

Erasmus Exchange Programme Study Visit
Report

Liberec September 13th to 17th 2021

YMCA Helsinki & Aseman Lapset ry

Background – how on Earth did we end up visiting Liberec...

ASEMAN LAPSET RY

HNMKY (YMCA Helsinki) and Aseman Lapset ry (The Children of the Station) are both Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working closely together; there is a long and - as we might say - a successful cooperation between the two organisations. Both NGOs are situated in Helsinki and work with the same target group. Therefore, it was quite nice that YMCA Helsinki made us an offer to join them on a study trip / exchange programme to Liberec.

Aseman Lapset was established in 1990. The starting point was the situation at the time in Helsinki City Centre – where relatively large numbers of young people were gathering in the surroundings of the Helsinki Railway Station and amongst them some disturbing phenomena were arising – violence, use of intoxicants etc. Therefore, it was seen as important to bring in some ordinary, safe adults among the youngsters. That soon developed into the Jeep café (serving coffee from the back of an old Land Rover) and further into a Youth Café – a simple solution of social outreach of Youth Work was implemented. That was the starting point of the Aseman Lapset.

Since then, the organisation has developed quite a lot and new ways of working have been implemented among new projects. The Friends Programme (enhancing mental well-being and battling anxiety and depression), Outreach Youth Work, Walkers Bus and Cars (mobile Youth Café's), Street Mediation (mediation for conflicts involving juveniles), K-0 (for bullying / conflicts in schools), the Pasila project (working with young people having committed several / serious crime) and the Ripa project (the use of experts by experience in Youth Work).

Monday September 13th

The visit programme started with a meeting with the hosting organisations; The Czech Street Work Association represented by Karolina Panuskova and Majak / Majak + represented by Petr Hampacher.



Karolina Panuskova and Petr Hampacher talking about their work.

The meeting took place in the Konopna Community Centre. The centre is a former kindergarten and it offers relatively good premises for the programmes carried out by Majak +. It also is a centre for the residential area around it. They have a large yard with different activities: a basketball-court, swings, all types of toys for children and even a camp-fire area.

We started with a conversation about the study visit, the goals set to it and the overall context and situation in which CAS and Majak are at the moment.

CAS

The Czech Streetwork Association (CAS) is a network of street social workers supporting each other. They offer low-threshold services in the street environment - outreach work, working with rough sleepers and people in vulnerable situations etc. They aim to keep up good quality standards for the work done on the street to guarantee that street work will have the value it deserves and to strengthen its legitimacy. They organize conferences and seminars, offer education and study visits etc. to workers and cooperation networks among others. All in all, there are approximately 30 educational programmes approved by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and carried out by CAS.

CAS also runs innovative projects such as Street Work online, training jobs (the Restart Shop), the campaign CAS OD CASU (Time to Time) to make street work more visible and to raise awareness. The low-threshold clubs are made more visible through awards for the clubs / street work teams – each year they nominate a street work team to receive the annual award which is called “Casovana bota”.

As we talked about the contradiction between the school system and NGO’s and the reasons behind it all, it became apparent that different ministries are not working according to the common plan – they have their own points of interest and ambitions. This means that at the grass roots level it is not easy to have a common approach and plan. The clients and goals are the same but at times the structure does not support the holistic approach at all.

MAJAK

Majak is an NGO which runs several programmes. It was formerly a regional organisation which was then divided into local organisations, but they have continued working closely together. Now the focus is more on the local level.

The organisation is funded by the state, but they need to apply for funding annually. There is no big risk of losing the funding, but it takes a lot of effort to carry out the applications, and the system does not take into account whether you are doing your job outstandingly or on a less perfect level. They need to register as a service provider and apply for funding and all the service providers are granted in accordingly.

Majak is divided into two teams; in the Primary Prevention team there are seven employees and in Majak + there are four employees. In addition to that there is an office worker to help the teams.

Prevention programmes provide school visits with different subjects carrying out 10-12 different programmes for pupils between the 4th and 9th grades. In 2009 the focus was also put on pupils who needed support after preventive programmes, such as working with young people who have just started high school. Also, the teachers are (or at least should be) in attendance during the visits. Learning clubs were established to meet the needs of those youngsters who are not so well off.

Now they have a holistic approach when working with young people. The work is done according to the needs of the service users and their families. The target group extends from 10 to 26 year-olds. Their work could be described as process management – the overall holistic approach means that there are no referrals unless there is a case of specific needs.

Petr told us that there can be said to be two subgroups. (Petr worked earlier with young people acting violently who have been placed in correctional institutes):

1. Young people involved in crime / criminal processes and the justice system and child protection services.
2. Young people needing support for behavioural and / or psychological issues. These youngsters are kind of on the border line; for example, young people suffering from eating disorders or anxiety who have not yet been diagnosed.

Working with these young people is about the case management and working with all those involved. What causes problems at times is that there are different rules for professionals working in different organisations and different fields, where some of them might have a confidentiality obligation.

In the afternoon we had the opportunity to talk with Petr accompanied by Petra from the Primary Prevention team. It was made clear that the support given in schools and the social work conflict slightly. Student welfare was originally focused pretty much on learning difficulties but nowadays the focus is more on behavioural issues etc.

Preventive work is about mapping the situation, making recommendations and referrals. They run preventive programs for people having issues with alcohol, smoking, health issues etc. Members of the prevention team work regionally which means that they travel a lot. They visit 70-80 schools in a school year, having two visits in each school. Visits normally last up to three hours and the classroom teacher also attends.

Primary prevention starts at the age of 7 or 8. It is strictly planned and there is a certified curriculum by the ministry of education. In addition to holding the lessons, the preventive team workers also prepare reports and evaluations after each class. Any issues that come up are reported. The work is not just about the individual's difficulties, but also about their families. This needs a lot of multi-professional cooperation.

Petra also showed us the "Majak Mice" cards which we found really useful – they are cards which help to express and discuss emotions. They also work well for family relationships and social peer situations.

[Konopna Community Centre](#)

In the afternoon we had a chance to visit the Konopna Community Centre and see the activities they run. They have a family club and parents with small children can come there. They offer the possibility to spend time with children since they have room for children to play both inside and outside. The workers can offer counselling for parents and work with families, family relationships and dynamics both from the point of view of the parents own relationships but also parent – child counselling and support. The vital thing is that parents also receive peer support from people in a similar situation.



The Konopna Community Center.

There is also a secondhand shop named Krokous in the centre. They sell clothes, shoes, toys etc. They get their products as donations from the community members: people living in the area. The outcome is giving back to the local community - renovating the premises, food support and such for local people. The shop also acts as a training field for young people. They hire young people to work there as clerks serving the customers visiting the shop. This offers opportunities for young people to develop their working life skills in a real setting.

Trip to Jested Mountain

After the day's work Petr and Dan from the Community Centre had organized the chance for us to visit the Jested Mountain by cable car. It was a nice idea to be able to see something else after having travelled and been in meetings all day. Spending time together in less formal surroundings gave us an opportunity to get to know each other a little better – great fun!!!



The Jested Mountain

About the first day

In the evening we had a brief reflection about the day. All in all it was a slow, relaxed start to the visit. The beginning was good and it helped us with creating the context and understanding the realities in which the work is carried out. We discovered lots of similarities with our own system.

What we liked was the viewpoint of quality. There are certificates granted according to certain criteria which helps and gives guidelines to the evaluation, even though this may mean quite a bit of work. What we were a bit confused by was the battle of different ministries. This is both weird and yet such a familiar phenomenon from Finland.

Another feature that we wondered or reflected upon was the boundaries. Why is it so difficult to get into schools? Is it the autonomy of the teachers? Maybe attitudes and fears? We also talked about the education - is it about bringing up or teaching the skills - which is more important? How much does it depend on teachers' or principals' personal values? Lack of time. Or is the time the most important asset... But as it seems, the number of programmes run in schools has risen which suggests that they have succeeded in their work.

This was also somewhat familiar to us even though there are good examples and ways to get around it – it means that we need to remind people about the basic values and meaning in their work. And we need to offer solutions – this means the creation of a win-win situation, the workers, institutions and most importantly the customers, young people and their families / peers.

What we liked was the systematic prevention programme at a very early age and we found it extremely important. We also liked that sex education was given during several years. Also, the notification of the meaning and importance of an outsider in assessing the needs of the children and the class was beneficial.

As a nice detail we liked the use of circles instead of the old-fashioned classroom structure when using the Majak Mice cards. On a broader level we appreciated the notification of

the meaning and importance of trust. As a good practice we took up the whole community centre - providing services for all age groups inhabiting the local community.

We talked about how to enhance the development of services according to the local reality and individual needs versus the universal services.

Tuesday September 14th 2021

Prevention programme, Zakladni skola, Novy Bor

On Tuesday we paid a visit to Zakladni skola in Novy Bor. Novy Bor is a small town 45 kilometres west of Liberec with a population of 11,500 people. In Novy Bor we had an opportunity to attend the prevention programme classes held by Filip from Majak. Filip used the Majak Mice cards as a tool to talk about the issues. Filip has drawn the cards himself.



Filip delivering the Prevention Programme lesson with the Majak Mice-cards.

We attended a class for the 9th graders with approximately 20 students. The subject of the lesson was the effects of COVID-19 on the lives of pupils and their families.

The students shared their experiences surprisingly openly even though there were outsiders watching the class. The youngsters told very personal stories about divorces, loss of family members, conflicts within the family etc. They showed and talked about emotions related to the subjects and events.

The class teacher did participate in the lesson, but at the beginning she just watched from the back of the class – which we must say, caused us to raise some eyebrows - but she showed that she knew her class and participated and supported the young people when needed.

It was nice to see that the method really works. It must be a challenging situation because there is only one lesson twice or three times a year to make the effect. On the other hand,

there is extra value in being in the position of an outbound actor. We must say that it demands a certain type of personality. Filip certainly proved that he is the right person for the task.

Afternoon, Konopna Community Centre

In the afternoon we had a chance to meet the young people at the community centre and have a chat with them. The staff had prepared some funny games and a quiz which helped us to get together, learn each other's names and maybe even learn a word or two of each other's language. There were some games and a campfire and chatting with a few local families and young volunteers.



Wednesday September 15th 2021

Office for Probation and Mediation Services

On Wednesday morning we had an opportunity to visit the Office for Probation and Mediation Services. They told us about the work they do with young people who are less than 15 years old and who have committed serious crimes. They work not just with the youngsters but also with their families.

The Office for Probation and Mediation is part of the state services and they work in the field of criminal justice. The mediation is about the alternative punishment, and they offer supervision, counselling and programmes for those who have committed crimes. In this sense the work has a lot of similarities to that carried out in Finland. They also support the victims of crime.

There are eight probation officers in Liberec, the difficulty being that sometimes it is not easy to keep a full staff because the wage is not high enough to support a family. The organisation said that they have a lot of cooperation with the NGO's – their existence is vital for the Office for Probation and Mediation Services.

Ospod office for child protection

On this occasion we also had a chance to meet the staff from the Ospod office for child protection. It is funded by the state, but the services are organized and carried out by the municipality.

We discussed the current issues that they are facing in their work, and they mentioned the most typical cases being young people with behavioural issues and suchlike. Due to COVID-19 child pregnancies and young people who are not attending schools are hot topics; a group of people vanished from schools during the pandemic. New current phenomena are petty thefts and street violence.

There is also a group of young people who need to escape from their homes. They want to get into the foster care system voluntarily and need crisis shelters. This situation has changed rapidly this year; during the spring of 2021 there were 10 young people who have been placed in foster care in Liberec. Previously the number was one or two per year.

In the beginning of the process there is a period of 20 days to evaluate the situation - a young person could be placed with a relative or someone trustworthy they already know instead of an institution.

There are 12 officers in Ospod. The number of clients per officer should be 40 families according to the law, but in reality, there are approximately 60 children per officer. Quite often there are several children in each family, which creates the issue of it not being a single child but the entire family who needs help with their situation.

As we talked about the foster care and the coverage for acting as a foster parent, they brought up that the foster homes get between €500 - €1300 per month depending on the budget and the number of children. In comparison, the average wage is €1500 per month in the Czech Republic. For example, a teacher earns that €1500 per month at the beginning of their career, but after three years that can be raised by 30%.

We also talked about the prosecution of minors. Ospod is a part of the criminal process – again this is similar to the Finnish system. We also talked about the problems in the system. Child protection stops offering services as the child turns 18 and the services after that are relatively limited.

They said that there is good cooperation between Majak, child protection and the probation officers – the municipality, the state and the NGO's can work together in beneficial ways at the grass roots level. There are specific judges just for children, juveniles, and adults. The work is solution orientated and there are professional mediation services available trying to find the best solution and decision / sentence for youngsters. They also do case management meetings and realize restorative family conferencing.

All in all, Majak is a great asset for probation services and other community services. As Majak works with the clients of Ospod and the probation officers, they can offer two structured programmes for perpetrators and those acting violently. They go through very basic questions - what, where, when, why, who's affected - to help the clients break the vicious cycle. The number of these client last year was 40 which is 1/3 of the overall number of the clients (in Majak). They require intensive work and there are weekly meetings with the young person and their family.

What was interesting is that these programmes really work - the success rate is as high as 80-90%. If a young person is assessed to be needing specialized services like mental health care, psychiatric treatment etc. then they are referred to specialists.

So, at the grass roots level the work is fluent and successful. What causes some difficulties is that there is a contradiction between ministries - again. The police force is under the Ministry of the Interior, but social work & child protection services operate under the Ministry of Social Affairs. You could say that there are common clients and goals, but cooperation between the two has not been made easy.

On the way to the next target, we talked about the mindset related to the use of volunteers in social work. There some similarities in the way the weight of history affects today's reality. In Finland the role of the society is traditionally very strong which may lead some to thinking that voluntary participation is not needed in this field because the officials will take care of it. In the Czech Republic, the weight of history comes from the communist era – voluntary work and active participation was not seen as accepted. After discussing the past, we moved on to current, up to date issues. There will be elections organized in one month in the Czech Republic and the main themes in the elections are COVID-19, refugees and taxes.

[Afternoon SVC Narnie, Community School, Free Time Clubs](#)

On Wednesday afternoon we visited a community school and the free time clubs. The school and the clubs are funded by the church, but they are open to anyone. Approximately one third of the families are Christian.

Director Petr runs the free time clubs which offer activities such as sports, dancing, self-defence, drama, cooking, maths etc. There are 32 clubs in all. The youngest attendants are from the age of 4 years and up, but mainly they are targeted from the first class till the sixth, which means the target group is from six years-old upwards.

One of the issues is that obesity is a consequence of COVID-19 which raises a lot of concern among paediatricians and other officials. This is why the NGO's try to encourage physical activities to enhance the children's well-being and healthy way of living.

There are also free time clubs for just hanging out, but most of the clubs do have a certain topic or theme. The fourth and fifth graders can also get support with their homework.

The clubs follow a tight plan / curriculum which needs to be made in September for the upcoming school year.

There is a fee for each group of about €25 - €30 per half a year, but this only covers approximately 20% of the costs. If there are families with financial difficulties then they can apply for a discount.

The number of pupils in the school is 180, but the number of children who attend the clubs is approximately 300. Some attendees come from the surrounding communities.



SVC Narnie

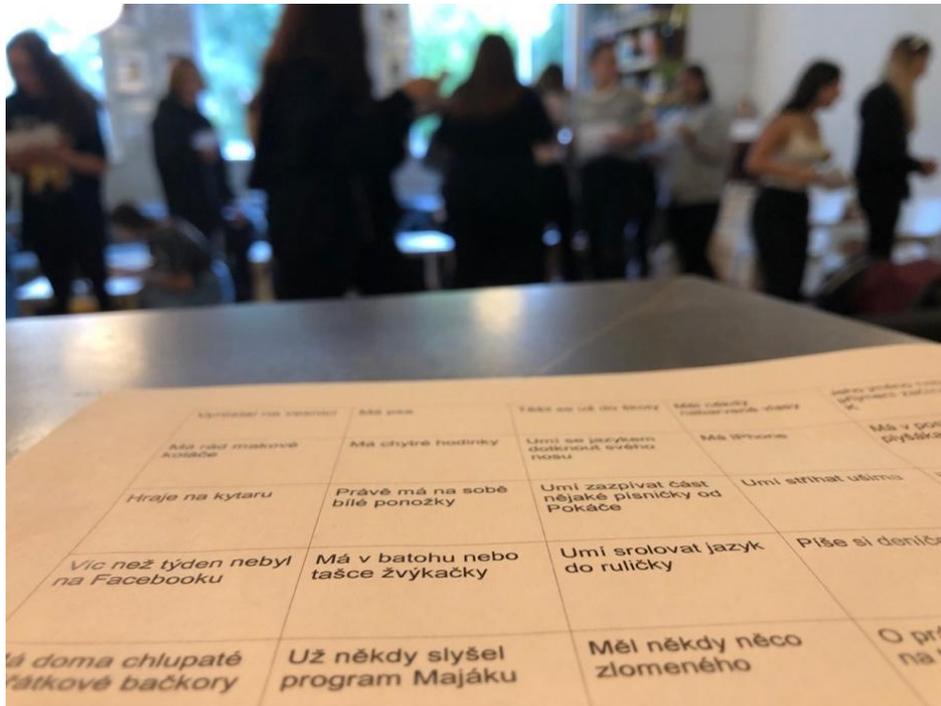
Thursday 16.9.2021

Class adaptation programme, Majak Community Centre

On Thursday we had an opportunity to monitor the class adaptation programme which was held at the Majak Community Centre by Petr and another worker from Majak. They

were working with a class who were to become hairdressers and barbers, which was made up of 22 students and two teachers.

In the beginning they went through the rules and then moved on to playing a kind of Bingo. The point was to try and find the person for each feature mentioned on the paper (for example who has a teddy bear in their bed, who does not eat hamburgers, who can touch the tip of their nose with their tongue, who can play a guitar etc.). The purpose of the game was to get to know each other. Majak workers also took part in the game.



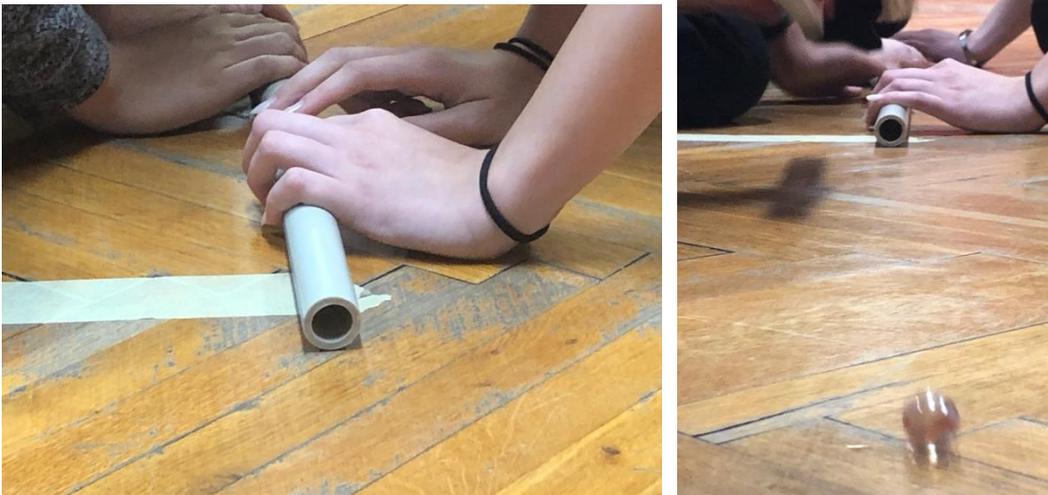
Bingo

The group then moved on to asking questions from teachers about their personal life - hobbies, pets, what they do during the holidays, how they start their morning, what sports they like. The purpose is to share something about yourself - they are not just teachers but individuals with their own personal likings and characteristics. It will be easier to talk about personal issues and ask for help with studies when you feel like you know the person.

After a break the students were given the task to form a line according to their birth dates. They only had one shot and were not allowed to speak out loud. They got it right on the first attempt as they were able to communicate and act as a group with non-verbal communication. In this rehearsal the roles of the group were also revealed; the leader, the clown etc.

The next task was a relay race - how to take a marble ball to the other end of the room through short plastic pipes. The task was to develop cooperation and problem-solving

skills. The focus of the workers was on how they cooperate and on the other hand how they tolerate failure and frustration.



The Marble Relay

The next rehearsal was about recognizing the roles in the group; how do the young people see each other's roles in the group - who's dominant, who's submissive etc. They went through five rounds and after that were divided into groups. For some of the students this appeared to be somewhat tough - it was made visible that their roles were not what they would have wanted them to be. At the end of the rehearsal the workers explained that all the roles are needed in the group, and they should work together to keep the group together and to avoid polarization.

From roles they went on to a rehearsal about cooperating as a big group. The task was to build a tower from wooden blocks by using ropes that were tied together with a hook hanging in the middle. What was interesting was that the roles started to change compared to the previous rehearsal. Some new young people took initiative and acted as leaders – they became the natural leaders as some of the more dominant youngsters got frustrated or did not have a similar understanding about the dynamics of the group.



Building the towers

All in all, the atmosphere was really nice and relaxed. There was a lot of laughter and none of the students appeared to be left out, but naturally some were more reserved and shy than the others. For some the visualization or exposing of roles appeared to be somewhat challenging.

Afternoon DDM Vetrnik and the V-klub

On Thursday afternoon we visited the free time activity centre in which we were hosted by Mrs. Martha Kutova. DDM Vetrnik serves all age groups from 3 year-olds to adults. The number of adults attending the activities is rising. It was founded by the city of Liberec (municipality organisation).

The activities include different programmes in the daytime, afternoons and evenings and also during weekends. There are free time activities, camps, competitions (such as dancing) but also educational seminars etc. They have their own premises where events and camps can be organized. Private parties can also rent the premises.

They run some competitions between the schools in the Liberec area, for example in mathematics. Some of the clubs' events are also school subjects and are funded by the municipality. Families who are not able to attend clubs which are not paid for by the municipality, due to their economic situation, are helped in finding the assets needed to ensure that activities are available for them.

During the school year they arrange more than 100 clubs and in the summertime they have 50-60 camps. Approximately 1,500 children are involved in the ordinary clubs and more than 1,000 in the summer camps and hundreds of children have participated in other activities. The capacity of the camp sites varies from 15 to 50. They have two types of summer camps: day camps and overnight camps.

All that means a lot of paperwork and constant applications to organize low budget events. The number of full-time staff is approximately 20, of which 11 are pedagogues and 9 are administrative staff. They are specialized in certain subjects. In addition, there are part time workers; approximately 100 for the clubs, 100 for the summer camps and 200 for arranging the competitions. Petr told us that the activity has been developed hugely under Martha's management within the last 3-4 years.

After visiting the centre we moved on to V-klub which was located quite nearby. The V-klub is also run by Martha's organisation. They receive municipal funding, and there are four staff members.



The V-klub

The club is free for attendants and there is no need for youngsters to register. The clientele is young people between 12-18 years, with 25-30 young people attending the club every day.

They are an open club with several activities and some afternoon clubs. They offer help for homework and support the relationships in the classroom / group. They give individual support to young people and if needed they make referrals to other NGO's according to the needs of the young people if there is anything worrying them.

The V-klub is also open during the summer holidays. They host day camps and organize events, competitions, tournaments etc. During the school day some youngsters pop in in

the middle of the day if there is a longer break. There are escape games for them, for example “Welcome to Hollywood”.

The issues they work with are family issues, anxiety, relationships in school and bullying among others. They work with the youngsters families as well – the background of one of the workers is as a family therapist.

The last year has been exceptional. COVID-19 meant that schools were closed for almost a year, and this could be seen in the young people’s well-being.

Friday September 17th 2021

Majak / Konopna Community Centre

On Friday there was time for some evaluation; it was not formal but more of a free chat.

What we came up with was that the hosts had set us a really high standard when it comes to a visit to Finland. They really did put a lot of time aside to be there for us.

Some of the professional highlights we came up with were:

CAS and the work they are doing to develop and maintain the high quality of the work through standards and recommendations. It sounds like a lot of work and somewhat bureaucratic but it is seen in the quality of work, it pays off.

The primary prevention programme in action - Filip was amazing. This really pinpointed the importance that the worker really knows what the purpose of the programme is and how to achieve it. The importance of trust, confidentiality and how to support the class as a group but also to take the individual situations and the needs of the youth into account. The young people we met really did put themselves out there and talked about really deep stories and experiences that they had gone through, but the atmosphere appeared to be respectful and safe.

The class adaption programme appeared to be very functional, but the professional skills of the workers cannot be highlighted too much. The way they handled the somewhat challenging questions concerning the roles in the group was very convincing. And on the other hand, these are the issues that come up every time a group is being formed – in this way the issues were handled in safe surroundings, the situation was facilitated by a safe adult and there was a mutual trust that all young people with their individual appearances were needed to form a working group.

The things mentioned above also brought up the need to adapt quickly to changing situations. There is not too much time since there are only four hours for each group and

in that time the workers need to make an impact. The workers must be constantly aware of the situation and ready to adapt to the needs of the young people / group. Also, the importance of training the teachers / lecturers must be taken into account since in everyday encounters the presence and awareness of staff is utterly important.

Our visit to the Child Protection Services & Probation Services showed us that there are a lot of similarities between the Czech Republic and Finland. Of course there are some differences as well, but for example “the battle of the ministries” sounded very familiar.

The Community School, the free time clubs and the visit to DDM Veternik also brought up something that we had to admire both in terms of the people working there and the focus put on the premises. The attitude of the teachers was really nice – they didn’t mind too much about less important things, were not constantly telling the young people what they should not do, but were focused on being there for the children. Also, as said, the focus put on the premises was really nice – the use of colours, paintings on the walls - the surroundings are inviting and inspirational for the children.

One more interesting topic was brought up during the last evaluation discussion. We were thinking about what kind of message the society and the culture is sending to young people about their rights and value. Are we aware of the hidden values that marketing, fashion, commercial services etc. carries with it? As an example - according to the most recent annual school welfare survey published, half of Finnish girls have experienced sexual harassment during the last year.

The teachers / other personnel working with youngsters should show that they like their work, young people and teaching by setting an example to the young about how we should treat each other.

This brought us to discuss the tasks of schools / teachers / educational personnel. To educate- that is to 1) bring up the youngsters 2) give them the skills and knowledge needed in life, and this should happen in this order. Teacher education in the Czech Republic takes five years and out of that only 25% is about psychology and pedagogy on a theoretical level. There is very little practical training. So how do we ensure that our future teachers etc. have an opportunity to learn how to cope with children? This also has to do with the approach of the people in power (ministries, municipalities) who plan and manage the work carried out in the field. Do they understand the situation at the grass roots level?

Conclusions / best practices:

The best things we took with us from the Study visit in short were:

- The certification and the work done to ensure the high quality of the work undertaken on the street / other premises.

- Prevention Programme – it started at an early stage and was consistent and well planned.
- The Majak Mice cards.
- The good cooperation between the NGO's and the public services, even if there are some structural difficulties due to the divergent guidelines coming from the ministries.
- The emphasis they put on cosiness – for example the use of colours. It appeared to us that the children and the young people (that is the service users!) would find that the premises were built for them.
- Our hosts were very friendly and put a lot of effort into welcoming us.
- The Primary Prevention Programme seemed like a very good and effective idea, even though much is up to the team leader and teacher. Filip, who we met, was an expert and a great example of this.
- It was great to see different organisations working together to achieve a common goal. Places like Majak would be great and much needed in Finland, even though there might be something similar somewhere.
- One notable thing is the communication with the police forces, which is a lot more friendly and fluent in Finland than in the Czech Republic based on what we saw.