

Action 2: Diversity festival "B-land"

Based on the report Burgerschool's student council came with the idea of organising a diversity festival, B-land, where all kinds of workshops would be offered to learn more about the culture of pupils with a migration background. Activities such as learning some new words in Romanian, Russian or Moroccan, dressing up in traditional clothing or learning dance were meant to celebrate diversity inside the school. Pupils and the school staff were involved in the working groups where brainstorms took place (Annex 1). Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, the festival was cancelled.

Action 3: School party

MSKA also wanted to organise an end-of-the-year school party for all the students. During a "dialogue day" students could give input among other aspects about the music, workshops and food (Annex 2). Those interested could write their name on a list so that we could add them on the previously made closed groups on Facebook. Because of Covid-19, the possibilities of a virtual festival are being explored.

Action 4: Diverse student council

The student council of Burgerschool was traditionally "elitist and white", but since the first dialogue days it became more diverse and more accessible for new members from all kinds of backgrounds. Before, the student council chose who was welcomed as new members. Nowadays, everyone can be a candidate and become a student counsellor, regardless of who you are and where you come from. They are welcomed and there are no difficulties working together since they do it already at school.



THE ADDED VALUE OF THE LC SESSIONS

The project was put on hold just before the coronavirus crisis and the LC meetings were finalised. Both schools already confirmed the continuation of the project for the next school year (2020-2021). Given all the circumstances, it is too soon to make a proper evaluation of the impact on the involved parents and pupils. It is however clear that the schools did manage to shift their focus from parental involvement to pupil involvement.