

# Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups

Migrant Parental  
Involvement in Education

Oudermentoren  
Project (Parent Mentor  
Project) in Rotterdam

Eddie Meijer  
October 2016  
[Updated March 2017]

## Plan Summary

### Context

The city of Rotterdam has a population of 625,000 people. In the Netherlands, Rotterdam has the highest percentage of foreigners from non-industrial nations, forming a large part of Rotterdam's multiethnic and multicultural diversity. 48% of the population are of non-Dutch origins or have at least one parent born outside the country. There are 80,000 Muslims, constituting 13% of the population, mainly from Morocco and Turkey. The city is home to the largest Dutch Antillean community. Rotterdam also has its own Chinatown at the (West-) Kruiskade, close to the central railway station.

Rotterdam is the largest port in Europe. The harbour is important for the city economy. In spite of this, wages are lower than in the Netherlands as a whole, and unemployment is relatively high, 15% for Rotterdam compared to 7% in the Netherlands. Also the level of educational attainment is relatively low; out of the four bigger cities in the country, Rotterdam is at the bottom. We see low scores on language and mathematics, too many weak schools and too many early school leavers in secondary vocational education. A more positive sign is that we have an increasing amount of people in the city possessing a higher education level.

The Municipality of Rotterdam invests heavily in education, more than €100 million per year. Educational policy is coordinated by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science through municipal governments. The ministry of Education pays for most of the expenses associated with schools, including wages, buildings and so on. Responsibility for school buildings, compulsory education and education in deprived areas are part of the responsibilities of the municipal government. In Rotterdam, the city works closely with the school boards. A school board in the Netherlands are the authorised supervisors for sometimes one school but can also be supervising over 100 schools.

Every four years there is established a new urban education program, which is now called *Leren Loont!* (Learning Pays Off!) The program focuses on school development, where is the main goal to improve educational outcomes and talents of all students in general. It is directed at all sorts of education: early childhood education, primary, secondary and vocational. The program sees the school as unit of change and gives subsidies for multi-year policy. Actions are formed in co-creation between the school (boards) and municipality, and are customized for schools individually. With a budget of €100 million, the money is spend on subjects concerning giving children a flying start (ages 2 - 6 years), quality through school development, having the best teachers for Rotterdam, developing work on craftsmanship (technology education) and strengthening links between education and youth care.

For many years, parental involvement has been an integral part of our policy for education. Rotterdam believes parental involvement, meaning cooperation between school and parents, leads to better educational outcomes for children and young people. Leading the vision on parent involvement is "Ouderbetrokkenheid 3.0" which focuses on teacher quality around the subject of empowerment of parents. However, although there are many positive schemes in place already, the 170 nationalities in the city, which represent a range of cultural orientations and beliefs present a challenge for Rotterdam schools in being able to communicate with all of its parents and establishing educational partnerships with all of them on an equivalent base.

## Brief description of action plan

The aim of the plan is to make a local adjusted copy of a programme developed in Hamburg, the *schulmentoren* project; to pilot it on a secondary school in Rotterdam and to implement the initiative on a city scale if it proves to be a success. It involves improving parent involvement in Rotterdam by enhancing or subsidizing the existing use of professional parent-school mediators with the use of parents as mentors. Most of the schools in Rotterdam have "*medewerkers ouderbetrokkenheid*" (professional mediators) who help teachers in their contact with (migrant) parents, organizing activities and bridging the gap between school and home. Part of the challenge is responding to the variety of different languages and cultural backgrounds of parents that schools serve. *Medewerkers ouderbetrokkenheid*, the school's professional mediators, are most effective in approaching parents of their own ethnicity, but since schools have (mostly) only one *medewerker ouderbetrokkenheid* it is hard to reach parents from all different nationalities. With the *oudermentoren* project (the parent mentor project) we will use different parents as mentors to introduce other parents to the school system, habits and overall aim to implement educational partnerships between more parents and the schools attended by their children. This is different from our usual approach in which we work only with the professional mediators.

The *oudermentorenproject* is a translation of the Hamburg *Schulmentorenproject*, a scheme that has been used to great success in Hamburg's schools, but in Rotterdam will have more focus on parents of an immigrant descent and less on newcomers and refugees. The *oudermentorenproject* will begin in the schoolyear 2016-2017, through a pilot in a secondary school. The Hamburg approach was attractive for Rotterdam because it proved to be a method that worked in empowering parents in practice for some time and appealed because the problems faced in Hamburg and Rotterdam are the same in many ways. Discussing the project in the workgroup, learning from the reactions of the other partners and seeing the project live in Hamburg made us even more enthusiastic.

By starting in one school next year we hope to develop a model that can be spread out over the city and be adapted and modified by other schools. Our target is that the *oudermentorenproject* can be used as a standalone approach or one that works in combination with the existing *medewerkers ouderbetrokkenheid*. It is our experience that if a project works well other schools are more easily convinced to adopt such a project. Not much persuasion from the site of the city is necessary in cases like that, especially if a project does not involve huge amounts of money to be spent or large investment in staff.

## Objectives

With the *oudermentoren* project we hope to give parent involvement a new boost because with the project, we anticipate reaching parents that are harder to reach through the existing structures of our *medewerkers ouderbetrokkenheid*.

The project also has the following objectives, to:

- **Expand the possibilities** for schools to get educational partnership with parents on a higher level, especially among schools who do not have a *medewerker ouderbetrokkenheid*, since city funds are not large enough to support all claims from schools.
- **Develop new ways of empowering parents.** Parents helping other parents is an important strand of our city policy in which we promote people to be helping each other instead of being dependent on professionals.

## Timing

The development and implementation of the *oudermentoren* project will go beyond the Action for Inclusion project period but the idea was born in Hamburg in October 2015.

Nov, Dec 2015:	Orientation and consultations with NGO's, schools and schoolboards. Funds arranged and the money for the project was secured from the parent involvement budget, part of the city's education budget 2015.
Jan and Mar 2016:	an order was given to CPS, the NGO who works as the main contractor in this area to develop the project. Sezer, an NGO specialized in working with migrants was asked to participate in the project with a subcontracted role. Hogeschool Rotterdam, a graduate school, was asked to monitor results.
Feb 2016:	The secondary school at which the pilot of the <i>oudermentoren</i> project will run was selected.
Pre-summer 2016	Election of the parents who will be trained as mentors at the start of the new school year 2016-2017.
Oct 2016	Project will begin after the autumn vacation. If the results in 2016-2017 are as we hope, the project will become available for other Rotterdam schools in the school year 2017-2018.

## Consultation

A range of people and organizations were consulted in the development of the project:

- Before starting the project we consulted the developers of the Hamburg *Schulmentorproject*. They exchanged the blueprints of their project with us, gave evaluation reports and held talks to answer all of the Rotterdam questions.
- Rotterdam also consulted specialists on parent involvement, including those at the university of Nijmegen, Erasmus University and hogeschool Rotterdam and talked about the project in the European working group.
- The project was also discussed with schools and school boards. The results of the discussions were that we decided to do a pilot on just one school, since this made it more feasible to start the actual project in October 2016. Because of the tight timescale we did not manage to find a second school that also matched the conditions that are favored for starting a project aimed at parent involvement. We found it an essential starting condition that the participating school already has a parent friendly environment and school policy. In the talks with the pilot school we made the decision to give a team leader of the school the role of project manager. In the Rotterdam blueprint for the project, which will be copied elsewhere in the city, the role of project manager will be filled in by a regular teacher.
- We asked for the opinion of migrant groups about the project and how they thought parents would respond to the project. We asked NGO's that work on a regular base with parents what they thought about the chances for success for a project like this. We met very positive responses on our initiative from that site and did not have to make many adjustments to the initial project as a result of their responses.

## Achievements and Experiences

### Achievements

Since the pilot will only begin in October 2016, it is still too early to talk about achieved objectives. However, at this stage, we can report major progress in setting the groundwork for the project, with all the milestones achieved in the timeline for the first year. We have also found that people who are involved in the development of the project are all very enthusiastic about it, especially the school that is selected for the pilot. Because we are still in the phase of preparing we also not know if there will be any unplanned achievements that emerge from the initiative, but will update with progress in the future.

### Measuring

Hogeschool Rotterdam has been asked to monitor the outcomes of the project. We have school account holders, who inform us on a regular base about projects the municipality pays for. The biggest proof that the project does its job will be the moment when other schools start with their own *oudermentorproject*.

### Experience

It is not yet time to reflect on overall lessons learned, but can share some of our experiences of setting up the project. We have learned that:

- If you work with more than one NGO on a project, it is important to make it clear from the outset who is in charge.
- If it is a pilot project, while it is essential make space for local adjustments, it is also important to keep focused on the kind of blueprint that you will like to have in the end that can be implemented on a larger scale.
- Research who might feel threatened by your project, and if possible, give that party a role in the project (see next section).
- EU funding rules can complicate funding arrangements for ensuring NGO involvement in the best possible way.

## Challenges and Modifications

### Challenges

Some of the challenges to success of the project and adherence to the timescale are noted below:

- **Tensions and alliances:** The announcement of the project caused initially some concern among the existing medewerkers *ouderbetrokkenheid*. They were afraid the project would undermine their position and that the project could even make them unnecessary. Our medewerkers *ouderbetrokkenheid* felt threatened and started to frustrate the initiatives of CPS and found a friend in one of the NGOs, who disliked its role as subcontractor (NGO's at the moment have hard times because of budget cuts and growing competition). We managed their worries by giving them an important role in the pilot. By speaking with the major partners in town on parent involvement who have connections with the pilot school, we also hope to monitor their feelings about the project when we actually begin the pilot. By making medewerkers *Ouderbetrokkenheid* important

for the success of the project we hope to have eliminated their opposition. Talks about the different roles the allied NGO's played in the project also smoothed their collaboration.

- **Ownership:** We would suggest that for future initiatives, it would be helpful to call all participants together and, as city in the role of client paying for the project, making clear an established understanding of who is in charge. It is important then to allow the NGO to listen to the wishes of the school but also make sure that the blueprint remains close to the original plan.
- **Financing:** Financing the project was not much of a problem because the city has a fund for financing innovative projects on parent involvement. The real challenge was to follow the EU rules on inviting tenders and open competition, where we needed specialised legal advice to manage that.

## Modifications

There were only few modifications required and we were able to stick to the original plan quite closely. However, a few changes were needed including:

- We agreed to start the project in October instead of August, creating more space for good preparations of the pilot before start.
- We allowed the school to use a team leader instead of a teacher to manage the pilot
- We made more room for medewerkers ouderbetrokkenheid than we intended to at the start.

All of these modifications we did because we, as a municipality, find it important that the project has a big as possible support to maximise the chance that the *oudermentor* project will be a success.

## Further Plans

The pilot project begins in October 2016, with many aspects of our plan that still need to be completed as described before. Updates will be provided in October 2016 on the start-up phase and at the end of schoolyear 2016-2017, where we will be happy to share our evaluation report generated by Hogeschool Rotterdam, so we can all learn from the full picture.

## Plan Summary

Current state of affairs on the school is that after the summer holidays of 2016 school actively recruited mentor parents. Initially this proved to be difficult.

With a delay of several months in order to get enough parents, the first modules of the project started in December. Of the initial group of parents are ultimately 6 parents remaining who have completed the entire process of training. Gradually, during the implementation of the modules, mentor parents fell off because of work or illness.

The school has an active parent involvement coordinator who works together with two employees who have special tasks on parent involvement. The location leader was also involved in the project. In consultation it was decided that the employee with parent involvement as tasks would give the modules of the project to the mentor parents to teach them the skills needed to deal with the parents of the school and become a mentor parent. The employees with parent involvement tasks were especially trained for

this job. The location leader has given a lot of support in the school for the role of mentor parent. Teachers are in favour of the role mentor parents play in the school.

The implementation of the modules started in December 2016. It turned out to be difficult to get the group complete. Sometimes the meetings were cancelled due to lack of subscription. The last meeting was held on 16 February 2017.

The mentor parents already fulfilled a role by assisting during the organisation of an open day at the school. This activity was by themselves, the school and the new parents who visited the open day evaluated as very positive.

Within the group is a good atmosphere and mutual understanding. People are motivated and gradually it becomes increasingly clear what is expected of mentor parents.

The employees with special tasks on parental involvement have with great verve and enthusiasm taught the modules to the mentor parents. Erasmus University has been present for interviews during the first and last meeting for research. A group app is used to organise contact between the mentor parents. There is an agreed schedule of the next meetings where the mentor parents will be involved again.

The mentor parents are introduced on the school website.

Experiences learned that mentor parents have a need for conversation lessons.

One parent mentioned a dilemma. Her son was always very open about school but because his mother now is a mentor parent he is more afraid to discuss school affairs with her.

The training modules for the mentor parents are seen as positive. The content was in line with the needs. Although the mentor parents only gradually got a clearer picture of what was expected of them. This made it for the participants sometimes difficult to get an idea of what to do with the theory presented to them.

The modules consisted of a variety of explanation of theory and exercises. The parents exercised with role-playing in combination with conversation technics.

It was experienced as positive that both the coordinator and parent were involved as the location leader was present during training sessions.

