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Intercultural assistant - solution supporting the integration of Chechen children at Coniew School Complex

Bartosz Swider

Project Coordinator ROPS in Rzeszow

b.swider@rops.rzeszow.pl

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Good practice from the Coniew School Complex, Góra Kalwaria commune, Masovian Region, Poland

- 2004 - the first children from Chechnya appeared at Coniew School Complex.
- In next few years all children living in the nearby „Center for Foreigners” in Linin, who applied for refugee status were directed to this school.
- Chechen children came to Poland as a result of their parents' or guardians' decision to leave the country out of fear for safety, often against their will, having difficult memories of a war-torn place behind them.



Problems at school with refugees children

- language barrier;
- frequent childrens absence at school;
- absence from physical education classes;
- general unpreparation of refugee children for a full-day stay at school;
- aggressive behavior of boys towards friends, carrying knives, threatening, starting fights, verbal attacks;
- Chechen parents usually did not participate in the meetings and were not interested in children's learning progress, no contact with parents;
- all-day separation parents from children was a huge emotional challenge for families from Chechnya.





Intercultural assistant at Coniewo School Complex



- September to December 2010 and from September to December 2011 - employment of intercultural assistant (IA) in the Coniewo School complex - **Mr. Aslan Dekaeu**.
- **„Legal Intervention Association“** commenced cooperation with the school in frame of the projects **“Multicultural Mazowsze”** and **“Mazowsze of equal opportunities”**.
- As part of those projects, in 2011, two more assistants were employed in five more schools in the region where refugees children attended.

Duties of intercultural assistant:

- support for students, both Polish and foreign;
- support for teaching staff, participation in meetings of teaching councils regarding refugee students;
- mediation and assistance in relations with parents of refugees children;
- conversations with children from Chechnya about their needs and difficulties at school;
- the role of a translator for newly arrived students in contacts with teachers;
- constant encouragement for children to participate in physical education classes and additional Polish language lessons;
- visits to a center for foreigners, talks with parents to encourage their children to learn Polish;
- support for parents during meetings with specialists
- attendance at school or class events and celebrations;
- the methodological and organizational support for the teaching Staff;
- running classes in the Chechen language;
- cooperation with the center for foreigners in Linin and in particular with Chechen parents and guardians

Results of the intercultural assistant's work



- better contact with refugees children with whom it was previously difficult to communicate;
- a bond based on trust was created, improved the opinion of Chechen parents about the school - they understood the importance of sending children to classes, motivated them to learn Polish and other subjects, and were much more willing to engage in school life than before;
- better understanding of Chechen children for the teachers;
- the trust of Polish children parents for the assistant, they started to use his help, ask questions about Chechen culture, difficult issues;
- solved many difficult issues resulted from cultural clash (e.g. wearing caps at school by boys, inappropriate behavior towards girls);
- appeased the protest of Chechen refugees in october 2010.

Intercultural assistant / teachers assistant

A teacher's assistant is a person employed with funds provided by the school's governing body (usually the commune office) pursuant to Article 94a, point 4a of the Education System Act. Such a person reports directly to the management - as an employee of the school.

Problem: some school principals are not aware that they can apply for this type of support, sometimes the governing bodies refuse to finance the employment of a person in this position, justifying this decision with a lack of financial resources.

An „intercultural assistant“ (IA) is a person employed in a function similar to a teacher's assistant, e.g. by a non-governmental organization (not from funds provided by the managing body).

In practice, people employed as **intercultural assistant** or **teacher's assistants** perform very similar functions at school and perform similar tasks.



Conditions for good cooperation:

- **Preparing the school staff for the presence of the IA:** a positive attitude of the school staff towards the presence of the IA is a basic condition for successful cooperation. It has two goals: recognizing staff's concerns or uncertainties related to the presence of IA at school (possibly during lessons) and responding to these concerns.
- **Appreciation of the role and work of IA by the school Staff:** The way teachers and school management treat IA (with respect or with a sense of superiority) affects not only the working atmosphere and well-being of IA, but also the way students perceive IA. The word "assistant" in the name of the function refers only to tasks related to supporting migrant children, their families as well as teaching staff, and not, for example, to performing the function assistant duties (e.g preparing the room, wiping the blackboard, making photocopies, etc).
- **Realistic definition of the effects of IAs work:** the work of IA at school can bring many benefits - (improve learning progress, adaptation of migrant children at school, communication with parents, as well as increasing the comfort of work of school Staff). However, the presence of IA at school will not solve all problems related to the presence of migrant children.



Desired competences of intercultural assistant:

- **Linguistic competences:** knowledge of the Polish language at least communicative and the languages spoken by migrant children;
- **Experience, qualifications and predispositions to work with children:** if the IA's main task is to work with children, experience, qualifications and predispositions in this area are extremely important. Formal teaching education is not always necessary to perform this position, the same as lack of experience working with children does not necessarily disqualify a candidate. The individual characteristics of a given person, his temperament and predispositions are also very important;
- **Understanding the impact of the migration experience on the functioning of the child and his or her family** - it is necessary to be sensitive to the needs and behavior of the child and to have empathy for what the child experiences in connection with the migration process. IA's personal experiences related to migration can be extremely helpful.

Desired competences of intercultural assistant:

- **Knowledge of cultural norms** in force in the country where the student is brought up and in Poland, as well as the ability to support the child, his/her relatives, peers and school staff in situations where cultural differences may cause mutual misunderstanding and result in conflicts;
- **Knowledge about the formal education system in Poland:** it is needed especially when the IA is to cooperate with parents and answer their questions and provide information regarding, e.g. the necessary equipment for children starting school, the organization of the school year (including the dates of holidays, the holiday calendar and school events such as the beginning and end of the school year), school rules (e.g. the rule to change the shoes at school), subsequent educational stages;
- **Knowledge about the local community in which IA will work:** knowledge in this context may be particularly useful when it has a significant impact on the situation of children and their families, e.g. location of the school and the refugee center (in a poor district of a large city).



Implementing IA into school work:

- discussion of the scope of IA's tasks;
- tour with IA around the school;
- presentation IA to the teaching council, school employees and administrative Staff - the IA may arouse curiosity or concern in people working in the school, the IA should be recognized by all people working in the school as a new member of Staff;
- introducing IA to parents of migrant and Polish children - important for the parents' sense of security - who has contact with their children, how and for what purpose;
- informing students about the presence and role of the IA: tasks, why such a person is at school, in what matters they can report to the IA, what is the role of the IA towards Polish students;
- providing as much detailed information as possible about the children who will be directly helped: knowledge about the situation of students can significantly help IA in working with individual children;
- providing information who IA can contact if he or she observes disturbing or dangerous situations at school.

Thank you!

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