
AVIOR CASE STUDY REPORT – THE NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

For the AVIOR Case Study the Dutch partners Rutu Foundation and Risbo worked together with two schools in the Netherlands. Risbo chose a primary school in Rotterdam, (de Kameleon), and the Rutu Foundation selected a primary school in Amsterdam (St Jan School).

In total, four or five meetings were held with each school. One colleague from Risbo and one colleague from Rutu Foundation were present at all meetings at the schools. First, there was an introductory meeting where the AVIOR partners explained the case study project to the school. Then, two meetings were held to discuss the process: the communication between parents and school and the relation between parents and the teachers. Also, we discussed the material in depth. The final meeting was to conclude the project and discuss the outcomes. As we will explain below, despite initial enthusiasm from the director, we experienced difficulties with the Rotterdam school and were unable to receive the required feedback.

In Amsterdam, we had three people who played a key role in the success of the case study: first, the adjunct director who printed out the materials, distributed them to the teachers and parents and made sure the teachers could come to the meetings with the parents which were held during school hours. She said that her job was to try to make it “as easy for the teachers as possible to participate in the project”. Secondly, we had the support of the parent contact worker. She is employed by the school board and the city council of Amsterdam and her job is to facilitate the communication between the parents and the school. In this case, the parental contact worker was a great help for this project. She was of Turkish descent and could translate for the Turkish parents, some of whom had very limited Dutch skills. She stayed in contact with the parents via WhatsApp groups and arranged meetings with the school for the project. Finally, one of the parents was university educated and was very enthusiastic about the project. She offered to help with the correction and translation of the material into Arabic.

The project ran between November 2018 and March 2019. The methodology of this case study was planned as action research. However, this required explanation and training for which there was not sufficient time. It proved already very difficult to find a convenient time for teachers and parents to meet at the same time: outside school hours, parents would have

to bring their children, but during school hours, teachers could not leave their class room. Instead, at the request of the schools, we simply sent the materials by email and the schools were free to print them out, distribute them to the teachers and let the teachers give instructions to the parents at a time that suited them.

For the evaluation, we used a questionnaire made by the AVIOR partners. The final results were either orally recorded by having physical meetings with parents and teachers or receiving written feedback by teachers and parents.

In total, 6 teachers and 6 parents participated from the St. Janschool and 4 teachers and 4 parents participated in the case study in Rotterdam.

Case study process

Background schools

De Kameleon:

De Kameleon is located in the south of Rotterdam. This neighbourhood has a very diverse family population. The vision of the school states that: *“de Kameleon has the ambition to realize excellent education that is tailor-made, future-oriented and solution-oriented, is based on diversity and is based on a passion for the child”* (website school, n.d.). Moreover, the school has an intensive training for children (*“Kanjertraining”*), which aims to empower children during socially stressful circumstances. Since the school has many newly arrived migrant children, de Kameleon uses this training help student’s find their place in their new environment. De Kameleon has previously participated in other projects around multilingualism and because of the positive experiences, their director was happy to work on the AVIOR case study. One of the ways they want to make the school more inclusive is by using the home language of a child in school to help the learning process go faster.

According to the school, most parents are from a low-socioeconomic class and do not possess sufficient English or Dutch skills to communicate effectively with the teacher. Also, many parents work fulltime and are unable to come to the school often. With the case study, the school hoped to reach the parent population that they had trouble communicating with. They hoped that the AVIOR materials might give an incentive for parents to come to the school more often whilst also being more involved in the learning process of their children.



De Kameleon School in Rotterdam

The kindergarten children (4-5-year olds) were our main target group. The main language combination we used was Dutch-Polish as this was the most frequently spoken home language.

St Jan School

The St Jan School in Amsterdam had previously expressed their interest in participating in a Language Friendly School pilot project with the Rutu Foundation and were interested in using multilingual school material.

The school is located in the Western neighbourhood of Amsterdam and characterised by a very diverse student population, with children and parents from all over the world and 37 spoken languages. The school has a policy based on three main themes: “being conscious”, “being involved”, and “being reliable” (website St Jan School). The adjunct director played a crucial role in the participation of the parents and teachers for this case study. Based on the available translations, the school selected Arabic and Turkish. Other languages they wanted (e.g. Spanish) were unfortunately not available. The Arabic speaking Moroccan parents and Turkish speaking parents were among those parents that the school had difficulty communicating with. With the AVIOR case study, it was hoped they would become more involved in the school.



St Jan School in Amsterdam

The adjunct director helped set up all meetings with the parents and we had four parents who came to all the meetings, while other parents worked on the materials but did not come to

the meetings. In one case, a father who participated took a few hours leave from his job to attend the meeting, indicating his interest in the project but also the difficulty of getting the parents and teachers together.

The school worked together with a preschool and after-school program which was located around the corner and we often met there instead of in the school. It meant that we did not see the teachers often. The case study took place in groups 4 and 5, with children from five to six years old. All teachers who participated in the case study had a Dutch background, as far as we know.

The Materials

The project team sent the AVIOR material by email for the schools to print it out themselves. The materials were prepared by the team in the desired language combinations (Turkish-Dutch and Polish-Dutch) and were sent via WeTransfer. The materials that they could use were:

- ▶ A different kind of chick
- ▶ Chocolate cake in Hawaii
- ▶ Maths cards
- ▶ Maths, Naturally! Part 1
- ▶ Language games (“bigger-smaller” and “three-word puzzle”)
- ▶ Word list posters.

In Rotterdam, it was left up to the teachers how they wanted to use the materials, which ones to use in class and which ones to give out to the parents.

In Amsterdam, the vice principal preferred to use the materials in clusters. This meant that every time we went to the school, we would discuss which materials were going to be used next. In this way, the parents and teachers had only two or three of the materials to work with each time. This gave the school a good overview of what to work with and the parents had a specific focus at home. The materials were printed out by the vice principal who distributed them to the parents and teachers. They first worked on numeracy, then they did the “different kind of chick” story and after this they worked with the word list posters.

Teacher-parent relationships

Both schools wanted to use the AVIOR case study to improve their relationship between the school and the “difficult-to-reach parent” groups (as they both called them).

Rotterdam

With the introduction of parent walk-ins in the morning, the school in Rotterdam was already actively trying to increase parental involvement. Twice a week parents are encouraged to come into the classroom with their child and stay for half an hour to see the welcome routine of the teacher. During this time, they could play with their children, ask questions, or participate in the introduction round. During this half an hour they were also allowed to use their home language and sometimes do an exercise with their child in their native tongue. During this time, the AVIOR materials were being used. Other teachers and teacher assistants decided to use the material also at other times during the day in little groups.

Despite numerous attempts on our part, we were only able to meet formally with one teacher during the case study process, who was assigned as the coordinator. We could not reach the parent group at all and only found out what parents thought at the end of the case study. Furthermore, the teacher apparently did not speak to the parents who were participating so we did not receive their feedback. Given the lack of feedback, we were unable to say whether there were any improvements at the school in Rotterdam concerning the teacher-parent relationship. At the end of the case study, we met some parents who all said they were very happy with the materials which they had used at home. One parent provided written feedback:

“It is a nice way to spend the time with the children because we can learn together. For my daughter it was a great pleasure that she could spend time with me. For me it is also good because I can find out what she is doing at school. If she didn’t understand something, I could explain it in Polish. But for me it was difficult to pronounce words in Dutch.” – Polish Mother

Amsterdam

Fortunately, as mentioned above, we had a completely different experience with the school in Amsterdam.

First of all, we met the parents frequently and they all said they were very happy with the project, they welcomed the fact that they could now follow what was going on in school and

they felt more welcome at school. Some parents said that in the past, the school had the policy that only Dutch was allowed in the school. Although according to the vice principal, this policy had been reversed 18 years ago, the fact that the parents still talked about it, meant that it was not clear to them they were allowed to use their mother tongue. According to the parent contact worker, the AVIOR project made it clear to the parents that their languages were welcome at the school:

“The fact that the mother tongue is allowed means a lot for parents. They feel welcome now. In the past we had OALT [a mother tongue based programme for migrant children] but that was banned in 2004. This is a beautiful turning point. To have this positive attitude towards languages.”

She did mention that not all parents were as involved in the project and felt that this project worked especially well for higher educated parents but who do not (yet) speak Dutch well.

It was also reported that one of the parents has a daughter and a grandchild attending the school. This project was the first time that the (grand) mother became actively involved with the school and worked with her grandchild on the materials. In the past she didn't feel safe at school. She would keep her daughter home and the teachers would complain about it. But now her daughter (who did not participate in the project as she is older than the target group) comes to school every day.

Another example was a case where it was uncertain whether the pupil would advance to the next class or whether she would have to repeat the class. During the AVIOR process, the parent had much more interaction with the teacher and they worked together on improving the student's skills where necessary. At the end of the year, the mother was proud to say that her daughter was allowed to go to the next level.

The teachers noticed that the parents (some of whom they said were 'hard to reach') would show up at school more often during the process of the case study and that the parents would now also communicate with other parents. They used to stay within their language groups but now spoke to the other parents of the other children in class. One teacher stated:

“I feel that parents are more involved in the education of their child. I see them more at school and the parents also ask me questions for more school material (outside of the AVIOR materials). I see that the collaboration with parents has a positive effect on the development of the children. However, I don't see this as much with math because the AVIOR math material does not suit our mathematical method we teach at school.” – Teacher in Amsterdam

The teachers found that the students participated much more as well. For example, parents were given the “chicken story” a week before it would be read in class. The children who had heard the story at home were participating more actively because they knew the story, they felt proud because they could predict the ending. Some of these children would normally stay silent. However, not all parents had read the story and this was clear when those children would not respond in the same way.

That the children enjoyed the materials, was made clear by one of the parents who said that whenever her daughter would receive the materials from the teacher she would rush home and urge her mother to come and help her. She did not want to wait for dinner, but kept pressing her mother to work with her. And once they started on the math materials, she would only need a few instructions and then continue herself.

According to the teachers, the Chicken story stimulated classroom discussion about different languages. The children suggested for example that they wanted to give language classes to each other. One teacher said:

“Because of the project I started thinking more about multilingualism. I am more aware of it now. I will now start looking for another child who speaks the same language so they can work together. For example, we have an older child who helps a younger student with math in their home language (Spanish).”

The vice principal related to us that because of the project, she realized the multilingual talents of one of the pupils. She walked in the corridor one day with the Arabic version of the Chicken story in her hand and an older girl from group 7 (who was not involved in the project) saw it and spontaneously started to read the story. The principal said: “Suddenly I realized we have experts in the school. This is a very intelligent girl but because the tests are all administered in Dutch it doesn’t show on the results.”

After the case study was concluded, we invited the parents and the school principal to the final AVIOR meeting and the mother said: ‘This is a beautiful project. I wanted to help my child but I didn’t know how. With this project I was able to help my child.’”

When asked what the impact was on her as a mother, she said:

“There is more contact now. The teacher does the same exercises and stories in the class, so we have a good collaboration. Now I know what is going on. I used to take my child to school and I wouldn’t talk to anybody. But now I also have contact with the other parents. We work together. With Turkish and Spanish parents.”

The vice principal summed up the project as follows: “It is the curriculum that links the parents to school. Parents need to have a reason to work together, to come out of their comfort zone. This project offers that reason, it makes the connection so that the triangle can work smoothly: parents, teachers, and child.”

Obstacles encountered

We experienced different obstacles with the two different schools:

Obstacles experienced by our team

One main obstacle experienced by our team was the communication with the school in Rotterdam. We were not able to meet with any of the parents involved in the case study or go in-depth with any of the other teachers. The director assigned one teacher to be the main contact point. However, she was not as enthusiastic about the AVIOR program because apparently she had developed another program to help children learn vocabulary and math and preferred this system over the AVIOR materials. She also stated that the school preferred to work without paper assignments for as long as possible, and therefore our target group was not the intended group to work with. We were unable to meet with any parents during the process of the case study. The coordinator said she was in contact with them but that it was a difficult group to work with. However, when we finally received the feedback from the parents, it appeared that – contrary to what the coordinator had said - they were very enthusiastic and happy with the materials.

Obstacles experienced by the parents

There were two difficulties experienced by parents. Firstly, the Moroccan parents at the Amsterdam school experienced difficulty in reading and working with the Arabic-Dutch material because although they were fluent Arabic speakers themselves, they used a different language at home with their children, namely Amazigh, a Berber variation. Until fairly

recently, this language was only oral and most parents are not familiar with the written form. But since most parents were able to read Arabic, we gave them the advice to use Berber with their children. In this way, the parents read the Arabic and translated that orally into Berber with their children, while the children could also read the Dutch instructions. In this way, all the languages of the children's linguistic repertoire were included in the process.

Another obstacle experienced by both parents from the Amsterdam and Rotterdam school is that they said that they missed an audio component for the material. Especially the parents from the Rotterdam school said that they were having trouble pronouncing the Dutch words on the material for their children. This is something that we can take into account going forward in the AVIOR project.

Obstacles experienced by the teachers

Some obstacles were experienced by the teachers of both schools.

The schools had problems downloading and printing the material. For example, documents sent via WeTransfer needs to be downloaded within 5 days, which the teacher was not able to do and then the link expired. Also, it was reported that the material shifted when sent in Word and it took the teacher a long time to correct all the materials. She stated that this took a long time and required skills in Word. This was our mistake as we should have sent the materials in PDF version.

The teachers from the Rotterdam school stated that they were also having trouble with the home language pronunciation (Polish in this case). They did try to solve this by using Google translate by coping the written word on the computer

Teachers at both schools mentioned that the AVIOR reading, numeracy and literacy materials did not match their current teaching method. The teachers stated that they sometimes found it difficult how to incorporate the material into the regular curriculum, and instead felt that the materials were an "additional" assignment.

Conclusions

We can say that we had one positive experience and one negative. The AVIOR material had a very clear positive impact on the parent/teacher relationship at the school in Amsterdam, even beyond the AVIOR scope as it also boosted the parents' confidence, increased the teachers awareness of multilingualism and improved contact between different parent groups. Unfortunately, in Rotterdam we were not able to meet with any parents during the process and we only had one member of staff who was able or willing to speak with us during the AVIOR case study process. As a result we did not receive much feedback to allow us to make any conclusions about the impact of the case study.

However, we did find in both schools that parents were very enthusiastic about the materials and were happy to be involved in the learning process of their children. Even though we had some hiccups with the materials (not printing well, language issues, or no audio component), the parents were happy to help us and were proud to use their own native language as a positive feature to help their children. The second positive factor is that both schools had a positive attitude towards multilingualism, and this increased with the researchers helping them work with multilingual materials in schools.

We also experienced some challenges with the material ourselves (preparing the materials proved to be very time consuming), but given the extremely positive outcomes in Amsterdam, looking back, all the work was well worth it.