



Open youth centre 'Gates'

Providing guidance and support through open youth work

LITHUANIA

Title of the practice (in original language)

Atvirasis jaunimo centras 'Vartai'

Who is/was implementing the practice?

- NGO: 'Actio Catholica Patria'
- Open youth centre: 'Gates'

Which other organisations are/were involved in the practice?

No other organisations are involved.

What are/were the main objectives of the practice?

'Gates' is a youth Centre that works with young people applying the principles of 'open youth work'¹. The Centre provides social services and individual guidance to young people (teenagers and young adults) with few opportunities, including those not in employment, education or training, and who are facing difficulties. The Centre's services help young people to address their problems and develop a range of life skills. The Centre provides a safe environment (free from violence, harassment, and intoxicating substances) for young people to spend their leisure time. Young people can engage in their favourite activities (e.g. playing music, various table and outdoor games, participating in creative workshops), put their ideas into practice, discuss topics of their concern, and, where needed, receive psychological support and guidance. In this way, the Centre prepares young people for an independent life.

When was the practice implemented?

Since 2006 (ongoing)

Who is/was targeted by the practice?

- Particular attention is paid to young people who:
- due to their behaviour or appearance do not fit into their peer group or the wider society;
 - see no purpose in their life;
 - have no motivation to learn and are unable to creatively manage their daily routine;
 - are prone to crime, consume alcohol and other potentially dangerous substances.

¹ Open youth work is a type of youth work methodology that focuses on non-formal ways of engaging young people through mutual learning and gives those young people involved a large degree of autonomy.

What activities are/were carried out?

The Centre operates from Kaunas, the second largest Lithuanian city. By 2017, there were 36 open youth centres in Lithuania. The main activities delivered are as follows:

- ‘Gates’ staff provide feedback to the young people and raise uneasy topics and issues affecting them. The Centre provides a safe environment and needs-oriented services that include leisure time engagement, emotional support, informal education group exercises and activities that focus on practical and social skills. The staff includes social workers, social educators and psychologists. Individual cases are discussed at the staff meetings. The teams are small. For those young people who might need additional support, have assigned a staff member to facilitate communication and engagement.
- Young people visiting the ‘Gates’ acquire many practical skills necessary for their independent life, such as shopping, cooking, planting flowers and making small repairs of things. Through a wide variety of social activities, participants learn to spend time with other people more meaningfully and more safely. This is particularly important to prevent young people spiralling off to the idleness and substance abuse. Across all the activities, young people engage in activities voluntarily which increases their motivation to learn.
- The equal relationship between the staff member and the young person is at the heart of the activities. Responsibility for the learning and educational process is given to the young people, while allowing them to experience any potential consequences or enjoy success. Equality and the importance of mutual dialogue is promoted at the Centre to enable young people to learn to critically think and assume responsibility for themselves and their actions.
- Volunteers are also welcome in the Centre. Every year there is at least one international and a few local volunteers. Furthermore, young people attending the Centre are invited to join volunteering activities in other organisations (local and international volunteering programs).

What are/were the sources of funding?

The annual cost of maintaining the Centre (including the rent and utility services, food, salaries, operational costs) is around EUR 40 000. The sources of funding are the Kaunas municipality, the Department of Youth Affairs under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.

What are/were the outputs: people reached and products?

- During a typical year, the Centre’s activities involve more than 200 young people, out of which 80 are regular visitors (with a visiting frequency of at least twice a month or higher). Around 40 young people are provided with consultations periodically by the staff of the Centre. Around 20 young people visit the Centre in a day.
- In 2017, 13 different initiatives were organised at the Centre by young people themselves. 5 experience hikes and camps were organised by the staff of the centre. Before and after every activity, individual or group meetings are held to set the learning goals and to reflect on new skills developed.
- The focus of the Centre is on the quality of the services by providing individualised and planned support for every young person, through formulating a support plan for the young person if it is needed.

What are/were the outcomes: medium-term results or effects?

- In the long term, young people become more self-reliant, can think critically and are better at staying in employment. They also become more responsible members of the society. These skills eventually protect them from unemployment (living only on allowances) and sometimes prevent destructive behaviour (self-mutilation, crimes, and drug use).

- After their long-term activity at the Centre, most young people continue their studies, find work, can work more coherently and independently.
- Those young people who attend the Centre for longer periods of time have better oral communication skills, can compromise and express their opinions and are better equipped to solve conflicts in ways different from those they are accustomed to. They are better at listening to others, engaging in discussion and at personally assuming responsibility for their environment.
- While in a “varied” (different hobbies, skills, education, abilities, etc.) but safe environment, young participants learn to tolerate different people in society also outside the safe settings of the Centre. They also build friendships, which often strengthen their self-confidence and encourage more meaningful leisure time and learning from each other. In this way, those young people who often fail to find their place in the society, find their role through the Centre, also find their place in the wider society.

What are/were the lessons learnt and success factors?

Lessons Learnt

- The quality of services to the young people through open youth work is more important than the actual number of activities.
- Without a strong team and shared understanding amongst the Centre staff, there will be no quality outcomes for the young people.

Success Factors

- Respect for the young person is key, as is equality and a trust-based relationship between the young person and the Centre staff.
- Every single young person coming to the Centre must be treated individually.
- The Centre’s team must be strong, and this strength should be reflected consistently in the meetings, reflections, evaluations, etc.
- A wide range of partners is necessary to facilitate the opportunities for the ‘Gate’ participants.
- The Centre must be able to provide services that they think are needed by young people, not only following the priorities formulated by the policy-makers. The possibility to test new methods, tools, activities, services and the freedom to learn through experience for the workers and young people are very important.
- Being attractive and reachable for young people through the social media is key.

What are key sources of information?

www.patria.lt/en/