



Parent'R'Us Awareness Raising Tool for School heads

Key messages:

- You as a school leader need to make it clear that you want to build a partnership between your school and ALL parents, and build parent representation accordingly, with a special focus on cultural and social differences.
- You need to support the teachers in initiating and maintaining partnerships. They are the professionals, you should not expect the initiative from the parents.
- Use all available means to support disadvantaged, vulnerable parents so that they can feel safe and treated as equal partners.

What do we mean by parental engagement at school?

To a certain extent parents are involved at school or at least they are supposed to be involved. Research around parental involvement and parental engagement defines these two notions differently, the first being an invitation for taking part in something that is already in place and the latter one being a **co-creation procedure between partners – namely school and home – mutually recognizing each other's role and impact and working in partnership around learning.** It is also clear from research that parental engagement has a number of benefits for children.

The difference between involving and engaging parents

Specific needs of vulnerable families

When you design your own school's engagement policy, and you aim for engaging all parents, regardless of their background or social status, you need to consider the following about disadvantaged, vulnerable families:

- A high percentage of these parents have bad schooling experiences that have a direct impact on their attitude towards teachers and schools;
- Many of these parents **don't feel comfortable in the school** as a physical space, thus policy needs to encourage school-related discourse to happen at safe third places (with the possible engagement of community organisations);



Involvement	Engagement
Who is involved/engaged?	
Parents	Parents and children + family and community
What is in the focus?	
School with teaching in centre	School, parents, learner with learning in centre
How it is done	
School initiative, formal meetings	Flexibility of form and timing
Communication is	
One-way school to home	Two-way, use of technology is dominant

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- A high percentage of these families need information as well as active support during engagement opportunities in languages other than the language of instruction;
- Even if the language they feel comfortable speaking is the language of instruction, their linguistic register may be different from that of the teachers, and they may not understand education jargon.



How can school leaders encourage a partnership approach to parent-teacher relations?

As a school leader, you first need to make it clear for your staff that you want to establish an equal partnership with parents taking into consideration their background regardless of how different that is from yours or others', and that you want them to do so themselves.



You need to revisit and rethink the time and space usually used for interacting with parents and redesign it if necessary. A parent room available for confidential discussion is a good first step if you don't yet have one, but you can consider using safe third spaces (not the school and not the home) for interaction.

The way to engaging vulnerable parents is usually through people they know and trust, so ensure that vulnerable parents are represented in your school's parent body/committee/organisation, and rely on them when designing the engagement of other similar parents.

Celebrate all successes that vulnerable families share with the school or that their children achieve at school.

Teacher training and coaching needs

Research conducted in the Parent'R'Us project as well as long-term experience of partners working in the field show that **first and foremost teachers need to identify their pre-conceptions about disadvantaged parents who usually differ from them greatly in many ways**. This can then be the basis for changing mindsets, overcoming prejudices and becoming open to differences. If you want to establish a parental engagement culture in your school, your teachers need help achieving mutual trust and appreciation. It needs to be initiated by the teachers as professionals.

Research clearly shows that in the majority of European countries the profile of teachers is closest to white, middle class, middle aged, female with a low level of diversity. Migrant and Roma communities are especially under-represented in the teaching professions while their children are the most vulnerable and at risk of school failure. Motivation research also shows that those choosing teaching as a profession are relatively risk-averse and opt for the school as a workplace being closest to values, behaviours and practices they consider their own. However, parent engagement is only possible if it is based on mutual respect and equal partnerships. Thus, teacher training needs to accompany administrative measures that focus on:

- Widening teachers' knowledge and understanding of diverse social and ethnic groups;
- Identifying and overcoming prejudices;

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- Offering tools for partnership with people different from teachers in general;
- Specific needs of vulnerable families.

Benefits of implementing the Parent'R'Us mentoring approach at your school

Supporting vulnerable families is only successful if it is built on trust. At the same time, **it is also important to boost the self-esteem of vulnerable parents and help them become conscious, equal partners at school.** The Parent'R'Us mentoring model is an exceptionally good tool for achieving this, while it can be a successful and affordable policy tool. By training your teachers and involving community organisation representatives to act as mentor managers, and subsequently trainers of parent mentors, the approach provides a very effective approach to renewing a mentor pool of upcoming generations of parents.

The Parent'R'Us mentoring model foresees peer mentoring from parent to parent that supports an equitable parent engagement policy in two ways. On the one hand, mentors – who are parents coming from the same disadvantaged background as mentees – are acknowledged and rewarded as successful role models for their community when choose to become mentors. On the other hand, mentees see a role model in the mentor parent who is very similar to them, offering them an easy role model to follow. As vulnerable parents often do not trust authority, including teachers for various reasons, this approach is especially suitable for reaching out and engaging them by building back trust via a peer they can trust and easily identify with.

Your mentor parents can also act as mentors, coaches and trainers for your teachers to help appreciate disadvantaged parents and to build partnerships with them. They can be the bridge, especially when there are major cultural differences between your teachers and parents.



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