

Mediation of a social worker between a school and a family to enable the child to continue attending school

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“Life is very complicated and difficult to organise; school was not a priority for us, so we just kept our child at home without thinking about the consequences.” (The child’s mother.)

What was the issue?

A school was concerned about a child from a local Sinti camp who had been enrolled but had stopped attending classes. The school was worried about the child’s welfare as well as their missing out on education. The school had tried to contact the family to ascertain what the problem was and to warn them that the school had a responsibility to raise their concerns with local child protection agencies if the situation could not be resolved. Before escalating the situation the school contacted one of the Municipality social workers that operated in the camp to see if they could help.

The social worker contacted the family and became aware of several issues:

- The family were unaware of the consequences of keeping the child away from school, such as the risk that the child may be taken into care
- The child had previously done well at school and had been motivated but the family felt that this had changed due what they saw as the racist attitude of a new teacher
- Overall the family had very few expectations of the education system for their child

To resolve the problem the social worker set about mediating between the different parties.

What did we do?

The social worker set up individual meetings with the family, the new teacher and the old teacher to obtain an understanding of all the different perspectives. There was more than one meeting with each person and the social worker made a point of going back to the family several times to develop a better understanding of the issues. At these meetings the social worker

“It is very hard sometimes for all families, whether Italian or Roma, to accept that a bad mark is not a judgement against the child. Rather that sometimes it is better that the child repeat a year rather than going on with a widening gap between them and the rest of the class.” (Teacher)

ascertained that one cause of the problem had been that the child was not doing their homework and was thus slipping behind in their grades.

After the initial meetings the social worker organised a joint meeting of all parties. They also involved the Aunt of the child who had two children of her own that attended the same school and were happy there.

This first joint meeting was tense with evident mutual mistrust from all parties. The social worker was present at the meeting but importantly asked a colleague to chair the meeting so as not to compromise the position of being a trusted support for the family. The colleague was able to be more neutral and help make the communication more effective allowing everyone to share their feelings and perspectives.

What difference did we make?

Trust between the parties grew during the meeting. The parents agreed to start sending their child to school again and the children of the Aunt (the child’s cousins) agreed to support the child with their homework.

Although the parents still had concerns about the way their child had been treated they saw that the old teacher (who they trusted) was supportive to the new teacher. This helped them feel more confident about a positive way ahead. They also felt that their opinions had been heard and respected during the mediation process and that they had not been unfairly judged. This helped them respect the views of the teachers and accept that their child had not been keeping up with his homework that had been one cause of his difficulties at the school.

They also understood the risks of keeping their child away from school, such as an intervention from the child welfare authorities.

The child started attending school again, although their grades slipped given the time they had missed. Consequently the teacher negotiated with the family about the child repeating that year of education again, something the family agreed to.

“Mediation between Roma and the authorities can be very difficult and is helped by the intervention of a third party, someone who is neutral. At the same time the mediation has to be done by someone that the Roma person trusts.” (Social worker)



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What did we learn?

1: The support of the Aunt was central to the success of the process, as the family trusted her.

2: The mediation needs to be undertaken by someone who is both neutral and who can gain the trust and confidence of all parties.

3: Often Roma people can feel judged and intimidated by people working in authority, including the school, even if that is not intended. Feeling this way can sometimes manifest as being difficult or aggressive. It is vital therefore to make an effort in terms of time and approach to building-up trust with the Roma person, to respect their viewpoint and make them feel as if they have been heard.

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