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Marginalised children and families in the French school system

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Hassan Ezzedine and Alain Grevot describe a project for schoolchildren in France.

This paper describes an aspect of the work of a specialist social work team which is part of a non-governmental organisation, Jeunesse, Culture, Loisirs, Technique (JCLT). The team, an equipe de prevention, is located in a town about 50 miles north of Paris. One of the team's projects, an accompagnement scolaire, illustrates work taking place at a crossroads of cultures. These cultural crossroads include: professional cultures - the project promotes joint work between social workers, teachers, youth workers and voluntary workers; social cultures - the project takes place in a large area of public housing, and leads to encounters between people of many different socio-economic classes and religious groups; ethnic cultures - the area houses people with roots in many places on the globe.

The work is also taking place in a particular wider socio-economic climate. In France there are about 3 million unemployed people (November 1996), and another 5 million whose employment is precarious. There are cuts in central and local government funding, and there is a crisis over the model of integration.
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which the state promotes. JCLT started work on this project in 1994. Funding is insecure, a series of short term contracts with the local authority, constantly re-assessed and re-negotiated.

The town where the housing estate is located has about 60,000 inhabitants. The city centre is by a small river, and the main public housing estates are on hills to the north and south of the town. We are working on the estate to the south, St Jean. There are about 16,000 inhabitants, of whom 43 per cent are under twenty, and 75 per cent of adults are working class. 86 per cent of the inhabitants are French citizens, but there are 46 ethnic groups represented within the estate. Unemployment is high and St Jean is an 'education priority zone' (National Urban Policy).

Within the estate, people are scattered in many micro-areas, each with a strong identity built up over the past forty years. Mutual mistrust between the inhabitants of micro-areas is high, and one of the aims shared by all professionals working in St Jean is to encourage mutual acceptance between the inhabitants of the different micro-areas.

The JCLT equipe de prevention is a specialist community work team which first started working in St Jean in 1987, offering a voluntary and confidential service to parents and children. The team includes four social workers (educateurs specialises) and one psychologist.

The project described here was started in 1994. The aim was to develop, in one of the poorest areas of the estate, which is part of a social rehousing programme (PRS), a programme to support children's commitment to school and education. We wanted, working on a voluntary basis, to support and encourage children between the ages of 8 and 14 who were in trouble at school. We were supported by the departement (equivalent to the county council) which pays one of our salaries, and by the state, which pays the rent of the ground floor flat where we are based. We are open on weekdays (except for Wednesday when there is no afternoon school), from 5.30 to 7.00 pm, and during school holidays for specific sessions.

Our work

We offer individualised support with school work for children who are known by teachers to have difficulties at school, and there is a small follow-up group of about 5 children. We aim to enhance the children's self esteem and give them
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a greater sense of security, and to restore their commitment to school. We also try to identify the kind of difficulties that the child may have, and, with the team psychologist, we offer the parents and children specialised individual counselling. We work hard with the parents throughout, and try to enable them to take responsibility for following up their children’s progress at school.

Our programme is unusual in that it is located outside the school and in one of the poorest parts of the city. Participation is voluntary and the work is clearly separate from the education system, but it is strongly supported by teachers and head teachers. It is implemented with the support of the local social services department, and we have an effective partnership between public and voluntary social services and other members of our local network. However, ‘getting in’ to our micro-area has not been easy. It was as if we had initially disturbed the privacy of the people who live there. During the first year, we had to cope with aggressive behaviour and our building was defaced.

We are working with children from four different primary schools and one secondary school. Teachers suggest to children in difficulties, who they think might benefit, that they should come and see us. At the same time the teachers give us a list of the children who they think we could help, so that we can take advantage of any opportunity to make contact with them that may occur. Of course not all the children whom the teachers would like us to help come to see us. Once every three months we meet with each of the teachers to assess the impact and effectiveness of our work. Here is an account of the progress of one child:

Silli is an 8 year old boy whose parents come from West Africa. His father is polygamous. Silli was having a lot of problems with reading, and hardly knew the alphabet. Our first aim was to help him to relax and to dedramatise his problems at school. Every effort that he made was praised and congratulated. He joined in all the school holiday sessions that we set up, and became more and more committed and lively. Four months after he started to come to us he was reading everything that he could lay hands on.

Of course, sadly, there are only a few ‘miracles’ like that, but, as one head teacher said ‘even if many of them make no significant progress, you can help them not to be completely swamped’.
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We work with children from 38 families: 7 French, 3 Portuguese, 17 from north Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), 7 from West Africa, 2 Turkish, and 2 mixed families (one parent French, the other from Africa or north Africa). We meet every family to negotiate a written agreement for the participation of their children in the programme. Initially we decided on that course so that the families could know who we were. We needed face to face contact in order to lay the basis for a relationship of trust. We wanted to have an understanding with them, so that we could talk with them about their children without offending their sensibilities. For example:

The N'Daye family comes from West Africa and one of their daughters is involved in our project. Her mother is clearly more involved than her father in the educational process, because a girl's upbringing is the mother's responsibility. The first time I met Mrs N'Daye, she discovered that I speak one of the Senegalese languages, and she immediately became more confident. As time went on she came to trust us more and more, asking for counselling about her daughter's behaviour, and bringing us Senegalese food that she had cooked.

Seventeen volunteers work with me in the project, mostly women. They are all French, and live outside the St Jean area. Most of them are middle or upper class. Many of them feared meeting people living in the PRS: they were afraid of the bad reputation that the area has, and they were anxious about their role with these very lively children. We had to help them to relax and be at ease when faced with the children. We helped them to think about their own behaviour so that they could avoid anything that might be insensitive towards the children. We set up a methodical and clear process aiming to help them to see other people as they are. We encouraged them to use their natural warmth to gain a place alongside the children.

Most of the volunteers were afraid of making their first contact with the St Jean area and its inhabitants, but no racial or cultural conflict has manifested itself between the children or their parents and the volunteers. One of the volunteers, a midwife, married to a radiologist, told us that her husband was very worried when she said that she was going to work with us. He thought that at the worst she would be raped, and that at the very
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least, their car would be broken into. There were no problems for her, and she
is now proud to tell her middle-class friends how much she enjoys helping these
children.

Our programme has been evaluated with teachers, head teachers, education
inspectors, social services department social workers, volunteers and members
of the county and town councils. We have also included parents. The next
step will be to try to decentralise our work, and work with the families in their
own homes.

Contextualisation

Establishing this project involved a series of cultural encounters. One of the
most important was the encounter between the schools and social workers. For
teachers and school inspectors to support an organisation dealing with school
matters, but based outside the walls of the school and employing many
volunteers, was a sign of an important process of change. To explain this, it is
necessary to describe some aspects of the ethos of French schools. For many
years the corporatism of teachers and of the civil servants of the *Education
Nationale* has led them to oppose any action set up outside the official education
system. The French school system is national and centralised. It was built, at
the end of the nineteenth century, on a basis of secularity and republicanism.
Education is the business of the state, and the French still remember the School
War, the battle between the State and the Catholic schools at the beginning of
this century. In 1905 the Church was separated from the state in all aspects of
public life, and this included schooling. School teachers (whose ‘uniform’ was
a black coat) were called ‘the black soldiers of the republic’. The school itself
was a fortress, separate from family and neighbourhood, distancing itself from
the influences of the family and the environment. It aimed to teach children
not only academic subjects, but also republican values, and children were taught
to be good republicans. It was a tool, and a successful tool, for the integration
of foreigners into French citizenship. It has taken many years for teachers to
accept the idea of sharing their mission with other people, whether professionals
or volunteers.

The concept of the 'fortress school' is now in difficulties, and the scale of
immigration from northern Africa is creating a challenge to French ideology.
Teachers are still trained to think that the school should not be influenced by
the environment. In this context, building a working relationship with the schools was fundamentally important. Initially we had to work daily with the teachers. We had to explain that our aim was to work with any child in trouble at school, regardless of ethnic background, and that we would work with the children on both their social and scholastic problems. We were able to engage the teachers in this work with us because it supported them in promoting republicanism. However, this approach meant that we were unable to get any funding on the basis of work with specific ethnic groups (and there were problems over producing a leaflet in Arabic).

There were also cultural encounters between different groups of people involved in the project. Firstly between the social workers and the volunteers. Social work is a young profession in France, and does not have the confidence of a well established identity. There is resistance to the idea of working with volunteers. Social workers’ first reaction to working with volunteers is often negative; they are afraid for their own professionalism and ethical stance. There is also the view that volunteers might be creating unemployment; in a country with 3 million unemployed, many consider it a priority that some payment should be made for any work done. As has been described, there was also a need to build bridges between the volunteers and the people who they were working with. The middle-class women were afraid of the people in the St Jean area, and lacking in confidence in their ability to help the children there. We aimed to create practical links both between different social classes and with the elected members of the council in order to change their perception of the people of St Jean.

Cultural differences over child rearing also had an impact on the project. In the African families, education was often seen as the woman’s business, and our first partners were usually the women in the families. There was more difficulty in building partnership with French families, because there are frequently very poor links between teachers and parents in France. We found that African mothers were often more prepared to get involved.

The development of this project demonstrates the necessity of taking into account a range of cultural and ideological positions. Hassan’s knowledge of an African language, and of an African culture, facilitated the development of the work with some of the minority groups. It was just as important that thought was given to the ideological positions of the teachers and the social
workers. Without an appreciation of the teachers' relationship to the community, we might not have anticipated the time that would be needed for preparatory work with them. Without an understanding of the perspective of social workers on volunteers, and of middle-class women on the people of St Jean, we could not have worked successfully with the volunteers to enable them to carry out their task.