Case Studies of promising parent- and family-focused support programme

Franziska Cohen*, Mareike Trauernicht*, Joana Cadima, Gil Nata, Katharina Ereky-Stevens, Martine Broekhuizen, Ryanne Francot, Yvonne Anders

*shared first authorship

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PARTNERS INVOLVED

Number	Partner name	People involved
1	Universiteit Utrecht (NL)	Martine Broekhuizen, Ryanne Francot
2	University of Oxford (UK)	Katharina Ereky-Stevens, Eszter Saghy
6	Freie Universität Berlin (DE)	Yvonne Anders, Franziska Cohen, Mareike Trauernicht, Sophia Köpke, Nadine Michels
9	University of Porto (PT)	Joana Cadima, Gil Nata, Sofia Guichard

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. BACKGROUND

Within the ISOTIS framework, Work package 3 (D3) addresses the role of parenting support and home-based educational programmes in the support of parents in creating safe, nurturing and stimulating home environments. The overall objective is to create a broad overview of existing approaches, to collect available evidence and to examine in-depth good practices to be able to formulate widely applicable recommendations for the development and implementation of parent- and family-focused support programmes, which specifically focus on the ISOTIS target groups. Theoretically, the work is embedded in assumptions of the bio-ecological system of human development as well as in theories of home learning environment and family systems theory.

The research presented in this report presents findings of five case studies of promising or successful programmes in four different countries. We aimed at obtaining in-depth knowledge of the success factors of parent- and family-focused (home-based) approaches to improve the quality of family environments. Thus, we wanted to shed light on how promising or already proven to be successful programmes overcome existing challenges and ensure high outreach and process quality. In addition, we wanted to explore strategies of implementing the home languages of culturally diverse target groups and ICT in the programmes.

1.2. METHODS

The research follows up on the inventory of family support programmes in Europe, created by Cadima and colleagues (2018). The inventory and the results of an expert panel were the basis for the selection of five programmes with a focus on parent empowerment for the case study D3.3. The programmes worked with migrant families and / or low SES families. They were either judged as highly innovative or had been already been evaluated as successful. Further selection criteria were effective outreach strategies, promotion or inclusion of families' mother tongues and the implementation of ICT in the programmes.

We analysed expectations, experiences and success factors from the perspective of participants, staff, providers and financing institutions from each programme by qualitative interviews and focus group interviews. The interviews were analysed with qualitative content analysis regarding the main categories: outreach, cooperation, requirements, home language support and ICT. The comparative analysis aimed at identifying common strategies across countries and levels, and how strategies need to be tailored to the specific characteristics of the communities, cities, countries or to the specific characteristics of the target groups within the given contexts.

1.3.   RESULTS

1.3.1. OUTREACH

In general, two main success factors contributing to effective outreach were identified: The establishment and use of trusting relationships and a strong adaptability and flexibility towards the needs of the target group in a given context.

Representatives of different levels (e.g. financiers and providers versus staff and parents) interpret establishment and use of trusting relationships differently. Whereas representatives of steering or leading levels relate to broader and overarching principles (such as maintaining the trust in the programme itself) staff and members spoke mainly about interpersonal relationships, giving concrete hands-on-examples. In different programmes it was highlighted that the practitioners working with families need to be trusted members of the community, they need to meet the parents at eye level and respect them as experts of their own children. The practitioner should be someone parents can identify with, e.g. sharing the same cultural or linguistic background to establish trusting relationships. Trust of the parents towards cooperating external institutions involved is also considered as important however, from the perspective of the parents the image of different institutions may differ across countries and contexts.

Adaptability towards the target group comprised three aspects: outreach locality, attractiveness of the programme's content, and structural conditions. Adaptability is a general principle, but it is met by each programme in its own way. Successful and innovative approaches meet their target groups through trusted organisations and key-persons who already have contact with the target group at places where parents spend their time. They make their programme visible through communication channels seen and listened to by the target group. They set up initial low-threshold participation possibilities, pleasant schedules regarding times and places of classes or meetings, and promote the programme in a non-stigmatizing way. However, the partners involved, communication channels used, and concrete activities offered need to be carefully adapted to the specific needs of the families in a given context.

1.3.2. COOPERATION

In four out of five programmes, cooperation with other partners is seen as an important mechanism to ensure the success of a programme in various ways: cooperation as an integrated programme component, for an effective outreach, for professional development, and as a strategic way for an external evaluation of the programme. Successful programmes seem to adapt their cooperation strategies against the background of the specific traditions and a careful evaluation of the needs of the target groups in the given contexts and the needs and aims of collaborating partners. Even the decision for a less visible cooperation with other partners may result after a careful evaluation of the needs and characteristics of specific target groups (e.g. target groups with strong fears towards authorities and formal institutions).

1.3.3. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The findings revealed that successful or promising family support programmes need staff or people in charge with both high personal and professional skills. At all levels, a strong motivation and interest to be involved is needed as well as a personal flexibility to adapt programmes, strategies and activities to different contexts and families. High motivation may be seen as a prerequisite for staff members but may also be implemented as a culture of leadership, which develops a positive vision for a programme. At the same time, motivational aspects as well as other professional skills may be subject to professional development.

At the organisational level, in addition to clear leadership strategies, implementation, monitoring and evaluation procedures seem to be related to programmes' long-lasting success. The work with families in need is a challenging job that should be based on strong professional knowledge (e.g. about the specific characteristics of the target group, about consulting methods, developmental psychology) and driven by an attitude of respect that each parent is an expert of their own child and has as much resources to share as the practitioner himself. Promising or successful programmes establish structured and continuous systems of supervision and professional development for their staff.

1.3.4. USE OF ICT

The integration and use of ICT is seen as a promising approach for family support programmes. However, the interview results showed that ICT - to date is so far an unused resource and facilitator. In some cases it is used as a communication tool to overcome language challenges. However, it is still not seen as a success factor by all representatives in the examined approaches, although implemented officially in the concept of two programmes. We point to the potential benefits of strategic ICT use within the programmes. The implementation of ICT tools needs to be adapted to the needs of the providers and families and should be supported through the professional development of the staff.

1.3.5. FIRST LANGUAGE SUPPORT

Even in otherwise very promising and successful programmes, the support of the first language (L1 support) seems to be either not considered or uncoordinated and seems to be supported partially, arbitrarily or at random. The decisions of programme's coordinators on which language is supposed to be supported – first home language, country language or multilingualism – is not based on evidence or on differentiated knowledge but rather based on rules or guidelines. The interviews showed that these guidelines in turn were more influenced by programme's circumstances or political changes. Migrant parents' attitudes towards L1 support seem to be two-fold: They value and wish the integration of their first languages in the programme and at the same time they stress the importance of the main language spoken in the country they live in in order to enable their children to have the best opportunities within the educational system. The

findings point to a strong need to support providers and staff to implement L1 support in a reflective and coordinated way, considering parents' perspectives on this topic.

1.4. EXISTING CHALLENGES

Although we investigated programmes that were proven to be successful and programmes with very promising approaches, the interviews and focus groups also revealed that effective family support is faced with challenges that are not easy to overcome, and this relates to all categories examined. Programmes may have developed effective outreach strategies for one specific target group, but this strategy may not be effective for other target groups within the area. The same holds true for content and activities of programmes. Thus, providers and staff are asked to reflect and evaluate their attitudes and activities continuously and invest continuous efforts into adaptations for new/other target groups, societal changes or changes within settings.

Furthermore, sometimes changes ask for rethinking core principles such as the beneficial effects of cooperation in general. Family support programmes need to adopt knowledge and strategies from other disciplines, for example the implementation and development of leadership models. Otherwise, technological and linguistic knowledge may not be widespread across programme professionals. This may be a reason for the fact that L1 and ICT support have not been strongly and/or successfully implemented so far.

Finally, funding is essential for any social intervention programme, but principles of funding follow quite often short-term rationales and are not supportive for the long-term quality of an intervention.

Following up on this, the findings are reflected against the background of existing research, and policy recommendations for providers and policy-makers are derived.

ISOTIS

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT TO TACKLE INEQUALITIES IN SOCIETY