

# **EVALUATION OF THE CEJI 'SCHOOL COMMUNITY APPROACH' EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **Introduction**

This evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of the "School Community Approach" programme (SCA) was undertaken by the EIESP for CEJI and focused on the implementation of the programme in five schools across four countries (Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands). The main objectives were to undertake in-depth evaluation of selected schools in the programme in order to better understand the outcomes, effects and impacts through collecting and analysing the perceptions, opinions and suggestions of all the different constituencies in the school community.

CEJI's School Community Approach is defined as: A long-term view to school development that involves the various actors of the school community in order to create a positive learning environment that respects diversity and where all pupils can succeed.

The SCA of CEJI uses diversity training as a pivotal factor in school change. The 'A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE'™ and Peer Training Programmes, both from the Anti-Defamation League's A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute, are two complementary training approaches to enhance the awareness and skills of the school community to be able to embrace diversity, confront discrimination, and create inclusive learning environments where all pupils can succeed. 'A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE'™ provides training and curricular tools for teachers to develop effective classroom strategies. Peer Training develops youth leadership and important transversal skills that empower pupils to actively participate in defining a positive school climate. These two programmes together, as part of a global project in which the administration develops a long-term view to school development, provide a clear framework within which schools are better prepared to address the social-educational challenges of today.

This evaluation focused on the school as a whole 'community': management staff, teachers and students. Two 'control' schools in which there had been no previous CEJI programmes (or others similar) were included. Four were upper secondary schools, predominantly vocational and technical, but one also had general education streams and the other two were lower secondary schools. Overall students were from 12 to 22 years old. The main data collection was by semi-directive, face-to-face interviews carried out in the language of the country using a set of common interview guidelines developed on the basis of the agreed indicators for the purpose of this evaluation. In total 123 interviews were carried out. Data was also collected through written documentation.

The agreed indicators were:

- There is an institutional commitment to create an inclusive environment that recognises cultural diversity as a valuable resource.
- The school and its different groups feel prepared to confront prejudice and discrimination and address intercultural conflicts.
- The different groups within the school report they have more confidence and feel more prepared to deliver the approach over a longer period.
- There is a capacity to undertake needs assessment in the school on a regular basis.
- There is evidence of improved communication within the school.
- The school recognises the valuable role of young people.

The full report is in three volumes as follows:

- Volume 1: Evaluation Report and Annexes
- Volume 2: Evaluation Tools
- Volume 3: Case Studies (available only on request to CEJI)

The national coordinators representing CEJI in this School Community Approach were:

- Belgium (Flanders): AGORA
- Belgium (Wallonia): IRFAM
- France: ARES
- Italy: Oltreilponte
- Netherlands: Intercultural Alliance

The piloting and evaluation of this project has been made possible with the support of the Ford Foundation.

## Conclusions

The findings suggest that SCA is contributing in all the schools where it is implemented to making the learning environment of the students more conducive to their well-being and making the school a place where they can grow positively. The overall focus of the first phase of this programme has been about “learning to live together” and building mutual respect in the schools involved. The objective of creating an inclusive environment has gone beyond the intercultural aspect and addressed a range of inner and outer diversities including addressing the students as individuals within the class and school group. Different types of external diversities, including the intercultural, have been addressed in different ways, either due to the characteristics of the school and its immediate environment or because the school chose to raise the awareness of its students to other countries and cultures through projects and internships (as part of their vocational studies). In the best cases the commitment to create an inclusive environment, respecting both inner and outer diversities, permeates the ethos of the school.

The immediate effects reported by those who followed the teacher training and peer training were:

- Teachers reported that they understood better the mechanisms of prejudice and discrimination and felt more confident to deal with discriminatory behaviour and prejudice and to initiate discussion on sensitive subjects. They felt they were more available to the students and better able to hear their needs. They said they had the confidence to be more open and some reported having undergone a reflection about their own beliefs and practices. As a result, staff in the schools reported a more serene atmosphere in their school in general, as well as in the classrooms. There were fewer incidents that became unmanageable.
- Students reported that they had become more active in their schools and demonstrated in the interviews that they experienced increased and enhanced confidence and self-esteem as well as a sense of belonging in the school. They initiated and proposed ideas both as follow up to the peer training and for other projects which they would like to see developed in the school. <sup>1</sup>
- In all cases the SCA project and the training undertaken, even for a limited number of

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<sup>1</sup> Recent research cited in: J. Gordon, L. O’Toole & C. Vince Whitman, “*A sense of belonging as part of children’s well-being*”, **Early Childhood Matters**, “**Enhancing a sense of belonging in the early years**”, November 2008, Number 111 (published by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation) underlines the central role of belonging in building a sense of well-being for children and young people. Three themes are shown to be the most relevant: agency, security and a positive sense of self. They are all demonstrated in the interviews with students.

staff and students, appears to have had a positive effect in reducing conflicts in schools and also physical and verbal aggression.

- One of the first results of the training reported was increased mutual respect, a better capacity to communicate and therefore also to listen creating a firm basis for building respect and dealing with prejudice.
- The schools involved have been prepared to invest substantial resources 'in kind' which include staff time and practical resources of the school.

One school has been working with CEJI for a number of years and in that school the outcomes are:

- Use of the tools in the classroom and/or other situations in the school and to deal with everyday problems.
- Adaptation of the tools to new situations (e.g. integration days for students and parents).
- Use of certain exercises for training class delegates.
- Effects on the overall organisation of the school – e.g. the re-organisation of the timetable.
- A reflection has been initiated on the notion of discipline.
- The school has opened its doors wide to the outside world through various programmes, projects and internships.

The findings of the evaluation suggest that there are four main strengths in CEJI's School Community Approach project which are:

- The experience of CEJI in developing and implementing projects designed to create an inclusive and supportive environment in schools.
- The tools developed and implemented which are clearly effective even in the short term.
- The very substantial investment by the staff and students in the schools involved.
- The local knowledge of coordinators and their relationships with schools is also important.

Other factors which contribute strongly to the success of the programme are:

- It is essential for the project to become firmly embedded in the school leading to coherence between the vision and goals of the school's global project and the SCA programme which can only happen if the staff and students feel empowered by the programme and respected in their school.
- It is equally important that the principles underpinning the programme are applied to other activities in the school and become fundamental to the overall ethos.
- The role and personality of the school principal are a major element; a dynamic, innovative, respected, available and involved principal is more likely to be able to bring the staff together around a set of shared goals for which they feel ownership and responsibility. The commitment of the whole school community appears closely linked to the nature of the relationship between the management team and the teaching and support staff.
- Reaching a critical mass of staff and students trained within a reasonable time appears to be a central issue for the project to become embedded in the school's practice.
- It is an excellent sign of success when the training tools begin to be used in the every day practice of the school for different purposes, e.g. training class delegates.
- Time plays an important role in allowing the work in each school to mature and to take root.
- The achievements have been substantial with the resources available as SCA functioned during its first phase with a comparatively small budget for the costs of the coordinators, the needs analysis, training and follow-up. Inputs by the schools represented a substantial investment of staff time and resources.

Factors that may hinder the good implementation for the next stage of the work:

- When the team of staff coordinating the project remains too small, it appears to reduce the capacity of the project to make a difference in the school as a whole.
- It will be important to reflect on how to involve parents more.

## **Recommendations**

### **The role of the CEJI in the next stage:**

1. It is recommended that CEJI focus on developing peer learning among the schools involved as well as on consolidating the tools in order to extend the project to more schools. In this way CEJI would focus on deepening the process in schools already involved through peer learning and using the experience and expertise of CEJI and those schools to increase the number of schools involved.
2. Peer learning could also integrate a reflection on how to extend the "school community" effectively to parents and to other players and partners around the school.
3. Some consolidation of the SCA tools would be useful so that new schools coming into the project would have:
  - a. A Manual on the School Community Approach. A draft Manual exists and it is recommended that resources been invested in finalising it (at least in English) by the end of the first quarter of 2009.
  - b. Self-evaluation tools for schools involved which could be developed on the basis of the tools used for this evaluation.
  - c. Stocktaking tools to be used in first contacts with new schools.
  - d. CEJI could reflect on the advisability of being able to recommend tools that schools could use to help them in developing a school project and action plan.

### **Communication about CEJI and its messages:**

It is recommended that CEJI reflect on how to communicate its purpose and to present its activities in a way that could be more attractive to schools. The findings suggest that the biggest immediate effects of the SCA are about the atmosphere in the school (how students and staff feel about themselves and towards each other, a decrease in the number of conflicts, better communication, relations in the classroom, etc.). Though these aspects are all related to creating inclusiveness, delivering the message in these terms might be more easily "heard" by school staff (and even education authorities). CEJI has a lot of experience in working with schools that are experiencing difficult and urgent issues and knows they are looking for practical, effective solutions.

## **Final remarks**

Overall in terms of outcomes, the project has certainly been worth carrying out. Staff and students have been trained and awareness has been raised in the schools involved about issues of creating inclusive environments. A range and variety of activities have been organised in all the schools and the schools declare that they are more able to address issues of prejudice and discrimination. One school, which has been working with CEJI for almost ten years, has taken the work to the next level of change and have a longer term perspective rooted in the school's own project. Other schools are beginning a process of change which, if continuing support is provided, could develop very positively.

A considerable amount has been achieved with a small budget that has acted as seed funding. In addition the schools have co-funded making a substantial investment in staff time and of their own resources. The A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE™ and peer training tools have been used successfully in all the schools. One school has adapted them to suit the needs of their students. Another has integrated them into their normal every day practice. The schools which only started the project recently are keen to continue training with support from CEJI and the coordinating organisation in their country to ensure that they can reach a level of understanding and a capacity for practical implementation that will ensure that the goals of the SCA project can be fully achieved within the school.

CEJI has successfully piloted this programme and demonstrated its potential for initiating and supporting a process of change in schools. A number of recommendations have been made with the intention on supporting CEJI in moving the programme to its next stage of development. In the schools where the programme is being implemented, it is making a real contribution to recognising the valuable role of young people in their school community and of ensuring that they have a strong sense of belonging to that community; that they feel appreciated for whom they are and receive positive recognition from others; that they feel protected, cared for and listened to with respect (and listen to other youth and adults in the same way) and that they have a sense of agency in so far as they are given the space to take independent action and can influence developments inside the school.

**Success factors observed in one of the schools:**

**A range of projects have opened the school up to the outside world.** They are undertaken within their own town (e.g. work on disability), abroad (in several countries through projects and internships for vocational students) and with various local actors (radio, contacts with regional authorities).

The importance placed on the **role of young people** in the school community. On the one hand, there is the enthusiasm, the flexibility and the ability to listen to them, which is very enriching for the young people. On the other, they are actors in the construction of their own curriculum through increased choice which increases the personalisation of their pathway (choice of workshops, enrolment via intranet, possibility to propose workshops and projects, etc.).

The work with CEJI has helped the school to **develop tools** to support their work and to integrate them into their daily practice.

Beyond the different actions and specific measures, **the students expressed a sense of well-being** in this school. All those interviewed were pleased with their choice of school and had the impression of being in an institution that was helping them to grow and to become autonomous. They had the impression that people listened to them, respected them for who they were and that they could influence the life of the school.

The teachers spoke at length of the **personal development** that was made possible through the activities that had been carried out over the years. The project as a whole enabled them to “stand back” and reflect together on their practice as teachers. All the problems have not been solved, but the teachers felt they have efficient tools and are able to find appropriate solutions to each problem more easily.

**November 2008**