

The school project of the Dutch language Basic educational institute in Brussels

In the early 90's, Brussels education was at a low: the number of pupils continually decreased and some schools had to be shut down. The VGC (Flemish Community Commission) decided to take a number of measures in order to raise the *quantity* of Dutch language education. About five years later, we see a considerable increase of the number of pupils, mainly due to **an influx of non-native speaking immigrants** in the Dutch language educational institutes in Brussels.

The enormous increase of the quantity surely was a step forward, but the demand for a *quality* increase of education became more and more urgent. For that reason, a long series of initiatives have been taken. Among them is **the school project, realised by CBE Brusselleer in collaboration with the VGC. Its aim is to improve the efficiency of communication between parents and school.** Because of the larger number of non-native speakers, communication has been and still is considered as problematic.



Objective of the school project

The school project is organised by Brusselleer, Basic Education Centre. Therefore, courses are aimed at **semi- and unskilled** adults whose child is taught at Dutch language primary schools in Brussels. The courses are given in the very school to make training more accessible.

Although the school project is part of a Dutch language courses policy, it has a more ambitious objective than just teaching Dutch.

For one thing, the curriculum is meant to improve the **communicative and social skills** of the parents. In this way, the courses supply parents with considerable support while they raise their children in a Dutch language school environment.

For another thing, a better knowledge of the schoolroom language and their presence in the school of their children, enables non-native speaking parents to become **more involved in school matters** and to follow the learning process of their children with more understanding.

At the same time, we want to make non-native speaking parents aware of the fact that they bring up their children in a **multilingual environment** and therefore require special efforts from them.

Last but not least, **information** between parents, teachers and school headmasters must be shared more efficiently.



Language courses, indeed, but ...

In collaboration with ...

The objectives of the school project can only be accomplished if we collaborate intensely with the schools and the external participants.

Schools that are confronted with problems related to a growing number of non-native speaking parents, should contact Brusselleer and the VGC. They will be added to a waiting list. An educational clerk will investigate to what extent a school is eligible for participation in the school project (possible reference to other centres, the parents' education level, etc.)

To make sure the collaboration with the school runs smoothly, we annually renew a co-operation agreement that unambiguously deals with all arrangements concerning publicity, expectations of the school, contacts with the school team, etc.

A multiplicity of **external participants** is actively involved in primary schools in Brussels. Communication between educational employees on the one hand, and school community workers, speech therapists, OVB teachers on the other hand, is of paramount importance, both on school level and co-ordinating level. It goes without saying that a great deal of consultation is required to gear language courses to the school curriculum as well as possible.

Because of the linguistic situation in Brussels, we have to familiarise parents with the offer of Dutch language entertainment for children. Every year, we organise visits to the local libraries and toyshops to enable both parents and their children to overcome their hesitation and make use of the Dutch language infrastructure.

At school ...

In order to accomplish the objectives, it is important that the parents' courses take place during school hours in the school of their children. In this way, we can also attract parents who find other courses far too inaccessible. The school of their children makes it possible to develop a positive attitude towards learning in a familiar, comfortable environment.

Task-oriented ...

Just like Brusselleer's NT2 language courses, school project courses are based on a task-oriented approach. This means that all language courses are taught in the realm of language tasks with which parents are often confronted in school.

Particular attention is paid to aspects such as commitment to the school and communication with the school.



Here are two examples :

‘What does my son get for lunch at school today?’

‘My daughter has to miss classes. She has the flue.’

We do not explicitly focus on grammar and vocabulary, but only in the realm of the language task that is crucial in the learning process.

For 2 school years

The school project courses take two school years. The first year - beginners' level - the course takes place only once a week; the second year twice a week.

Not every school provides this comprehensive curriculum. Some schools only work with a beginners group, some with an advanced group, others with a combination of both.

Their curriculum depends on various circumstances: the parents' preferences, the schools' wishes, the specificity of the school.

After the school project

The school project courses **do not turn parents into bilinguals**. When participants have completed these two years, they will, however, have gained some independence that will enable them to participate in school life in the broadest sense of the word and without too many barriers. Students will then be able to apply the necessary basics in the schoolroom language of their children. This will serve them well in particular situations: enrolling a child in school, reporting a child sick, informing about the child's learning process, etc. Some participants consider the level achieved as sufficient, other parents want to continue.

The latter can register for Brusselleer's open courses.

Through these courses, they can continue to improve their language skills another one or two years.

But not everyone wants to continue "studying" Dutch and one course will not do to fully command a language. Therefore, it is important that parents already in the course of their study become considerably acquainted with Dutch language organisations and Flemish people.

They are strongly encouraged to participate in community centre activities, to get acquainted with miscellaneous socio-cultural organisations and to participate in the school community. Sometimes, parents choose to continue on their own.

In the course of 11 years, the school project has also produced some long-term results. Mothers who took part in the school project many years ago and are now in their final year of the open school system, can opt to receive practical language training. Last year, some mothers took practical language trainings in the school of their children. They assisted in coaching the children in class or served as volunteers in the local Dutch language library and toyshop.

The school project ... not a once-only project

An increasing content

The objectives desired can only be accomplished through continual efforts. Continuity of collaboration plays a key role.

In the beginning, **collaboration** with the schools was not always easy. The school project still had to earn its position in the school team. Attending internal meetings and consulting with individual schools was almost impossible. At present, the commitment of the teachers is evident. Each year, school governors and teachers receive a list with the number of participants. At the end of each school year, we make an assessment with every governing body.

The educational clerks of the school project must become well-known in school to make sure that the collaboration with the teachers runs smoothly and parents get to know the teacher and will be encouraged to take language courses.

The school project, launched in '91, **filled in a need** that was sensed by various schools, and has developed considerably ever since.

In the past, schools submitting a request were almost immediately accepted. Nowadays, schools submitting a request are added on a waiting list. They are allowed to join the project within a year's time after being screened on a number of important indicators: the capacity of the school, the number of semi- and unskilled participants, local community, etc. For the moment, 25 out of 123 primary schools in Brussels participate in the school project.

Gradually, the school project has aroused interest outside of Brussels as well. In Flanders, there is an increasing demand for the realisation of similar projects.

Initially, **teaching material** was geared as much as possible to the subject matters of the child. This method resulted in the development of subject-oriented teaching material (as in schools). As a result, students were not enough encouraged to find out how they could put the subject matters into practice. Therefore, the courses' approach is currently task-oriented, and a common outline has been developed to make sure that all educational clerks offer a parallel curriculum.

The school project's staff communicates with many schools in Brussels and keeps an eye on the practical changes within the educational institutes of Brussels. They also attend informative meetings.

Besides, nearly all educational clerks of the school project have received Advanced Training for Primary Education. Parents can rely on a team of professional staff who coach them in the best of ways during their learning process.