

Foyer nieuwsbrief internationaal (Verzending datum: 04/09/2012)

Foyer Summer Report

Welcome to the summer edition of Foyer's international newsletter!

Summer is that time when buildings get progressively hotter, offices progressively emptier, and many a poor office plant progressively drier. With summer almost over, offices filling up with tanned colleagues and plants sighing a sigh of great relief, this report tells you all about what went on at Foyer while some - mistakenly! - believed that there was no longer anyone around...

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Personal trajectories: on the road to success

After the end of the school year, Vormingscentrum Foyer, the vocational training centre for young people with a disadvantaged background, drew up the balance sheet.

Pupils at the training centre are between 16 and 18 years of age and follow personalised development trajectories aimed at (re)integrating them in a conventional school or guiding them onto the job market.

In 2011-2012, 39 boys and 22 girls were enrolled, which constitutes a record. Most pupils are of Romanian Roma origin, while the rest hail from countries as diverse as Morocco, Liberia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Brazil. 20 pupils already started a part-time internship project in the course of the school year. Also, an increasing number of pupils who have attended Vormingscentrum Foyer go into part-time vocational training afterwards. Preferred fields include logistics, administration, cookery, childcare and carpentry. Some 25 pupils will stay at Vormingscentrum Foyer to finish their personal trajectory next school year. Here, too, the trend is definitely positive, with ever fewer pupils dropping out of the programme.

14 pupils were supported by a language coach, thanks to Vormingscentrum Foyer's own language coach and the excellent collaboration with a local teacher training centre, which will be renewed next school year.

Coach Maarten Hendrickx: "We are convinced that it is essential that pupils feel at home here. They will only do well if they are given the opportunity to learn within a warm, confidential, and structured environment that invites them to explore and push their limits. Young people who feel ill at ease at school will automatically be hampered in their personal development."

One project that truly marked the past school year was the "Crossing" theatre project. It acted as a catalyst and source of motivation for other activities within the training centre. Maarten Hendrickx: "Several youngsters grew and truly blossomed thanks to this wonderful project. They stepped outside of their comfort zone and learned that exploring the unknown can lead to positive results. Occasionally it may even give you wings to fly. [...] Also, several girls have learned to ride a bicycle this year. Most were a little reluctant at first, but they became very enthusiastic as they started making progress. The boys went swimming for the first time, and here, too, many had to overcome an initial fear, but quickly developed into skilled swimmers.

[...]

Some of the pupils who graduated this year will soon start learning at a centre for part-time education. Yet Vormingscentrum Foyer continues to follow up these former pupils to provide mental, emotional or cognitive support if needed. They need a safe haven, a place to turn to when things do not go very well - a sort of support that in many cases is not available at home."

"The fact that so few pupils now give up on their school career after enrolling in Vormingscentrum Foyer constitutes a giant leap forward," Maarten Hendrickx concludes.

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The silence of the North

To end the working year in style, twenty-eight women of the Dar Al Amal women's centre went on a three-day city trip to Göteborg in southern Sweden. Their aim? Broadening their horizons and getting to know another society. Northern Europe was uncharted territory for the women visiting the centre, and therefore all the more intriguing.

In Göteborg the women took a particular interest in the role that migration plays in local society. Among others, they visited a women's project aimed at newly arrived immigrants. The majority of these newcomers were from Somalia, but project participants still came from a wide variety of countries and regions - Göteborg is home to no less than 136 different nationalities. The women also visited the town hall, where they attended a conference on democracy in Sweden, a retirement home and a Swedish church that functioned as a multicultural meeting place for women.

Yet what impressed the women most of all was their walk through a council housing project in one of the city's disadvantaged neighbourhoods: ten large blocks of flats in a beautiful landscaped park. It was just that...the occupants felt isolated: there were no shops, markets or other public meeting places in the vicinity. Conversations with local women of immigrant origin revealed the difficulty of making social contact and building friendships in this part of the city.

A participant sums up her experience: "Göteborg is very pretty, with lots of green areas, few cars, many bicycles and well-developed public transportation. People do not look down on foreigners. If you go on an excursion in Flanders with a group of 28 women of immigrant origin, many of whom are wearing headscarves, you do get different looks! Still, I prefer Brussels neighbourhoods like Molenbeek, Laeken or Anderlecht. Göteborg may be green and clean, but it seemed very quiet to me. People do not really talk to one another. [...] Way too much silence and isolation."

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ROMED mediation training

In January 2011 the Council of Europe and the European Union launched their joint ROMED-programme, aimed at making the services provided by mediators, community workers and facilitators better and more efficient. Existing national and European training modules are expanded with additional skills, instruments and methods.

In Belgium the Federal Public Service for Social Integration acts as National Focal Point and coordinates the programme. A training course for fieldworkers and mediators from Brussels and Flanders was organized at Foyer from 3 to 5 July. In autumn the same course will be organized for their colleagues from Wallonia. After completing the course, all course participants are monitored for six months by the National Focal Point.

Training sessions were led by integration officer José Gonzalez and by Koen Geurts, who heads Foyer's Roma and Travellers Service. Both had taken part in a ROMED training programme in Strasbourg in January. Course participants included intercultural mediators from Antwerp, Brussels, Leuven and several other cities in Flanders.

Mediation is one of the approaches taken in Europe to address the inequalities that Roma face in the areas of job access, health care, and education. It involves hiring people of Roma origin, from local communities or with a thorough knowledge of Roma issues, in order to mediate between Roma families and public institutions.

The European Ethical Code of Ethics for Mediators is a set of basic principles and norms that was drawn up as a key instrument for improving the quality of the mediators' work and to protect them against abuse. A first draft of the code was presented for feedback to all mediators who took part in the training sessions.

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Culturally sensitive diabetes education

Diabetes is a widespread problem in a number of immigrant communities in Belgium and one that Foyer has been trying to tackle for a while, taking a trial-and-error approach in this little-explored field. Doctor Abdellatif Riffi of Vrije Universiteit Brussel has recently studied this topic and published a set of findings and recommendations.

Culturally sensitive diabetes education furthers general knowledge on diabetes, allowing for a better regulation of the disease. That is one of the main findings of a study carried out in the Brussels University Hospital. A group of Belgian diabetes-sufferers of Moroccan origin were informed about the disease with the help of a video and a group talk led by an intercultural mediator. This approach turned out to be effective, but it needs to be repeated regularly, otherwise patients' newly acquired knowledge drains away. Dr. Abdellatif Riffi, researcher and GP, tells us: "Many Turkish and Moroccan diabetes patients, in particular, have very little knowledge of the disease that they are suffering from, do not stick to their prescribed diet and do not take their medication properly. Given the high prevalence of diabetes in these groups, there is no denying that there is a real problem."

An earlier study, in which Riffi also participated, revealed that diabetics of Moroccan origin had higher blood sugar values than their Belgian-origin counterparts, less effective regulation and more complications as a result. The researchers decided to try and establish which interventions were effective with these patients and which were not.

For the present study, 127 diabetics of Moroccan origin were selected and divided into three groups. The first group received ordinary care at the hospital, while the second group received a specially adapted and well-illustrated "diabetes passport" in addition to the regular treatment. The third group, finally, also received culturally sensitive diabetes education, in the form of a group session led by a specially trained intercultural mediator. Participants were shown a video on diabetes in either Moroccan Arabic, standard Arabic or Berber. The mediator then gave a presentation and invited patients to ask questions and share their experiences.

Patient questionnaires given one and six months into the programme showed that only patients in the third group had acquired significantly more knowledge about diabetes. Moreover, their diabetes regulation, measured by their blood levels, improved notably.

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