

Inspirational book for preschool education

Warm, Welcome and Reciprocal.

Towards a good
parent-school collaboration.



MANIFESTO

From Parental Involvement to Parent-School Collaboration

At the end of the AMIF project, we asked all participants to write down what they stand for, what their vision of parent-school collaboration is. From their input and the conversation that followed, we wrote a manifesto that brings together their acquired insights in one text. It is both the final piece of the project and an appeal to preschools to be inspired by it.

- 1 In a parent-school collaboration, **reciprocity** is central for us. Parents and school are **partners** who can strengthen, question and value each other. **Dialogue** is therefore very important and also allows for discussion and contradiction. Working on **mutual trust** is the starting point.
- 2 We listen to **parents' voices** so that we can properly grasp their needs and concerns. We assume that good parent-school collaboration leads to an **increased quality** of our school functioning. By asking parents the core question, "is this school a good place for my child?", we are challenged to **question our obvious-seeming systems**.
- 3 All actors - the child, the parent, the teacher, the school team, partner organisations - are included in an **empowering process**. We see **empowerment** in the interest of each of these actors and not just as a function of parents living in socially vulnerable circumstances.
- 4 Working towards parent-school collaboration is an ongoing and **dynamic process**. The outcome is not predetermined, the search inspires. In this process we learn to listen well, to question each other well, to deal with the diversity of opinions, perceptions... After all, everyone can contribute expertise from his/her role or function.
- 5 In this we do not stand alone but are **supported** by our alliance with neighbourhood, integration and welfare organisations. Privileged partners are the **childcare and preventive family support institutions, services and organisations**. Cooperation with them represents added value.
- 6 Together with **these partners**, we strive for the well-being and wellbeing of children and their families and work towards a rightful place for everyone in society. By focusing on **meetings and interconnections** between the various actors, we contribute to better **social cohesion** in (local) society.
- 7 For all these principles, it is up to us, school staff, to take the **initiative**, to take the first steps towards parents towards a stronger parent-school collaboration.

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Professional support to school teams

“I first wanted to feel how things were going in the school, observe. I felt stress with the teachers, ‘who is coming to inspect us’. I often said that I was not coming to inspect or control, ‘I don’t come here to evaluate, but to see how certain things could run more efficiently’. In the first conversations, I tried to gain insight into ‘what do you dream about, what is your wish, how would you prefer contact with parents to run, what kind of frustrations do you want to deal with?’”

(Eva, teacher at the Centre for Basis Education Brusselleer vzw)

In a changing society, institutions such as schools cannot help but constantly ask themselves what are contemporary responses to new challenges. This assumes an open and critical mindset on the part of the headmaster and staff to question their own frame of reference and be inspired by what other institutions are trying out and setting up. At the same time, it is inherent to any organisation that there are blind spots regarding certain aspects of its operations. You know the feeling: you are in the middle of it, so you don't have a good overview.

This is why dynamic process guidance and vision development is needed: constantly sharpening your vision of what constitutes good parent-school collaboration, working with partners whose expertise can help you in the change process you are going through as a school.

In this chapter, we focus on the importance of guidance structures in which process guidance and vision development are central. This is how, as a school, you support your own teachers and staff, allow them to grow, professionalise and work in a learning community.

Setting up a guidance structure

— The school as a professional learning community in a diverse society ...

Building a parent-school collaboration brings teachers and child-care workers into contact with a wide diversity of parents and local communities. The increasing diversity requires school staff not to see their own actions and vision as absolutely valid. They are just trying to connect different perspectives in their work: practice is a **meeting and negotiation** between people with different views, values and norms.

Fostering this continuous reflection is what professionalisation processes are essentially about: teachers and childcare workers who, as 'researchers', dare to question their assumptions to improve the quality of education for each child, his or her family and the local community. Through **critical reflection**, new pedagogical practices emerge that respond to the needs of a specific social context.

From this perspective, **Neset**, an advisory network of researchers monitoring educational research on behalf of the European Commission, released a report describing the importance of developing preschools and nurseries as **professional learning communities**. Drawing on international research and inspiring practices in Europe, Neset puts forward five essential success factors of a professional learning community (Neset, 2017).

- 1 Teachers and childcare workers engage in **reflection and in-depth dialogue** with colleagues on the pedagogy of daily practice.
- 2 Teachers move beyond their own classroom doors by 'deprivatising' their practice, **observing each other's practices**, giving feedback, planning together and engaging in dialogue with parents and local communities to make school together.
- 3 There is an investment in **collective responsibility** in the lives of young children and their families, because change is not just the responsibility of one teacher or one headmaster.

- 4 There is a focus on achieving a **shared vision and values**, embedded in children's rights and respect for diversity. This forms the basis for making shared, collective and ethical decisions in daily interactions with children, parents, communities and each other as colleagues.
- 5 **Inspiring leadership** is a decisive factor in implementing and embedding change and innovation in schools.

— **...through the creation of a guidance structure**

This requires schools to realise a guidance structure, whether or not in cooperation with other partners, in which these reflective processes can take place at different levels: at the individual level of a teacher/child supervisor, at the team level of teachers, at the organisation level, at the level of school communities and at the level of partnerships with welfare and integration organisations. To guide reflection processes and process guidance, it is important to build a shared vision with the team (see point 3).

In the boxed texts, we outline two practices from our pilot projects in setting up a guidance structure.

Guidance structure Pilot Project Brussels



Tais, GO! Educational
Network Brussels

“There is a parent-school cooperation **coordinator** per school who, with the support of the management, is fully committed to the project. These coordinators make their colleagues enthusiastic and support them. Because they are so intertwined with the project, they have a good view of bottlenecks and good practices, and this provides depth. Thus, thanks to them, the theme ‘stimulating parents to meet each other’ came along on the agenda.

But our coordinators are not alone: **core groups** of parent-school cooperation were also set up at each school. This proved to be a real necessity to qualitatively shape, adjust and evaluate various actions together with all those involved. **Vision creation** was also regularly discussed with the entire school team. After all, setting up concrete activities goes hand in hand with working on an overall vision, and it was precisely in this area that team members indicated during the interviews that they were missing something.

In order to share ideas, challenges and strengths between the various schools and partners, we organised **intervision sessions** for teachers, among others. This exchange also resulted in concrete changes. For instance, it inspired one school to organise a ‘soft landing’: parents are now welcome to drop off their child in class every morning and are then welcome to ‘hang around’ for a while.

Perhaps one of the most valued accompaniments within our project are the **individual support** sessions for team

members. Hopon (centre for parental support, Brussels) thus supported teachers in the approach and philosophy of parent-child moments in the classroom. In one primary school Brusselleer vzw (learning centre aiming at basic education for adults) provided intensive hands-on coaching and clear communication that meant a lot to team members.

With the **steering committee**, consisting of the managers of all our partners and schools, we monitored the smooth running of the project and provided the necessary guidance and information exchange. At the same time, sufficient exchange across partners and activities remains a major challenge every time.

In our pilot project, we tried to develop a good network of **multidisciplinary support structures**. This way, expertise can spread and there is a positive synergy between different activities: commitment to one aspect helps advance other aspects as well.”

Guidance structure Pilot Project Ostend



Melanie, education mediator City of Ostend, and Kimberly, project officer Ostend

“Six times a school year, we organise a working group on pre-school participation for teachers from three different schools and bridging figures. In this **intervision working group**, we

- paid attention to what teachers and parents indicated during the interviews in the preparatory phase,
- brainstormed together with teachers and worked out concrete actions at class and school level on four themes: communication, parent involvement, daily routine and reception policy.

These suggestions of actions were discussed and tried out in the individual schools. They were evaluated at a working group meeting.

An educational coach was deployed in each school to support and coach teachers / care coordinators / bridging figures in better parent-school cooperation. She discusses parent-school collaboration at least fortnightly with the teachers participating in the overarching peer review. How can they share the developed actions, mindshifts and vision changes with their fellow teachers? How can they also encourage the evolutionary process they experience in the intervision among all teachers in the school?

The coach repeatedly brings these themes to the school’s **core team** ‘Preschool Participation’. She sits regularly with the management and other staff to work out an integrated vision, to continue to get mandate to support teachers and to improve organisational conditions so that teachers have the mental and time space to meet parents. The principals of the three schools also meet bi-annually with the coaches to ensure follow-up and embedding at different levels.”

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Supervision and coaching

Supervising and coaching staff through various forms of guidance is essentially about creating conditions so that deep learning can take place. Through the guidance structure, you introduce a process-based way of working in which an (internal or external) pedagogical coach has a crucial role to enable a climate of dialogue and participation. By this we do not mean a place where we exchange some ideas and experiences, but a democratic place where we question assumptions and where relationships are at the forefront.

— The mirror and the questioner

Moving towards stronger parent-school cooperation means initiating a process of change towards that goal. A 'one session' training or courses-after-school-hours may not be enough. At the same time, it is not always easy for schools to come to conclusions, on the basis of analyses of their own practice - e.g. by interviewing parents or teachers – on what actions can lead to change. The central point is: **reflecting on one's own practice** and motivating people to enter into the change process with small steps. An external coach can support this process. He or she asks questions and brings in knowledge and expertise.

A coach matters to bring about change. Through a coach, you as a teacher, core team or school can ask the question whether you are doing the right thing. The coach holds up a mirror to the school and constantly asks the why question. This is necessary because as a school - and this applies to any organisation - you quickly find yourself in a 'closed system' where that why question is not often asked or answered.

— Preconditions

By bringing guidance or coaching into the school, a process of in-depth reflection and learning is encouraged in the team above all. As a supervisor or coach, this means that you assume a kind of 'critical friend' position. This form of deep learning usually takes place in a zone between comfort and fear of the uncertain: you try to challenge participants without making them anxious. You do invite them to leave known paths, you search together for alternative meanings and possible actions, based on input from parents. As an (internal or external) pedagogical coach, it is therefore best

to think about creating a **safe climate** in which participants can speak freely and show their vulnerability. Working on trust and safety is a continuous process.

We let two coaches speak who have supervised some pilot projects, specifically: **Sarah**, project officer and coach in the pilot project in Ghent (Ghent Education Centre) and **Stéphanie**, community worker at Community Building Organisation in Mechelen and coach in the three primary schools of the pilot project in Mechelen.

— Why work with an external partner/coach?

“The school is sometimes stuck - ‘what we are doing is not working’ - so they are happy to get support. For example, they like being handed models, such as the ‘12 keys’ or the participation pyramid, because it gives them a different perspective to think about something. Community Building Organisation has a certain way of looking at and working with parents. Bringing that expertise in at a time when teachers are ‘stuck’ can be liberating. As an external coach you can more easily keep the goal in mind, in this case: keep bringing in the perspective of families.”
(Stéphanie)

“An external coach has advantages: you are an outsider and you have no connection with what has already happened in the school, with the past and the evolved culture, which allows you to start with free hands and a fresh perspective. Thus, as an external coach, you can constantly ask the open-minded question, ‘what exactly are you doing here?’ and ‘why are you doing it this way?’ At the same time, I also ask deeper questions and am not satisfied with a simple, superficial answer - such as ‘because that’s how we’ve always done it’ - but together we look for an answer to which we can link an action or anchor an action already done.” (Sarah)

— **Attitude**

“Your attitude is very important. The way you enter the team matters. It is both about exploring and observing but also about naming who you are and what you have come to do, and also what you definitely don’t want to do. So transparency, openness and clarity. That means you sometimes have to set your limits: ‘I cannot answer this question myself’. At the same time, as a coach you sometimes have to stand on your brakes, so as not to push what a team is not yet ready for. That means you sometimes have to reformulate the original coaching question together with the team. It is also important to coach non-judgementally, to step into a school and see what is already there, and from there to bring teachers to insights. You can bring in new items - such as good practices from other schools - yourself, but it is up to them to look in the mirror and get started.”
(Sarah)

“I found it important to grasp that classroom and school context, so once a forenoon, be present enough in the school. That way you can better understand some insecurities and fears in teachers.” (Stéphanie)

— **Asking questions**

“Because of my knowledge of vulnerable families working in the Community Building Organisation, my role is to bring the perspective of families into the school team. My role as a coach is just asking that why question. The teacher is a bit irritated because fewer parents showed up. Then I ask, ‘have you asked them why that didn’t work out?’ ‘Ah no, maybe we should do that first’. Teachers also like to move quickly and enthusiastically into action mode: ‘we’re going to do this and that’, and then that why question can put the brakes on for a while. That way, we think together and often come to new insights. Also when evaluating: don’t label something as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but pause for a moment and ask deeper questions.” (Stéphanie)



“A coach is not the ‘all-knowing person’ who just comes to explain. Some schools have a double attitude to this: on the one hand they do want you to come and tell them what to do, on the other hand they don’t accept it either.” (Sarah)

— **Open minds**

“A coach can hardly work if there is no open culture present. There must at least be the intention to obtain it. A proverb says: those who need it, don’t ask. Sometimes schools get stuck in their own world and don’t see the questions they need to address.” (Sarah)

— **Tailored**

“In one school it’s best to use the helicopter perspective, in another it’s best to work out concrete actions together. It is always looking for the right way. You have to adapt to the rhythm of the school and take into account the school culture.” (Stéphanie)

— **Feedback needed**

“Feedback to all interviewees is necessary, even and especially if certain actions are already planned after discussing the results of the interviews. This is only right and, moreover, makes parents feel that they are being taken seriously: ‘something will be done about my concerns’. Especially with parents who feel they have little or no influence on the environment around them.” (Stéphanie)

“Coaching close to teachers pays off”

Veronique and Sarah, respectively coordinator and parenting coach at welfare service Hopon service of Solidarity for Families, Brussels

“Hopon is a parenting support service. A large part of our task consists of discussing parenting interactively with (groups of) parents and responding to questions from professionals. Our task within this project was to supervise preschool activities, ‘Experiencing Talents Together’ (see Chapter 5) and parent cafés to shape and/or further develop these actions within the three Brussels schools involved. ‘**Experiencing Talents Together**’ (ETT) was new for us because it involves children. We start from what the teacher sees as possible and desirable. It helps to convey to teachers that this is an experiment, that we are going to try things out together and learn from them together.

In preparation, we want to discuss some things with the teacher beforehand:

— General

- What are your expectations, what do you want to achieve with this ETT activity?
- What do you think this could mean for the parents and for the child?
- What do you see yourself doing, what do you expect from us, how can we do it together?
- What do you feel comfortable with, what works for you?
- Do you want to register the participants so you know who is coming and how many or do you leave it open?
- -...

— Before the activity:

- How are we going to shape this, how do we welcome the parents (may differ if they are parents you already know or new parents)?
- What does the activity look like?

— After the activity:

- What do you want to cover in the post-activity discussion?
- How will you ask this, do we work with open questions, do we use a methodology,...?

Also in the **follow-up discussion** after each activity, we hold

individual conversations with the teachers, e.g. how did you experience this now, what did you get out of it, what did you see (and what did I see as a supporter),...? Those conversations were very necessary! Some teachers were quite quick to respond, ‘it didn’t succeed because not all the parents were there’. But that allowed us to go on and on about when something is successful, what you look at, how to formulate your expectations in such a way that they influence your perception afterwards.

— Effects after eighteen months

What struck us was the motivation and desire among teachers to continue doing something similar. **The wealth of information about the home context** is particularly motivating, as it helps them to interact with the children. They noticed that contact was more distant before the activity and now more pleasant, fluid. Teachers also welcomed **feedback from parents**. For example, one teacher said that one parent did not bring anything in at the parent contacts but after the activity began to talk spontaneously about what was difficult at home.

In the three schools, the ETT moments will be continued. **Other teachers also** want this because they notice a different way of communicating with parents. We also notice that, **despite language or cultural barriers, parents are getting closer together**, something teachers often indicate as ‘very difficult to achieve’. Some teachers explicitly state that, thanks to these concrete collaborations and activities, they have really experienced a fundamental shift in vision. That there was an **‘aha moment’**.”

Vision development

Visioning a good parent-school collaboration seeks answers to many questions, such as: **what do we stand for**, what exactly do we want to achieve and why, who do we need to do this, what do we have in-house and where can we still get inspiration, who do we involve in this story, how do we get the whole team in it, how do we start a process so that all actors feel involved in where we want to go?

Developing a vision creates **momentum**. It can connect all actors - pupils, parents, teachers, other school staff. Therefore, it cannot be a top-down process. Connection happens when everyone feels involved and is addressed to think along. This is not a path without obstacles. Resistance, fears, uncertainties, negative experiences, certain perceptions and prejudices are on the table with the school if it wants to set explicit lines and red threads. So professionalising the team also means providing **security** so that those barriers can be discussed, so that they are not just seen as a burden but as a challenge.

“In schools, it is best to work on a vision first, especially where it is not yet strongly developed. If not, other actions do not make much sense. In practice, we find that when school staff do not know the purpose of a particular action, it has little or no chance of success. Hence, a clear vision to which all school staff subscribe is a great asset.”
(Sarah, project officer and coach in the pilot projects, Ghent Education Centre)

— The 12 keys

There are many models to stimulate and fuel the process of dynamic vision development. One of them is working with the ‘12 keys’. These keys are the outcome of a project by the Belgian King Baudouin Foundation in which **parents arrived at 12 key conditions** that, independently of the actions chosen, are important in building a good parent-school relationship. To quote parents: “Keep these 12 keys in mind at all times! Because without these keys, your project risks becoming an empty box and your action a simple methodology without any content...”.

- 1 Start with the elementary: smile, goodbye and respect
- 2 Think in and act from within the (school) team
- 3 Taking families as they are, where they are
- 4 It is up to the school to step up to the parents
- 5 Creating bonds before difficulties arise
- 6 Prioritise verbal contact and visual support
- 7 Overcoming language barriers
- 8 Making the implicit explicit
- 9 Paying attention to the fathers
- 10 Increasing the number of doors/entrances
- 11 Forge links with surrounding organisations
- 12 Making time an ally

— Practices with the 12 keys

Some (schools in) started from the 12 keys to **sensitise and motivate** the whole school team around parent-school cooperation.

“We used the 12 keys to set up a thinking process. First with the teachers, then with the parents and finally with the two groups together. In the first session with the teachers, priorities were set through stickers, to be distributed among the keys that the team members felt were most important. The aim was to continue working with the three keys that received the most stickers and were therefore perceived as having the highest priority. The school team was then asked to form 3 groups. Each group was given the task of listing the actions the school is already doing for the three keys. We then thought about what new actions the school could develop. In the next meeting, the team is asked to think about the proposed actions: what could be thresholds and how can we make the actions concrete?” (Miranda, Vives University College)

“The 12 keys have been visualised in the teacher’s room and we actively deploy these in school operations. The angle is: we always look at what the teacher and the school can do to improve cooperation with parents. We keep following this and get critical questioning from the community worker and we plan peer reviews with two other schools. We will test the actions we plan in the future. Moreover, as a newly appointed bridging figure, I can also help activate the process.” (Ellen, bridging figure primary school Dubbelsprong, Mechelen)



“Visualising strengthens school culture”

Ann, care teacher,
and Tamara,
headmaster primary
school Sint-Salvator,
Ghent

“The **12 keys** were generally very recognisable to the team, but it motivated them to **work deeper** on it. For example, ‘smile’. You might ask, ‘do you have to agree on that now?’ But by being intentional about that, you realise the impact it has on parents. By smiling you say, ‘you are welcome’, ‘I am open to you’. We sometimes tread lightly on that but it’s actually crucial.

Under the guidance of coach Sarah, we looked at each key with the team: how is this in you, what are you already strong at, what can you still work on? We took them as a kind of filter so we could see what our working points were. At the same time, we turned them into something visual: **a poster with the 12 keys hangs in every classroom**, as a little visual reminder. We often do that with priorities: visualise them, show them every now and then, use them, find good metaphors to refer to... By giving those posters a prominent place, you say without words: ‘this is desirable behaviour for teachers in our organisation’, ‘this is important for the cultural development of this school’.

Because of those keys, we put even more emphasis than before on ‘**outreach**’ as the school’s mission. That means: as a school, always keep taking the initiative, even when things don’t work out, without passing judgement, always looking to see more broadly. ‘What else can I do to make it pleasant for you and your child?’

We are going to explore those 12 keys in more depth in the coming years and also introduce them to primary school colleagues.”

“An ongoing interaction between visio and practice”

Tais, GO!
Scholengroep
Brussel

“In the three Brussels schools involved, we conducted the teacher and parent interviews and focus groups using the 12 keys, in collaboration with the Brussels Education Centre (OCB). The interviews with teachers at the start of the project clearly showed that school teams were committed to working with parents but perceived little **shared vision**.

Based on the results of these interviews, we then looked for actions to strengthen parent-school collaboration. We found that a good interaction between vision development and concrete practical actions is very important here: one links up with the other, they help each other move forward.

The preschools are always linked to a **primary school**, which we want to involve more strongly in this process in the future. After all, we believe that a coherent vision is in the best interests of the children and families and helps ease the transition to primary school.

For us, these elements are **crucial context conditions** for a living(ive) vision around parent-school collaboration:

- an enduring policy choice by the school or organisation where focused time is taken and given to continue to grow as a team,
- an interaction between the ‘vision’ and concrete practice,
- involving the whole school life,
- providing learning and experimentation space for all involved.
- partners who have the opportunity to support the school in this process.”



groenten

