

MENTORING

WHAT CAN SUPPORT PROJECTS ACHIEVE THAT SCHOOLS CANNOT?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mentoring and coaching is an established practice in corporate multinational firms worldwide, but mentoring programs for school pupils are still relatively new in Europe. This policy brief highlights a special kind of mentor: students in higher education with an immigrant background who can act as role models and coaches for younger students, often playing the part of an older sibling, and ultimately aiding mentees with core learning issues.

The policy brief argues that mentoring should become an integral part of the educational support system for disadvantaged children of immigrants. It shows how mentors can offer specific and personalised support, using methods that have been proven to improve the cognitive gains, self-esteem, and self-reliance of their mentees.

The policy brief addresses the following topics:

- Why mentor programmes are important for children of immigrants
- The benefits of mentoring and what it can add to school-based education
- The professionalisation of mentoring organisations
- The potential gain from upscaling the mentoring instrument to the European level.

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of mentoring projects that are formed and led by student and immigrant organisations. Projects are also becoming more professional, with some already in operation for more than a decade. This situation creates a unique momentum for enlarging the projects and exchanging ideas about best practices across Europe.

The authors call upon politicians, policymakers, and practitioners to help build a European programme on mentoring. The newly formed European Network for Educational Support Projects (ENESP), which unites grassroots initiatives on mentoring across Europe, is a first step in building such a coalition. ENESP's community-level expertise across multiple national contexts can guide EU policymakers as they tap into one of Europe's most underutilised resources: a growing population of high-achieving young adults with an immigrant background who can help younger students realise educational success.



I. INTRODUCTION

Mentoring by older immigrant students provides a boost to educational outcomes among younger immigrants. This policy brief focuses on higher education students of immigrant background as mentors for high school pupils. Such mentors can act as role models: they offer support for studying and learning, and help their mentees develop scholastic and professional goals. But despite its rapidly rising popularity and benefits, policymakers and educators still see mentoring programmes as bonus or optional supplements rather than necessary components of an educational experience, particularly for at-risk students.

Actually, mentoring programmes can target several core needs that schools are not equipped to address. Because of their ability to provide intense and individualised guidance, they can motivate students more deeply and personally. They can handle emotional, cognitive, and social problems in a holistic manner—for example, by reaching out to a student’s parents—in a way teachers are mostly unable to realise within a school environment. Mentoring also allows for learning in an informal setting, which for teenagers is often a welcome change from formal learning in a classroom setting. Mentors have a different role than teachers or parents, as they can more easily push pupils to become agents of their own educational trajectories and destinies.

This policy brief explores how policymakers can design mentoring and other educational support projects as an integral part of the educational landscape; and why it is important for them to do so. We highlight projects in which the mentors supporting the next generation are of immigrant descent, presenting concepts and examples that focus on the hidden talents and potential of children of immigrants in different age groups. In this way, the brief counters predominant narratives that present the children of immigrants as possessing an educational deficit and needing to ‘catch up’ in schools.

The following sections review the educational goals of mentoring programmes and offer practical guidance on how schools can use them. The brief then summarises the current research on the benefits of mentoring, and concludes with recommendations for programme development as well as for policymakers at the EU level.

II. EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The essence of mentoring is when an older or more experienced person takes interest in a younger person for an extended period, or through a particular phase of life. In addition to mentoring, terms such as coaching, guidance, or tutoring also describe a similar activity.

Box I. Mentoring perspectives

‘I always wanted to be a lawyer or judge, but I never thought that someone like me, you know, coming from a Turkish family, could actually do that. This is why, when I met my mentor Sibel, it was like a revelation. She does not only help me with my school tasks, she also has a very similar history and background. She does not even always have to explain me math or English or so, it makes already a big difference for me to know that she is there and that we can simply talk. And on top, she is studying law’.

—Yeliz, 15, mentee, Mentor Project Junge Vorbilder in Hamburg

‘I became a mentor because in my school career I missed some chances for the simple fact that there was no one to guide me. I could have avoided a lot of problems and detours, if my parents would have known better how the school system works, or if I would have had a mentor. And being a mentor was so interesting and relevant that I became also more interested in the project itself, and how to negotiate with schools that there is more to education than just the lessons and the teachers. Now, as a project coordinator, my very personal experience and example already demonstrates to the schools what they can gain from the cooperation with a project like ours. But, obviously, you have to do a good job too!’

—Nadim, project coordinator, Junge Vorbilder in Hamburg

Source: Authors’ interviews with Yeliz and Nadim.



Mentoring can focus on a particular challenge or goal, like preventing school dropout, but it can also more broadly support children and young adults in vulnerable positions in becoming successful in school. It can involve social activities and the effort to expose children to a world outside their own milieu and experience (a good example is the programme Big Brothers Big Sisters of America).

Mentoring can also specifically target individuals with high potential by offering orientation, guidance, and support to high-achieving kids in nonsupportive environments. The Dutch umbrella organisation N-Point, for example, takes children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to the Mathematik Olympiads and offers robotics courses. The German organisations MiCoach in Bremen and the Berlin-based SABA (Sista-Abla Brotha-Abi)¹ Mentoring Project both help immigrant youth access university. Other organisations, such as Junge Vorbilder (Young Role Models) in Hamburg, help students get access to advanced secondary-school curricula. And others, like De Stichting voor Kennis en Sociale Cohesie (The Foundation for Knowledge and Social Cohesion; SKC) in Amsterdam, target students ages 10 to 12 by offering school-related guidance at the end of primary education.

Mentoring programmes are quite diverse, but of the ones that serve the children of immigrants, most target pupils in secondary schools and make use of mentors who already study in higher education. In addition to this model, other strands of educational support through mentoring include:

1. **Mentoring in primary school**, which usually supports children in accessing more demanding academic tracks in secondary school
2. **Mentoring in vocational education**, which prepares youngsters for the labour market and for finding an apprenticeship
3. **Mentoring for pupils at risk**—who are students that schools often find difficult to reach
4. **Mentoring in higher education**, aimed at stemming the high dropout rates in the first year at university, particularly among students from nonacademic family backgrounds
5. **Mentoring in the labour market**, which guides students' transitions to the labour market, helps them build networks, and offers coaching as they begin their first jobs.

These diverse programmes share several fundamental features. Mentors and mentees generally meet once or twice a week for two or three hours, and the

relationship usually develops in line with the following sequence and themes:

- Matching the mentor and the mentee
- Making a personal connection
- Learning to learn, through encouraging the mentee's awareness of their own learning style and helping them improve it
- Shifting focus to deeper problems (for instance socioemotional ones) as the relationship deepens
- Attention to the mentee's future
- Closing the mentor-mentee relationship and gaining independence.

At the inception of a mentoring project, it is essential to identify the project goals in order to successfully match a mentor and a mentee, and give them the best chance to develop a dynamic that clicks and is useful for achieving the goals. Across various projects targeting secondary education pupils, mentors are often just a few years older than their mentees. If the goal is to support the transition to an academic track or to higher education, the best matches are often university students who can most legitimately act as role models and experiential experts. Gender is a relevant consideration, and having similar ethnic and social backgrounds also helps. This can demonstrate to mentees that success is possible for those of their own ethnicity, or for those from disadvantaged families or neighbourhoods.

Widely unnoticed in the general educational debate, such mentoring projects make use of the rapidly growing cohort of highly educated second-generation young adults in Europe. These mentors' personal knowledge of the school system; combined with their general understanding of mentees' home, social, and school experiences; makes them well-equipped to provide meaningful mentorship.

III. HOW SCHOOLS CAN USE MENTORING PROGRAMMES

Schools often introduce mentoring projects because of limited capacity to be fully inclusive or accommodate the needs of certain groups of pupils. Sometimes parents search for these programmes, and sometimes schools themselves invite them.



Box 2. A case study of Junge Vorbilder (Young Role Models) in Hamburg

Older siblings in immigrant families often provide guidance on navigating the school system even if parents cannot. In a way, the Junge Vorbilder (Young Role Model) mentoring programme imitates this sibling relationship, since many of the mentors share key characteristics with their mentees: often they have grown up and attended school in the same areas, they come from immigrant families, and they frequently share similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

Programme overview. Junge Vorbilder is a project within Verikom, an independent association of intercultural community centres in Hamburg that offers counselling, language courses, and mentoring for immigrants, especially women and girls. In 2013, Junge Vorbilder had 50 mentor-mentee pairs. Additionally, since 2011 the project has offered group mentoring in the form of tutoring courses in several secondary schools in Hamburg.

Content. The mentoring consists of tutoring, socioemotional support, and educational and vocational orientation for students in grades 8 to 11 in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Mentors often meet with the students in their own homes, allowing the mentors to be in contact with their mentees' parents and families.

Training. Mentors receive an intensive basic training at the beginning of their tenure, and they are regularly offered additional training. Monthly mentor meetings offer a platform for mutual exchange, and create team spirit among the mentors of a certain region. Since the beginning of Junge Vorbilder in 2004, approximately 300 mentors have been trained.

A mutually beneficial relationship. For the mentors, many of whom are studying to be teachers, mentoring offers a valuable first-hand professional experience. It is also an avenue through which they can assume responsibility in society and contribute something to their community. Finally, many mentors become engaged in this activity because they would have liked to have something similar in their own secondary school days.

Source: Authors' research, facilitated by Junge Vorbilder project leaders.

The projects often help educators diagnose problems within a particular school, or sometimes point to a more general quality of the school system that may need adjustment. For example, the difficulty of transitioning from the lower vocational track to the more demanding Gymnasium track in secondary education for pupils in Hamburg prompted the creation of the Junge Vorbilder project (see Box 2). The project's effectiveness is in part due to the fact that the mentors all come from immigrant families and thus serve as examples, not just for mentees and their families, but also for teachers, who become more motivated to encourage the children of immigrants in their own classes.

Through an open dialogue with well-functioning mentorship programmes, educators can reform their views on the potential of their students, and can improve their level of services and outreach to the students' communities. Ideally, these professionals should not perceive a mentoring programme as a nice but inconsequential effort, nor as an implicit critique of their own work. Rather, it is an instrument that greatly broadens the scope and possibilities of education. In well-developed relationships between schools and

non-school-based educational support projects, the different approaches to child development complement each other and work toward the same goals.

IV. BENEFITS OF MENTORING

Multiple studies have shown the benefits of mentoring projects. A 2013 quantitative Dutch study by Menno Vos and his coauthors showed the effects of mentoring on cognitive outcomes and 'soft' skills.² The following paragraphs synthesise the findings of this and other studies in this area.

Cognitive gains. The proven cognitive gains of mentoring include higher marks and lower dropout rates. For example, secondary school students had improved cognitive abilities after one year of mentoring. They significantly improved their school outcomes and test scores.³



Self-esteem and social skills. The study outcomes of Vos and coauthors also showed significantly better self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social skills after one year of mentoring. Similarly, an earlier qualitative evaluation of three mentorship projects in the Netherlands⁴ found increased self-esteem and learning motivation, with students gaining clarity on their future goals. Yet another study from the United States proved significant positive effects of mentoring on ‘externalising’ (e.g. aggressive) and ‘internalising’ behaviour (e.g. low self-esteem or depressive tendencies) among mentees.⁵

Networking. Another interesting outcome is that mentees’ numbers of network contacts grow significantly.⁶ This is mostly because mentoring stimulates the mentees to mobilise their existing contacts upon facing difficulties in school to a much greater extent than they did before.

Overall, mentoring is never aimed just at cognitive gains, but also at students’ social and emotional development. Particularly in adolescence, mentors are often better suited for making a connection to pupils than teachers or parents. Addressing socioemotional problems is especially effective when mentors share a similar linguistic and cultural background—as is the case with the projects Ağabey-Abla in Stuttgart and Witte Tulp in Amsterdam, in addition to Junge Vorbilder.

The cultural and linguistic commonality also facilitates the mentor’s access to parents, particularly in cases of limited second-language competences.

The main difference between mentoring and more traditional forms of tutoring lies in this socioemotional attention to the mentees, and it is the factor that works most strongly in favour of long-lasting effects that go beyond the duration of the mentorship itself. In the United States, a country with a long tradition of mentoring, a meta-analysis of 55 evaluation studies of mentoring projects concludes that mentoring programmes can rebuild the positive effects of ‘natural’ mentorship relations, e.g. those within the family or neighbourhood.⁷ The effectiveness of mentoring rises when projects have been designed for the specific situations and needs of children who lack positive role models or supportive adults in their daily lives.

Finally, the project organisation can contribute to the effectiveness of mentoring. Positive features include training for the mentors, structured joint activities for mentors and mentees, the intensity of the contact, the involvement of parents, and a clear vision of program goals.

Box 3. A case study of the Mentorproject at SKC in Amsterdam

The Stichting voor Kennis en Sociale Cohesie (Foundation for Knowledge and Social Cohesion; SKC) in Amsterdam develops educational programmes to enhance social cohesion among the city’s inhabitants. One of largest is the Mentorproject SKC, founded in 1998 and developed into a well-recognised centre of knowledge and expertise, especially for socially disadvantaged youth. The foundation facilitates shared knowledge and participation from all segments of the population, and is not tied to any specific ethnic, political, or religious group. The board, employees, and volunteers have diverse backgrounds.

The foundation’s main tasks include:

- analyzing social problems and formulating recommendations for addressing them;
- developing new initiatives that address social problems; and
- creating opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds to meet and work together.

Initiatives span the fields of education, welfare, employment, art, and culture. The SKC Mentorproject aims to help children in primary education focus on the transition to secondary school. In the Netherlands this is highly determined by the score achieved in the national ‘Cito’ test, and high school and university students support youngsters as they prepare for the test during the last two grades of primary school. The programme also fosters learning and social skills that are crucial for a successful transfer to secondary school. Finally, the SKC Mentorproject tries to prevent early school leaving by continuing support to children in the first two years of secondary school.

Each year more than 1,000 children participate in the programme, and about 300 volunteers and interns help guide them.

Source: Authors’ research, facilitated by Mentorproject SKC project leaders.



V. ENSURING LONG-TERM PROGRAMME SUCCESS

The European mentoring landscape has been growing and diversifying over the past ten years. Frequently, however, projects exist for a couple of years and then just disappear. Although the idea of mentoring is simple and intuitively convincing, the organisational practice—especially maintaining a relationship with schools and other institutions—can be quite challenging. The projects mentioned here, which are the active core of the European Network for Educational Support Projects (ENESP) within the SIRIUS network,⁸ have all proven a level of professionalisation, and can be the basis for formulating criteria that can help programmes elsewhere succeed.

Embedding the project. Mentor projects that are sustainable in the long term tend to be strongly embedded within the school system or an integral part of a well-established social welfare or immigrant organisation. This opens the door to longer-term funding and ensures that the project is less reliant on individual enthusiasm of a project coordinator. In addition, links to a professional organisation increase the likelihood that professional standards are applied—which is particularly important for training activities.

Fostering a good relationship with the school. Outside organisations may find it difficult to enter educational institutions. For their part, schools may sign up for a mentor project without appointing a proper contact person or without informing the staff about the role of the mentors. Mentors need to feel welcome in a school, and mentor projects are more effective if there is good communication with teachers. Teachers with a negative attitude toward a mentoring project can severely jeopardise its legitimacy and discourage pupils from participating.

Establishing a clear role for mentors. There is potential for conflict if specific roles and competences are not clearly articulated, both for schools and for mentors themselves. Frequently, teachers see mentors as support for the most difficult children, but mentors are not professional social workers. They may be excellent mediators between the school and the most difficult pupils, and they can be capable of re-establishing communication and a learning relationship. However, mentoring is most effective with pupils who are themselves motivated to take part in the project, and need some extra support or a role model to achieve higher and more ambitious goals such as access to university. Very often, teachers or schools overlook the need for extra support for average or high-potential pupils because they are unproblematic.

Supporting mentors in the long term. Mentors are a target group in themselves, with needs and ambitions that must be addressed. Preparation and continuous training for mentors is indispensable, as well as a clearly communicating the advantages of participating in this work. Many projects do not pay their mentors, but because of their often-tight economic circumstances, they should receive some compensation. This can be in the form of a study grant, or by offering valuable practical experience for those who are student teachers. Some projects also offer career paths within the project itself, such as becoming mentoring trainers or being part of the project coordination team.

Ensuring sustainable support. A major challenge for mentor programmes is the overreliance on project-based subsidies. Projects struggle to find long-term funding for their organisation, which makes them vulnerable. Funding is more often provided to new rather than existing projects. Policymakers should include mentoring into regular budgets, rather than assigning funds for additional or temporary project initiatives.

In addition, a professional attitude and self-reflection are the most important virtues to foster among all participants. These are central characteristics of the ideal mentor, but should also characterise the project organisation and the general approach of the schools when cooperating with these projects.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE EU LEVEL

A growing group of children of immigrants are entering higher education. They represent a vast potential of cultural and social capital that is so far largely untapped. In some countries, one in five students with an immigrant background already reaches higher education, and together they number tens of thousands of students in Europe.

The potential for upscaling mentor projects to the national and even European level is considerable. In ten years, students with and without a migrant background all over Europe should be able to become mentors as a regular student job. A European-funded scheme to recruit and train thousands of mentors across the continent is feasible, and can potentially transform the lives of the younger generation of children of immigrants across Europe.



Box 4. Spotlight on N-Point President Murat Alici

Murat Alici is President of the umbrella organisation N-Point, based in Amsterdam. He is of Turkish origin and born in the Netherlands, and works as a dentist. N-Point is the network organisation for several locally based homework and mentor project organisations in major cities in the Netherlands. Thousands of children of immigrant origin receive support from several hundred volunteers nationwide through N-Point. Murat Alici voices in the statement he gave for this policy brief the opinion of many who are active in the European Network of Educational Support Projects (ENESP):

'The driving force behind N-Point are our volunteers that do this work with all their heart. Our resources are however very limited. We see that huge resources are available at the national or European level for education, but they often do not end up in practical support for the children we support in our projects. The contrast is sometimes overwhelming. The budget of our organisation is not spent on nice-looking offices, well-paid professionals, or overhead. Our volunteers just turned a former Lidl supermarket in a suburb of Amsterdam into a homework class in their spare time without almost any resources. We earn an increasing share of the wealth in Europe, so it is only fair to demand that our children profit from this too. And if we don't invest in these children a lot of talent will be lost in Europe. Talent we desperately need to create a competitive knowledge economy'.

Source: Authors' interview with Murat Alici.

Taking a first step toward this goal, young leaders of immigrant project organisations have created a European Network of Educational Support Projects (ENESP), sponsored by the SIRIUS network. ENESP consists of organisations active in the field of mentoring in six European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Spain. The aim of the network is to exchange and transfer knowledge across countries and to support organisations all over Europe in establishing mentoring projects. The organisations that work within ENESP are immigrant-focused: they are either run by immigrants or children of immigrants, or the mentors they deploy have an immigration background.

The European Union has put great emphasis on the topic of education and migration, but the partners to improve the educational outcomes of children are mainly policymakers and practitioners of the majority

populations. Both European- and national-level stakeholders tend to have a top-down perspective in which policymakers who are removed from the day-to-day reality of children of immigrants design educational interventions that aim to address deficits. ENESP advocates a new, bottom-up approach, in which the main stakeholders are themselves the children of immigrants.

A Europe-wide mentorship programme would help make educational systems more inclusive and develop children's potential to access higher levels of education. The projects in focus in this policy brief help highlight the steadily growing, but still largely overlooked pool of promising high achievers from immigrant families. Mentoring projects give them a form of recognition, while creating opportunities for more young adults to follow in their footsteps and achieve better educational outcomes.



ENDNOTES

- 1 *Abla* and *Abi* mean big sister and big brother, respectively, in Turkish.
- 2 Menno Vos, Hanneke Pot, and Aafje Dotinga, *Met mentoring naar de top! Toekomst, ontwikkeling en perspectief* (Groningen, Netherlands: Instituut voor integratie en sociale weerbaarheid, 2013), www.mentorprogrammafriesland.nl/includes/downloadFile.asp?id=NmM4TVRNmk5RPT1jZjE%3D&date=6c8cf1.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Maurice Crul and Karen Kraal, *Evaluatie landelijk ondersteuningsprogramma mentoring* (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Migratie- en Etnische Studies at the University of Amsterdam, 2004), www.eukn.org/dsresource?objectid=66363.
- 5 Lisa M. Keating, Michelle A. Tomishima, Sharon Foster, and Michael Alessandri, 'The effects of a mentoring program on at-risk youth', *Adolescence* 37, no. 148 (2002): 717-34.
- 6 Vos, Pot, and Dotinga, *Met mentoring naar de top!*
- 7 David L. DuBois, Bruce E. Holloway, Jeffrey C. Valentine, and Harris Cooper, 'Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review', *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2002): 157-97, www.wmich.edu/evalphd/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Effectiveness-of-Mentoring-Programs-for-Youth.pdf.
- 8 SIRIUS is a European policy network focused on the education of children and young people with a migrant background. See SIRIUS Network, accessed 7 February 2014, www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/.



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