

# **Involve Parents – Improve School**

## **A multilateral COMENIUS project**

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Success at school greatly depends on the homes of the pupils. Thus children whose parents have a low educational profile, especially those with a background of (im)migration, will have restricted educational opportunities. Parental involvement, above all the increased integration of (im)migrants, has so far been a marginal theme in Teacher Education and INSET courses in Europe. With regard to the demographic development in the EU countries, ways have to be sought to give parents an opportunity to take up their responsibility for their children's work at school. It has become evident that this is not a national, but a European problem.

#### A survey of the project

COMENIUS focuses on Lifelong Learning – the development of materials, measures and strategies to support the continuing professional education and development of teachers and other school staff. As mentioned above, parental involvement, above all the increased integration of (im)migrants, has so far been a marginal theme in Teacher Education and INSET courses in Europe. The focus of the project therefore lies upon the development of concepts and materials which will make teachers sensitive to the task of involving parents with a low educational profile. The project is thus in accordance with the Commission's declaration on Priority 2. Schools and teachers will be confronted with unaccustomed tasks in relation to what they have done so far, and for the completion of these, according to Priority 3, strategies and competences to help make colleagues sensitive to linguistic and cultural barriers need to be put forward. The project "Involve Parents – Improve School" coordinated by NiLS includes France, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Turkey, but also Russia as an associated partner. The partner countries are represented by national or regional institutions for Teacher Further Education, through Academies for teachers, resp. through practice-oriented institutions. From the very beginning of the project, tandem partners from fur-

ther EU countries were envisaged on a voluntary basis, in order to increase the weight of evidence in the synopsis. Institutions from Denmark, Ireland and Portugal were invited to participate. These are countries with different traditions of migration and with different approaches to dealing with the concurrent problems. The reports from the countries represented have been produced from the viewpoint of the respective teams of authors and, within the given time and financial framework, do not pretend to purport an official position, nor be comprehensive in their field of survey.

The starting point for the project is the interrelationship, confirmed in much international research, between the expectations and attitudes of the parents, on the one hand, and the success of the children in school, on the other. Inherent in this equation is the disadvantagedness of children with parents of a low educational profile. Ways have to be sought to give parents an opportunity to take up their responsibility for their children's work at school. Considering the high number of pupils with a background of (im)migration, whose families are at the same time disadvantaged economically, working with parents with a background of (im)migration must be seen in the context of working with parents with a low educational profile. All European countries must see this reality despite all the differences that have arisen from the development of migration and despite the different educational systems.

As it could be assumed that there are already numerous advisory and support systems in Europe in the area of cooperation between parents and school, a synopsis of the status quo in the participating countries was produced in the initial phase of the project, complemented by reports on the situation in Denmark and Ireland.

The European synopsis provides an overview of parent involvement in the participating countries and a collection of *best practice* examples of suc-

successful parent involvement in Europe. All available information, resp. statistics indicate that parents with a background of (im)migration are underrepresented in school committees and councils. This deficit is all the more serious, because, as a result of the growing autonomy of schools in Europe, parent co-determination is on the move. If this is true, then there is a lot more to be debated above and beyond the project regarding legal rulings and quotas.

The support of parental involvement, above all under the aspect of the increased inclusion of (im)migrants, is a marginal theme in Teacher Education and INSET courses in Europe. The project "Involve Parents – Improve School" is intended to contribute to anchoring this theme more strongly in the appropriate curricula. The project focuses on developing ideas and materials to improve the involvement of parents in school life and work. Modules will be developed and tested, which will serve as constitutive elements for appropriate school-specific programmes on parental involvement from pre-school to lower secondary school.

The development of materials and suitable course models is important to put across competences to school staffs more systematically than has been done so far, which will help to include parents with a low educational profile in the school careers of their children. The materials are especially concerned with how to deal with different value systems and behavioural norms, resulting from different cultural and socio-economic lifestyles. One pre-condition for success in working with parents is being able to understand which complex reasons are behind the distance that parents keep to the institution school. The target is to get schools to develop a programme for continuing parent education above and beyond single, possibly quite sensible, one-off events.

Because of the decidedly heterogeneous situation in the participating countries, this synopsis provides the starting point for more considered discussion and further cooperation. Differences at

the start relate not only to the demographic situation, but also to the legal framework for parent involvement and culturally determined understanding of cooperation between school and parents.

## Aims and schedule of the project

After producing the synopsis, the essential aims and phases of the remaining two years will be as follows:

### 1. The status quo: selected examples of successful parental involvement in Europe

Schools and parents are expected to develop a constructive upbringing and education partnership. The diversity stemming from differences in origin and lifestyle must not only be respected, but seen as an opportunity to enrich school life.

### 2. Putting together and testing concepts and materials in the participating countries

The concepts and materials which have been developed together to improve the inclusion of parents will be tested and evaluated across borders in schools and institutions in the further course of the project.

The materials will be produced in the respective mother tongues of the partners and in English as the working language. A professional publication of the results in the partner languages is planned.

### 3. Further education measures for teaching staff

Because of the diversity of the parents, not only with regard to the different origins of the migrant groups in the individual countries, generalizing further education materials and programmes will not help. Therefore modules will

have to be developed and tested by the partner countries in a work-sharing process on the basis of the Europe-wide synopsis. The latter can then be used as constitutive elements in school specific programmes for parent involvement. Ideas and materials can be developed accordingly for preschool to lower secondary school programmes. The preschool area is particularly important as it is decisive for the ensuing school career of the children. In addition, the parents' interest in school is still considerable at this time and they are still most able to support their children in their day-to-day work.

The modules to be produced will be complemented by a toolbox (including method suggestions) which will contain instructions and ideas for Teacher Education and INSET.

#### **4. Dissemination, to guarantee the results finding their way throughout Europe.**

Using a central, English language, project website [www.involve-migrants-improve-school.eu](http://www.involve-migrants-improve-school.eu) the European world of experts will be informed about the projects and measures. In addition, the materials will be published in the languages of the respective partner countries through the websites of the participating institutions.

#### **On the relevance of the project theme**

The relevance of the project theme "Involve Parents" was distinctly confirmed while the project was running by a whole series of reports and initiatives at the European, but also at the national level.

When talking of the value of parental involvement with regard to better integration of children with a background of migration, resp. children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it is imperative to point to the recommendations made by the EU Commission.

The Green Book "Migration & Mobility: Opportunities and Challenges for the EU Education Systems" (EU, Green Book 2008) is a part of the revised social agenda "Opportunities, Social Access and Solidarity in the Europe of the 21st Century", also approved in July 2008 by the Commission (A Revised Social Agenda 2008).

The call is made in the Social Agenda for all citizens to dispose of access to high quality education, social security and health cover, but also to the services they require to overcome the disadvantages of birth, in order for them to lead a long and active life. The Green Book publication is intended to launch a broad discussion among the general public on how education policy can best react to the challenge thrown down by (im)migration and mobility in the EU.

These challenges are not new, but the problems involved have multiplied because of the high number of pupils with a background of migration, who are also in a very weak socio-economic position. The Green Book focuses on the combination of language/cultural differences and socio-economic disadvantage and its tendential concentration in certain areas and schools. The essential education policy challenge must be seen in this area.

The Green Book states, quoting the PIRLS Study (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and the PISA Study (Programme for International Student Assessment), that there is clear proof that the educational achievement of (im)migrant children does not equal that of their age peers. Regarding reading competence in the PIRLS Study, (im)migrant pupils can not compete with their non-(im)migrant peers at the end of primary education. This pattern of weak achievement in (im)migrant children is carried across into secondary education. The disadvantage has a knock-on effect, inasmuch as the language and reading competences are a pre-condition for successful participation in society and profession.

On top of all this, the PISA Study reveals that the situation has got worse in the second generation regarding their performance in reading, mathematics and science. The upshot is that the education systems in these countries are not succeeding in functioning as an integrative factor, that differences are hardening and that the social exclusion of (im)migrants is still increasing.

In this connection, the central role of the parents is mentioned explicitly. The topic of 'parents with a background of (im)migration' is, as emphasised in the Green Book, a task which all European countries have to take up. This once again confirms the importance of the project "Involve Parents – Improve School". Looking at the factors which are crucial to the disadvantage of children with a background of (im)migration, it is not only important to emphasize the importance, but also the identification of good approaches to parent involvement (cf. Green Paper p. 8f).

The socio-economical situation of children with an (im)migrant background is crucial according to the Green Book. This once again confirms the project approach of putting the topic 'parents

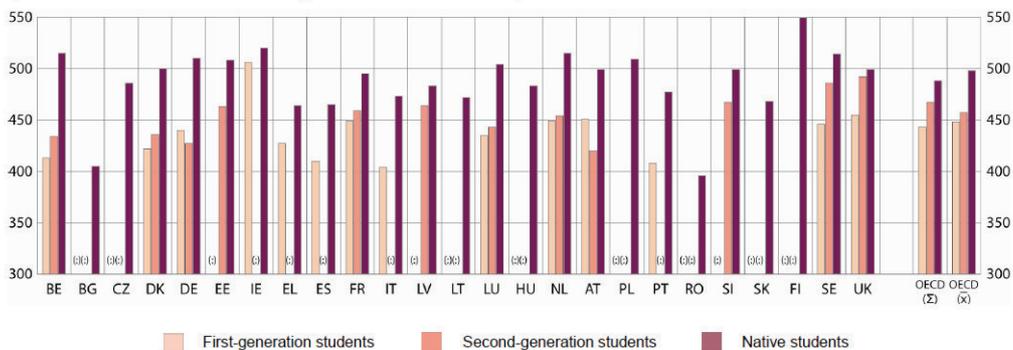
with a background of (im)migration' into the wider context of socio-economic status and poor education.

On the other hand, the Green Book makes it clear that the socio-economic situation cannot be made responsible for the whole volume of disadvantage that hits (im)migrant pupils. The PISA Study makes clear that (im)migrant children with comparable socio-economic status often perform less well than the non-(im)migrant children. This is more true for some countries than others and is an indicator of the influence of different policies and educational concepts.

Language is a key factor next to the socio-economic situation. "The mastery of the language of instruction is a sine qua non pre-condition for success at school. It can even be a problem for (im)migrant children born in the land of schooling, if they cannot stabilize or increase their language competence acquired in school in the home environment. Language can form a barrier between (im)migrant families and school and make it very difficult for parents to support children." (Green Paper, p. 8)

**Figure 3 - Differences in student performance in reading, by immigrant status and country**

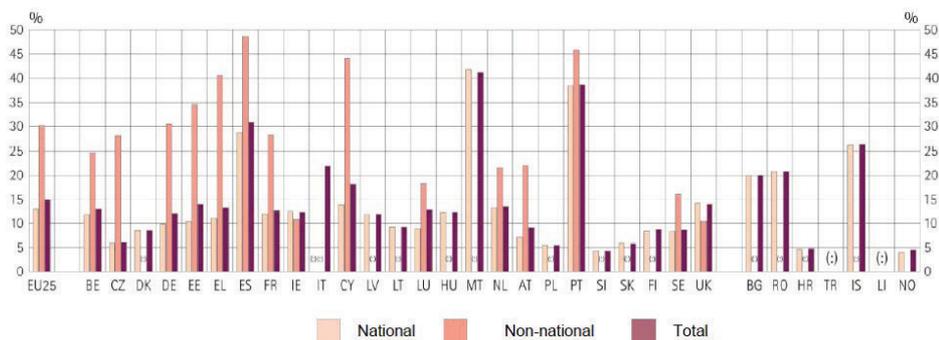
(Performance on the reading scale – mean score)



Data source: OECD PISA 2006 – see European Communities 2008, p. 6

**Figure 5 - Share of early school leavers by nationality, 2005**

(Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with only lower-secondary education and not in education or training, by nationality, 2005)



Data source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey), 2005. See European Communities 2008, p.7

Other factors are the expectations of the children from the side of the family, role definition in the extended family and social group, through which education can be accentuated or denigrated. The influence of the mothers on the school performance of the children cannot be stressed enough. The above data confirm the project approaches to parental involvement regarding (im)migrants, as they are to be found in the best practice examples of the country reports. One consideration might be the provision of language courses for the mothers by the schools, serving at the same time to put across knowledge of the respective school system, i.e. learning and teaching concepts and methods.

Here, another factor surfaces which explains the absentee parents' attitudes and thus the poor level of their children's work. The knowledge brought with them from their native country – from the mastery of their mother tongue to their knowledge of the institution school – is more or less worthless because of the cultural and societal differences between country of origin and country of migration. The basic conceptual difference

of distinguishing economic, cultural and social capital which underlies these considerations is further explained in the study "Education and Migration – strategies for integrating migrant children in European schools and societies" (Heckmann 2008, p.26 ff) . As the mainly unskilled workers of the 1960s and 1970s came to Europe above all from rural and semi-rural areas with low formal education standards and the tendency grew as families were reunited, the children of this migrant group could only have a very tenuous position per se to enter the education systems of the receiving countries. If the social and cultural capital they had acquired in the mother country was already limited, then it was most certainly devalued completely in the face of the demands made by society in the new environment.

The often striking differences in school success between children from certain ethnic/migrant groups and children from the majority disappear the moment the cultural and social capital of the parents is considered. Ethnos-based explanations do not help us to understand these differences any more than different staffing levels and equip-

ment, nor parent attitudes relevant to school or the availability of cultural resources. (Heckmann 2008, p.28).

A differentiated consideration of the different groups of migrants is important, because it does matter to Teacher Education and to colleagues involved in parent involvement what the causes of lack of success in school are.

If we understand by social capital the network of persons with whom an individual is connected on the basis of mutually having got to know and respect one another, then we may conclude that a deficit in social capital is often the missing link to obtaining success at school for (im)migrants:

*"One central aspect of a lack of social capital that is relevant for succeeding in the education system of the country of immigration is the generally weak or non-existent relations between educational institutions, teachers and the parents of migrant children."*  
(Heckmann 2008, p. 28)

In this context, lack of social capital means that the parents do not have any or enough information about the school system. In the ensuing study in 2009 on the integration of (im)migrant children in school in Europe, the Eurydice Network collected data on, among other things, "Measures to support communication with (im)migrant families" (Eurydice Network 2009). In the study, a distinction is drawn between written information (the printed word) about the school system in diverse languages of origin, the support of interpreters and the nomination of particular contact persons. With reference to the aim formulated in the sub-title of the project "Involve Parents – Improve School", namely the development of "Concepts and materials to make school work, including the involvement of parents with a background of (im)migration", the provision of appropriate written information on the school system and the nomination of particular contact persons are most certainly worth considering.

Individual best practice examples in the country reports show, however, that information on the school system, important as it may be, does not suffice alone, but rather there is a need for more detailed parent handbooks, e.g. on the topic of reading support or help with homework.

### Migration in Europe – Diversity in Europe

The diversity in Europe can be seen when considering the history of migration. France, Germany, Poland and Spain should be given short consideration.

In France, a classic immigration country, the situation is still marked today by the history of colonisation, as well as by a long tradition of inducing foreign workers. After the Second World War and during the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, France sought – mainly male – workers from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Poland and Russia. At the same time immigration from the (former) colonies became stronger through the wars of liberation and the process of decolonisation. In the economic crisis of the early 1970s, France followed the example of other European countries and in 1974 stopped the recruitment drive for foreign workers. This did not lead to the return of the migrants, nor to a reduction in immigration, however. Many immigrants stayed in France and brought their families over. Resurrecting families has since then been the most important form of immigration regarding numbers.

Germany has been important for (im)migrants since the middle of the 1950s. There have been different forms and phases of immigration: there was the recruitment programme for guest workers for industry, the family members who followed later, the politically negotiated arrival of returning settlers from former German settlements in East and South-East Europe and refugees from all over a torn world, some seeking the right to remain. It was above all in the framework of the discussion on regulating immigration that in recent years the integration of the (im)migrants became a topic in itself.

Immigration also plays a role in the debate on the consequences of demographic developments.

Poland is considered to be a land of emigration because of its negative balance. Because of its geographical position between East and West, Poland increasingly functions as a transit country for migrants. There are even many migrants from Vietnam and Armenia in Poland. It is also seen as a destination for migrants from its Eastern neighbours and other parts of the former Soviet Union. In contrast, Spain has changed from a traditional exporter of migrants to a country of immigration. The causes are manifold. Spain offered a relatively constant economic growth with its membership in the EC/EU, and was an attractive proposition regarding its need for workers (e.g. in agriculture). Since the 1970s Spain has become attractive to workers through a relatively liberal immigration policy in comparison to the USA, Germany and France, especially for migrants from Latin America and from the Philippines. The composition of the foreign population in Spain has changed considerably in the last two decades. Europeans are once again the largest group, mainly because of migration from central and eastern Europe, although in between the Latin Americans had taken over this position. Africans are not unimportant as a group. Regarding educational opportunity, the question of the cultural minority of the Spanish Romany people looms large beside the issue of integration of immigrants.

### **Note 1: Migrant – Immigrant – Newcomer?**

The situation in the participating countries is decidedly heterogeneous, as these remarks on the situation in some member states of Europe show. This is mirrored alone in the difficulty to give an adequate designation to the parent groups targeted in this project. Initially we talked of "families with a background of (im)migration", and this followed the current usage in Germany. In the other states, language alone dictates another solution, as can be seen in the following exam-

ples. In France, a migrant is defined as a recent arrival who is living in France temporarily. The population statistics differentiate between foreigners (étrangers) and immigrants (immigrés). Immigrants are people who were born abroad, independent of their present status. So nationalised foreigners are still "immigrés", but not the children of those "immigrés" who were born in France. In Great Britain, the regulations talk about parents with an "ethnic minority background", and of "minority students" or "ethnic minority students", while in other countries the definitions 'ethnic minority' or 'minority' relate to population groups with no background of (im)migration, (cf. see Heckmann 2008, p.9).

In Ireland, the Ministry of Education and Science addresses its information material to "Newcomers to Ireland". Russia is mainly concerned with immigrants from the former Soviet Union. In some Spanish regions, the perspective of this project includes the long-present cultural minority of the Spanish Roma.

If this project refers to children with a background of (im)migration, then this is intended to point out that "immigration" plays a role in their biography, independent of whether their parents immigrated or not. Unfortunately, it is still not clear in Germany whether people with a background of (im)migration can be or have been statistically recorded. To register this group correctly, we would have to know the place of birth, but also the place of birth of the parents. This data is not included in official population statistics.

### **Involving parents: In diversity there is the strength to go new ways**

The synopsis shows that it is important to work with diversity, because this project intends to develop modules for school-specific programmes on parental involvement, and we have to consider that each country has distinguishable concepts in its political and societal intercourse with these

groups. On the other hand, this can be seen as the European added value. We relativize the national perspectives and approaches by comparing them productively and reflecting upon them. This is a matter of no mean importance for Germany because of the question of how to view ethnic minorities in relation to the extremely dominant majority, the *Leitkultur*. In contrast, France pays more attention to social differences.

A particular challenge in the project has been the different approaches to the role of parents in relation to schools and parental involvement in their children's education. The changes in this role discussion can, of course, be explained historically. Naturally, this had to be taken into account when partners selected modules for evaluation in terms of transferability.

While teachers have always hoped for more parental involvement in Germany, this expectation of parents hardly exists in France: the responsibility for socialisation and education is assumed by the schools.

In Scotland there has been a long history of seeing parents as having an important role in supporting the education of their children, both at home and in school. Parents, including those from ethnic minority and migrant families, are actively encouraged to be involved in their children's education and the wider life of the school. This begins through legislation at government level which places duties on local education authorities to promote parental involvement- at authority level, at school level and at class level. At all of these levels parents are seen as partners, with their views being sought and their knowledge of their children and their wider skills valued and utilised to support their children's development, that of the school and also authority and national developments.

Support from a national level is offered to authorities, schools and parents to take forward this involvement. There is a further focus, from the earliest stages onwards, on trying to support and

involve vulnerable families who may find it difficult to support their children or who are difficult to engage with. This is from a national level through to class level and operates across services. (Details of legislation, policies and strategies to promote parental involvement are included in the relevant Scottish country report.)

Scottish schools try to take the migration background into account, in order to improve parent participation: "Parents are asked when their child enrolls if there is anything that would help them get involved, e.g. translation, interpretation, childcare, transport" (Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 17). It is, for instance, recommended in some Scottish schools that bilingual Reading Clubs should be introduced to improve parent involvement: "Staff said that they have developed a greater insight to and understanding of the needs of bilingual learners and parents. They can now enjoy much more positive, supportive relationships with bilingual parents" (Scottish Executive 2006, p. 20).

By way of contrast, diversity in the form of cultural diversity is negated in France in the context of the Republican model. Immigrants are perceived as "French". In other countries, e.g. Germany, the language otherness of the families with a background of (im)migration is seen as a deficit in school that needs to be overcome. Germany could learn from France that "language support is not everything, if we are talking about the future of European (im)-migrant societies. It is more the case that we need just as much to combat social inequality and discrimination in central areas like education, work and housing." (Sievers 2008, p.127)

Basically, it must be seen that more attention is being paid to parental involvement in the European context and educational science is increasingly improving its position. Many studies show clearly that schools and parents must move closer together with definite aims. Schools must take the initiative, indeed can do so, because in the arrangement of their interrelationship with parents they are comparatively far more autonomous than in other areas.

## To sum it up: Trends and recommendations

Just how diverse Europe is can be observed at different points in this document and certainly within the area of parental involvement. This is just as true for the history of migration and for the present situation of the (im)migrants as for the different concepts of dealing with the groups concerned. But it is also true of society's expectations of school and family.

Despite all these differences, the mutual task of working on the topic of parental involvement is founded on the common conviction that school must play a central role in the creation of an integrative society (European Communities 2008a, p.3).

In addition to this basic agreed position, a series of common trends and problem areas have become evident in the country reports:

- Start as early as possible with the involvement of parents (kindergarten!)
- Pay special attention to the transition from kindergarten to primary school
- Pay special attention to the key time of transition from primary to secondary school
- Find appropriate ways to support and involve parents in times of transition
- Avoid focussing on problems/concentrate on positive approaches
- Involving parents must become an integral part of the school program
- Schools should develop their own calendar for events and cooperation with parents

- Cooperation with parents needs organisation
- Valuing differences
- Supporting and involving parents during the whole school career
- Using all kind of strategies to contact and inform parents, students, teachers and school members (newsletters, magazines, networks)
- Involving teachers to find appropriate ways to communicate with parents
- Learning about mutual expectations
- Creating a sense of belonging (school and team spirit)
- Providing parents' education and training
- Integrating/cross curriculum contents
- Discussing how far the different cultural, historical, linguistic background of the students/families has to be integrated in the curriculum
- Assessing and evaluating the programs for parental involvement

The support of parental involvement, above all the increased inclusion of (im)migrants, is a task that has to be undertaken by all the countries in Europe. The trends and problem areas discussed above show that it makes a lot of sense to learn from one another in these areas and work together on common solutions to complete the task. The key conclusions arrived at by the partners for the improvement of parent involvement should be seen as their recommendations to the European Commission.

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