

## Project: INTERCULTURAL MENTORING FOR SCHOOLS

### *Project goal*

*„When you're here I can understand everything better! Why don't you come everyday?"*

This statement from a young pupil towards a mentor shows the main goal of the Mentoring-Project: We understand Mentoring as a successful tool for integration, because the immediate contact between the involved people, breaks down stereotypes and establishes meaningful relationships. In our project students with a migration or refugee background visit regularly primary and secondary schools in Vienna and St. Pölten. There they support children with migration biographies or children from refugee-families. Each mentor is proficient in more than one language and are either students or graduates. Most of our mentors went through the Austrian school system, therefore they know the problems and issues children with a migration history or German as a second language face in schools. Additionally, since autumn 2016 Syrian refugees work as mentors, supporting teachers in classes with a high number of Arabic speaking pupils. They also see the project as a chance to give back to the Austrian community, which is a way of escaping the stigma of being only welfare-receivers. This is an important experience for refugees.

Scientific studies and our project experience show, that pupils, who participate in a mentoring-programme profit enormously from mentors as role-models: The mentors are an additional support person for the children, to whom they can talk to and build relationships with. Because our mentors are mainly students, it is fairly easy for them to work with children and teenagers. The pupils themselves usually have no issues whatsoever to approach the mentors and build relationships with them or ask them for advice. For children with German as a second (or third or fourth) language mentors are very important, because they are themselves at least bilingual and can work with children facing the same issues on a different level. The effect is even greater when the child (or children) and the mentor speak the same language. Through that kind of support the pupils gain positive experiences, which enhances their self-confidence and their position within the classroom.

Different to other mentoring-programs in lower Austria and in Vienna, our project is set exclusively within the classrooms. This approach has proved to be very successful, because it includes the teachers as well. Another reason for this kind of setting is, that it doesn't lead to a certain stigma for the pupils. Thereby possible resentments from parents do not take place.

Intercultural mentors can lead to a better mutual appreciation within the classroom. Possible misunderstandings between parents, teachers and pupils can be resolved easier. Additionally, mentors can show children and teenagers with a migration background that there are other possibilities regarding their schooling. The special position the mentors are in, enables them to be role-models for a better together. They share their experiences from their school- and university time with the pupils. They show them, that other options can be chosen regarding a career. Therefore this approach can be seen as a very effective tool for integration.

## **Project implementation**

With the beginning of January 2017 40 mentors have been working for the project, 37 in Vienna and 3 in St. Pölten. In Vienna they regularly visit 23 schools and in St. Pölten 3. In total 13 primary schools, 11 secondary schools, one grammar school and one higher school of economy are involved with our project. In some schools more than one mentor is working, which leads to synergy effects within the school.

All of our mentors are next to German proficient in at least one other language. All together the group speaks 14 languages: 11 speak Arabic; additionally 3 speak Kurdish, 13 Turkish, 2 Farsi, 5 Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. Other languages are: Spanish, Russian, Italian, Thai, Romanian, Tagalog, Bulgarian and Pashto.

Our mentors are students<sup>1</sup> with a migration or refugee-background and have a lot of experience, which is being shared through the mentoring-programme. Especially children and teenagers hold the presence of mentors in high esteem, because they are "someone, who is there for them" and they "speak their language and share similar experiences". Statements from the pupils show that this is a very successful approach: *"One kid with a Serbian background, who has a lot of trouble following the class, but who is also very motivated and engaged, constantly thanks me. Some things he doesn't understand instantly, and he is ashamed to ask in the class. When I go over to him and explain it slowly, then he understands it all and is really happy. Today he didn't just thank me. He came over and hugged me and said: 'Thank you for your help. Now I am done with all the assignments'."*<sup>2</sup>

In a personal interview we talk about the motivation and the individual qualities with mentors to be. We also inform them about the project itself, their work and the main goals of the project. Future mentors also have the possibility to accompany an experienced mentor into the classroom and gain valuable experience. Usually mentors work one day during the morning in their classroom and are available for the pupils. Because of the regular contact between the mentors and the pupils the students become significant people in the lives of the children and teenagers. All of our mentors are bilingual and speak German very well. This means, that they become positive role models when it comes to multilingualism. Through their regular visits they convey not only professional and educational possibilities, but also that a good command of the German language and their own languages leads to advantages when it comes to future jobs and schooling.

The teacher and the mentor decide together how the work itself will look like and how it will be implemented in the school and the classroom (e.g. open classes, working with groups, working on special assignments, working on projects etc.). From the reports, that our mentors hand in twice a year, we can see, that the sphere of activities is very diverse and constantly changing due to the specific situations that sometimes arise in a classroom. The flexibility and adaptability of our mentors is very specific to our project and goes hand in hand with intercultural learning. Therefore, the mentor sometimes works in the whole classroom, sometimes with a certain group of pupils and sometimes with only one child or teenager.

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<sup>1</sup> Our mentors are mainly studying to be teachers and are social and cultural anthropologists.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from a report from one of our mentors.

A mentor is therefore not only working with the pupils on class assignments, but also a person the children and teenagers can talk to and trust.

Because of the fact that our mentors are working within the classroom, they are a valuable resource for the teachers when it comes intercultural learning and cultural and lingual plurality.

Of course the mentors also work with the parents. They can be asked about all sorts of topics and work as translators. Through that they offer a low-threshold approach towards the Austrian school system and help, when necessary, to establish contact between the parents and the school or other institutions.

Moreover the project offers monthly meetings, where the mentors can discuss various topics among themselves or with us. Solutions for problems and other issues are discussed with the team and the mentors. Through that kind of approach, there is a constant process of optimizing the work. Written reports, based on a questionnaire, are handed in twice a year by the mentors. The analysis finds its way then into our yearly reports and the reports for our financial supporters. Further information can be found in the anthology *Erfahrungen teilen – Vielfalt erleben. Interkulturelles Mentoring und Mehrsprachigkeit an österreichischen Schulen*, published 2015 by Susanne Binder and Eva Kössner (LIT-Verlag).

### **Budgetary situation**

The project has been successfully running since 2010 and will be continued, if further finances are provided. The monetary aid in the year 2016 was € 25.225,- (BMEIA, Initiative Vielfalter, Anerkennungsfonds des Sozialministeriums, Ma 17 and Büro für Diversität der Stadt St. Pölten). Our mentors receive for their work in the schools € 50,- per month, depending on the number of mentors and financial aid. The budget for the mentors in the year 2016 was altogether € 9.400,-. We have been assured to receive some financial support (BMEIA) for the year 2017, which will cover only a part of the project expenses.