

School Safety Net

Virtual Meeting on the Case Scenario Entitled "A Young Albanese Refugee Girl's Integration Difficulties"

Minutes

Participants

Christine Cloes (Belgium – Inforef)
Julien Keutgen (Belgium – Inforef)
Francis Mulder (Belgium)
Martine Prignon (Belgium – AEDE)
Barbara Degl’Innocenti (Italy – CIPAT)
Nicoletta Grossi (Italy – CIPAT)
Lorenzo Martellini (Italy – Pixel)
Mihaela Cornelia Achihăiței (Romania – Botoșani)
Gabriela Adomnica (Romania – Botoșani)
Sorin Aionesei (Romania – Botoșani)
Nicoleta Foltea (Romania – Botoșani)

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Presentation of the participants.

Julien Keutgen presents the scenario on the integration of immigrant students.

This case is based on several Belgian cases. It tells the story of a 16 year-old girl from Albania who has spent time in a refugee centre and is now starting school in her new country. She has a varied set of problems:

- She is enrolled at the level corresponding to her age, but her diploma has not been validated yet. Therefore she might later have to go to a lower level.
- She has learnt some of the national language, but still has difficulties understanding her lessons and she runs the risk of failing. Her parents have no knowledge of the language.
- There seems to be a problem with her family. The girl refuses to talk about it. The social assistant of the school knows about the student's problems, but not all the details.
- The girl has troubles integrating in her class. She is defiant and aggressive towards her classmates, who therefore reject her. Due to her behaviour, she is often expelled from the class by the teachers (unaware of her difficulties).

Presentation of Belgian teachers' discussion on the case.

A recurring comment concerns the teachers' attitude, who are not helping the girl because they have not been informed about her situation or because they do not want to make the effort.

The lack of support is also mentioned. She should receive help in the national language, there should have been a transition between the refugee centre and the school, there is no support to the family. In those conditions, the girl's behaviour is almost normal.

Other comments concerned language and communication with the family. The school should hire an interpreter, organise a parents' café to involve the parents. It was noted that in Belgium, schools are not allowed to translate their official communication.

Barbara Degl'Innocenti says in her school there is more than 80% of foreign students. The first problem is not only linguistic but also discovering a new society and new rules.

J.K. presents the strategy:

The main actions to be carried out with the girl should be to improve her command of the language, find her place in the class and take remedial classes. For all this, she will need to open to others and to receive the help of professionals for language, her homework and to improve her self-esteem.

The classmates' attitude seemed normal considering the situation. Belgian teachers considered it is difficult to propose them strategies, because students' integration is the responsibility of the school staff, which should foster harmony and empathy in the class group.

Teachers should be better informed about their students' situations and the possible support and tools she could receive. They can also work with the class to foster solidarity.

The parents' main problem is their lack of command of the language. They also seem to rely entirely on the school to solve their daughter's problems. Closer links should be created between the school and the parents. They could ask the school to call interpreters to help the dialogue and learn the language. They could also receive help from other parents, to act as intermediary with the school and to help them better integrate in the community. Other initiative would be to participate in parents' meeting and in initiatives such as parents' café.

The headteacher is the most important operator, because he is the one who will coordinate all the actions. He should:

- Lead the girl to an intermediary class where she could catch up in language and basic lessons
- Professional guidance. The girl may reject school because she is not in the right section. The headteacher could inquire about her school path, discuss with her and assess her skills to find the best suited school path.
- Other activities that should be organised by the headteacher are remedial lessons, activities to foster coexistence in the class, teacher training and a general strategy to welcome immigrant students. Finally, he should always stay in touch with the school staff and the parents and call, if needed, external experts.

Finally, regarding other actors. The school social assistant was prominent in this case, but the school will also need external help such as associations and mediators for the family. More globally, decision-makers should make integration a priority.

J.K. then gives word to the Italian teachers.

B.D'I. agrees. Immigrant students needs a multiagency solution, there is no single approach to their situation. In her experience as teacher and headteacher, the school team does not see the human potential of those students, only the problems they pose. Their resources and skills should be valorised.

Mihaela Cornelia Achihăiței then gives word to **Sorin Aionesei**, psychologist.



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The problem of many immigrant people is discovering a new culture. Their capacity to change can be limited. There is frustration and aggressiveness. He gives an example of how people can get frustrated when they are criticised by a person of authority they cannot reply to.

J.K. asks **B.D'I.** about a comment she posted on the portal stating enrolling the girl at school was a step back since she was graduated in her home country, while in Belgium she has to continue school (she is only 16 years old). She says in Italy, school is not compulsory after 16. She suggests rules should be harmonised at the European level, and with countries outside the EU. To have an idea of students' background, their skills should be evaluated.

Francis Mulder says there is a problem with the legislation and diploma equivalence. He thinks it is a good idea to assess immigrant students' skills to better select their school path.

M.C.A. reports the opinion of a colleague. The school must ensure a psychiatric and psychological counselling for this girl. Meanwhile, it would be useful that local families invite the whole family in order to show them the Belgian lifestyle and to practice the language. In addition, the student needs more attention from the classmates and the teachers.

Another colleague presents her opinion. Education policies should take into account educational strategies to prevent violence and failure. Different societies should ask what kind of parents they want to form.

F.M. says there are many things in the strategy. To be implemented, it requires good management. It should be part of a school project, not of a specific initiative. New students should be evaluated upon their arrival according to specific indicators. Adult coaching of students in difficulties is often effective to coordinate students' actions and gain their trust.

Nicoletta Grossi: the school should start from the student's skills to prepare a personalised path.

SA: interventions should be integrated in a national plan. Conceptions about immigrants need to be changed, they are particularly negative in a time of crisis and unemployment. Civil society should be involved.

Conclusion of the strategy by **Inforef**: strategy will cost a lot of time and human and financial resources. They need support from the authorities, they cannot be a school initiative but must be coordinated and funded, integrated in a society project.

B.D'I. agrees with the above.

J.K. concludes the meeting.