

Roma Empowerment and Support for Inclusion

Case Study

Ghent, Belgium



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On behalf of project implementers a special thanks goes to all the children and parents involved regardless of their color, abilities, language, nationality, ethnicity and religion.

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We love to blur boundaries when working together with education staff; social workers; early childhood specialists; etc. in order to come to an effective collaboration. We build bridges between institutions and between people.

*(Coordinator, Bridging Figures
for Intra-European Migrants)*



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PURPOSE OF THE CASE STUDY

The present case study is aimed at providing an accessible narrative to share promising practices and lessons learned with other actors in the field around early childhood inclusion approaches. This case study is developed based on the information provided by the implementing partners and data collected during visits in countries, and focusses on interventions carried out between 2012 and the present in the project co-funded by Bernard van Leer Foundation, focussing on Roma communities and residents within the City of Ghent in Belgium.

CONTEXT

Since 2007, the number of people migrating to Ghent from a Central or Eastern European countries has increased. Statistics up to December, 31st 2015 indicate that the largest migrant groups arrived from Bulgaria (8,184), Slovakia (1,823) and Poland (1,370). The City of Ghent refers to this new migration as 'Intra-European Migration' or 'IEM'.

“This target group of newcomers are often insufficiently acquainted with our educational system. The challenge is to make them familiar with our educational system. Many parents often think that we only play silly games in the classroom. [...] That’s why some parents underestimate the importance of sending the children to school. I notice this during talks or meetings with parents. Here the challenge is to introduce the parents to the classroom and to the school”
(Teacher, pre-school).

The Roma is a significant ethnic group among recent migration to Ghent. It is estimated that at least 4,000 Roma from Bulgaria and 1,500 Roma from Slovakia are living in the City. The main push factors for these Roma are poverty, racism and discrimination in their countries of origin. They are all coming to Ghent with the hope to find a better future in Western European cities.

The circumstances in which some Roma families live in Ghent are far from ideal. Reports indicate exploitation in labour and housing markets, human trafficking and badly paid illegal work (especially among Bulgarian Roma) and precarious living conditions and squatting (especially among Roma from Slovakia). However, they still believe that their life in Ghent is much better than in their countries of origin.

The City of Ghent is well known for its integration policies. Ghent is also active on European level and is the Chair of the Eurocities Inclusion Task Force. Recently the City of Ghent developed the "Ghent 2020" strategy which aims to launch a social movement. It invites all 'creative forces' in society to promote sustainability, openness and solidarity in the City and emphasizes the important role of Early Childhood Development and education in general in the process of inclusion.

The City of Ghent policy in relation to migrants is not based on ethnicity and it follows European “explicit but not exclusive targeting” guidelines, following a uniform approach across all IEM groups. It operates a two-track policy: on the one hand, efforts are made to integrate the newcomers into the social fabric of the city. On the other hand, the law is strictly enforced when it comes to minor criminality, and the misuse of residence and labour permits. However, the right to education and healthcare is guaranteed, even for people without legal residence.

Flanders has an excellent reputation in terms of average school performance, but this masks persistent variations due to existing social inequalities. Children can be enrolled into the free kindergarten from the age of 2,5 years. Although attendance is not obligatory, almost 90% of children from general population attend kindergarten. Kindergartens are connected to primary schools and thus help to prepare children for attending primary school.

When it comes to the educational position of IEM and Roma pupils in Ghent, interviews with Roma parents carried out for the evaluation of the project identified three different but connected clusters of challenges: limited attendance, especially at kindergarten level; learning and development delay, with irregular educational careers and consequent referral to special education; and lack of parental involvement. Cultural differences gave rise on occasion to frustration and incomprehension on the part of the school staff and a tendency to talk about differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’. When school teams spoke about the challenges of working with IEM student and parents, they rarely focussed on language as an issue.

A significant proportion of Roma pupils start primary education without any kind of school experience or prior knowledge of the usual rules, structures and expectations. This in turn contributes to the limited attendance at school, underachievement in school results and the continual draining away of Roma pupils from their further education progression.

When families cannot meet their basic needs, education slips down their priorities. Parents get involved with their children’s education depending on what they think and what they know about education, how they respond to it emotionally and how much effort they are prepared to make.

¹ Boost, D. Wauters, J. and Timmerman, C. ‘Brugfiguren intra-Europese Migratie: Report of the Project Evaluation’, for the Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS), University of Antwerp, 2016

If parents have little understanding of the school system (because of their own lack of education), they are less likely to be involved with the schooling of their children and this appears to be related to truancy. Parents' feelings about education in general and their children's school specifically are also significant. We found that they seemed to worry about their children, about leaving them behind at school, in the care of others. So IEM pupils miss out on school not only because their parents lack of knowledge but also because they do not trust the schools. These two elements are interwoven: knowing seems to affect trusting. Therefore, it became obvious that preschools/primary schools have to take time and care to inform parents about daily life and practice of the school through a clear communicative dialogue. It was also noticeable that the efforts that parents were willing to make in getting involved with schools were galvanised when their children showed that they were happy at school.

Roma children are often disproportionately represented in special education in both their countries of origin as well as in Western European education systems and in Flanders also, pupils with a migration background are more often referred to special education. This can jeopardise the future career of these students and seriously challenges the notion of a meritocratic society in which everyone can rise to a level that is commensurate with his or her abilities and commitment, regardless of factors such as origin and ethnicity.

Given this background, it is not surprising that only 1% of the Roma population in Europe goes on to higher education with a direct impact on their prospects in the labour market and therefore also on their chances of freeing themselves from social marginalisation.

To support its integration policies, the City of Ghent has three conciliation pathways that are focused on intra-European migrants: Anchor figures involved in the work environment, Neighbourhood stewards promoting community cohesion and the Brugfiguren Intra-Europese Migratie (BIEM) who mediate between IEM families and the education system to secure the fundamental right of IEM children to access education. This case study relates to the placement of 4 BIEMs in Ghent to mediate between families of Roma school pupils and the school system.

The response of the City of Ghent

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED

The city of Ghent had clear idea of the work that they want to do. In the partnership with the BvLF they managed to integrate the role of BIEMs in the city budget. They also involved their Pedagogical Institute in the coordination of the project and quality insurance. The Elke Decruynaere, the Alderwoman of Education, Upbringing and Youth for Ghent was also personally engaged in the project implementation.

Bridging Figures - The School Mediators Intra European Migration Project

The BIEM Project was implemented to improve communication between schools, families and the neighbourhood. The tasks of the professionals that are expected to build these bridges are defined in three main segments:

- support of parents,
- sensitisation of the school team and
- cooperation with the neighbourhood.

Indirectly they were also focusing on contact with children.

The BIEM project took place in four schools in Ghent, all of them having large numbers of IEM children, many from homes where Dutch is not the first language. These schools shared many of the challenges that the BIEM project set out to address while also having individual characteristics.

School 1: Het Kompas Special Education Elementary School (School principal Manu Van Dijck) is a school for children with learning difficulties from 6 to 13 years old, to which pupils can be referred by a Student Counselling Centre (Centrum Leerlingenbegeleiding-CLB) from a mainstream school for a certain period. Low educational skills among mothers of pupils, including 19 who did not complete their primary schooling, was one element that mediators encountered there. There were 40 IEM pupils including Roma

School 2: Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Elementary Catholic College (School principal Bernadette Vyncke) is a large school with 529 pupils in 2012, comprising 36 different nationalities of whom 444 have a home language that is not Dutch, 61 having Roma backgrounds. Pupils with a Roma background were 20 under 6 and 41 aged 6 -12.

School 3: De Toverberg Elementary City School (School principal Esmeralda Verdon) runs an educational project featuring art and development focused learning and within this there is a special emphasis on the visual arts. The geographical origin of the student body is very diverse including not only Eastern and Western Europe but also Africa and the Middle East. There were 98 Roma children at the school in 2012 and Bulgarian was the most frequently encountered non-Belgian nationality. Pupils with a Roma background were 42 under 6 and 56 aged 6 – 12 years.

School 4: De Mozaiek Elementary School (School principle Frank Billiet) which welcomes almost 30 different nationalities, the largest group of which are children of Turkish origin. The school has a high proportion of low socio-economic status pupils from families with complex life situations including a lack of residence permits, financial difficulties, poor housing and/or temporary accommodation. Nine toddlers and 36 children under 12 presented with a Roma certificate but the numbers of children from Roma communities is believed to be higher due to under-reporting.

In particular, we want all children from the age of 2 and ½ till the age of 12 years (at least) to be able to enjoy the right to education in a qualitative way. We believe that education is a strong tool to empower people and to enlarge their possibilities and choices in life. (BIEM, City of Ghent)

Building on existing good practices

Precise figures are not available but it follows from the above that some 250 children from Roma communities are attending these four schools.

The BIEM project is an expansion of a mediation project that has existed in Ghent since 1997. It aimed to strengthen that project by working with a new target group of IEM and Roma, however, both projects have the same focus on improving the learning achievements, socio-emotional development and the wellbeing of pupils, according to their personal abilities and personality. Specifically, BIEM aims to improve methodologies and expertise on the target group, increase kindergarten participation, and optimize outcomes at key moments of transition for students (e.g. when advancing to another grade, school, etc.).

Boundary-blurring practices

Building relationship of trust with the communities, increasing parents' involvement in school and accessibility, mutual involvement, building parental skills and strengthening cooperation between the school and neighbourhood organisations was supported by blurring the physical boundaries of the school/ kindergarten. Most activities of BIEMs concern a form of proactive outreach; bridging figures work from within the school, but only part of their work is situated in the school. Amongst other things, they spend a lot of time at the entrance gate of the school and make home visits².

Through collaboration with different sectors, institutions and civil initiatives while searching for answers to the comprehensive needs of Roma children and their families, BIEMs were also crossing and blurring the boundaries between different services and sectors. The BIEMs 'builds bridges' between the school and family life as well as with the outside world. Of necessity, their work crosses between education, welfare and integration: they are professionals who operate from within the school, who cooperate with many other organisations in various sectors and whose work merges into different policy domains³.

BIEMs' background and expertise

By the end of June 2012, the City of Ghent had selected four BIEMs focused on Intra-European Migration, two of Bulgarian, one of Slovak and one of Belgian origin (Nezhlya Azizova, Sevnur Ahmedova, Erika Mikova and Kelly Cattoor - one BIEM per school). After taking on their positions, BIEMs participated in a number of trainings. They also became students and in 3 years they completed a 3-year educational training for graduated social workers. Besides their knowledge of languages most of them also had in depth knowledge and understanding of the culture of the countries of IEM origin and Belgium.

In their work BIEMs were focused on building respectful relationship with parents, improving the parental involvement in school, both actively and passively and strengthening the parents' pedagogical and didactical skills while linking home

“Without the IEM-mediator (BIEM), it would be more difficult to achieve these results. Because she knows the culture, speaks the languages and is familiar with the countries our IEM-children come from. The IEM-mediator bridges the gap between the culture of the country of origin and the Flemish school system. [...] The IEM-mediator reaches the target group more easily because she is familiar with their culture and customs and she can “translate” them to the culture and customs in Flanders” (Teacher, school).

2 Hemelsoet, Elias (2015): Shaping the right to education for Roma children: a case study of present practices in Ghent, Belgium <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.1023009>

3 Ibid.

and school environment. They were also providing parents with direct support in solving administrative issues, submitting documents etc.

On the other hand, they were continuously developing methodologies and expertise on the target group and sharing it with the staff working in schools and neighbourhood organizations. They were also empowering schools to cooperate with neighbourhood organizations, making both schools and IEM children and their families visible in the neighbourhood.

In order to improve school attendance and academic performance, BIEMs worked actively to improve kindergarten participation, and provide children and parents with support during transition periods (e.g. when advancing to another grade, school, etc.).

CHALLENGES The BIEM project faced a number of challenges:

Recruitment

At the outset, it proved difficult to find enough suitably qualified Roma people who could apply for work as mediators. As the project progressed, demonstrating that the work was coherent and credible to participants, parents and school teams, and had measurable outcomes was also demanding. After the project was completed there was also the degree to which results from specific case studies could be made applicable to the mainstream. Finding reliable figures on attendance etc. was also a problem.

Double role

*“It is difficult, because sometimes you have to be really loyal to the school but you also have to defend the interests of the parents. You should not give the parents the impression that you defend the school and vice versa”
(IEM-mediator)*

The BIEMs have to manage a challenging double role in maintaining a balance between parents and the school team that impacts the whole of the BIEM project. Mediators with a migration background can face an additional challenge since their shared cultural background with the IEMs can appear to compromise their supposed neutrality vis-à-vis the school representatives. A common cultural background can be beneficial in some scenarios, but disadvantageous in others. BIEMs walk a thin line between the sometimes opposite expectations from the family and the school. The arising relation of trust

is based on a shared interest to create optimal developmental opportunities and prospects for the children.

Workload

The projected workloads of mediators as outlined originally did not predict the additional 'welfare-workload' assumed by the mediator as part of their essential daily practice. Feedback from interviews⁴ shows how this added substantially to their tasks and could also put them under emotional strain. The lack of clear boundaries between the responsibilities of mediators and other social welfare actors also contributed to stress experienced by mediators. And the expectations, in terms of outcomes, of both parents and school members were sometimes unrealistic.

The task load of a (n) (BIEM-) mediator should not be underestimated. As one of the school principals says: "We need our mediator very badly. She works much harder than she has to and doesn't mind working overtime. She is tremendously committed but even that is actually insufficient for our needs. She is overworked and overburdened. (School Principal)

Engaging with parents

OUTCOMES

The impact of the BIEMs was threefold: helping parents both with educational matters as well as with their general welfare; improving parental involvement; and influencing the dynamics and structures within schools in order to make parental involvement easier. While the time mediators spent on improving the socio-economic situation of IEM parents was not foreseen in the original design of the project, it emerged as a crucial element of the mediators' role. Interview data⁵ clearly showed that from the parents' perspective this contributed a lot of 'added value'. By building trust between the parents and mediator, this additional assistance and support (for example helping to fill in applications for social welfare assistance or explaining official correspondence) contributed to creating a better environment for pupils to achieve good results in school. However, mediators also reported a tension between their supporting and empowering role and the negative effects on their own personal wellbeing from the burden of the emotional investment they made in their clients' lives.

BIEMs access to vulnerable families revealed that regular social welfare organizations sometimes did not succeed in reaching these families, thus giving

⁴ Boost, Wauters and Timmerman op. cit.

⁵ Ibid.

the mediator a signal- and referral role. The trust built up between mediator and families living in precarious situations enabled parents to seek advice and help with the assistance of the mediator.

Parental involvement

Reaching IEM parents through formal parent-teacher contact can be challenging although taking part in informal activities can be a good starting point. Mediators can help by encouraging and reassuring parents to attend more formal meetings. Parents said that the presence of mediators at these formal meetings was crucial, not only as interpreters but also as intermediaries, retelling messages from teachers in forms clearly understood by parents. Nevertheless, this process can also create tension between the mediator and the teachers.

None of the schools reported active participation by IEM parents, for example in parental committees. However, interview data⁶ showed that IEM parents are very keen to have more information about how schools function from day to day. The presence and/or involvement of parents within the school and classrooms not only affects their general educational awareness, it can also empower them pedagogically. Inviting parents into the classroom proved to be a successful strategy to inform them about the importance of (kindergarten) education. During these visits, parents saw what goes on within a school at first hand, eliminating problems arising from language differences. The presence of the mediator also stimulated parent participation in other informal activities. Here again, the wellbeing of the child can be a motivational factor however, it is important that the parents are allowed to participate in these moments in their own way, for example by bringing a picnic.

The weekly coffee mornings organised in some of the focus schools also turned out to be very useful. They offered a space in which parents could be informally involved and empowered by using their own language. Educational topics were part of the agenda but these occasions also offered opportunities to discuss other issues as well with parents talking about their personal situation as well as about education. The absence of formal parent committees is thus compensated by the BIEM, who acts as a channel for messages from parents to the school team and the principal. Another good practice was the 'voorleesweek'

⁶ Ibid.

or 'reading aloud week'. Parental involvement at school could develop into greater parental involvement at home. It is important to note that this kind of good practices are processes that require time.

The school context proves to be very important for parental involvement. In one of the focus schools, for example, pupils were brought to school by bus however this got in the way of informal contacts at the school gate between mediator and parents in the morning or afternoon. In another focus school, the mediator came across a complete absence of vision on parental involvement: the parents' presence was discouraged rather than welcomed. This obviously hampers the mediator in their work particularly when, in this school, contact with parents tended to occur only when there was a problem.

BIEM role relative to the school

From the perspective of the schools, BIEMs helped to improve participation in the educational process; increase contact between IEMs and school team members; and provide school teams with essential information. Cultural differences gave rise on occasion to frustration and incomprehension on the part of the school staff and a tendency to talk about differences between 'them' and 'us'. When school teams spoke about the challenges of working with IEM student and parents, they rarely focussed on language as an issue. Nevertheless, the language skills that BIEM offer were considered an invaluable asset in communicating with pupils and parents.

The presence of a BIEM made contact and participation easier not only for parents but also for teachers and established a more equal footing for dialogue. Mediators also provided school teams with cultural background information to help them understand specific events or experiences. Because of their knowledge of the home life of parents and pupils, mediators were able to defuse problems and provide the framework where appropriate could be found.

BIEMs also carried out remedial work, for example, by organizing a follow-up system to tackle truancy, however. But school policy is crucial in this matter: schools can use mediators as a 'buffer' to keep parents away from the school team and the classroom practices. As such, mediators can amplify the closed network instead of opening it up.

BIEM role with parents

The BIEMs helped parents to understand more about the Flemish education system, its traditions and its expectations and by doing this, they also increased awareness among parents about the importance of education. Formal information sessions were not successful, but they found that they could exchange information through more informal channels and impromptu contacts. Home visits were a good practice to introduce elements of school and neighbourhood life to the IEM's homes, helped by mediators' language skills and cultural awareness.

BIEM role relative to pupils

A BIEM with specific language skills and cultural knowledge does not only stimulate contact with parents but also creates a reliable contact for IEM pupils and their school system. As a trusted person, a BIEM can also help to guide pupils in their educational paths.

BIEM role in the neighbourhood

BIEMs mostly cooperate with neighbourhood organizations in order to tackle the precarious situation of IEMs, not only in their specific role, but also as trusted go-betweens. Neighbourhood organizations also participate in projects to empower the parents' learning and pedagogical potential, as in library visits. BIEMs also helped pupils find out about sport clubs and other leisure activities in the neighbourhood.

This approach succeeds in increasing the involvement of Roma parents in the schooling of their children, although the initiative is not particularly directed towards them. Visiting people at their homes is said to be of decisive importance in order to create a level of basic confidence. It creates opportunities to gain an insight into the expectations of people as well as in existing barriers for (regular) school attendance. This confidence consequently facilitates steps to be taken beyond noncommittal help. From the perspective of school and society, there are also expectations such as the participation of all children in the educational system.

Added value of the project

While the role of the BIEM was conceived as working primarily with parents, schools and neighbourhoods, the fieldwork shows how BIEM also undertook actions that targeted at children. Mediators in this project were able - by having the time and facilities to do so - to invest in cooperation. They were accessible physically and emotionally and their perceived neutrality enabled BIEMs to help with the dialogue between school and parents although it is important to remember that mediators can sometimes be used by schools to limit access rather than facilitate it. Speaking the language of the target group overcame communication barriers with parents and also students. Their expert knowledge of cultural traits and sensitivities was very useful but keeping an open mind and being accessible was valued more than sharing a cultural background.

Explicit political will

LESSONS LEARNED

Clear and explicit political will and commitment of the key political players is crucial. It sets the stage for novelties to be introduced, provide general positive climate and guarantee that new policy measures are benefiting the whole society and not only a target group.

Trust in BIEMs

Gaining the trust of the parents was not easy but is essential for successful outcomes. It required continuous active investment and a high level of personal involvement for mediators. Merely hiring a BIEM with a common ethnic and/or national background did not guarantee success. Regular meetings were needed to create solid foundations for mediator-parent relationships and practical support was the best way to gain trust which then expanded to become a more general trust in the school. From the parents' perspectives the wellbeing of their children remains a crucial condition for being able to trust the BIEM and the school.

*“We, as parents, must know that our children are in a safe place where they will learn a lot, so that we have peace of mind. All these projects and a good communication reassure us. We are sure this is the best for our children”
(Parent, school).*

Trust in the school

The extension of trust in the mediator to trust in the school flags up the significance of school policies towards IEM pupils and parents. In order to be able to do their job effectively, the mediators need to be embedded in a supportive educational institution since they also need the trust from the school team they work with, actively cooperating from a feeling of shared responsibility. We found in the research that this openness towards the mediators was not always guaranteed.

Continuity

The empowerment and emancipation component is quite strong in this project. BIEMs had the opportunity to undertake 3 years of studies and obtain a professional social work qualification. The coach, BIEMs, educators and parents had opportunities to participate in different types of training, peer learning etc.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The project was coordinated by a **Steering Group (SG)**. The SG was presided by Luc Heyerick, the Head of the department of Education and Training. The Service for Integration of the City of Ghent represented by Samira Wymeersh played the role of the Secretariat. From 2014 Ms. Samira Wymeersh became coordinator of BIEMs, replacing Elmira Zeynalyan. Members of the SG were representatives of different services of the City and University: Jan Peeters director of the Research and Resource Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care of the Department of Social Welfare Studies at the Ghent University, Elias Hemelsoet – policy advisor for GO! education of the Flemish community, Ariana Tabaku, City of Ghent, Service of Strategy and Cooperation and Diane Lefere, coordinator-coach of school mediators in catholic schools.

Besides its mandate to take decisions, SG was contributing greatly with the expertise and reputation of its members, giving the project a lot of visibility and also professional credibility.

With regard to evaluation, the project collaborated with the University College Ghent (Hogeschool Gent), Faculty of Education, Health and Social Work, to draw up a zero measurement of the project. The zero measurement took place from 01.09.2012 – 31.12.12. and the final report was submitted at the beginning of 2013.

The final evaluation was done by CeMIS (Centrum voor Migratie en Interculturele Studies Universiteit Antwerpen) between December 14th, 2015 and May 31st, 2016. The findings of the final evaluation were used to inform the case study.

The everyday work of the BIEMs was monitored and evaluated by the school principals and also by the BIEM coordinator who was employed by the City of Ghent to directly support and coordinate BIEMs. The BIEM coordinator is now employed by the Pedagogical Institute and is working with mediators in general not only with BIEMs.

The project was also monitored by the ISSA staff, and the role of ISSA was to visit schools where BIEMs operated, to meet with BIEMs, their coordinator and SG and come back with suggestions for improvement of the project activities and the implementation in general. ISSA's role was also to provide participants in the project with additional professional development opportunities and prospects for networking and exchanging experiences with peers.

During the project the role of the BIEM became part of the formal educational system and funded by the city of Ghent. However, there is no guarantee that after the coming elections, the new city government will continue to fund it.

To protect and sustain it, BIEM's role is not treated any more as part of a project. A team of experts is working to enrich the role. BIEMs are members of the larger team of mediators and it is planned to engage them also in activities with other schools with Roma children (they will serve as advisors, somebody who will come with fresh ideas and empower school teams to solve problems). In addition, they will get more involved with younger children and their families and invest more time and energy in bringing them to kindergartens.

SUSTANABILITY AND SCALABILITY

Based on experience from the project the following recommendations were suggested by the implementing partners:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Adapting school policies

The aims of the BIEM project and the mediators' role in it needs to be readjusted especially when it comes to organizing changes in school policies. This must result in a stronger mandate for mediators and greater discretionary leeway for them

Defining a framework on parental involvement

A framework on parental involvement could be developed by the Institute for Education Ghent, compatible with BIEMs' goals and supportive of them.

Developing clear agreement between schools and city of Ghent

Schools' declarations of intent should be considered carefully: by explicitly focusing on the expectations and responsibilities of both schools and mediators, focus schools could then be more appropriately selected.

Preserving neutrality of BIEMs

The mediator's neutrality would be made more explicit if they were contracted as local government (city administration) staff. Obviously, the schools where they will be employed would be consulted in the selection process.

The professionalism of mediators

It needs to be more clearly respected and protected, in line with the conclusions of the evaluation concerning the centrality of the role and personality of a mediator. From a parents' perspective, the personal and emotional involvement of the mediator is the basis for their mutual trust and this stems from the friendly, accessible and culturally sensitive way contact is made and maintained.

Professional development of BIEMs

Ensuring the ongoing enabling of mediators is important so that they can continue to organise informal contact within and outside school for parents. Good practice like open classrooms, coffee classes and opportunities for parents to see the school in action was shown to be effective in overcoming language and cultural barriers, and improving the flow of information about the education system in general but also allaying concerns about the wellbeing of their children. Getting to know the school and its practices informally, with the help of mediators, proved an important key to higher participation and involvement – especially in kindergarten.

Process-bound character of the mediation practice

Recognize the process-bound character of the mediation practice. Results will only be achieved when different interventions are combined and are embedded in a broader school context that facilitates them. As such, no single success factor or intervention can be identified and transferred to and implemented in other school contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect in terms of processes on the mediators, practices and on specific interventions that are implemented.

The job description for BIEMs

It would be useful to reconsider the responsibilities that fall to mediators concerning the welfare of pupils at home. The final project evaluation showed that these tasks currently take up a lot of the time available to mediators. In one sense, these welfare-related tasks could be acknowledged as crucial to mediator practice since the evaluation showed their positive influence on the relationship of trust between parents, mediators and the school. However, it could also be argued that the existing substantial social care provision should do a better job with this target group and mediators should, ideally, be able to focus on education-related tasks. Whatever choice is made, it is important to fine-tune it with relevant stakeholders and local civil society.

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