

CASE STUDY: AN EXAMPLE OF INVOLVING THE SCHOOL AS A REAL PARTNER

Getting school staff to focus on parent-teacher relationships

School type: Pre-primary and Primary education

Country: Belgium

SIREE partner organisation: VIVES University of Applied Sciences

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Vrije Basisschool Vlam is a pre-primary and primary Catholic school centrally located in the Barakken, a multicultural suburb of Menen. The school hosts around 200 pupils and has become more diverse over the past decades, and has been struggling with this recent and swift change. The teaching staff has shown great motivation for transformation to address the changing needs of parents and children. For several years, they were actively looking for new ways to improve the relationship with parents, and to have all participate during formal and informal meetings. Their actions had limited success, partly because the school staff developed those actions without consulting the parents themselves.

INSTALLING THE FIRST LEARNING COMMUNITY (LC)

The headteacher was very enthusiastic about SIREE and she wanted us to present the project to the teachers who were excited, but had some concerns regarding the extra time they needed to invest. The headteacher arranged for substitute teachers to take on the duties for participating teachers at the LCs. **Our first LC community session was organised with the entire teaching staff, where we wanted to build on previous experiences – what they had already done to improve the relationship with parents, what worked and what did not.** We also wanted to know from teachers what they perceived to be existing challenges. This helped us to create a support basis among the school staff for future changes. It became clear teachers were particularly struggling with, and felt frustrated about, parents who did not show up during formal and informal meetings.

Other challenges included efficiently sharing information, creating trust relationships with parents, networking with external organisations, and extracurricular parental involvement. For the second LC, the focus was on **dialogue with parents**, and sessions were introduced as “school talks” (schoolbabbels) to emphasise the informal character. The headteacher was present as much as possible, which helped parents feel listened to and gave the signal the school was serious about improving relationships. The liaison officer acted as a bridge between the parents, the school, and the municipality.

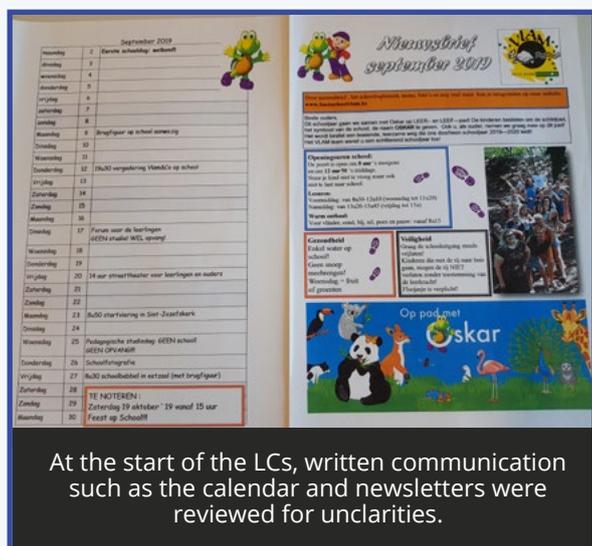
To keep the sessions alive, a meeting was scheduled in between two LCs with the headteacher to re-emphasise the possible actions of the previous session and discuss the planning for the next meeting. In this way we ensured we had approval of the school staff about the direction in which we were going. The LCs were scheduled on Friday mornings just before language classes for the parents, meaning they only had to come to the school once. Invitations were handed out a week before sessions, which took place in the centrally located school dining room.

Parents could bring their young children and beverages were available to create an informal and welcoming atmosphere. The first meeting with the parents was mainly about getting to know each other, the project and building trust. We also initiated an exercise where we asked parents to think about what they liked about the school, and what needed to improve. For this exercise we split parents up into two groups, and the Vives facilitators offered to write down their comments – as for some writing in Dutch was too difficult and we suspected others were illiterate.

Positive experiences related to supportive and friendly teachers, the pedagogical vision, activities for the children, the green environment of the school and the ethnic and cultural diversity. Suggestions for improvements included welcoming foreign language-speaking newcomers and making them familiar with school regulations, better information about hot meals and including a halal option, and inviting parents in the school and the class during informal meetings.

PROGRESS OF THE SESSIONS

The sessions were organised every two months, and each one would start with a short talk from the headteacher on the previous meeting. She explained once why certain changes were not possible – such as organising a school bus or halal food – and would answer any questions that parents had. This proved to be one of the most important parts of the meetings, especially as time went on and parents felt more secure to voice their concerns, as often there were interesting dialogues about themes not on the agenda. It allowed for a necessary exchange of perspectives and motivated parents to keep showing up because they felt that their voices were heard – even though this did not always result in an actual change. Issues that were discussed during these dialogues were concerns about Islamic children who had to attend church celebrations, about young boys and girls who had to change their clothes together for gymnastic classes, and unclarities regarding written communication. For the VIVES facilitators this also meant they often had to be flexible to change the agenda on the spot, and to partially let go of what was prepared beforehand.



At the start of the LCs, written communication such as the calendar and newsletters were reviewed for unclarities.



Professionally designed invitations were introduced to attract parents.

The LCs focused on themes mentioned by parents or teachers in previous sessions, for example about communication, parental involvement with homework, and language at school and home. The methods used were adjusted to the target group with lots of visual material such as pictures and

illustrations, and translation of text in the most used languages (Dutch, English, French and Arabic). For non-Dutch speaking parents, we made use of translations by other parents and the facilitators, as well as translation apps. We also made sure to work in small groups, so everybody could be given the chance to voice their opinion. We ensured we did not have a lot on the agenda as progress during the sessions was slow, which mainly resulted from translations that had to be done to keep everybody on board.

On average there were around 10 to 15 parents present during the LCs. There were sessions during which very few were present, but this mainly had to do with timing – it was Ramadan or just before the holidays. We also noticed after around four or five sessions less parents came, after which we decided to pay more attention to **making the project more visible in the school.**

A small SIREE project corner was created at a central place in the school and professional invitations and posters were designed, which were handed to parents by the Vives facilitator a few days before the next session. On the day itself, one facilitator would approach parents in the schoolyard, and the other would welcome them at the door. These changes, in addition to the actions – large and small – sparked renewed interest for parents to attend sessions.

We also believe the facilitators play a role in attracting certain participants. Whereas in the early sessions there was a great variety among parents with respect to gender and ethnicity, in the later sessions this changed to a more homogenous group of mainly Arabic-speaking mothers. With respect to the absence of men this could be the result of them being in the minority from the beginning, but also that the facilitators were both female. The presence of an Arabic-speaking facilitator with a migrant background proved essential to connect with Arabic-speaking participants to keep them motivated to come to the sessions. To keep parents motivated to attend LCs and share their opinions, it was

important the full co-creation cycle was completed and moved beyond the first dialogue stages. This is not always easy, especially when the school does not see the need to implement actions proposed by the parents, or when there is willingness but not enough time, energy, or financial resources to take action. In these instances, the facilitator can act as a bridge to find means that both suit the parents and school, and by ensuring that proposed actions stay on the agenda. It also helps to implement some “quick wins” from the early stages meaning actions that do not require much input from the school team, but show the parents are being listened to.



ACTIONS

Action 1: Consultation of local actors

Centre for General Wellbeing (CAW), was invited to talk about its operation e.g. homework support groups, play library, language classes for children during the holidays and parenting support. The liaison officer also presented an overview of local possibilities for adults to learn and practice Dutch language skills.



Islamic parents attend the school's Christmas celebration

Action 2: Visit to church celebration

In response to questions and concerns posed by mainly Islamic parents about the role of their children during church events, the school invited parents to join the Christmas celebration. Parents will also be invited to join future church activities.

Action 3: Wi-Fi in school

The school made the Wi-Fi code available in corridors to allow parents to make use of their translation app when communicating with the school staff.

A few actions were put on hold as a result of the Covid-19 regulations:

Action 4: Farewell camp for final year students

It was discussed how to organise this, keeping in mind the financial, cultural, and other concerns of the parents. The initial idea is to organise the camp on the school premises, so parents who wished to go home after dinner could do so. Parents are also asked to help with the food preparations.

Action 5: Overview of local support networks adjusted to the target group

The local authorities responsible for integration will be asked about the possibilities to put together an easily accessible overview of the local support network.

Action 6: Dutch language classes for parents at school

The headmaster proposed to host regular language classes for parents at school, so they can improve their Dutch language skills. In this way education-related themes can be integrated into the classes and it offers another opportunity for parents and school staff to meet. The classes will be organised with and by parents. At least one parent who is fluent in Dutch has offered to teach the parents.