

Study visit - the Netherlands: Castricum, Middelburg, Moerdijk

In October, namely from 11th to 15th October 2021, we visited our colleagues in the Netherlands for a 5-day study visit. We visited three cities and five clubs for children and young people (one in Castricum, three in Middelburg, and one in Moerdijk) and five schools. The study visit gave us an opportunity to look at the Dutch social work system and also the education system in a more comprehensive way. In Middelburg, our colleagues also gave us a tour through a refugee camp. The study visit was very inspiring in many ways; the important topics are described in the chapters below.

Dutch education system

In the Netherlands, primary education is free until the age of 18. Further education is paid for. The state contributes Eur 83 per month and the rest has to be paid by students or their parents. The cost of education depends on the quality and varies from institution to institution. The education system is divided into five successive levels. Up to the age of four, education is voluntary – it is similar to kindergartens in the Czech Republic. From the age of four to twelve, all pupils attend primary schools, with the exception of children and young people with some types of mental disabilities (e. g. autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties, etc.) who attend specialist primary schools for pupils with special educational needs of this type. From the age of twelve to sixteen, primary school is followed by further education, which pupils choose based on their own preferences. They can study at a school that focuses more on practical activities (similar to our apprenticeships) or a college similar to Czech grammar schools. In both types of schools the basic subjects are the same, but practical activities differ - the apprenticeship offers more practical teaching (flower arranging, animal care, different types of crafts, etc.). This level of education is completed with an exam. This may be followed by a two year extension, when it is possible to study a similar or different major and this level of education is ideally completed with an exam at the age of 18. Universities represent the last level of education, which may be completed by bachelor's or master's degree.

There are specialised schools for foreigners within the education system, which primarily aim to teach pupils the Dutch language. These schools (ISK) cater for pupils from different cultural background from 12 to 16 years of age. Pupils are divided into classes according to the level of education they have completed. Young people from Europe and from war zones in Africa and the Middle East study together. The aim of the course is to attain at least a B2 (intermediate) level in Dutch. It is compulsory for foreigners to attend this type of school. Schools are graded based on the ratio of theoretical knowledge to practical skills that students will acquire in the school. It is common for students to change majors during their studies to find the one that suits them best. As already mentioned, the Dutch education system is more flexible than the Czech one.

The foundation of the Dutch education system is to make pupils feel comfortable – pupils' psychological well-being positively influences their school success. It is important to involve individuals in the group, to be sensitive to their individual needs, to support their talents and to help them with differences. The Dutch system allows for changing within specialisations, with the exception of foreigners who do not speak Dutch. Part of the *Wellbeing First* philosophy is that pupils and students are supported by a whole team of adult professionals in the school. This means not only by teachers, but also by school psychologists, social workers, team leaders and mentors. Teachers treat teenagers

with respect and a partnership approach prevails. Risky behaviour is seen as an opportunity for change, rather than a problem. Students and pupils are given the space to achieve their full potential. The cooperation of schools and families is crucial. Teachers show an active interest in pupils, have an overview of their life situation and, in some types of schools, accompany students to practical trainings and to future employment. Schools are in most cases open institutions that organise public and community events, cooperate with non-profit organisations working with youth, etc.

Castricum Centre

The Castricum Centre was opened ten years ago to address the situation of squatting groups of teenagers. Amber and her colleagues work in an organisation that provides social services to a wide target group of people in the Castricum area, from children and young people to people with disabilities and senior citizens. Professionals with different specialisations work for the organisation. There are six workers in the youth section, of which only two work full time (i.e. 36 hours per week) and the rest work part time. They cooperate with university students and volunteers and closely cooperate with other stakeholders of community life (school, family, police and offices and authorities). Once a month, workers organise joint meetings to discuss stories of specific clients in order to define the steps of joint work. In general, it is typical for the Netherlands that organisations work with a wide range of target groups, with each target group having a key worker. During the study visit, we visited three areas on the north coast of the Netherlands - Castricum, Middelburg and Moerdijk. Although the areas differed in size and civic amenities, the common denominator and key element of the youth work was the close cooperation between all stakeholders of the system.

Clusius College

During our study visit we had the opportunity to visit the Clusius College in Castricum town, an apprenticeship-type vocational school (with practical subjects focusing on agriculture, animal husbandry, window dressing/arranging and ecology). There are four academic years in the school with every academic year having a team leader who has an overview of what is going on in the academic year. The school tries as much as possible to meet the individual needs of each student. Students receive a yellow card if they break a rule during class or have a conflict with teachers. It is a document where students fill-in their view of the situation and teachers add their own opinion and then they discuss the situation together. There is a class for pupils with special needs in the school who, unlike the others, always study in the same classroom and have a permanent school bench. They are not given homework and they keep textbooks at school to avoid unnecessary pressure. They have weekly and monthly plans. There is a class in the school for pupils who find it difficult to concentrate, which has a member of staff helping pupils with their learning. In some cases, online learning and others tools are used to enable better concentration and calmness.

Discovery Club

The target age group of the Discovery Club is 12 to 25 years and most of the visitors are teenage boys. They usually abuse substances (typically marijuana, hashish, MDMA, ketamine); sometimes clients of the club sell substances and therefore get into conflict with the law. Street fights, family problems, alcohol use, dropping out of school, etc. are also common. These problems are common to about 15 % of young people who are prone to risky behaviour or come from a background that deteriorates their life situation. The Discovery Club also provides an outreach programme where workers contact

teenagers in their natural environment during street work. They engage in community projects based on the needs of the target group – a skate park or a leisure shelter. Ninety percent of the budget of the service is paid for by the Castricum town district. Such a funding scheme is typical for most of the services that we saw during our study visit. Funding is usually provided for one year, however, it also allows for longer term planning. The services have typically established good relationships with the town council and therefore they gain long-term support for the programme. The programme also offers counselling for families.

The workers always support their clients, and they become their advocates. Clients at the same time know that social workers are in contact with other workers within the network of follow-up services. Workers are visible when moving within the school and they are also in contact with the police – texting and informing each other about what is happening on the streets, for instance about street violence etc. In addition to this close cooperation, the transparency of the whole process is crucial. Workers support their clients in difficult life situations, however, clients have to be aware of the consequences of their actions (as in our programme with marijuana users, where we do not report clients but also do not cover for their potentially illegal activities).

The outreach programme does not have fixed opening hours; workers go out when they consider it appropriate or when called by the police. They closely cooperate with all stakeholders of the system in the youth programmes. Compared to the situation in the Czech Republic, there is greater tolerance of substance use. Special services commonly test substance quality at parties, the service may be used anonymously to find out what a substance is. Social work with young people is divided into several areas, including the Discovery Low-threshold Club, the outreach programme, working in schools, coaching and online work. Workers are available online – communicating with clients via text messages or chats on apps and social media. The Discovery programme worker also randomly provides outreach services by getting on a bike and riding around the area. The outreach workers reach out to young people and ask for their opinion – the outreach programme is similar to the Czech Republic, only it is more random and situational. The programme has already performed several community projects (e. g. building a skate park, teenage leisure shelters, etc.)

Lonelinessskilling_projektJoinus

JoinUs is one of the projects operated in cooperation with the Discovery Club workers. They provide group work with young people who experience social isolation, are lonely and find it difficult to make friends. The aim of the programme is to strengthen their social skills and make new contacts through regular meetings. The group meets once every two weeks. The programme has been heavily promoted through social media, paid advertising and a national television campaign.

Middelburg

Middelburg is the capital of the Zeeland province and with its almost 40,000 inhabitants it is also the largest town that we visited during our study visit. In Middelburg we visited a total of three low-threshold clubs, an outreach programme, a refugee camp and several schools. As part of the school visits we visited schools for foreigners (ISK), which have a specific approach to education. The approach to social work in the youth programmes and in schools is very similar to the approach in

Castricum. Youth workers (their job description corresponds to outreach rather than social workers as established in the Czech Republic according to the Social Services Act) work both in the Club and also in the outreach programme. Each programme is managed by a liaison worker who in a way designs the operation of the given service and a team of volunteers, colleagues on study visits and students working within internships (the record was a city where all the services were provided by one social worker and three hundred volunteers). Student internships, as part of their university studies, are long and intensive (at least several hours per week for the period of one year). Services can be supplemented with an alternative *labour force*, student interns tend to work alone in the service or with volunteers. The **2nd base** Club is located near the ISK School for foreigners and it is mainly refugee boys who visit the Club. Another club is a rehearsal and music club. The workers at these clubs go out on the streets in pairs to reach out to both familiar and new groups of teenagers. The aim of this outreach programme is to establish contact with the target group; it is performed rather as outreach work, building relationships and establishing contacts. Individual workers also care for their catchment schools, which they visit during breaks or give lectures during prevention programmes. Each worker uses their own “superpower” to reach out to children and teenagers. Even though Middelburg is a large town, collaboration between the youth workers, follow up services and local government is crucial.

Principles of youth work

Cooperation of the individual units of the child care system

The success of youth work is based on the functioning *child care system* as a whole. Both preventive and repressive services work together in the interest of children and young people. Cooperation with the police is essential (e. g. in the Castricum Club, the sale and use of addictive substances and weapons, petty crime and street gangs are frequent topics). A project called Drop your knife-week (11 – 15 October 2021) demonstrates an example of this system of work. During this week, young people throughout the Netherlands may hand in their weapons to police stations without any penalty. The event is based on the story of a boy, Nick Bood, who lost his life in a street shooting while selling drugs. His father, as a journalist working for the local newspaper, was the first to arrive at the scene. After discovering that it was his own son, he began actively addressing the situation with local government. Cooperation with local government regarding implementation of community projects, communication with schools, social workers from the child welfare authority, dealing with the situation of clients e. g. in the form of case conferences, is common in Neposeda. In PROSTOR PRO we are experienced at working closely with local governments especially in small municipalities, however, in larger towns it is still a challenge for us to establish close cooperation and represent an equal partner in youth work. The Dutch model is exceptional since it also works extensively with the police. Youth workers are informed in advance of planned street conflict between different groups and workers therefore act as mediators and experts on the local situation. Their task is to mitigate tension. Youth workers are welcomed in schools despite the fact that schools have their own social workers. Staff in the schools we visited repeatedly told us that youth workers from the low-threshold youth clubs were important to them, particularly in the afternoon free time that is out of scope of the school responsibility. They inform each other about what is happening in their area and when they can help each other. Students know about this cooperation, the communication is transparent.

Work as a lifestyle and a mission

Youth workers, depending on the length of practice, position, experience and skills earn an average Dutch salary (higher for managerial positions). It is common in the Netherlands that the work is based on established relationships with all parts of the system (school, police, authorities, etc.) and clients. Good knowledge of the location and local key players represents a prerequisite for successful problem solving. The cooperation is based on personal contacts; some workers have been working in the same position for several decades and often live in the local area. This blurs the boundary between professional and personal life. Workers are available (in a figurative sense) 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at least via a personal / service phones. The success of the service depends on the personality and contacts of the individual youth workers. The difficulty of replacing the worker in the event of his / her departure, long term absence, etc. represents a limitation of this approach. On the one hand, we see it as a great advantage that the service is represented by one or two familiar faces, which allows for easier contact and identification. On the other hand, this approach places great demands on the skills and abilities of the individual, who has to adapt his or her personal life to the profession to the extent that professional and personal roles merge into one.

Workers are always on the side of the clients

As already mentioned, services for children and young people and the education system are focused on the needs of individuals. For example, the normal opening hours of clubs are generally between 1pm or 2pm to 5 p. m., followed by a break, and then clubs reopen in the evening until 10 pm. The clubs have established basic rules that must be observed. The rules serve primarily for maintaining the safety and operation of the clubs. The employees of the clubs and schools strive to make these institutions a safe environment where everyone is given the opportunity to become responsible for their life story. The funding system set up for services helps to achieve this. Funding is allocated directly by the council to the specific services, so it is possible to influence the allocation of funding to a particular service according to long term outcomes. The implementation of sub-projects on various issues is also typical. Simplified record keeping also contributes – workers report services and client attendance. In contrast to the pressure to report and meet commitments and targets, this simplified record keeping allows for the avoidance of pressure to solve problems and allows young people to decide how to proceed with their situation at their own pace. Dutch society is very liberal even within Europe. Tolerance for responsible substance use (marijuana, MDMA) is typical even among teenagers (e. g. testing at parties where people bring an unknown substance and have it analysed on site, is common). Addictive substances are very accessible in the Netherlands. Their daily use (especially for marijuana) is not uncommon among clients. The easy availability is caused by their low price in certain areas (e. g. in Moerdijk, a tablet of ecstasy only costs Eur 3 (for comparison, a can of Coca-cola in a shop in the centre of Amsterdam costs Eur 3.50). The Czech society is very conservative in certain areas, compared to the Dutch society (e. g. topics related to LGBTQ+, immigration, sex workers or euthanasia). This difference is particularly evident in the fact that in the Czech Republic many teenagers who in any way deviate from the standard set by the society (e. g. based on ethnicity) are not fully accepted by the society. On the contrary, they are judged on the basis of facts they cannot change (skin colour, sexual orientation, origin). In the eyes of the public this leads to a reduction of their personality based on the label assigned to them (typically for example the Roma). This negatively impacts their self-esteem. Even in the Netherlands there are schools and environments that are more *Dutch*, yet the country's development is very inclusive compared to the Czech Republic. Our school system is not very good at working with differences as services are focused on the 'normal' or 'average' user and there is little opportunity to

work more individually, adapt to those with unique circumstances or be really inclusive. This openness was evident, for example, in the fact that workers did not know if there was a legal limit for consent to sex, whereas in some Czech organisations sex under the age of 15 is a big topic.

Inspiration

Like other countries in Western Europe (e. g. Belgium or Germany), it is typical for the Netherlands to have youth workers who have been working in one organisation or area for as long as several decades. Workers therefore manage to build a network of contacts across the system, and they are able to make good use of this knowledge when dealing with clients' troubles. Thanks to the cooperation with the police, they are able to work preventively and mitigate the effects of risky teenage behaviour such as street violence. At Neposedá and PROSTOR PRO we also consider knowledge of the local area and all its key players (*stakeholders*) and cooperation with them as crucial. Similarly to the Netherlands, it would not be possible to implement larger community projects (e. g. Neposedá: skate park in Újezd nad Lesy, opening of a new club in Běchovice, PROSTOR PRO: public event PRO STREET JAM, opening of a club in Kostelec, general landscaping in small villages, etc.) without the involvement of the wider community and its leaders. However, while building relationships in the community is crucial, it is a very demanding and long-term discipline. This experience has been confirmed by organisations in the Czech Republic, where the "lifespan" of a youth worker in the low-threshold youth clubs is on average 2 to 3 years. Here, in addition to a major change of the system (which is primarily single-source funding for one year, dependent on the changing political scene, which is not pro-social in the long term), a reflection on our practice in our organisations would be appropriate.

Karolína (Neposedá): *"For me personally, the easy-going approach of my Dutch colleagues was very inspiring. On the one hand, based on this experience, there is room for revision of the methodology of individual plans. Within the team we can discuss how we want to implement the plans and how to simplify the entire process. Another phenomenon that helped me to reflect on our perception of services is the way that Dutch colleagues work with boundaries. For us, it was surprising how much the personal and professional life is interlinked, with workers being available all the time. I find this model truly client oriented, but on the other hand I wonder how Dutch colleagues deal with the troubles associated with burnout syndrome. Facilities use various tools to prevent it (psychologists, multisport passes, etc.), but they do not actively use supervisions (they have not used this type of tool even once in 15 years). The disadvantage of this approach may be when the worker loses perspective of their work and becomes too immersed in it (e. g. messiah syndrome); they may unwittingly have a negative impact on clients without realising it. However, in the organisations intervention works well. I cannot imagine such a system of services in the Czech environment. I think that setting boundaries for both clients and workers is crucial. Even though it may seem that if a worker observes the working hours (which are adapted to the client needs), his/her help will not be needed to the extent and for the number of clients as in the Dutch model. In the past, we have experienced various breaches of set rules (e. g. lending money to clients, contact outside of working hours, etc.) and this approach has proved ineffective in the long term and in some cases even risky (e. g. frequent contacting of the worker by a particular client outside of working hours, etc.). The extent of work with volunteers and interns is also inspiring; I can imagine that we would cooperate with vocational schools in a wider scope in order to achieve long lasting effects.*

PROSTOR PRO workers: *“We agreed in principle with the inspiration described by Karolína. The insight into the Dutch school system, its openness towards the students and the collaboration with other stakeholders working in the location (although schools employ a school psychologist and social worker) was very inspiring. We are currently trying to link our low threshold work with schools, so it was nice to see how they have organized it in another country and how the model works for both sides. The system of internships for university students studying social work (we often met students in the clubs working on internships or volunteering) was great, students spend a large part of their studies in the chosen social service during their internship – so the services can basically “educate” their future colleagues. The overall attitude of the workers towards the meaning of their work was very inspiring; we repeatedly encountered the perception that working with children and young people is considered a way of life: “social work is not a job, but a lifestyle”. On the one hand we can identify ourselves with such an approach, on the other hand it is in contradiction to the setting of boundaries (personal/professional) described by Karolína. We were interested in the JoinUs project, where we had the opportunity to have a discussion with one of the clients of the programme – it is an interesting idea that could be implemented in our Czech conditions (considering the Covid pandemics, but not exclusively – also with respect to the virtual world and social media).*

As the participants of the study visit we agreed that it was good to visit several places, talk to more workers, and see a lot of things – but a drawback of this was that we didn’t see the work in more depth (as we would have if we had visited only one organisation). During our visits we were only able to see a snapshot of the work that was going on, however, this is not meant to sound like a negative assessment, but rather a fact which is also reflected in this report. Had there been more time, we would have welcomed spending longer in direct work. If we had the opportunity to go to the Netherlands again, we would certainly be interested in working in the capital or another large city (where we feel that social work with children and young people may be different).

Thank you very much for the experience.

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