

Study visit report

Helsinki, September 27th to October 1st, 2021

The study visit took place under Erasmus+ from September 27th to October 1st, 2021. Our host organisation was the Finnish branch of the international YMCA (NMKY) organisation and Aseman Lapset, an organisation providing outreach programmes for youth and also street mediation.

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September 27th

Aseman Lapset

Aseman Lapset – translated as Children of the Station – is a project of Helsinki Central Railway Station that began in 1983. At that time the station was, and still is, a popular meeting place for local youth. A programme to reduce the impact of risky behaviour by youngsters and effective ways of dealing with such risky behaviour was gradually developed. The principle of conflict mediation was also developed here, which later became a service that operates across the country with the ability to resolve a wide range of conflicts and cases. Since 2013, a mediation service has been provided in the Kamppi department store by Aseman Lapset streetworkers. They described the department store (exaggerating) as the largest low-threshold club.

Mediation service as a tool

Introduction

The Helsinki Mediation Service started its activities in 1987. Between 1990 and 2017 it operated as part of the Helsinki City Social Services Authority; it currently reports to the city council. The city contributes two-thirds of the budget for its activities, the remaining third comes from private donors and from the profits of the state betting office which donates part of its profit to non-profit organisations; this is similar to the way Sazka used to operate in the Czech environment by offering support for sports activities.

Objectives

The core work of the Helsinki Mediation Service is mediating crimes and offences and reaching a settlement agreement between victims and offenders, without lengthy and demanding criminal proceedings. The most common offences are property crimes or offences such as theft, assault, defamation, threats, etc.

Values

The mediation services operate on the values of accountability, respect, human relations and equality. These values include principles such as safety, voluntariness, trust, empathy, understanding, self-determination, etc.

Governing legislation and accessibility

Since 2006, the mediation service has been anchored by its own law and has become a service operating nationwide. It currently operates in 18 areas, with over 100 mediation counsellors and 1,200 mediation volunteers providing their services.

Principles and cooperation

In Helsinki, over 71% of cases are initiated by the police and over 27% by the prosecutor.

Mediation services are offered through the active addressing of stakeholders. The impartial position of the mediator (not being in the role of the police, the parent nor the victim) when trying to resolve the crime in question is also beneficial. The final agreement may eventually be recognized by the court, as some cases do progress this far.

Reach

There were 9,762 mediated cases in Finland in 2019, with 859 cases in Helsinki; compared to over 2,000 cases in Helsinki the previous year. Cooperation was established in 70% of cases, in which an agreement was reached in 89% of cases, most often in the form of an apology or financial compensation.

Working with minors

There is a community service programme for minors up to the age of 18. It is conditioned by the age of the offender and the city being a prosecutor. Mediators can work in any city district for up to a maximum of 40 hours per case.

Partner relationships

Only the police or prosecutor can offer mediation in these matters and they offer and recommend this service. Cooperation may be terminated if conditions are not met. It is not offered for those who have committed repeated violent crimes.

Advantages of mediation

Mediation brings benefits to the parties, both the victim and the perpetrator. For victims, it allows for the naming of the consequences of the act, for reflecting emotions, for coming to terms with fear and anxiety, the possibility to forgive the act, and finally it enables a quick and easy way to compensate the damage. For perpetrators, it allows for learning about the consequences of the act and brings a possibility of taking material and moral responsibility. Last but not least, it also serves as a tool to prevent recidivism.

Job prerequisites

The basic volunteer training lasts 60 hours and includes the theoretical basis of mediation, an overview of the legal and penal system, communication and mediation exercises.

Mediators with at least two years of experience can then be selected for further training in the area of mediation between couples.

Meeting with a representative of the police

The police act as initiator and active player in mediation cases, as was confirmed to us during a personal meeting with a representative of the police. The dual role of a police officer and social worker was described to us. This active involvement has been in place for over 10 years and the city contributes to it from its budget.

Walkers Cafe

This project was founded by the Aseman Lapset organisation. It is an 'open café' for young people who can find a pleasant and welcoming environment. The café was very attractive as a place to meet and spend time, which was proven by quite a few young people being there during our visit, some playing chess or talking to each other. We discussed with the worker the rules for entering and staying in the café – similar to those applied in the Czech low-threshold centres for children and youth – and also an outreach work performed in the Café. Prices were minimal, even when compared to Czech conditions.

It was interesting to see that there is no registration or cooperation contracting with visitors, everything works on a free basis.

September 28th

YMCA

On the second day we were introduced to our host organisation NMKY, which has been operating in Helsinki since 1889. Its mission is wide, starting with the development and organisation of hobbies and active leisure time, up to the education of children and adults, as well as help with integration, language training, etc. It is interesting that there are two official languages in Finland: Finnish and Swedish, due to their shared history.

They focus a lot on the development of basketball, which is popular in Finland - and which is also expensive to practice, our Finnish hosts told us it was one of the most expensive sports to do. Social skills are also strengthened through sport; the aim is not to produce professional athletes.

As part of the leisure activities they do outreach work with young people, organise evening basketball training sessions and matches, scout groups, etc.

NMKY run day clubs for families, after-school clubs and clubs for young families. They also run workshops, a club to help with finding and keeping a job (as described later), development programmes of multicultural cooperation and other programmes in schools, in school clubs and outreach work for youngsters and young adults.

An interesting feature is the location of one of the basketball courts on the roof of the YMCA building; the YMCA also operates the Arthur Hotel (where we stayed) in the same premises.

Youth Centre in Vantaa

This is a type of sheltered housing that has been operating here for 27 years. There are 5 such facilities for families and children in Finland. All drugs and alcohol are prohibited in the Centre. Active cooperation by clients in solving their own problems represents a condition of stay. Legal guardians must agree with the stay for minors under the age of 18. The Centre is a safe place where clients are motivated to acquire standard habits.

Heureka

Our Finnish hosts arranged a visit to the Heureka Museum in the afternoon; the Museum was an example of a modern concept of the institution, which was demonstrated by presentation forms of various exhibitions aimed at engaging both children and adults. There were exhibitions on mankind, the universe, wood and manufacturing industries, etc., all designed in one large interactive exhibition attractive for visitors. This visit confirmed our existing impression of the high level of public institutions.

September 29th

Malmi

Malmi is a suburb of Helsinki with a large immigrant community. Our guide referred to the area as a ghetto. For this reason, it is quite logical that youth programmes and services are concentrated here.

Basketball

There is a basketball training centre in Malmi where we met a young worker, originally from Afghanistan, who told us about the basketball training sessions he is responsible for, which are organised by the YMCA. He gave us a good example of how it connects the majority and the minority.

Clubs at schools in Malmi

We visited two school clubs in Malmi. Schools primarily address non-profit organisations that then became the operators of the clubs; schools run the clubs themselves only when they cannot find an outside operator.

The teacher who spoke to us considers the club as an all-round benefit, allowing different topics to be transferred from schools directly to this environment and to the workers. Information sharing or mutual consultation between teacher and pupil can take place only with parental consent. A disadvantage may be the blurring of the distinction between the school and the club, teachers and social workers.

The club is designed not only for 750 pupils but for a wide range of young people in that age group.

September 30th

Walkers bus

This is another of the projects operated by Aseman Lapset. It is a low-threshold bus operating on the outskirts of Helsinki (Vantaa and Malmi, mentioned above), and this project has now been underway for thirteen years. Apart from this bus, Aseman Lapset operates several caravans that also travel outside Helsinki and provide their services right in the places where young people naturally meet and hang out.

They stay at one location for approximately two months. The service is designed for youngsters aged between 13 and 18 who often demonstrate risky behaviour, this is similar to what we know in the Czech Republic. It operates on a similar basis to Walkers Café, with social workers being present, and offers low cost refreshments and a comfortable environment. It is open 3 days a week and receives 30 – 40 visitors per day.

October 1st

YMCA – Youth Club

This project, which operates in the YMCA building in the centre of Helsinki, provides employment and qualifications for unemployed youngsters up to the age of 28 who are interested in doing social work as their profession. When YMCA workers start to cooperate with such a youngster, he/she can claim benefits from the social system. So actually he/she is learning/gaining a qualification and at the same time gets “paid” from the state via social benefits.

Clients can then spend a maximum of six months gaining qualifications and potential future employment in one of the clubs in schools, or as youth workers in activation activities, basketball, training, etc. The Club operates three days a week and clients can spend a maximum of 4 hours there. A typical client is a woman or man aged between 20 and 24.

Inspiration and good practice

Good cooperation among several people from different fields, who meet with young people with a common goal to address their issues, can definitely serve as an inspiration for us. We found that individual institutions communicated with each other using a partnership approach. The way mediation is applied and available on a large scale and actively offered and promoted represents an example of good practice. We have been able to see it from several angles, both from the workers themselves and from the institutions that consider this form of cooperation to be common; this relationship of trust is deeply rooted and systematically supported in Finnish society.

A fundamental approach, also in terms of prevention, that we could observe was the promotion of active leisure, especially with regard to sport, which is developed more in terms of skills rather than a competition aimed at winning. In doing so, children are instilled with principles of fair play and mutual respect also outside of the playground, etc.

It was a great inspiration to see how new workers are recruited among the clients and how they are motivated to participate in youth programmes, to get qualification during such cooperation and, as mentioned above, such involvement is reflected in the social assistance of the state.