

An Innovative Public Sector in 2017 – New Solutions to Complex Challenges

EPISA2017111 Open.Heart Project

Submitted by the Ombudsoffice for Children and Youths Salzburg

The 'Open.Heart' project was developed by the *Kinder- und Jugendanwaltschaft Salzburg* – the regional government's body for child and youth advocacy – in 2015 as a response to the unmet needs of young refugees living in Salzburg. Despite being under the age of 18, unaccompanied asylum seeking children are unable to access the same level of support granted to Austrian born children. The support for these young people stems from governmental funds allocated to (adult and child) asylum seekers rather than being taken from general funds allocated to child and youth welfare. As a result young people are structurally excluded from opportunities available to their Austrian peers, for example they are excluded from accessing foster care.

The *Kinder- und Jugendanwaltschaft Salzburg* – whilst continuing to fight this two-tier system – tried to address some of the consequences of these issues by establishing the 'Open.Heart' project. The individual care and support available to young refugees is limited as a result of the differential treatment described above and with this project the *Kinder- und Jugendanwaltschaft* aims to enable young people to access additional support in their daily lives. As previous research has shown, social networks are central for young refugees to enhance their resilience and general wellbeing. Researchers have repeatedly pointed out the importance of informal supporters for refugees' ability to settle in their new environment.

The 'Open.Heart' project prepares volunteers to become mentors for young unaccompanied refugees. Also, the *Kinder- und Jugendanwaltschaft* has successfully fought for a model of foster care which is closely interlinked with the mentoring project. Mentors can be individual people as well as groups of people, such as families or friends. They receive training regarding important issues affecting the young people's lives. Six modules cover the asylum system and state support available to young refugees, experiences of trauma and intercultural communication. The project team also holds long conversations with both young people and mentors in order to address expectations and wishes for the mentorship.

After having been 'matched' mentors and mentees meet on a regular basis – mentors are expected to be able to meet the young person at least once a week over a longer period of time. The project team continues to provide support to those involved, organising regular 'rounds of reflection' for mentors and mentees and providing one-on-one support when needed. Furthermore the project offers ongoing training – for example on interfaith dialogue. Lastly, if mentors are able to offer living space, the mentee and mentor can decide to move on to a supported foster care arrangement.

From its beginnings the 'Open.Heart' project has been accompanied by an evaluation team based at the University of Salzburg. The first results show that the project not only benefits young people, but is also experienced as highly rewarding by mentors. Our ongoing evaluation has shown that both sides are able to learn through and with each other. The project has thus been shown to make a vital contribution to processes of integration and social inclusion.