

CASE STUDY: AN EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY COOPERATION

Engaging migrant background parents and pupils in school through community-school cooperation

School type: Primary education

Country: United Kingdom

SIREE partner organisation: Medway Plus

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Phoenix Academy is a junior school for students 7-11 years old, situated in the Chatham Central Ward, which serves one of the most disadvantaged communities in Medway. The school has a 387-student place capacity, where 37% of the student body is of migrant heritage. There are currently 43 different countries and languages represented at this school. The teaching staff has worked extremely hard over the years on engaging these children and immersing them into the English education system, while trialling many strategies to limit the impact this may have had on their students' wellbeing. Care and diversity are just a couple of the core elements by which this school operates.

For them, the single biggest issues faced by the school and its families had always been the language barriers of these represented communities and concerns around the lack of support services for children and families in the wider Medway areas. There are many complex issues the school faces daily, so it was sometimes at a loss as to how best to engage with the migrant parents. The school's data and testimonies concluded it was particularly hard to engage parents especially in the area of their children's education, and teachers worried this would significantly impact on those migrant children long-term. Motivated by the SIREE project and a willingness by the whole school team to implement changes, Phoenix would become an active participant in the SIREE project.

INSTALLING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY (LC)

It was important to the Medway Plus team to represent the SIREE project, but we were also mindful of the need to approach our engagements with sensitivity and understanding to the migrant community, where they could contribute to the project based on their own individuality and set of beliefs – as much of our data had concluded they often felt isolated and excluded. We knew this because of the significant work and activities Medway Plus had already delivered to the communities in previous years. With these experiences in mind, we set up an informal meeting at the school, to put forward the aims and objectives of the project. With the help and support of the school's Special Educational Needs (SEN) teacher and Phoenix Project Leader, we began the implementation of the SIREE project.



Entrance to Phoenix Academy with welcome in several languages.



Noticeboard of different countries on a day of celebrating International Culture for the students.

It is vital to note the project leader has direct responsibility for those migrant children's education and a wealth of knowledge and understanding of her students which has proved valuable. For the purpose of the project, it was felt she would be in the best position to move it forward. From this initial meeting, we collectively decided we needed to set up a series of face-to-face meetings with other staff and personnel so we could explain the project in order to engage them. Here we would be able to spend some time getting to know and talk to those directly involved in the school structure and understand the school policies and frameworks.

We were extremely grateful the school's management board saw the project's potential and gave us free rein to deliver activities, they have also allowed us important time and space to manage the project. As long as we were careful to operate within the school's guidelines

and procedures, Phoenix School backed us fully. At the very first meeting with the School Administrative Team, we realised one of our first challenges was that we would not be able to gather any information directly involving children or their parents. Because of the UK's schools' safeguarding and confidentiality policy we knew this could significantly limit getting direct information and access to children, especially unaccompanied refugee children. While they could appear as a number, they could not be named. This had an impact on the numbers of participants we were able to record, although we know the numbers of those that may have benefitted from the project. We can only guess how many newcomer families and students we have reached.

The second challenge we faced was if this project were to work effectively we would need a team approach. This kind of approach means everyone on the project team has equal responsibility for its success, and Medway Plus could only facilitate this by arranging regular meetings on the school sites. Over a period of weeks and months we knew we had to be familiar figures within the school so teaching staff, parents and even students felt a sense of familiarity and presence. We did not feel it would be beneficial to promote an activity and turn up on the day like some of our other schools had wanted. It is vital to the project we were part of the wider Phoenix team. Our concerns were short-lived and unlike some other schools we encountered, Phoenix agreed and embraced our team wholeheartedly.



Display of SIREE project on a day of celebrating International Culture for the students.

PROGRESS OF THE SESSIONS

From our initial LC meetings, we began to engage with a cohort of regular staff. These teachers were all enthusiastic, had a special interest in migrant education, and attended almost all of the LC meetings and activities. Their involvement provided children and families with security, familiarity, and trust, and they were the voice of the parents and students that allowed us to understand some of the issues they face, which included not knowing school routines or what their children were learning.

Equally there are those staff and personnel who only felt compelled to contribute their thoughts and feelings regarding certain matters and issues at different stages along the project. These included issues around how to safely manage the traffic of parents coming in to attend the SIREE activities in a safe and structured way. Of course, in terms of attendance and activity function we worked together to address these important school procedures in a very careful, monitored way. We always welcomed advice on the activities and the purpose of these engagements, and because of that mutual respect it was kindly decided the school would free up a member of staff who would always be present and willing to support us.

Those staff have attended different LC meetings and activities, and have contributed many useful ideas. For example, at the beginning of the project we were finding it difficult to engage with parents. After explaining our frustration to teachers they suggested we could have early access to the school grounds to chat with parents, and they would be there to introduce us. It has become clear their involvement has laid very solid foundations for us to work with, and they enabled us to begin to build relationships with parents.

Another example of their work was explaining that migrant families very rarely came to school, but would happily watch the after school football team. We developed the idea to trial a summer club on the school premises. Teachers helped to think outside of the box, and shared that migrant parents did not let their children attend extracurricular activities, because of a fear of actively engaging with the school. Although not the success we hoped it would be, as parents did not engage, it proved extremely useful for future engagements, as we discovered that you cannot plan activities you believe may work without actively seeking the views of parents first.

A plus was more teachers were sharing vital information with others in the team they had not been aware of. One specialist teaching assistant explained to us that one of her parents liked to watch his son playing football in the playground, but because of a language barrier he did not know he could be invited into the school grounds to watch his son. She was able to share these details, and that meant in future information would be given out in multiple languages to include all parents.

ACTIONS

We are glad we sought views of all frontline staff as an action, as we feel this mix of voices that included parents and students has contributed to the effectiveness of the project.

Action 1: The Young Language Ambassadors

It has also motivated staff and families to contribute to what was our ultimate success: The Young Language Ambassadors. An action whereby students support the wellbeing of other migrant pupils through buddying up schemes and playground friends. The ambassadors can be the voice for new migrant children who do not yet have the language skills to express their thoughts and feelings. Knowing parents are engaged when it involves their children has been the breakthrough we needed, and they have commented on their pride in the children's achievement.



The Young Language Ambassadors presentations.

The Young Language Ambassadors in its infancy was created with an intention to support other migrant children within school – we did not realise just how it would engage their parents. The success of this activity has been adopted into other schools and all have commented on its effectiveness. We all agree without the SIREE project this would have been impossible. The Young Language Ambassadors initiative is something the school and the SIREE project are very proud of, and at several of our events we welcomed pupils that have been awarded certificates of achievement.

Action 2: Teachers Learning Community

Our Teachers Learning Community has given us a platform and a way of promoting SIREE to their families that we may not have achieved if we had not worked as a team. We have put together some fantastic actions like our coffee mornings, which allowed us to develop our community advocates scheme to be able to enlist non-migrant community parents to support and befriend other migrant parents. Also, our engagement days where we could celebrate the work of the SIREE project and share the real experiences of what it would be like to be a newcomer living in the UK.

Action 3: English class and community cook-ups

Behind the scenes the teachers understanding the aims of SIREE were out there having gentle conversations with migrant parents who were reluctant to enter the school gates, let alone come to any activity. It is their information that led us to more family-based activities, which were our English class and community cook-ups where we were able to provide English lessons to migrant families and share dishes from families' homelands. We talked about the recipes and shared stories while cooking and eating the food in a very informal way. We were able to fully engage with our migrant families.



Learning Community activities – cook-up club (left) and community advocates (right).

They are their own voice now for migrant families and were instrumental in gathering information we could use to move this project forward. They have a voice and much still to do but within the LC meetings, there was empowerment.

Everyone felt useful and part of the wider community that has been a powerful tool. Having those parents on board means the school can continue long after the SIREE project has finished.



Learning Community event – launch day at Phoenix Academy.