

Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups :

Migrant Parental
Involvement in Education

Measuring the Impact
of School Mediators
in Ghent

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October 2016

Plan Summary

Context

From 1997, the department of Education of the city of Ghent has worked with school mediators ("*brugfiguren*" or 'bridging figures') to improve the relationships between schools, families and neighborhoods, especially in neighborhoods with a larger representation of marginalized and/or excluded groups. Today, the city uses 38 mediators, who build positive relationships between parents and school, in order to promote equal opportunities for all children (aged between 2.5 years to 12 years old). School mediators have proved efficient in working with minority groups, so in 2012 the city launched a project to reinforce the existing team of school mediators by recruiting four extra mediators, plus one coach.

However, in recent years the city of Ghent has seen a rise in the number of migrants coming from Eastern Europe, with many from Roma origin. School populations have changed as a result, with parents and children coming from this migration stream facing problems that are much more complex than migrants before them experienced; ranging from difficulties associated with language, housing, to legal position and blatant poverty.

Throughout the years, the city has gained much expertise on parental engagement. One of the challenges the city faces is how to decrease the number of pupils leaving school without any kind of degree. We have set a goal to raise awareness of this problem already from kindergarten and preparatory school and although we continue this focus throughout elementary (primary) school, until recently, mediators were not present in secondary schools. As such, until now, we could only partially work towards smooth transitions between different school stages. In 2015, we launched a project to reinforce the existing team of school mediators by recruiting two extra mediators to work specifically in four secondary schools (for pupils aged 12-18 years) for a period of three years. If proven efficient, the project will be sustained/enlarged.

Bridging figures/ school mediators are a strong partner in parental engagement, communication and care policy in the educational system in Ghent. They take into account all parents, regardless of their background and relate them to the opportunities in the district and with networks outside the district. They increase confidence of parents in the school and in that sense, help to secure greater well-being of the children. They bridge the gap between home and school and manage the respective expectations. Bridging figures are unique because they operate from the inside of a school (and are therefore familiar with the character of the school, policies and expectations) but help to open the school up to external organizations and other perspectives (both for parents and for non-educational partners). School mediators are flexible, both in time and location, often working beyond the bounded school site, and are therefore very approachable/ hold a low threshold for all actors in the field.

Parental engagement requires a mutual understanding, which relies heavily on attitude. This involves much more than just parents 'being reached'. Often this results in a genuine strengthening of schools. The risk, however is that by employing bridging figures, anything involving parents and vulnerable pupils becomes invariably passed on as work of the bridging figure. It is therefore important for the bridging figure not only to aim to increase parental engagement at the school, but above all to structurally embed these skills in the school. In order to be effective, schools have to be co-owner, with the school mediators of the parental engagement process.

There are however also challenges facing some schools, since unfortunately, the resources available are not sufficient to be able to grant a bridge figure at each school. As such, eligibility has been limited to elementary (primary) schools based in Ghent and mediators have been allocated according to the school population. Because we currently use different funding approaches per school network, unintentional differences have arisen in recent years between the networks. However, it is the role of the Education Ghent to deploy neutral and fair policies. The number of school mediators is limited so to make sure that bridge figures are placed where the greatest needs are, we work with a list of uniform criteria across the different schools in the networks, with schools ranked using the following indicators (SES):

- home language of the pupil;
- receiving an education allowance;
- the highest grade of the mother's education;
- parents belong to the itinerant/ traveller population.

However, the number of SES students is increasing for the whole city, but the means to increase the number of bridge figures are not growing, leaving these schools' questioned unanswered and some needs unmet.

Brief description of action plan

The main aim of the action plan is to increase the city's grasp of evidence of the impact of parental engagement; in particular to measure the effectiveness of school mediators and to ensure that they are allocated fairly and where they are likely to have the most impact. There is a problem that although the team know and feel (and hear from parents and school team) that mediators are doing a good job, we need substantial 'evidence' to prove that parental engagement is contributing to the wellbeing of children and preventing early school leaving in the long run. As the research review indicated (Oliver2016) research evidence on the impact of interventions to encourage parental engagement is mixed and not so strong, while it is difficult to provide a strong evidence base of effectiveness (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). We need to be able to develop a finely tuned system that shows what mediators are doing, and more specifically will help us fairly allocate mediators to the right schools. A secondary aim is to develop other systems that offer more generic support to other schools that aren't able to be provided with mediators.

The action plan will deliver this through the following mechanisms aimed at:

- 1) Recording evidence on mediators activity:** We are running a pilot project, called the 'school mediators secondary education', through which a registration system has been developed so that every mediator's activity is registered in an on-line closed application. In this way, it makes outcomes very tangible and measurable.
- 2) Making sure mediators are fairly allocated:** We are developing a *parental engagement barometer* to measure the extent to which schools' progress on parental engagement has been achieved. The barometer will create a means of easily mapping schools' current parental engagement work. We also want to develop a system that takes **more account of the size of the schools**. If two schools tap 75% of the indicators, currently, both have right to a full time bridge figure, but it makes a huge difference in practice whether the school has 300 or 75 students, since the number of questions from parents, teachers and students in the first school is much larger than in the second. This means we need to change the methodology for assessing eligibility, which will have an impact on the assignment of school mediators to certain schools.

3) Offering a support package for schools not obtaining mediators: Depending on the level of progress demonstrated on the barometer, schools will be provided with stepping stones: measures that they can in the school to get a higher level. They can access a support package provided for all schools that have no bridge figure, which will include:

- Guidance/ support in carrying out stepping stones towards more parental engagement;
- Information and expertise sharing (via a renewed website with background information; tools; best practices; possibility to exchange between schools, school teams, boards, bridge figures.
- Education and training for schools;
- Consultancy or a flying school mediator whereby bridge figures and coaches help a school and accompany its journey towards better parental engagement through tailor-made advice and concrete, specific measures.

Theory of change

The Action plan is based on the insight that investing in parental engagement gives additional value to schools. If we can gain more evidence of the impact of mediators' work, and devise a better system of allocation, we can target resources. By using schools excelling in parental engagement as ambassadors, there is also the possibility of developing learning communities.

Objectives

In order to measure the effectiveness of mediators and ensure their fairest allocation to schools where they are most likely to have the most impact, we have the following objectives:

Objective 1: For small scale change

- Developing instruments with regard to registering mediators' activities
- Developing instruments with regard to impact measurement of their activities
- Designing transparent and easy to copy procedures regarding school mediation

Objective 2: For large scale change

- Developing very concrete recommendations for all schools regarding parental involvement ('stepping stones')
- Facilitating social mix within schools and between schools

Timing

The objectives for small scale change were originally planned for May 2016, but we have revised our timeline for full achievement of all objectives from September 2016 – January 2017.

These include the steps towards registration of mediators' activities. This involved developing contact with academics; exchange of good practices with international partners and assigning of staff (1/2 FTE) and staff time (March-December 2016) for the development of tools. There have been several prior attempts at registering mediators' work, but this has not been consistent or uniform.

Objectives for larger scale change were planned for September 2016, but these have been postponed to January 2017 because of technical-juridical issues¹ which mean it is far better to delay by six months. Steps towards new methodology of school mediation involve the development of criteria, a stronger declaration of commitment, drawing up of 'parental engagement barometer' and drawing up of 'stepping stones' (appropriate measures to take to move forward).

The steps we will take beyond the Action Plan development time (from June 2016 onwards) therefore include:

Steps to small scale change:

- Set up working group regarding the evaluation and registration online for whole pool of mediators;
- Develop 'parental engagement barometer'
- Finalise format for consultancy/ flying school mediator.
- Make contacts with academics on further research regarding impact measurement tools.

Steps to large scale change:

- Shape stepping stones (road map for parental engagement in schools with and without mediators, including indicators and evaluation tools)
- Facilitate exchange and cooperation between schools to learn from each other on parental engagement.

Consultation

A range of individuals were consulted in the development work so far. These include:

- School mediators from all networks
- Principles of all school with bridging figures
- Principles of schools without bridging figures

All of them were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Findings were overall in line with proposals adopted².

Achievements and Experiences

Achievements

- We have put in place a **registration system**. However the registration is rather detailed and should be put in a 'light' version before applying this all school mediators. The final version should be put into place January 2017.

¹ Technical-juridical problems: half of the school mediators are placed in positions in Catholic schools, with funding provided by the local government. The agreement to support this, ends on December 31st 2016 and from January 2017 onwards, we can work with new methodology for the whole group of school mediators, whichever schools they work in.

² Parents themselves were not consulted on this issue. However, there is a thorough survey taking place every 2 years (where possible every year) which gives data on the level of satisfaction of the parents ("Oudertevredenheidsmeting").

- **The city is able to enlarge our offer on parental engagement towards schools.** As stated before, the resources are not sufficient to grant a bridge figure at each school, but the bridge figures have years of experience in working on parent involvement and there is a lot of expertise that is being shared through this focus.
- **Proposals for an adapted methodology³ with a focus on embedding knowledge.** These proposals have been developed (although are not yet operational). In them, more importance is given to the component of ‘transfer of knowledge’ whereby parental engagement is not restricted only to the bridge figure, but the whole school team has to be involved (and cannot be done without the commitment of the principle). In this regard, the declaration of engagement will become more important as some kind of contract. Added to that, schools will be tested on the level of parental engagement. Based on the outcome, the school and bridge figure draw up a joint action plan, in which the roles and expectations are described.

At the end of the school year, the performance/ progress of this action plan will be measured. Are the recommendations being followed up? Have the actions taken place? Is the action plan taken up by the whole team or solely by the school mediator? If the commitment of the school is insufficient, the following school year the bridge figure may be asked to leave and work on parental engagement elsewhere.

The current financial agreement runs until the end of December 2016, with the new period starting in January 2017. From then onwards we will allocate bridge figures for one school year. Each year, the action plan has to be evaluated in June. Every year the SES-indicators will be checked and a ranking made. Schools with new -adequate high SES indicators therefore do not wait longer have to wait a year before getting assigned a bridge figure. On the other hand, as mentioned, if schools are not making enough progress, bridge figure can be withdrawn.

Schools that are higher up the rankings need not fear for the continuity of their bridge figures. Unless one of the parties would request this explicitly, a school will always be assigned the same bridge figure. In order to promote the sharing of expertise and internal development, a bridge figure may, however, not be placed more than 3 consecutive school years in the same school.

Impacts

Objectives for small scale change	State of the art	Impact
Instruments with regard to registering activities	Instrument developed for pilot project. To be adapted in put into place for all mediators (from Sept.2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visibility, transparency; • Awareness of time-consuming activities; • Development of possible tool for creating more awareness re. parental engagement.
Instruments with regard to impact measurement	Contact with academics to participate in pilot project. No concrete actions yet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of open-minded coordination and will to move ahead with mediation.
Transparent and easy to copy procedures regarding mediation	Several proposals listed for new methodology. If agreed to by policy makers, to be put in place in Jan.2017.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility to showcase good practices on school mediation on local and international level.

³ ATTENTION: these are proposals and for the moment not yet in place.

Objectives for small scale change	State of the art	Impact
Very concrete recommendations for all schools regarding parental involvement ('stepping stones')	Being developed. Should be put into place Jan 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility to reach more schools and enable parental involvement in schools not eligible for their own mediator.
Facilitate social mix within schools and between schools.	Ongoing aim	

Measurement

Since the tools and methods we are developing are not yet operational, it is not yet possible to measure their success. It is certainly feasible once they have moved beyond construction stage. The second objective for large scale change is too ambitious and hard to measure.

Experience

The process has been helpful in developing awareness of the need to develop these systems and tools, as well as the awareness that impact measurement to demonstrate importance of policy interventions is not something we are alone in grappling with.

Challenges and Modifications

Challenges

There were several issues that we have dealt with in implementing the action plan, including:

- 1) Lack of commitment of all mediators to register activities;
- 2) Not all mediators are convinced of added value of consultancy/flying mediation;
- 3) Not enough time to define stepping stones, especially with the issue that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

We have aimed and are aiming to address these challenges through solutions that include

- 1) Demonstrating the relevance of registration and developing a simpler, easier tool for recording activities;
- 2) Producing a clearly defined format for consultancy/ flying mediation, drawn up by relevant partners;
- 3) Making time for study and consultation to make realistic stepping stones that will be cross-checked with target group.

Modifications

There were significant modifications to the action plan that involved reformulating objectives to rather:

- 1) Strengthen the contact, consultation and active cooperation between parents and school staff;
- 2) Strengthen the role of parents in the learning and educational process of their children;
- 3) Strengthen parental engagement and co-ownership by all school teams;

- 4) Re-direct vulnerable children to activities based on 'broad learning', in co-ownership with school teams.

We also recognized that one of the objectives for large scale change is too ambitious, but maintain that a goal to facilitate social mix within schools and between schools is a positive goal for long term change.

Further Plans

Future

The project will proceed as explained in the timeline section. We have allocated time and staff to elaborate material on parental engagement (1/2 FTE until January 2017) and will engage in some evaluation of progress by December 2016.

