

Focus group Belgium

The focus group took place on Thursday, **January 11, 2018** from 5 to 7pm. There were 9 families present during this focus group. To facilitate communication, we divided the participants into three tables with, for each, a 'facilitator'. Every 15-20min, the participants mixed and changed tables and the facilitator summarized what had been said in the previous group and then the conversation started again. It had been decided to separate the youngest children in a separate room and to make an animation with them so that they could also express themselves around the theme of school. Young teens and children who wished could stay with their parents and participate in discussion tables.

Below is a summary of the main points heard during the conversation tables.

The unanimity was on the importance of the atmosphere within the school and the exchanges 'parents-staff of the school'. Indeed, the **"family" atmosphere is essential**, it allows parents and students to ask questions, to express difficulties and worries without feeling judged. Some parents feel accused of being bad parents. For the school-parent relationship to go well, there needs to be a climate of trust and tolerance: a family atmosphere. The fact that teachers know the child well, reassures, creates a sense of equality, tolerance. Good experiences of school-parents 'relationship seems to share a common feature: a feeling of equality between parents/teachers & children. If not, some parents spoke of fear of "retaliation" against children by management or teachers. Parents sometimes feel helpless; they feel like they do not have the proper 'tools' to defend their child.

Creating a custom link appears to be a condition for better managed contacts later. **The director's availability**: It is important not to have directors hiding in their office. Their presence at important moments, for example at the exit of the school or at the reception, facilitates contact. Some parents even use the term "connivance". If a "wall" is created between the two parties, the reactions can become disproportionate.

The **choice of school is important**, given the differences between schools in terms of pedagogy, engagement style, level of learning ... The question of level seems to come in mind very early in the educational path. Another criterion also appears, the success of a school sometimes makes it overpopulated, and this, to the detriment of the students.

Some schools seem to lead many projects promoting exchanges between students (moments of collective exchanges, dialogue with teachers, PPR ("Plan for Success" - possibility of assistance for study and homework after school hours, it's successful project) by the teachers in the school buildings).

The interest of **multidisciplinary teams** (management, teachers, educators, psychologist, speech therapist, PMS center (Psycho Medical Social center), ...) was a point often put forward. This makes it easy to split what needs to be done at home / school and allows for help and personalized follow-up over time.

A compulsory body that exists in every school in Belgium and has been mentioned few times: the **participation council**. It is an organ that represents the PO of the school, parents, students, teachers, associations. This body is advisory and may have plans for establishment, study tours or others.

The **association of student parents** was also mentioned but not necessarily as an easy access body and attended except by parents already involved in the operation (parent who are already a member of the participation council). Yet all parents receive the list of contacts, however only few use it.



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Other points discussed:

- Some schools push to **elitism**, they are accessible only to "model children".
- Some organ bodies are attended by "model students" which also leads to an elitist system.
- Some parents regret a time when priority was more placed on order, discipline and respect for authority
- The **use of ICT** makes communication with the school easier, more attractive and sometimes faster, via a website, email, Facebook ...
- The **lack of creativity spaces** in the school: more drawing, music, artistic expression, ... The school has become a place of conformity (a bit boring) that limits the means of expression.
- **Time and resources:** Indeed, if a child is in difficulty, it takes a larger investment to catch up (help with homework, work and more to catch up ...). The use of computer / internet for research and homework is discriminating for some because they cannot afford or use it properly (lack of skills).