Proactive International Network for Newborn and Young Children

Portugal
Ireland
Norway
Netherlands

**LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS**
**14 - 16 OCTOBER 2019**

Proactive International Network for Newborn and Young Children

# Report of 3rd Learning Exchange Visit

International Child Development Initiatives, Leiden, the Netherlands

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The Proactive International Network of Newborn and Young Children (PINN) aims to **share best practice in the areas of prevention and early intervention in disadvantaged populations, evidence informed practice, practitioner training in prevention and early intervention approaches**, and the importance of early childhood care and education (ECEC) as a preventative tool. The objective of this learning exchange is to allow partner organisations to develop and reinforce networks, increase their capacity to work at a transnational level, share and confront ideas, practices and methods in ECEC and prevention and early intervention.

**The city of Leiden in The Netherlands was the location for the third International Learning Exchange Visit of the PINN Project, which took place between 14 and 16 October 2019.**

**The local organizer was International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), along with Stichting JES Rijnland and the Centre for Children and Families Leiden.**

**We, the participants, were 15 practitioners, programme coordinators, lecturers, researchers and policy makers from Portugal, Ireland, Norway and The Netherlands. Our goal was to get a better understanding of how prevention and early intervention 'works' for children with additional needs in the Netherlands.**

# Highlights

During the busy three-day programme we had the opportunity to speak with **parents, teachers, social workers, policy makers, child projection lawyers, lecturers and family support workers**.

As part of the opening session, which took place in the historic orphanage of Leiden (also the building where ICDI, and JES Rijnland is based), we heard from an **expert on urban studies, Rob Manders** from Blaauwberg, a sociological consultancy. Rob drew attention to the intense period of transformation and urban renewal in Leiden in recent decades, which has seen it transitioning from a low-skilled impoverished industrial city (albeit also the site of the oldest University in The Netherlands) to a prosperous highly educated 'knowledge city'. Rob explained that one of the greatest challenges for the city in 2019 is to link the 'prosperous and arrived' with the 'underprivileged and developing', a form of solidarity – not only on moral grounds – but also **in recognition that 'the city thrives with new and hidden talent'**.

During the remainder of the three-days we heard from many perspectives about how young children and their families, who are struggling to find their way and to thrive, are being supported. In his presentation, **child psychologist and director of ICDI Mathijs Euwema**, speaking from the perspective of being a father of three young children, highlighted the commercialization of care and support in the Netherlands, and possible over **diagnosing and 'labeling' of children with additional needs**. This is because without an official diagnosis, services are not being paid, a rather perverse incentive in the system.
A further aggravating factor is the **decentralization of care** which has been taking place in the Netherlands since 2015, meaning that all 355 Municipalities need to come up with and finance their own child and youth care 'solutions'.
This results in a complex mix of (mental) health care, social support and educational services that are either financed by the municipalities, by the health insurance companies or that have to be paid for by parents themselves.

For parents and children to **find their way in this "jungle"** is not an easy feat, even more so for those from **marginalized and immigrant backgrounds**. Despite all this, Mathijs also emphasized that children in The Netherlands consider themselves the happiest in the world, as consistently shown in research by UNICEF.

A recurring message throughout the visit was the **shift in outlook regarding family support** that is slowly underway in The Netherlands. This is best summarized from a **move away from reacting to and trying to 'fix'** so called “multi-problem” families **to attempting to really listen** to the questions that parents have and standing next to them and working with them. This was especially emphasized during the Parenting, Child-Rearing and Systems Approach to Supporting Families workshops, which took place as part of the **Mini-Conference in the University of Applied Sciences in Leiden**.

The **importance of engaging with parents and understanding the impact of contextual factors** such as family values, parenting attitudes and social support on parental practices was also highlighted. Suzanne Bannik described the family-centred and multi-disciplinary approach - ‘Integrated and Early Help for Young Children’ - for children aged 0-7, most of whom are between 2 and 4 years. This **coordinated approach** also facilitated a more efficient response to families’ difficulties, **enabling cognitive/education difficulties to be identified earlier and appropriate supports to be put in place** to support child wellbeing. We were impressed with the speed of the initial assessment visit to a family at their home, that Suzanne and her colleagues undertake following a referral from the family doctor (General Practitioner) or day care service.

Throughout the 3-day visit we were also impressed by the commitment and dedication of all practitioners we met, and saw much to be positive about in how health, care and education professionals work together.

**Parents' perspectives** on the rights of children with additional needs were powerfully captured by **Annemarie Koppenaal**, representing the **Autisme Café, Leiden**. This is a parent-for parent support group for families with children and young adults with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Annemarie's insights and experiences were a real eye-opener into the perspectives of parents of children with Autism, especially as she also discussed the transition to adolescence and adulthood when new kinds of parent-child relationships need to be negotiated, a topic which is often neglected.

The visit to **Het Gebouw**, the welcoming **community-based integrated centre in the multi-cultural Leiden Noord district** was another highlight of the Learning Exchange Visit. Here we visited the **library, playgroup, toy library, child and family health centre, cafe and primary schools** - all under one roof. All participants appreciated the family system approach to working in the Netherlands – i.e. not just to responding to the child, or a mother or father when a problem is identified– but aiming to **support the whole family dynamic**. From an initial individual-based consultation, child needs are identified at an early stage and continuity of care is offered 0-18 years. **Parental involvement** was seen as crucial for empowering parents both to support, and promote, positive child outcomes.

In Het Gebouw, we heard about **JES Rijnland's home visiting play programmes (0-23 months)** including their recognition that parents prefer to speak in their own language when playing and reading to their children. These programmes are designed to **promote child development and positive parenting experiences as well as linking families in with a social network**. JES Rijnland work primarily with more vulnerable families, including migrants and those who are socially isolated and have amongst their staff and interns those who are comfortable speaking Arabic, English, Polish, Turkish, as well as Dutch.

We were however, struck by the seemingly **increasing segregation that is taking place in the Dutch ECEC and primary education system**, where more and more children are being referred to **special needs schools** – this at a time when inclusive education is being prioritized in many countries in Europe (and this is also the case in The Netherlands following the Adaptive Primary Education Act of 2014). This came to the fore during the discussions following the visit to **Cardea Campus, a 'state of the art' newly built service for children aged between birth and 7 years**. This provides a 'specialised educational environment' for 4-6 year-olds (including children with ASD) in those situations where teachers, ECEC practitioners, education specialists consider that children are not coping in regular school or ECEC services.
While at Cardea we also heard how **parents and Early Childhood Educators are supported through the process of diagnosis and treatment for children**. This happens via programmes such as 'Alert 4 You', which provides Early Childhood Educators with expertise and advice to strengthen their engagement with young children and Het Palet Observation Group. This facilitates a gradual transition to school for children, over a ten-month period, based on observations, to determine their needs and the best educational approach for them.

A family-centred approach is seen as central in the State supported **'Safety at Home'** (Veilig Thuis), which is the advice and reporting point for all cases of **domestic violence, child and elder abuse** i.e. from pregnancy to 100+ years. In total, there are 26 Veilig Thuis locations around the Netherlands. During the Mini-Conference we heard from Marja de Klerk, from Veilig Thuis who described the clear and powerful 3-part vision of Veilig Thuis way of working: firstly putting a safety plan in place, and regularly check its effectiveness; secondly be risk driven, recognize risks and minimize the risks (both mental and physical) and thirdly be recovery focused, with recovery as an aim.

As with all of the PINN Learning Exchange Visits, the Leiden experience brings into focus prevention and early intervention practice and policy in the four participating countries Ireland, Norway, Portugal and The Netherlands. It also raises lots of questions and issues requiring further investigation, and it opens up new opportunities for collaboration and exchange. These include a desire from our colleagues in Portugal to learn more about the **TOY for Inclusion approach** (www.toy4inclusion.eu) which addresses exclusion and segregation in ECEC by creating community-based Play Hubs, which also promotes intergenerational learning. TOY for Inclusion is one of ICDI's flagship initiatives and is now operational in 8 countries including in the Netherlands.

As a result of this visit our colleagues in Norway are keen to pay more attention to coaching and training for ECEC educators on engagement with parents. The restructuring of the Fjell Municipality in the region of Bergen will provide an opportunity to put this into practice.
It is also anticipated that a more thorough discussion of research being conducted within all participating countries in the area of early intervention and prevention will provide huge learning opportunities for identifying effective or innovative practices to improve child health and wellbeing.

We also felt that there should be **more awareness amongst those funding and implementing interventions focused on young children regarding the underpinning research informing their design**. This necessitates close collaboration and exchange of perspectives between practitioners, researchers and policy makers. As remarked during the visit: "Policy makers and practitioners often have different agendas." A strong impression in our visit to the Town Hall was how budget considerations seemed to dominate policy makers' way of thinking at the expense of a focus on long term prevention measures.

We would like to **thank all who made this visit such an enjoyable and stimulating learning experience**, also including the wonderful Leiden Hutspot Dinner hosted by Carolien de Groot and Cees van Damme in their home. Thanks also to the colleagues in ICDI, JES Rijnland, Centre for Children and Family, University of Applied Science, Cardea, het Gebouw, Leiden Municipality who gave so generously of their time.

# Next exchange visits

**The Leiden Exchange Visit was the third of a total of four.**

| | WHEN | WHERE |
|---|---|---|
| **FOURTH VISIT** | MAY 2020 | IRELAND |

Here you can also read the **reports of the 1st and 2nd Learning Exchange Visits** to Tromsø, Norway and Coimbra, Portugal: https://icdi.nl/projects/proactive-international-network-for-newborn-and-young-children-pinn

## PINN partner organisations

Ireland, Prevention and Early Intervention Network *(Project Coordinator)*
Portugal, University of Coimbra
Netherlands, International Child Development Initiatives – ICDI
Norway, University of Tromsø