It takes a village to raise a child

A cooperative and co-creative response to school delay and early school leaving

KdG Research
University of Applied Sciences and Arts

Interreg
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VRAC

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KEEP COOL IN
THE SUNSHINE

1/ Foreword

Our international project was launched in early 2019 under the motto ‘It Takes a Village to Raise a Child’ (VRAC). Eight organisations from four different countries set out to achieve ambitious goals. After four years, we bring together our experiences and conclusions. The process was challenging, rich in learning and one which called for openness, collegiality, flexibility, pragmatism and resilience, not least because of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The key focus of our project is to assist children and young people in their development, to create resilience in terms of their wellbeing. The lives of children and young people encompass various social environments: home, community and leisure, and of course, school. These are separate worlds, and yet at the same time they are not. They are intertwined with one another and influence each other.

Based on this context, we presented the issue of school delay and early school leaving as a challenge. Given that one in 10 young people in Europe leave secondary school without completing their education, can we increase their chances of a successful school career by focusing broadly on these various environments?

The image of a village fits this objective perfectly. Guided by the keywords ‘together’ and ‘broad’, experiments were set up in six pilot areas, thus giving a voice to all stakeholders: professionals in education, wellbeing and leisure, policymakers, parents, as well as children and young people. In this shared space, it was important to support one another: no one should have to do it all alone.

The eight European partners were: the City of Mechelen as lead partner (BE), SAAMO, the Province of Antwerp (BE), East Sussex Community Voice (UK),

MAP (UK), Afeji (FR), Association des Centres Sociaux de Wattrelos (FR), the Municipality of Leiden (NL), and finally, KdG University of Applied Sciences and Arts (BE) as knowledge partner.

Developing activities in such widely varying contexts, with such diverse partners, results in a somewhat complicated but instructive process. During the process, the partners learned a lot from each other about the best way to tackle things, the challenges faced and things that are going well. At the same time, a transnational cooperation also offers the opportunity of looking at yourself from a different perspective. It challenges you to question and improve your ways of working.

This report describes the cooperation, various local projects and conclusions, with the common threads being a shared vision, an integrated offer, participation and co-creation. The reader will see how, with similar objectives as the starting point, it is still possible to undertake very diverse actions. There is no one unique answer. It is not a copy-paste method. Instead, it's all about actions undertaken by people, in a specific context and subject to very specific challenges.

Such human actions take time, and in that sense, our project is not over. On the contrary: building a village takes time, but above all, it is a task that is never completely finished. There are always new challenges, new opportunities, new ideas and new inhabitants along the way. It is only by cooperating with one another, by discussing and reaching agreements after listening to each other and by undertaking activities jointly, that the village is eventually created.

As VRAC Project Manager, I would like to thank all the partners for their commitment, flexibility, willingness to learn and creativity. These have not been easy years, and certainly not for cross-border (in a literal and figurative sense) initiatives.

I am proud to have been a part of this project. Thanks also to Interreg 2 Seas and the City of Mechelen, and all other staff members, and especially, the many parents and children who made our village a success.

Finally:

Let's not underestimate children and young people, let's not underestimate parents, let's not underestimate the power of collaboration, and let's also not underestimate our power to make change happen.

Hilde Lauwers
Project Manager of It Takes a Village to Raise a Child – Interreg 2 Seas
Strategy & Development Department
City of Mechelen

2/ Introduction

How do you build a village around children and young people? There's no need to create it from scratch. The building blocks already exist. In every municipality, in every neighbourhood, there are individuals and organisations active and deeply committed to the development of children and young people: schools, wellbeing services, youth work programmes, community projects: all of them offer specialised and meaningful development opportunities and learning spaces. However, due to the multitude of locations and organisations, children and families do not always find their way to these services. All the separate parts are there, but they don't yet form a 'village' that works together to support and motivate children and young people. How do you connect all the partners within a common project, a village?

In this report, seven projects tell you how they formed a village to combat school delay and early school leaving. The report describes the steps taken by the projects, their successes, and what they have learned from setbacks along the way. You can read about the thresholds and barriers to forming such a village as well as about how the various partners in a village overcome those barriers through a shared commitment to the lives of children and young people. All seven projects had ambitious goals, which formed a common horizon that inspired staff and volunteers to give their utmost, time and time again.

School delay and early school leaving are complex problems. You can look at children and families to see what is not going well, what they don't have or can't do. But you can also look at their talents, their plans and their dreams. You can listen to the solutions they propose themselves, their ideas for the community and their questions for the school. This opens up a landscape of numerous positive dynamics: a youngster who thrives in a youth programme, an engaged mum at the school gate, a teacher finding support in a partner network, a community gathering initiated by children from the neighbourhood. The approach based on appreciation and acknowledgement proves that what we pay attention to, grows. This attention and appreciation were central to each project.

This attention must come from the people around us: from teachers who teach with passion, youth workers and youth counsellors who build trusting relationships, community workers and local residents who appreciate the efforts of young people when they do their part. All of these people formed connections with each other. Action, reflection and participation by children and young people, staff members and volunteers proved essential in this process. In addition, there was need for a context to facilitate these connections: organisations that give people time, space and a mandate, and partnership agreements between organisations.

This report describes the organisational, practical and policy aspects required to make the village work. It also talks about the difficulties that staff members may encounter, what they can do about them, as well as the policy interventions needed to support staff members in the connections they form.

Perhaps you yourself work in an organisation for young people, and this report can help you identify certain actions and strategies to give shape to your work. It's possible that you are viewing this topic from an organisational or policy perspective. In that case, you will find inspiration to set up the necessary conditions and framework to attract the right people and help them thrive. Because that's a big lesson we gained from all the projects: it's people who allow organisations to set ambitious goals for themselves. People who persist in trying to find solutions, who connect people to one another, who bring together different perspectives, who have a feel for working with children, who create understanding between children, parents, teachers and school principals, and who seek and find tangible solutions to complex problems.

This report tries to do justice to all such people. It does this by showing them not only what they have accomplished, but also the barriers they have overcome and the pathways prepared for the future. It also sheds light on the systemic aspects that complicate their work and the policy interventions that could reinforce their efforts.

With the right people in the right place, with time and with sustained effort, you can bring individuals and organisations together and align them with the development of children and young people. These projects show you what can happen when you follow the path of collaboration and participation. And they confidently invite you to choose this path as well. They proudly share what they have accomplished and make a passionate plea for you to continue their work in your day-to-day practice.

3/ The main aims of the VRAC-project

3.1. School delay and early school leaving

About one out of 10 young people in Europe leave secondary school without completing their education. That's 4.4 million young people full of talent, dreams and ambition. There are several reasons why their educational careers come to a standstill. These reasons are often interconnected. It involves a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family factors. School delay and early school leaving, in turn, leave their mark on young people and can lead to poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and mental health problems.

This is not a new phenomenon. The past decade has seen a sharp increase in the attention devoted to this issue. In 2011, the European Commission introduced a package of policy measures to tackle this issue. As a result, several European countries have succeeded in reducing the number of early school leavers. Despite this, children and young people in socially vulnerable situations are still at higher risk of early school leaving. Moreover, according to the evaluation reports that have reviewed the European measures, these risks are proving particularly persistent.

3.2. A comprehensive and participative approach

The phenomenon of early school leaving arises at school, and therefore, schools play an important role in addressing this issue. But gradually, there is a growing understanding that schools alone cannot successfully deal with this problem. In 2015, the European Commission launched the Whole School Approach with a clear message: if we want to achieve a breakthrough, we need to move away from isolated short-term actions and to a more holistic and more long-term approach. Organisations and services within the fields of wellbeing, leisure and community work can play a vital role in supporting schools. Together, they form a broad-based educational community surrounding children and their families.

There is also a growing realisation at the European level that an approach can only be successful in close cooperation with children, young people and their parents. They are the experts on their own life situations, and that expertise is indispensable to the success of the approach.

* In European statistics, early leavers from education and training are young people aged 18 to 24 who have completed, at most, lower secondary education and who are no longer involved in any further education or training. This indicator is expressed as a percentage of persons aged 18 to 24, to whom such criteria apply, out of the total population aged 18 to 24. In 2021, it was 9.7% of 18-24-year-olds.
Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Early_leaver_from_education_and_training

3.3. It takes a village to raise a child

Based on this growing insight, eight partner organisations from four European countries decided to combine forces. Thanks to the support of the Interreg 2 Seas Programme, they set up an ambitious project with the title 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child' (VRAC). Each of the seven partners developed, within their specific context, an innovative, holistic approach to school delay and early school leaving. Researchers from KdG University of Applied Sciences and Arts (BE), as the eighth partner, provided the project with inputs and analyses.

Through this project, the pilot projects aimed to evolve towards a new organisational model for the upbringing and education of children and young people in socially vulnerable situations.

Three main challenges were identified:

1 – How can local actors arrive at a shared vision of the causes of and approaches to school delay and early school leaving? How can they agree on a holistic view of child and adolescent development?

2 – How can local actors create an integrated offer to tackle school delay and early school leaving?

3 – How can they design this offer in co-creation with children, young people and their parents?

Children's Zone

Originally developed in Harlem, New York, the Children's Zone was reproduced in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium. Although the specific details may vary from place to place, there are a number of basic principles that form the common core of this programme. The basic premise is to connect learning opportunities at school with the development opportunities in the community. A Children's Zone actually starts with what most middle-class families take for granted: good schools, attractive and safe playgrounds, proper housing, functioning organisations, safe streets, etc. After all, it is very difficult, and often impossible, to raise healthy children in a community without infrastructure or organisations that help form connections between children and families. That is why the Children's Zone is committed to creating a strong community, with a shared interest: the development of children. In this way, a Children's Zone involves the entire community in the children's development process. Based on this joint involvement, we build a sense of community between residents, facilities and key partners, who together create an environment necessary for the healthy development of children. Specifically, this translates into a connecting chain of initiatives – a sort of pipeline – that guides children from a very young age until they graduate.

3.4. Two major pillars

To achieve their ambition, the pilot projects chose to bundle their activities under two major strategies: extended learning time and frontline wellbeing teams.

3.4.1. Extended learning time

Children and young people who are at increased risk of school delay and early school leaving often find it difficult to feel at home in school. Customs and manners are different at school than at home. Children and teachers have a harder time building a relationship; their interactions are more often negative. But outside of school, there are leisure and community programmes that do succeed in connecting with these children and young people. Their participative and play-based approach and their closeness to the world inhabited by young people encourage contact. Children and young people also encounter various learning opportunities here. These programmes allow them to develop or regain a future perspective.

The pilot projects make the existing extracurricular offer more accessible and also expand this with additional activities. They ensure that the offer is always developed in close consultation with the children and their parents. They focus explicitly on parent involvement, for example, by offering training on this topic to professionals and volunteers. In addition, they connect the extracurricular offer to school-based learning. They improve communication between teachers and young people/community workers and make them more involved in each other's work. In this way, they strive to evolve towards a more integrated educational offer in which school and community work together on a broad, holistic development of children and young people.

The pilot projects derived inspiration for this strategy from the Children's Zone programme.

3.4.2. Frontline wellbeing teams

Children and young people who are at higher risk for school delay and early school leaving often struggle with difficulties in other areas of life as well. Difficulties in school can, in turn, reinforce other problems. This situation also affects the wellbeing and self-confidence of children and young people.

Therefore, there is a real possibility that children who are experiencing difficulties in their school careers may also need and/or receive support from one or more youth counsellors. In practice, these youth counsellors often work alongside one another but in highly compartmentalised and specialised sectors. Each has their take on the problem and tackles their piece of the puzzle. Coordination and cooperation between youth counsellors themselves, and between the youth counsellors and the school, is often problematic.

In order to improve this situation, the pilot projects want to experiment with working with frontline wellbeing teams. With these teams, the projects want to go beyond merely a client consultation between services. They strive to set up a concrete collaboration between different youth counsellors, starting from a shared vision and within an integrated service. Based on the Children's Zone, the projects have opted for a

continuous pipeline of initiatives that will guide children and young people throughout their development process. They ensure that there is a single point of contact and that the same youth counsellor continues to follow up with the family, even in the long term.

For this strategy, the project drew inspiration from the Wraparound Care model. It also offered training to local partners on this.

Wraparound Care

The Wraparound Care model is based on the family's own analysis of their situation: what have they gone through, what is the problem according to them, what is going well, what are their needs and wishes, what would they like to decide for themselves and what do they need help with? This may include informal help from friends and family as well as formal, professional help. Ownership of the process lies with the family itself, from the start as well as throughout the process of providing assistance. An appropriate team of support persons rally around the family and together they arrive at a single plan tailored to the needs of the family. This plan describes exactly who provides what kind of help. The whole team regularly discuss how things are going with the family and adjust the plan accordingly. The assistance is provided so that families regain their ability to respond to the challenges they face.

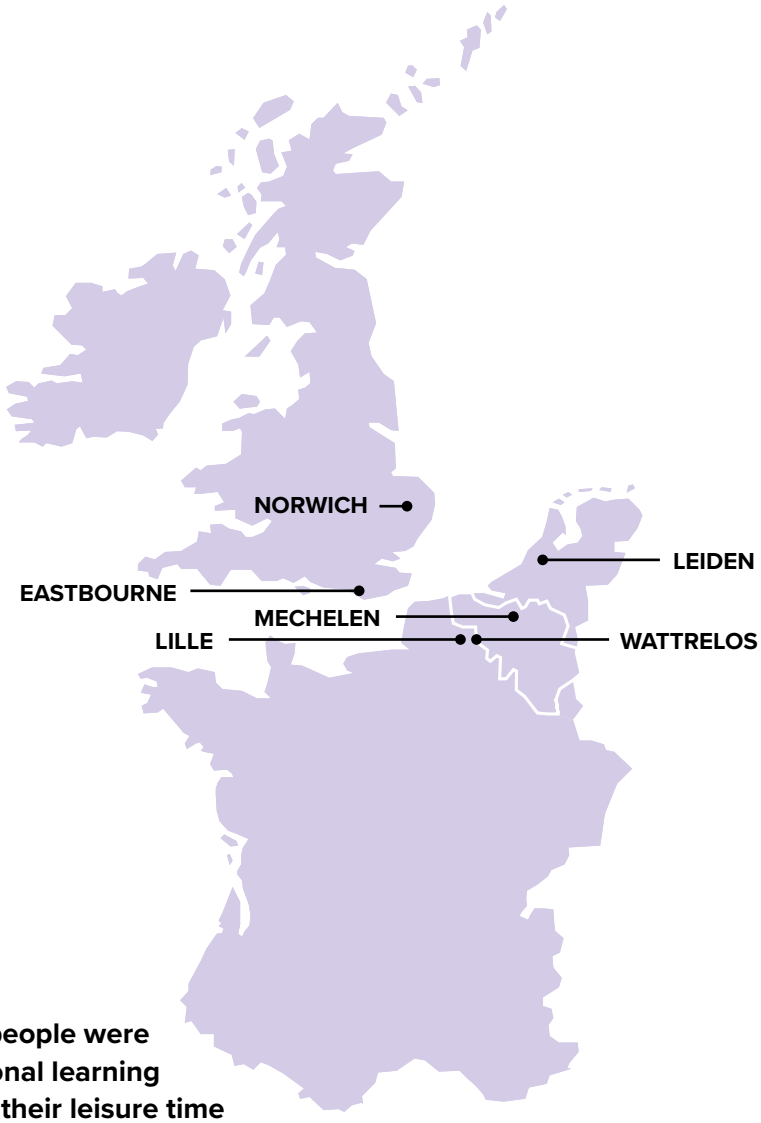
3.5. Findings and advice from the projects

The VRAC project ran from 2019 to 2023. Within this common framework, the pilot projects set up their own concrete actions tailored to their specific context. The project teams met with one another, digitally and in person, to exchange ideas and learn from each other's approaches.

KdG researchers contributed the theoretical frameworks, developed training packages and assisted with data collection. For the evaluation, they conducted interviews with project staff and attended local initiatives, whenever possible. Furthermore, they have referred to the newsletters, meeting reports, project summaries and other documents provided by the pilot projects. Based on these sources, the researchers have prepared this report outlining the key findings and recommendations from the pilot projects.

What can you expect from this report?
Firstly, we provide some key figures relating to this project. Thereafter, we briefly describe how the various pilot projects have translated VRAC's ambitions into practice. We then summarise the most important insights gained across the various projects. We also provide practical guidance for those who want to get started based on the insights from this project. We conclude with some policy recommendations, especially at the local policy level, to create a feasible framework within which such initiatives can flourish.

VRAC in figures



Duration of the project:

01/01/2019 → 31/01/2023

Project budget:

€4.976.262

1025 children and young people were provided with additional learning opportunities during their leisure time

100 focus groups with children

and **30** focus groups with parents

... led to increased involvement

679 children and young people received individual support

611 professionals participated in education, training and exchange

77 policymakers were informed about the progress of the VRAC project

205 key people learned how to adapt their working method

11 other vulnerable neighbourhoods plan to use the same working method

4/ What was VRAC?

It is not easy to briefly summarise a project that ran for four years. In this chapter, we offer a concise overview of the various pilot projects. In the next chapter, we present the insights interspersed with more detailed examples and statements. We include the relevant contact details at the end of this report.

4.1. VRAC Mechelen. A network of partners supporting one another, right down to their activities on the ground.

4.1.1. About the project partners

VRAC Mechelen was coordinated by the *Team Leerrecht en Gelijke Onderwijskansen* of the *City of Mechelen* (referred to hereinafter as '*Team Leerrecht*') and by SAAMO. *Team Leerrecht* strives to ensure the right to education and create equal, high-quality educational opportunities for all. Through innovative project activities and engaged community work, SAAMO brings people together to work on concrete and sustainable solutions. VRAC Mechelen was active not just in various schools but also within the family context at home and in the community. The link between the school, the community and the home context was always the focus when developing the initiatives.

4.1.2. Project approach

An intersectoral VRAC network with a shared vision and common language
Organisations and professionals from different sectors came together in a network called '*Het Mechelse netwerk nieuwe autoriteit in de wijk*'. Guided by the framework introduced by Haim Omer, this network inspired professionals and brought them together to provide integrated support to children, young people and families. Twice a year, a two-day training was offered, as a starting point for all partners. This training created a common language and mindset for working together in an intersectoral and integrated manner. In addition, VRAC Mechelen facilitated monthly peer review meetings and supporters' meetings. This equipped partners with tools they could use within their own contexts. As a result, they felt less isolated and better supported. Professionals got to know and trust each other and mutually recognised each other's contributions. Through collaborative thought and action, they set to work on cases, challenges and ideas encompassing all aspects of their work, right down to their activities on the ground.

NETSTERK, an answer to the search for a bridge between school, community and the home context
NETSTERK served as a local and easily approachable point of contact for all professionals in Mechelen who take care of the needs of children, young people and families. A member of *Team Leerrecht*, assisted by two colleagues, provided the necessary support to these professionals so that they could share and discuss

their concerns within a network. Together they tried to find the support required by the families as well as the professionals themselves. By connecting partners from different contexts with each other, Netsterk facilitated intersectoral collaboration. The family support worker also made home visits and tried to work with the family to find concrete solutions for concrete problems.

The voice of children and parents

Children, young people and parents in vulnerable situations often feel that they are not being listened to properly. That is why VRAC Mechelen particularly focuses its efforts on asking children, young people and parents questions and encouraging them to participate. Not just the projects at school, but also the programmes for children and adolescents and within the community, gave children and young people the opportunity to think about what could be improved both at school and in the community. Based on these projects, SAAMO developed the *Buurtbouwers Kids* and *Jongeren Donkerlei* initiatives. In *Buurtbouwers Kids*, 7 to 12-year-olds said what they wanted to change in their neighbourhood or in Mechelen and how they enjoyed their free time. The *Jongeren Donkerlei* project involved young people (12 to 20 years old) in designing public spaces and initiating a conversation with aldermen and police. In the *Thuis op School* programme, *Team Leerrecht* worked with a secondary school to develop a programme for student participation to prevent early school leaving. Based on this programme, *Team Leerrecht* also developed a participative workshop called '*De leerling-expert*' that has since been used in several schools in Mechelen.

Not just the children and young people but the parents too were asked about their concerns and the areas in which they saw opportunities for their children. VRAC helped parents make their voices heard in relation to the school and the support options offered. For this, *Team Leerrecht* and SAAMO worked on an outreach basis and proactively approached people: they talked to children, young people and parents at school and on the streets and collaborated with community organisations.

Focus on children's talents

Talent was one of the common threads uniting the various initiatives introduced by VRAC Mechelen. VRAC Mechelen focused on developing talent-based thinking in the community, at school and in the home context. Via the summer school programme, VRAC Mechelen offered children and young people in vulnerable situations additional developmental and learning opportunities. During *Talentevents*, children got the opportunity to discover not just their own talents but also different professions and a broader future perspective. The *Sterk(h)ouders op school* programme was a positive and connective programme for pupils, parents and the school. In this programme, *Team Leerrecht* worked with a single class. Professionals from Mechelen also received training on talent-based thinking.

School enrolment and Transfer Secundair

Within the framework of VRAC, *Team Leerrecht* was able to provide parents with additional support during the application and enrolment process in an elementary or secondary school. In addition, SAAMO played a lead role in implementing the *Transfer Secundair* project. As a result, SAAMO was able to help a VRAC elementary school provide better guidance to pupils and their parents in making a more conscious school and study choice when making the transition to secondary education.

Additional ad hoc support during Covid-19

During the coronavirus pandemic, VRAC Mechelen undertook additional actions and provided additional support. The needs of children, young people and families in vulnerable situations became more visible during the pandemic. The coronavirus measures and the switch to online education made it more difficult to reach these pupils and families. *Team Leerrecht* and SAAMO assisted schools in contacting pupils and families among whom educational commitment was a matter of concern. They also offered a single helpline for Mechelen professionals and parents concerned about pupils. Frontline organisations visited families who were unreachable by phone or digitally. By listening to children and parents, appropriate support and practical solutions were sought, such as the use of borrowed laptops.

4.1.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision

A common language and shared vision help in building an intersectoral network. VRAC Mechelen ensured that the vision was action-oriented and usable across organisations. Starting from this shared framework and common language, you can simultaneously focus your efforts on the community, home context and school context and strengthen the connections between all these actors. This makes it easier to organise support for children and young people in vulnerable situations and their families, and professionals feel that they have the necessary reinforcement for performing their job. By introducing talent-based thinking at school, at home and in leisure activities, children and young people have more opportunities to explore and develop their talents (while playing). They can grow up feeling more confident and resilient. Talent-based thinking helps schools make a positive connection with the family, despite difficulties during the school career. It also allows children and young people to make more conscious school and study choices.

2 – With regard to an integrated offer

VRAC Mechelen works with a single point of contact. This staff member serves as a bridge and can give shape to the support provided, together with the family and the professionals involved. As a result, families feel more heard and better supported, connections between the home, school and community contexts are re-established, professionals gain a broader cross-context perspective, and the school careers of children and young people once again take centre stage.

3 – With regard to participation and co-creation

Children, young people and parents are given a voice in organising additional developmental opportunities in schools and communities. This clearly adds value. Since their voices and expectations are central, children, young people and parents feel better supported. They become more confident in their ability to help shape their environment. Schools, organisers of leisure activities, partners in the area of wellbeing and local policymakers who pay heed to these inputs are able to come up with solutions and proposals that are more concrete, sustainable and broadly supported. However, children, young people and their parents need assistance and learning opportunities to be able to participate as equal partners.

4.2. VRAC East Sussex. The voice of children and parents as the foundation.

4.2.1. About the project partner

East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) is responsible for coordinating the VRAC project within this region. ESCV provides citizens with a platform to have a say in the design and implementation of public services so as to make these services more independent, professional, and inclusive. In recent years, the organisation has developed a broad network in the region with a variety of partners who are involved in children's development. ESCV offers several programmes on wellbeing in partnership with schools in Hailsham, Newhaven and Peacehaven.

4.2.2. Project approach

Participation is key
Central to all of ESCV's actions is the voice of children and young people and their parents. The organisation also applies this approach in the context of the VRAC project. ESCV conducted a number of surveys and summarised the responses of children and parents in a report. In each case, the organisation has discussed these reports with relevant partners such as schools and health departments.

In addition, ESCV also got its Youth Inspect & Advice Group (IAG) involved in the VRAC project. This group is managed entirely by the youngsters themselves, with the support of a youth worker. These young people work with schools and screen the school websites. They provide schools with feedback and advice for implementing better wellbeing and mental health policies. For the VRAC project, the young people provided advice for the development of the frontline wellbeing teams. They gave inputs on how to promote the service and make it more accessible, how vulnerable children and families could gain confidence in the service, how to support young people during referrals and how to make place for parent and caregiver involvement. Four young people in the group also had the opportunity to receive additional training, thanks to VRAC.

PACE: Partnership, Activity, Community and Education
One of the sub-projects in this pilot project was PACE. PACE stands for Partnership, Activity, Community and Education. This sub-project was implemented by the Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA). The SCDA offered three secondary schools a rolling 12-week programme focused on leisure, wellbeing and learning.

PACE targeted children aged between 11 and 16 who had undergone negative school experiences, had difficulty motivating themselves for school and who were overlooked by the existing services. Through fun after-school activities at the schools and community centre, the children gained new learning experiences. This strengthened their sense of wellbeing and belonging. The children were involved in the selection, design and implementation of the activities. The activities were very diverse: 'forest schools', gardening, music workshops, cooking, life skills training, art, and a visit to a vocational college.

The SCDA worked on five aspects during these activities: building relationships, being physically active, learning new skills, volunteering and being in the moment. Their goal was for young people to continue to be involved with the youth team even after the programme, as volunteers in activities for 8 to 11-year-olds. Young people were also encouraged to do volunteer work within the local community and were provided support for this. The PACE programme was repeated several times.

Smooth Moves to Secondary School: assistance in the transition to secondary school
For the Smooth Moves programme, ESCV partnered with Priority 1-54, an organisation that offers creative workshops and training programmes on topics such as bullying, loneliness in young people and online safety. Smooth Moves assisted about 30 children from six schools in their transition from primary to secondary education.

This transition is an exciting phase in children's lives. There are new things to enjoy such as new friends, new classes and more independence. But some children and their parents are also worried about this phase. Smooth Moves created opportunities to discuss these concerns. Smooth Moves was partly devised by children and young people via a youth advice group. During creative workshops, children talked about what they were worried about and what they looked forward to. In addition, trial sessions and a three-day summer camp were organised. School staff, outreach workers and parents received training in this area.

Finally, Priority 1-54 trained pupils aged 12 to 14 years to become 'Transition Ambassadors'. These Transition Ambassadors ensure that new pupils feel safe, valued, respected and welcome during their first year of secondary school.

From wellbeing coordinator to frontline wellbeing team
ESCV appointed a wellbeing coordinator whose role, as a single point of contact, was to build bridges between all partners within the support network. The wellbeing coordinator also provided tailor-made support to the children and adolescents at VRAC schools in Hailsham, Newhaven and Peacehaven as well as to their parents/caregivers.

Attention was paid not just to the school career but also the broader care needs of the child and parents. The wellbeing coordinator offered a listening ear and assistance to the family in their search for help. Where necessary, the wellbeing coordinator tried to lower barriers to school and school-based support so that children could continue to engage with and develop in school. This was done by creating positive connections between children, parents/caregivers, schools and services. Gradually, the position of the wellbeing coordinator evolved into a frontline wellbeing team of partners that children, their parents and professionals could turn to.

4.2.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision

ESCV advocates a cultural shift in our use of language about young people and pupils, both in schools and in the broader community. How do we talk about young people and pupils? How do we talk with them? It's also important to not just tell them what to do but also explain to them *why* we do or don't do something.

2 – With regard to an integrated offer

An intersectoral network need not always start from scratch. There are often networks and partnerships that already exist within the local community . However, the task of integrating all these partners into a frontline wellbeing team and creating positive connections between schools, services, parents and children takes time and resources. The school's engagement in this effort is the key to success for ensuring a more integrated service. If such engagement is absent, the job is only half done. Building trust and good relationships with schools always takes more time and resources than you initially estimate. Therefore, it is important to take this into account in the funding from the start.

3 – With regard to participation and co-creation

The participation of children and young people is an indispensable part of the process. But children, young people and parents need support to make their voices heard. It is important to take these voices into account when designing the actual offer.

4.3. VRAC Lille. Elimination of waiting lists gives families perspective.

4.3.1. About the project partner

In Lille (northern France), Afeji joined forces with VRAC. Afeji is an organisation with about 3,000 staff members. Together, they provide guidance to more than 15,000 people in vulnerable situations each year, throughout their lives. Afeji works in all life domains. Two of Afeji's services collaborated with VRAC: SESSAD and CMPP.

SESSAD (*Service d'Education Spéciale et de Soins A Domicile*) supports children and young people with learning disabilities in their everyday environment: at home, at school and in their leisure time. CMPP (*Centre Médico Psycho Pédagogique*) provides assistance to children with developmental disabilities. In both SESSAD and the CMPP, a multidisciplinary team provides a wide range of specialised psychological, educational and paramedical assistance.

4.3.2. Project approach

Both services were struggling with the problem of long waiting lists. The waiting time for SESSAD's services is currently about 3.5 years. About 110 families are waiting for help. The CMPP has about 300 families on its waiting list. During the VRAC project, both services chose to address issues related to the waiting lists and expand their offer to include more accessible support, in closer collaboration with partner organisations and before the start of their regular offer. In this way, they can help more children faster.

SESSAD

Thanks to VRAC, SESSAD was able to assist 32 families on the waiting list. Children at high risk of early school leaving were given priority. Parents and children were heavily involved in the design and evaluation of the support services. It was tailored as far as possible to the pace, needs, talents and interests of the participants.

The SESSAD staff member worked with the family to find leisure activities, viable solutions and accessible assistance to restore a sense of perspective regarding their situation. The children also received individual, educational support. In addition, SESSAD tried to connect parents with one another by organising focus groups. But the participation in these initiatives remained limited. There was no real need for exchange, and there was a great physical and mental distance between the parents.

CMPP

Difficulties at school are often a reason for referring children to the CMPP. In the past, the CMPP worked closely with schools and any problems were identified and addressed more quickly. But over the years, the distance between the school and the counselling services has widened. Schools are more likely to call on the CMPP for emergency interventions rather than for preventive measures. Also, children are sometimes wrongly labelled as 'disabled'.

The VRAC project provided the CMPP an opportunity to start working more intensively with the schools. They introduced their project to numerous schools and partner organisations. But after nearly two years of fruitless attempts to build a network and enter into agreements with partners, the CMPP decided to change course. It was decided to set up a concrete programme for children experiencing difficulties at school. Thanks to the VRAC project, the CMPP was able to provide counselling to 57 young people, mostly boys aged between 6 and 16. The CMPP set up a small team to provide this counselling. By setting up concrete activities and achieving tangible results, they were able to gradually convince more partners and schools that working together adds value. Internally, more and more colleagues also became convinced of this approach.

4.3.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision

Play and leisure time are not always taken seriously. But play is an important lever for educational support, especially when it's provided during leisure activities. Respecting or breaking a rule goes further than the leisure activity itself. After all, children also acquire life skills during their leisure. It is up to the

children themselves to master these skills. That requires time and the right conditions. Not everyone is immediately convinced of the added value of this play-based approach. But by applying this in practice, you can present concrete results and convince people.

2 – **With regard to an integrated offer**
Collaborative efforts with partners with complementary expertise allow you to prevent vulnerable children from falling behind and leaving school early. Such a network must be built patiently and gradually based on concrete situations. To get people on board, actual practice is more effective than theoretical models or grand principles.

3 – **With regard to participation and co-creation**
Afeji greatly values the family's expertise regarding their own situation. Setting up the educational project together with the child and their family makes the project more relevant and easier to implement. Families are sometimes more open to co-creation than professional youth counsellors.

4.4. VRAC ACS Wattrelos. Playing as a stepping stone for learning.

4.4.1. About the project partner

L' Association des Centres Sociaux de Wattrelos (ASCW) is an association that brings together the three community centres of the municipality of Wattrelos in northern France. These centres work on developing a range of leisure activities for children and adults. They focus on individual development and collective action to improve living conditions in the neighbourhood. The local community manages these centres. Over several rounds of public participation, local residents determine the themes on which the community centres will focus and the activities they will engage in.

4.4.2. Project approach

The families were invited to put themselves forward as participants in the VRAC project. Staff members visited the families at home to ask them about their questions and needs. Parents requested for attention to self-confidence and verbal expression as well as healthy eating. Based on this, the community centres developed separate offers for groups and individuals.

For the group activities, the centres worked with four external partners. Each organisation took turns in developing a creative and play-based educational offer involving magic, drama, music, cooking, philosophising, dancing, etc. This allowed the children to learn new things in a creative and active way. During the sessions, the regular staff members observed the participating children, about 10 per session, and watched them gradually open up.

Eight children received individual guidance on a weekly basis from the organisation *Heureux d'apprendre*. Through play or theatre, this organisation helped the children express themselves more clearly to their teachers and peers. They also worked directly on the children's school tasks. Here too, the counsellors noticed a marked difference after only a few months. The children who were very shy in the beginning soon opened up and started speaking to others.

Another centre worked with a paediatric psychiatric nurse. This nurse provided care and support for two sisters over the course of a long-term programme. Every Wednesday, she held a four-hour session specifically tailored to their needs and also organised sessions with them during the school holidays. Besides focusing attention on their school development, a lot of time was also spent on wellbeing and care tasks. She particularly focused on stimulating the children's imagination and powers of expression. In addition, she helped the mother create a more stimulating home environment.

4.4.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision
A holistic approach is necessary. You have to work simultaneously in the areas of mental health, physical health, family environment, school, etc.

2 – With regard to an integrated offer
It should not be assumed that a school will immediately recognise a community centre or leisure programme as a partner to tackle school early school leaving and school delay. But it is important not to give up. Once there is trust, many positive things happen.

3 – With regard to participation and co-creation
Each child has different needs. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. The support provided should be adjusted to fit the pace and needs of the child. Furthermore, it is important that the working methods used during leisure should be appropriate to the world of children. Learning can definitely be combined with recreation.

4.5. VRAC Norwich. A menu of holistic support to empower the young.

4.5.1. About the project partner

VRAC Norwich was coordinated by the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP). MAP organises school and leisure activities. They empower young people with information, advice and support. By doing this, MAP promotes the wellbeing of young people. They support young people to make informed choices, gain awareness of themselves and life stresses and build resilience in life and at school. That way, they promote a more holistic process of development.

4.5.2. Project approach

A menu of holistic support

Thanks to their presence in schools, MAP was able to work on an outreach basis and in an accessible manner. MAP offered a menu of support initiatives for pupils who voluntarily showed interest in their activities. This offer included mentoring, mediation in the family context or otherwise, advice and accessible counselling. Mentoring consists of offering personal, non-therapeutic support, assistance, encouragement and inspiration to young people, over an extended period of time and especially during moments of transition. Listening to the young person is central to this process. Parents were involved only if the youngster wanted them to be involved. School staff were closely involved and recognised the importance of this additional support for pupils. If necessary, the MAP youth workers referred young people to other activities within the project or to the specialised offer of other partners.

Life Zone pop-up groups at lunchtime

On a weekly basis, MAP organised Life Zone pop-ups for 11 to 16-year-old pupils at the three VRAC schools during their lunch break. During these sessions, young people got the chance to talk about their needs and interests and suggest ideas for Life Zone activities. Young people suggested various summer activities such as team building activities, canoeing, archery and woodworking. These activities gave them the opportunity to learn through play and make new friends. At another school, a group of pupils founded the Refreshers Club to support their fellow pupils during exams and in dealing with exam stress. The Refreshers Club offered a place to talk, eat, relax and play games during lunch and in the after school club. In addition, support was also available in connection with exam stress, learning strategies, wellbeing and career advice.

The Boost programme

Boost was another programme within VRAC Norwich. This programme focused on 11 to 13-year-old pupils who were struggling with self-confidence or making social connections at school. For six weeks, a MAP youth worker took a group of young people out of class on an outing once a week. Informal learning opportunities were created via various activities and the youth work methods used. The aim was to improve self-confidence and acquire social skills.

4.5.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision

For an accessible and holistic school-based support system at school to be successful, it is critical that the school board endorses and supports this partnership. Such support encourages a positive cooperation between youth workers and school staff and the exchange of ideas and resources.

2 – With regard to an integrated offer

In addition to influencing culture at schools, frontline organisations should pay attention to influencing policy via the government. The most impactful shifts occur when there is a change in government guidelines and the expectations from schools.

3 – With regard to participation and co-creation

It is important to build person-centred relationships with young people. Young people will engage and voluntarily cooperate only when they perceive that professionals trust them and are themselves trustworthy, and that the relationship is based on equality and mutual respect. This basic attitude, as well as the visions and participative methods within youth work, can offer inspiration to teachers or youth counsellors.

4.6. VRAC Leiden. Working with children based on their strengths and talents.

4.6.1. About the project partner

VRAC Leiden was coordinated by the municipality of Leiden. For the work package related to extended learning time, the municipality worked with *Samen Ondernemend Leren* (SOL). SOL enhances people's wellbeing by encouraging them to do things together and learn from each other through this. For the work package related to the frontline wellbeing team, the *Preventief Interventie Team* (PIT) was the implementing partner. PIT provides early assistance to children who are at risk of running into obstacles with respect to their social development at school and at home.

VRAC Leiden was implemented at several locations in the North Leiden district. VRAC Leiden works with three schools there, all of which are housed in a single building. SOL has its own meeting space in this building. In addition, they are also active in the surrounding streets and squares within the neighbourhood. PIT also visited the schools for their interviews with children, screenings and behavioural interventions. In addition, PIT often visited people at home or other places where they felt more comfortable.

4.6.2. Project approach

VRAC Leiden's goal was that all children and young people in North Leiden, regardless of circumstances in which they grow up, should be able to participate properly in school. The project focused on their wellbeing, their sense of belonging at school and on providing a broad learning environment. To achieve this, VRAC Leiden used the following approach: 1) working with children and young people based on their strengths and talents and with the active involvement of their parents; 2) leveraging the informal support networks of children, young people and parents, such as family and friends; 3) facilitating a professional collaboration between organisations and the people working with these children, young people and parents; and 4) enhancing the pedagogical knowledge of professionals and volunteers.

A partner network for North Leiden

The municipality of Leiden promoted cooperation between SOL, PIT, the VRAC schools, children, young people and their parents. The municipality also organised a training on frontline wellbeing teams for Leiden professionals within the network. The focus was on Wraparound Care. The training also paid attention to the

informal support networks of children, young people and their parents, such as family and friends. Trainings and networking meetings were organised to create and strengthen connections between the various professionals.

Participation and co-creation workshops
At the start of the project, SOL engaged in conversation with children, young people, their parents and other professionals via co-creation workshops. Leading up to this workshop, more than 100 children were surveyed via a questionnaire about their interests and needs. Their parents were surveyed before or after an activity via phone and/or Whatsapp. This allowed SOL to actively connect with parents in an accessible manner. SOL incorporated all these inputs in the design of their activities.

Learning while doing
SOL provided children and young people aged between 8 and 17 a place where they could feel safe, have fun and develop themselves. SOL offered exciting, after-school activities based on seven themes from which children could choose what they wanted: music, nature, sports, media and technology, art and culture, the world and the neighbourhood. SOL also organised a *Girlz Lounge*: a weekly, after-school programme for girls aged between 8 and 12. In addition to fun activities, *Girlz Lounge* also created a safe environment where girls could talk with each other about topics such as identity, self-awareness, feelings and thoughts.

SOL mapped what the children learned during these activities using the *Levensvaardighedenpaspoort* (Life Skills Passport) developed by the University of Applied Sciences Leiden. This passport was developed based on five life skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills and responsible decision-making. In addition to these activities, SOL offered homework assistance, helped introduce 11 and 12-year-olds to the secondary school curriculum, and worked on school motivation and engagement with 15 and 16-year-olds during classes.

Preventive response to problem behaviour
The *Preventief Interventieteam* (PIT) worked with children who exhibited externalising problem behaviours at school and in their home situation. By taking preventive action, PIT was able to support these children in their development and prevent them from falling behind in school. In collaboration with the school and with their parents, they identified the children who could benefit from counselling by PIT. Building a relationship of trust between the PIT coach, the child and the parents was the first hurdle in this process. Subsequently, the child's situation, talents and qualities were identified, and the PIT coach drew up a plan in collaboration with the child, parents and the school. After six months, this plan was evaluated, adjusted or finalised. PIT also tried to work with the teachers and equip them the necessary tools.

Crisis team for people in vulnerable situations during the Covid-19 pandemic
During the coronavirus pandemic, it became difficult to reach children, young people and families. To avoid losing contact with them, a crisis team was set up in cooperation with other city departments and VRAC partners. The crisis team ensured that children and their families remained involved with the school and the classes. They offered homework assistance online and gave children the chance to borrow laptops.

4.6.3. Lessons learned with regard to the different challenges

1 – With regard to a shared vision

Leisure activities that focus on fun and play also create a safe environment for discussing sensitive topics and working on talents and life skills. Exchange between the partners, as well as a training on Wraparound Care or a tangible tool, can help promote communication between different projects and a recognition of each other's contribution.

2 – With regard to an integrated offer

When setting up a new offer, it is advisable to first conduct a thorough analysis of the specific context and environment and to find out what initiatives, organisations and networks already exist within the neighbourhood or community. Contact these organisations to ask how they approach a particular challenge, what they think works and whether it would be useful to work together. An inspiring framework for action such as Wraparound Care can connect different stakeholders and help identify similarities and differences. It is also important to discuss in advance how the partners wish to deal with deontological issues such as privacy laws and professional secrecy.

3 – With regard to participation and co-creation

Municipal services, schools and leisure programmes can allow children, young people and parents to get involved, in an accessible manner, in designing their offer and activities. For example, this can be done by conducting a survey among children and parents and via co-creation workshops. Also, once the activities are complete, you can evaluate and adjust them with the participants in an informal manner. It is important to gradually build a relationship of trust so that more and better insights can emerge. This is how you can further customise the offer in a gradual manner.

5/ Insights from the pilot projects

This chapter summarises the key insights gained from the pilot projects. Some projects and sub-projects decided to focus on the leisure time of children and young people. Others took wellbeing and the provision of assistance as their starting point. Despite different perspectives, the pilot projects had three major challenges in common:

1 – How can local actors arrive at a shared vision of the causes of and approach to school delay and early school leaving? How can they agree on a holistic view of child and adolescent development?

A school career that goes awry has a profound impact on the lives of children and young people. The causes and consequences of school delay and early school leaving form a complex tangle of factors at school, at home and in the community. A broad perspective on children and young people and their development helps in gaining a clear understanding of these causes and consequences, while also revealing solutions. Children cannot be simply equated with their functioning at school or their home situation or the neighbourhood in which they grow up.

Organisations in the fields of education, wellbeing and leisure usually focus attention on one particular facet of the child or young person. Schools focus their attention primarily on cognitive development and school skills. Youth counsellors are mindful of young people's wellbeing and difficulties in the situations they deal with. Youth workers, in turn, look at the interests, social and creative skills of children and young people. Community workers consider the roles that children and young people fulfil or could fulfil within their communities.

If the local actors manage to combine these perspectives in a balanced manner, they will arrive at a much broader picture. They will be able to see more clearly the difficulties and challenges faced by the children, as well as the solutions that present themselves. Starting from such a broad and holistic vision, the range of interventions also expands. Children who drop out of school may find a new perspective in a more informal form of learning. A targeted intervention by a youth counsellor may lead the way to a diagnosis or bring an underlying problem to the surface. Actions that improve the quality of life in the community can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of children, young people and their parents.

2 – How can local actors set up an integrated offer to tackle school delay and early school leaving?

If the school career falters, there are many services and organisations that can help – each in their individual field, with their piece of the solution. But it is not so simple for children and their families to find their way to all these services. They do not know where to go, end up on a waiting list or do not

meet the right conditions. But even if support is forthcoming, it is not always usable or clear. Children and their families receive conflicting advice, youth counsellors may come and go, a particular service is not aware of the offer of another or is not aware of the steps taken by children and young people in a different context. Greater consultation, alignment and coordination among local actors is certainly a step forward, but in the long run, an integrated approach challenges the services to think about how children and young people can gain access to the appropriate help and learning opportunities.

3 – How can they design this offer in co-creation with children, young people and their parents?

Education, counselling and leisure have become increasingly professionalised and specialised in recent decades. The assessments made by professionals and the solutions they propose based on their expertise sometimes differ from what children, young people and their families themselves think. End-users' expertise about their own life situation is often not recognised or taken seriously. However, such inputs are indispensable for developing an educational, counselling or leisure offer that meets their needs and capitalises on their strengths. It is important that professionals learn to take a step back and that they are well-versed with the working methods and conversation techniques that allow them to listen carefully to the children and their families. The various pilot projects tried to design their offer in a participative manner so as to inspire other actors to do the same.

In addition to these three challenges, we noticed that the pilot projects underwent more or less three phases for each challenge. Typically, the projects began with concrete initiatives. Thereafter, they strengthened the interaction and exchange between all the different visions and initiatives in the field. Finally, the projects strove to achieve a close coordination and integration among all the actors involved.

It is not as if the projects simply proceeded in a straight line towards their goal; rather, it was a process of trial and error. Working to set up integrated and community-based education in a vulnerable neighbourhood is a long-winded task. For all the projects, the integration phase was therefore more of a target or a horizon they were working towards. But even if the reality is much messier than the plan makes it seem, the distinct phases definitely help in keeping control of the process in practice and are a way to visualise the results in a clear and organised manner.

The three biggest challenges and the three major steps together result in a model consisting of nine building blocks.

Framework of analysis

	TAKING INITIATIVE	INITIATING INTERACTION	PROMOTING INTEGRATION
Towards a **SHARED VISION**	Develop and diseminate a broad perspective on this issue. Compare this vision with other visions. Identify differences and similarities.	Explore different ways to arrive at a shared vision. Develop tools and focus efforts on training and formal and informal exchange.	Together, choose a holistic approach to learning. Agree on a shared framework for providing integrated service.
Towards an **INTEGRATED OFFER**	Support schools, children and families with extended learning time and create a single point of contact for wellbeing services.	Create a network. Organise trainings, exchanges and meetings. Work together in a concrete manner.	Align and coordinate different partners to achieve an integrated approach. Create frontline wellbeing teams.
Towards **PARTICIPATION** & **CO-CREATION**	Encourage participation by giving children and their families greater access to existing and new services. Give them a say in your offer.	Inspire partners to work based on a participative approach. Provide support to children and their parents so that they can express their opions.	Build in the structural participation of children and families so that it becomes natural for them to help in designing the offer.

5.1. Building a shared vision

5.1.1. Taking initiative: looking at children and young people from a broad perspective

With all pilot projects on the same page

While preparing the project application and following a series of discussions, the partners arrived at a shared view of the causes of and approach to school delay and early school leaving. They also agreed on a common vision of the children's development. Theoretical models such as Wraparound Care and Children's Zone helped the project partners give shape to their common vision. Once the project was launched, the partners continued to work further on developing a shared vision.

VRAC focused its efforts on two pillars: extended learning time activities and a frontline wellbeing team. Within the context of the extended learning time activities, the project partners organised study visits to Antwerp and Rotterdam to see how the Children's Zone model was being applied in practice. A webinar showcased two inspiring practices from London. Via a series of workshops, the projects worked on developing a joint mission statement. The projects and sub-projects focused on leisure agreed among themselves on a number of shared principles.

- The development of children and young people is best viewed from a holistic perspective. Besides focusing on cognitive development and school skills, there is also a need to pay attention to children's emotional, social, creative and physical development.
- In addition to school-based learning, it is important to offer children and young people other places where they can learn and gain other types of learning experiences. Play-based, informal and creative working methods also encourage learning. They give children and young people the opportunity to build relationships, discover talents and express thoughts and feelings. They also provide an opportunity to practice skills or engage in conversation about sensitive topics. Since children and young people are able to relax during such activities, they have a greater mental capacity to tackle difficulties or challenges.
- Children and young people are perfectly capable of helping design this extracurricular offer themselves. They provide ideas for activities and take co-ownership for the implementation. In the section on participation, we will discuss this in more detail.
- Ideally, such a broad learning environment should help guide children from the early years until they graduate. Moreover, extra attention is paid to the moments of transition. For example, the VRAC project focused on the transition between primary and secondary education through the Smooth Moves programme in East Sussex and *Transfer Secundair* in Mechelen.

The projects and sub-projects focused on wellbeing also arrived at a shared vision, based on the 10 principles of Wraparound Care:

- In the team context: with the help of a coordinator/coach/support person, the family builds a team around itself. The team may consist of formal and informal partners.

- Participation and choices for families and young people: children, young people and families know and decide what they need. The professionals focus on the wellbeing and development opportunities of children and young people. They work on creating the positive link with education and upbringing, in a general sense.
- Natural support: professionals believe in the power of an informal network of people, for example, the support available via friends/family and the community.
- Cooperation: professionals support each other and share their knowledge and experiences. They learn from each other and from their experience of what works, so that they can provide better assistance in cooperation with one another. Acting jointly, they assume their responsibilities and provide care.
- Community-oriented: professionals follow a neighbourhood-oriented approach and make maximum use of the strengths of the neighbourhood. Whenever possible, they provide support in the community, at school and/or for the family at home. This support should be approachable and accessible.
- Culturally competent: professionals regard every human being as worthy and valuable. They pay attention to cultural sensitivity issues.
- Individualised: every parent, child and young person is unique. Communication is important and must be tailored accordingly. Professionals monitor whether the support continues to meet the needs of the child, young person or family.
- Based on strengths: professionals believe in the power of each individual. They assume that there is a growth mindset.
- Perseverance/unconditional care: professionals do what they say and say what they do. They don't give up. They focus on presence and outreach.
- Result-oriented: professionals work purposefully and document their process. There is a lot of focus on identifying, acknowledging and celebrating successes, even though these are sometimes only small successes.

Relationship between education and wellbeing

The project partners were convinced that wellbeing deserves a place in schools and that schools can connect to the support services more quickly and for prevention purposes. While they are not required to act as youth counsellors, teachers can nevertheless work with external partners to integrate certain wellbeing-related themes at school. They can also draw inspiration from the wellbeing approach in their pedagogical relationship with children and young people.

> *" What's important to me is the relationship. We often come across schools that don't necessarily know their pupils very well or that haven't built up a relationship with the pupil. Simply by taking the time to listen and get to know each other better, we get things done. And actually, that's all that's needed." (CMPP staff member, VRAC Lille)*

Internally strengthen your vision

Inspired by the exchange with their European partners, the project partners set to work internally to get colleagues and management on board. In Norwich, MAP was able to offer the wrap around care model providing a holistic menu of support to young people in each of the three schools they worked with.This also strengthened the cooperation between the various sub-teams of MAP. However, the internal process did not go smoothly for all the partners. The VRAC project also created questions and resistance, as illustrated by the following practices.

In Leiden, SOL had difficulties getting some colleagues, who work bottom-up with young people, to join the VRAC project. They did not immediately see the point of 'translating' their approach into terms that have meaning for people from other sectors. However, the interventions that seem obvious to them, such as taking time to gain trust and build a relationship, are not immediately comprehensible to staff members from another sector, such as education. In that case, a translation is necessary, but not every colleague immediately sees the added value of this for their own practice. VRAC staff members therefore work across these different frames of reference.

In Lille, some CMPP staff members were concerned that VRAC would disrupt and change the way they work. Some therapists were also concerned that VRAC would 'steal' the children from them. Thanks to the vision of Wraparound Care, the project staff succeeded in getting their colleagues on board. It became increasingly clear that all forms of support and assistance remain necessary as long as they match the needs of the family. Although this does not reduce the need for specialised help. However, ensuring easy access can actually reduce the barrier to seeking assistance.

> *" Some young people tell us: I don't want to see a psychologist, I'm not crazy. Thanks to VRAC, we were able to dispel the clichéd image of psychological support. Our approach provided a counterbalance, which helped reassure some of the children and their families. Because they're afraid of psychologists. After all, they look inside your head..." (CMPP staff member, VRAC Lille)*

In addition, all the pilot projects were faced with staff absenteeism and changes in personnel. As a result, there was a repeated need to discuss the underlying visions. Sometimes for pilot projects, existing or new coordinators and staff members had to put in a lot of effort to find out the exact vision formulated

Case study from VRAC Norwich

In Norwich, MAP (Mancroft Advice Project) represents the VRAC project. MAP offers their three services in schools, advice work (providing young people with a range of advice on whatever they might need) therapeutic intervention (counselling) and youth work, which includes mentoring and group activities. Mentoring and counselling both offer one-to-one private and confidential space where young people can talk about thoughts, feelings or events. Mentoring is a space for young people to talk about low level worries and set goals for achieving something they want to change or improve in their lives. Counselling is a talking therapy that involves a trained therapist listening to you and helping you find ways to deal with emotional issues. MAP also offers a mediation service with a trained mediator who can offer to work with a young person and an adult (for example, a teacher or a parent) in order to improve the relationship. In this way, MAP makes mental wellbeing a more obvious part of school and therefore subtly changes the awareness of this topic at school, rather than by trying to bring about a systemic change.

The school has teachers whose task or sub-task is to monitor the mental wellbeing of the pupils (the pastoral team), but these teachers are often very busy and combine their care task with other duties. MAP's presence at school allows them to refer young people directly, but discreetly, to a youth worker who, as compared to them, does have the time and the necessary impartiality to talk to the young person. Thanks to its informal youth work activities at school, MAP is not a distant or unknown service.

"What we offer is quite unique in the UK because we are completely independent of the school staff. So if a young person comes to me and says, 'I hate this teacher, I hate this subject, I hate this...', I can sit there with confidence and say, 'That's fine, I'm not going to tell anyone'. We only involve the school if someone is in danger." (MAP staff member, VRAC Norwich)

The schools are aware of the added value of MAP's presence; as explained by one the school principals:

by present or former colleagues who had submitted the project or worked on it before them. In that sense, the process of formulating a vision is never over.

Disseminating your vision in the local context

Forming a vision requires an internal process. But in addition to this, the pilot projects also wanted to inspire their external partners – both fellow organisations from their own sector and partner organisations from other sectors – about their vision. Sometimes they saw that their view was confirmed by other partners in the field.

> *" The principal of the elementary school said: 'Our kids aren't doing well, and I think that's not just a school-related problem, but also a neighbourhood issue'." (VRAC Leiden staff member)*

The VRAC vision also often gave rise to questions and resistance from external partners.

- The actual practice and manoeuvring space of some employees and organisations are often too strictly defined by habits, formal agreements and mandates, task and job descriptions, organisational interests, power positions and relationships between allies and adversaries, other projects and initiatives vying for attention, etc. Hence, it is difficult to deviate from this.
- Some staff members are curious to explore these new visions and ways of working but are held back by the school board. Or they have doubts about whether they can and should apply this vision in their practice.
- Some professionals have a rather superficial view of the VRAC vision and quickly decide that they are already applying this vision in their practice. As a consequence, they overlook a part of the approach and vision.
- Some professionals relegate this VRAC vision to a secondary position in their overall perspective. They are happy that such an approach exists, but do not see it as their core task to incorporate it in their activities. Whenever organisations experience a lot of pressure and stress, they tend to refocus on what they consider to be their core task.

For example, community centres in Wattrelos were not immediately seen and recognised as a partner for tackling early school

"The pupils are aware of MAP, they know where to turn to if needed. Since MAP and the pastoral team work together based on the Wraparound Care principle, we are seeing fewer cases of young people playing truant or getting suspended. We have a student who used to get suspended a lot, and now that's not happening at all. And that's because of the Wraparound Care around that student. Frankly speaking, MAP offers a service that is quite crucial. We don't have the same extent of behavioural problems any more because the pupils know there is someone there to help them deal with things." (Principal of a local VRAC school)

However, MAP staff members indicate that their offer is still often treated as something separate from everything else, because teachers are often too busy to deal with issues relating to the pupils' mental wellbeing. Teachers refer to MAP, but do not have the time to go deeper into their offer. It takes several years for this approach to become truly integrated in a school.

"We're doing everything we can to raise awareness of how we work, but teachers and school staff are under so much pressure and so much stress that they're just happy to be able to bring a young person to MAP and not have to worry about anything else. In one school, where we've been working for seven years now, they're starting to understand how we work." (MAP staff member, VRAC Norwich)

Case study from VRAC Mechelen

VRAC Mechelen based many of its activities on the talent-based approach of Belgian author Luk Dewulf. In this approach, talent is not about exceptional faculties such as a distinct talent for soccer or painting. Talent is about qualities and traits such as empathy, perseverance or persuasion. Traits that all of us have. In the right context, talents will flourish.

Several initiatives in Mechelen use a talent-based approach: the summer school that provides extra support to children during the summer holidays or the *Talentevents* where children can learn about careers and study choices. Different staff members visit children and their families to carry out a 'talent interview'.

The talent-based approach helps create a strong connection with children and young people. The children themselves are happy and proud when their talents are identified, and parents are also more open to having a conversation when it is about their children's talents. In this way, talent-based thinking assists schools in making a positive connection with the family, even when the school career is not going well.

Talent-based thinking also shines a different light on difficult behaviour in school. Difficult behaviour may indicate the presence of underlying talents that have not yet found the appropriate context where they can be fully expressed. Young people who are articulate and critical may often very quickly be viewed by some teachers as having 'a big mouth', even though they can make a lot of difference in the world with those underlying talents.

The talent-based approach was successful in Mechelen and it managed to connect and inspire many professionals within a short period of time. *"The city of Mechelen will be officially awarded the label of 'City of Talents'. So talent thinking will not disappear in Mechelen after the VRAC project is completed. The label is a beautiful and rightful recognition for the commitment of teachers, counselors and principals, summer school volunteers and youth workers who took part in a 'Talent Whisperer training' and who are now working with the talents of children and young people in their own schools, organisations and leisure activities. It is a powerful, positive and connecting story that is also further pursued at policy and political levels in the city."* (VRAC Mechelen staff member)

leaving and school delay. Due to their accessible, informal and broad-based leisure activities, community centres are not always taken seriously as an educational partner.

> *" Some teachers are really overwhelmed by the behaviour of certain children. I think they're definitely interested (in working with us), but the problem is that they see us as a kind of out-of-school care service where you can drop off children and nothing more. In fact, they confuse activities with care, which is not the same thing. We use play-based activities as a springboard for learning. And sometimes this is not sufficiently recognised." (ASCW staff member, VRAC Wattrelos)*

The pilot projects did not allow themselves to get fazed by this. In this phase, they allowed the different views to coexist, taking time to identify them and explore the similarities and differences. We can describe

this as a way of ‘working apart together’, i.e. with knowledge of and respect for each other’s vision. They made sure that the differences were not highlighted or brought to a head in any way.

In Norwich, for example, MAP worked in collaboration with three schools and spent time building a relationship in order to uphold MAP’s values of working with young people in a voluntary capacity. MAP provide free and confidential support to young people and have worked closely with schools to ensure this way of working continues.

Despite a flexible attitude, the pilot projects remained true to a set of principles as the ‘bottom line’ when working with external partners. For example, VRAC Norwich did not enter into an agreement with a school when it became clear that MAP was unable to maintain confidentiality about what young people confided in them.

Actions make the vision tangible
Gradually, it was realised that the words used to formulate your vision has an effect on how it is perceived. VRAC Mechelen discovered how important it is that a vision is formulated in a sufficiently action-oriented manner and that it can be implemented across different organisations. It is crucial that professionals feel empowered in their jobs. Vision and action go hand in hand. When partners experience first-hand how the vision yields tangible results in practice, they are more easily won over.

The physical distance between activities also plays a role. Organisations that can develop their programme within the school itself, for example, can sometimes demonstrate their added value sooner than organisations that operate outside the school, as illustrated by VRAC Norwich.

5.1.2. Initiating interaction: how can a shared vision improve your work?

Organisations can collaborate meaningfully with one another even though they have different visions. But a shared vision reinforces the joint impact. Starting from a shared vision, organisations develop actions that are more in harmony with one another. They appreciate each other’s work. Children and their families see that the different organisations that support them are on the same page.

That is why the pilot projects looked for ways in which the different visions could interact with each other. They put down their vision on paper and communicated it within their network via VRAC newsletters and social media channels. Some projects, such as VRAC Mechelen, also used a number of clear logos in the design that visualised their principles.

In addition, the pilot projects initiated an interaction with their partners that was informal and welcoming. For example, SAAMO in Mechelen set up a participative programme in the area of leisure, where children could contribute ideas for the redesign of their neighbourhood park. SAAMO also invited the teachers of these children to be present when the children presented their ideas to the local politicians. This gave the teachers a view of the path traversed by the children during the course of this programme. Afterwards, they asked the children to bring the presentation they had made for the policymakers to the class.

A tool to promote communication

Two of the projects that focused on leisure made use of a tool that allowed the children to track their learning experiences. These tools helped children translate the informal learning opportunities gained during leisure to the school-based learning environment of goals and competencies. VRAC Wattrelos developed a workbook for the pupils, and SOL in Leiden worked with the *Levensvaardighedenpaspoort* (Life Skills Passport) developed by the University of Applied Sciences Leiden. This passport was developed based on five life skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills and responsible decision-making.

In addition, in Leiden, PIT worked with Leiden University to create a neurocognitive profile. With the help of various tests, the University tried to identify social strengths and weaknesses. They looked for explanations for the children's behaviour and indicated the skills children can learn to prevent such behaviour. Using this profile, a PIT coach worked with the parents, the school and the child to create a plan of action to teach the missing skills. But through this, the Wraparound Care approach was also introduced into the school.

Discussing the vision

The pilot projects also shared their vision during the many formal and informal meetings with other organisations. They brought their perspective to the existing meetings and also organised specific meetings, such as feedback events, to express and discuss their views.

The pilot projects also organised trainings and peer reviews to propagate their vision. For example, several projects developed and supervised a training course on the Wraparound Care model.

5.1.3. Towards an integrated vision: the need to keep talking

Ideally, the end result of this challenge is that the various local partners arrive at an integrated vision. This appeared to be a target achievable only in the long term. Nevertheless, the pursuit of this target itself led to a number of findings.

Importance of a shared vision for working in a structural manner

Above all, the projects remained committed to a shared vision so as to create structural impact. After all, VRAC wanted to do more than merely help individual children and families. The partners wanted to bring about a change in the structural mechanisms of exclusion at school and within the community. They wanted to make teachers, school boards and local policymakers aware of some of the structural barriers in their organisations and policies by helping them understand the experience and living conditions of children and young people in vulnerable situations.

> *" In the case of a student who showed very rebellious behaviour at school and was almost suspended, a conversation with the parents brought a lot to light. The family was threatened with eviction and had no income. All family members were under tremendous stress. By systematically 'looking over the wall', a school can learn a lot about its pupils." (VRAC Mechelen staff member)*

Case study from VRAC East Sussex

East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) supports people in socially vulnerable situations, enabling them to influence the design and delivery of public services and to hold those in power to account. In the field of education, they have been building partnerships with various schools for a while now. Via a panel of young people (Youth Inspect & Advice Group) and a range of project activities, they work with schools to understand youth voice and take into account the view of users in vulnerable situations.

For the various sub-aspects of the VRAC project, ESCV worked intensely with different partners. ESCV also paid close attention to the consultation with and between these partners.

ESCV and its partners collaborated around a shared vision that focused on building a sense of belonging for young people and parents and also strengthening relationships between, schools, families, and communities. The network of partners shared knowledge and skills, and this led to collaboration, a greater understanding of the challenges ahead, and shared training opportunities. It created pathways to support families and built trust. ESCV always ensured that there was a very short line of communication with the families throughout the project, and staff members always asked the families for their input and experiences about the ESCV offer as well as the offer of other organisations and services. During the last two years of the VRAC project, two Feedback Events were also organised to inform other organisations and policymakers about the initiatives and get them more closely involved. Moreover, ESCV always tried to allow young people and parents to speak for themselves and asked them explicitly about their experiences. Using all kinds of media, including social media, VRAC East Sussex tries to make their vision visible and show what people in vulnerable situations think about education, counselling and mental health.

Ongoing mission

Perhaps the search for local connection and alignment between existing visions should be an ongoing mission. Partners come and go, staff members find other jobs, insights change. It may not be realistic to expect there to be a shared vision that will remain unchanged.

Another point to note is that a shared vision that connects organisations may exclude potential partners if they do not identify with that shared vision. Therefore, a certain amount of friction and discussion between visions is valuable. The challenge is to develop a vision framework which is sufficiently unifying but which leaves room for discussion and evolution. VRAC Mechelen found the talent-based approach to be this kind of shared framework.

Practical tips and recommendations for achieving a shared vision

1 – Make your vision comprehensible, workable and concrete

A holistic view of learning and development and a broad view of school delay and early school leaving may sometimes appear vague and abstract. On the other hand, a play-based approach is not always taken seriously. However, this should not throw you off-track. Make your vision tangible by setting up concrete actions. Articulate your vision so that partner organisations see what they can gain from it. Keep sharing your approach, both formally and informally.

2 – Formulate your vision in a sufficiently broad manner

Make sure your vision is 'translatable' to different contexts. After all, you want diverse partners to be able to share them. School boards, youth counsellors and youth workers need to be able to work with it within their context.

3 – Disseminate your vision

Concrete actions are important, but also keep telling people why you are performing these actions and the vision behind them. If you are planning to collaborate, discuss the visions of all partners. Organise trainings on theoretical models which are in keeping with the vision and which can inspire employees.

4 – Watch what you say

Be cautious with the language you use. Make sure not to reduce children, young people and their families to their living situations. Keep highlighting positive traits and talents. Avoid statements that judge people. Invite end users to join you at the table, whenever possible. In such situations, staff members talk differently than when they talk 'about' the target group.

5 – Allow for changes in the vision

A vision is alive and evolving. Be aware of this from the beginning. As you go along, identify the changes and articulate the reason for these. This ensures that your vision remains workable and comprehensible.

5.2. Towards an integrated offer

The pilot projects have undertaken numerous actions to tackle school delay and early school leaving. The three building blocks deal with those actions and the pursuit of an integrated offer. To clearly demonstrate the learning effects from the VRAC project, in this report we have separated 'action' from 'vision' but, in practice, action and vision went hand-in-hand. The actions made the underlying vision tangible, which was also necessary for convincing partners and users to participate in this process of social innovation.

5.2.1. Taking initiative: setting up concrete actions based on a broad perspective

The needs on the ground spur the pilot projects to action. We describe the initiatives they initially undertook within their own activities. For this, we make a distinction between initiatives focused on leisure and those focused on wellbeing.

EXTENDED LEARNING TIME DURING LEISURE

The leisure time activities were based on a vision of extended learning time. The underlying idea is that children and young people can also have valuable learning experiences outside the lessons in school and outside the school walls. A rich extracurricular educational offer complements school-based learning. It provides additional learning opportunities in the area of social, emotional, creative or physical skills. It creates additional developmental opportunities for children and young people who find it more difficult to connect to school-based learning. Children are given opportunities to display and develop other aspects of their identity and to practice skills. They receive help from people who are growing up or who were brought up in a similar situation and they are given the freedom to take initiative and play a meaningful role for others. Such initiatives are often lacking in vulnerable communities where there is a great need for such an offer.

Making the existing offer more accessible
Several pilot projects were able to offer their existing leisure activities free of charge thanks to VRAC, which made these more accessible. In Norwich and Lille, children were helped to find their way to the existing leisure activities on offer. At the request of the children and their families, the staff tried to find a suitable hobby and assisted the children during their initial and later use of the offer.

New learning opportunities in leisure time
The pilot projects also expanded their offer with a lot of new activities. Some activities took place at the school or started off from the school, during school hours or lunch breaks. Others took place just after school, on Wednesday afternoons or Friday evenings. Activities were also organised on weekends and during school holidays. The pilot projects organised these activities themselves or in close cooperation with external partners. We observed four parallels between the different initiatives:

- The projects organised an informal, play-based and active offer that combined learning and fun. The pilot projects organised adventure and sports activities such as canoeing or archery. They took children out into nature or did gardening or cooking with them. There were also a lot of creative activities. This

enabled the children to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences via dance, music, words or images. The children were also given the opportunity to broaden their world and visit places outside the neighbourhood where they live.

- Various activities helped children and young people increase their self-confidence and develop social contacts. The active and relaxed nature of the activities, the more informal style of counselling and the expressive nature of the offer helped children speak up and connect with others. The positive experiences gained and the feedback from others strengthened the sense of self-esteem and self-worth of these children and young people. They saw themselves more positively and opened up to contacts with others.
- Young people and their parents were given a say in the design of the programme. They could indicate their needs and interests and choose activities from a range of options. The PACE project in East-Sussex, for example, fully engaged in co-design and youth voice, with led to very tangible outcomes. In a number of projects, children and young people also took on roles and responsibilities in implementing the activities. There were forms of ownership, co-ownership and self-organisation. In Norwich, for example, pupils set up the Refreshers Club to support their peers during exams. In the next chapter, we will discuss this in more detail.
- Fun and relaxed activities also provided an opportunity to broach more serious topics, at a pace determined by the youngsters themselves. The Refreshers Club (Norwich) offered a place to talk, eat, relax and play games. In addition, support was also available in relation to exam stress, learning strategies, wellbeing and career advice. The *Girlz Lounge* in Leiden offered participants a safe environment to talk with each other on topics such as identity or self-awareness.

In this 'Taking initiative' phase, the activities run separately and are often disconnected from the school and community. Young people stick together, and in this way, they find a place where they feel safe. Strengthening the bond between the children and young people is of central importance. In the next phase, the projects connect these leisure-time initiatives more explicitly to school learning, to the community and with wellbeing and assistance.

AN ACCESSIBLE WELLBEING OFFER

The pilot projects working in the wellbeing domain also made several efforts during this phase to make the existing support more accessible and provide additional help. Thanks to VRAC, the pilot projects were able to offer assistance at no cost and provide basic support more quickly. This prevented problems from escalating and reduced the waiting lists.

Importance of an approachable point of contact

Several pilot projects designated a specific staff member as an easily approachable point of contact. The added value of this approach was evident in a number of areas:

- These staff members were able to work on an outreach basis and make personal connections with children and families. They were easily accessible and gave a concrete face to abstract services.

> *" The fact that we have mobile phone numbers makes it very easy to contact us. We can be reached directly. So the child is not referred to the CMPP (which is a kind of vague abbreviation) but to Stéphan or Félicien, and this is done by partners who know us. And that was really a driving force. In addition, we also responded to everything. We've never rejected anyone. We always visited the child and their family to see if there was anything we could do. As a result, we've been able to provide solutions for some very difficult situations. We've always stood on the front lines, and we think that's only logical. Whatever happens, you have to go." (CMPP staff member, VRAC Lille)*

> *" A pupil counsellor told me she was having difficulties getting in touch with the mother of a pupil. So I suggested: shall I simply drop by there? It appeared that the parents worked in a small shop just around the corner here. So I went over to the shop. The mother went to get someone to translate and from the conversation it emerged that she was illiterate. I passed on all the info to the pupil counsellor and now she drops into the shop whenever she wants to talk to the mother because the mother can't read the letters from the school." (VRAC Mechelen staff member)*

- Staff members were given the time and space to listen to the children and their families, to build rapport and trust. This relationship formed the basis for the counselling.

Case study from VRAC ACS Wattrelos

The community centre in Wattrelos entered into a partnership with Enjoy, a group of young actors and artists. This group visited the centre to create theatrical performances in which children could talk about the problems they faced at school, at home or in the neighbourhood (bullying, screen addiction, loneliness, etc.). Together with the social workers, the actors helped the children express how they felt and talk about things important to them. At the end, the children created their own small show.

SEVE, another partner, developed workshops on philosophising with children. These workshops contributed to the development of critical thinking skills. When given the chance, children appeared capable of forming their own opinions and sharing them with others. They learned to put their opinions into words and listen to the thoughts of others. In this manner, they learned to resist the temptations of over-simplified or ready-made explanations, dogmas or prejudices. They were also introduced to the fundamental principles of communicating without violence and learned to trust themselves and others.

The regular staff members observed the participating children during these sessions, which were organised with about 10 children per session. The counsellors saw how the children flourished over the course of the sessions. For example, one boy was very shy and struggled with low self-esteem. At the beginning of the sessions, he barely spoke. But he was offered various channels to express himself, and over time he started speaking more often. Afterwards, he also interacted more easily with his peers in other leisure activities.

Case study from VRAC Lille

In Lille, two of Afeji's sub-projects collaborated with VRAC: SESSAD and CMPP. From the beginning, SESSAD was committed to eliminating the waiting list. Project staff tried to contact the families which had been on the waiting list the longest and/or the families with children for whom the risk of early school leaving was the highest. But they were not always welcomed with open arms. Many families were tired because of the constant struggle to gain access to appropriate assistance. Families were therefore wary when someone suddenly showed up offering help.

During the initial meetings, what came to fore was their anger at the system. They had suffered a lot and had little trust in society and its institutions. The many waiting lists, along with the large case load of caregivers, had a discouraging effect on these families. They felt as if they had been abandoned to their fate or that were being barely assisted. Moreover, the administrative demarcation into regions and departments meant that the help did not always reach the people living on the border of a demarcated area. This created certain blind spots where there was hardly any assistance provided. SESSAD made a commitment to also go to those places that other organisations ignored for practical reasons.

The CMPP initially wanted to work on developing a network. At the start of the project, they identified all the relevant partners and organised several meetings. They hoped to quickly reach an agreement with several major educational institutions, but this was not a great success. They were politely invited over for a coffee, but that was all. After the first lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, they decided to organise meetings with the schools again. This time with frontline staff: school nurses, social services, etc. Again, this did not yield the desired agreements, but the team received useful feedback. A nurse wondered: *"Will this reduce the waiting lists in healthcare?"*

After nearly two years of fruitless attempts to build a network and enter into agreements with partners, the CMPP decided to change course. It was decided to set up a concrete programme with about 40 children who were experiencing difficulties in school. This change in direction allowed the CMPP to make a concrete start with a group of children, under the guidance of an educational worker. The extensive investment in a network did eventually pay off. The VRAC project started getting an increasing number of referrals, especially as it became clearer how the customised approach was being applied concretely in practice.

> *" I always focus on the relationship. We may not agree on the objectives (of the approach), but the relationship should not be broken. Once we agree on the initial objectives, we can get started. Even if they're not a priority for me, they are for the family. For me, it is important that the contact and the relationship are established. After that, we'll see how it goes." (SESSAD staff member, VRAC Lille)*

- Since this staff member was not bound to a strictly defined offer, there was more freedom to provide services based on the needs. The staff took a broad, holistic approach to the children and their families and their needs and opportunities in various life domains.

> *"If a youngster is at the risk of dropping out of school, a file is put together and the young person is offered a pathway which may include a number of topics. When I look at that file from VRAC's perspective, I see more support needs than for the young person alone. The family or teachers may also need support. I then try to look for additional support within the wider support network. That way we strengthen the young person, but also the contexts around that young person." (VRAC Mechelen staff member)*

- Leisure needs, which some youth counsellors are quick to label as less essential were, however, taken seriously. And even if things are not going so well at school, these staff members try not to focus on this only or give it the highest priority.

> *"The children come because of difficulties in school. We do not see them only as pupils. We also ask them: 'Who are you? What do you want to do?' And the schools ask: 'But when are they going to start studying again?' We try not to focus too much on school progress. Sometimes schools give us the school report to take a look at. I take it out of politeness, but I'm not interested in the grades." (CMPP staff member, VRAC Lille)*

> *"Our principle is that if a child feels better and gets the care and necessary extracurricular developmental opportunities they need, this will be reflected in their studies and in school." (SESSAD staff member, VRAC Lille)*

- From this middle position, the staff looked for concrete solutions. They played a mediating role between the family and the existing assistance services. Sometimes they took over the task of looking for help (for a while). Whenever possible, they put families on the right track, but allowed them to look further for the necessary assistance themselves.

> *"Often, it's the family that takes the required steps. Based on my knowledge of the offer, I can advise families to knock on the right door and find the right person at the right time for the right answer." (SESSAD staff member, VRAC Lille)*

- The designated contact persons constantly monitored the link between wellbeing and education, and vice versa. They were the ones who personified this relationship. During consultations regarding the issues at school, they made the link with themes relating to wellbeing, and conversely, at a wellbeing consultation, they always kept the children's education in mind. By working at the intersection of the two worlds, the contact persons were able to keep the spotlight on wellbeing as well as education in contexts where one of the two domains might more quickly fade into the background.

In this phase, pilot projects working on wellbeing also noticed that there was quite a large distance between their offer and those of other partners involved in children's development. For example, schools makes referrals but do not have the time or space to collaborate with partners. Also, schools do not always see the part they play in the pupil's difficulties and in how these can be resolved.

> *" Care, education, home, leisure, everything is very compartmentalised. And there's no common project. Based on Wraparound Care, we are trying to make this happen, but it is difficult to work with partners towards a common goal." (CMPP staff member, VRAC Lille)*

5.2.2. Initiating interaction: when my action improves your work and vice versa

Both in the case of projects focused on leisure and those focused on wellbeing, initially the additional offer was mostly separate from the existing services. The pilot projects tried to close that gap.

FOCUSED ON LEISURE

Leisure programmes provided a valuable after-school educational offer. Despite this, there was only a limited interaction between the school and the leisure activities. Schools promoted the offer, referred children, made their buildings available and/or sometimes also made class time available. But for the rest, the school did not pay much attention to what the children learned in their free time and how they developed in the process. Teachers said that they were very busy. School boards did not encourage the interaction and sometimes held back out of fear that their team would be overloaded.

> *" One school has a tradition of children crafting something at home for another child in the class and composing a poem to go with it. Not all children succeed in doing this and then they stand there empty-handed. We have asked the teachers to provide us with a list of pupils who do not manage to make a gift and a poem at home so that we can provide extra support to those children. But then we don't get that list and have to chase it again. And then we think: we're offering you a valuable service, after all. So why not take advantage of that? Because of a lack of time I guess." (SOL staff member, VRAC Leiden)*

Some of the projects that focused on leisure activities, such as the ASCW in Wattrelos and SOL

Case study from VRAC East Sussex

For the Smooth Moves programme, ESCV partnered with Priority 1-54, an organisation that offers creative workshops and training programmes on topics such as bullying, loneliness in young people and online safety. Smooth Moves assisted about 30 children from six schools in their transition from primary to secondary education. This transition is an exciting phase in children's lives. There are new things to enjoy such as new friends, new classes and more independence. But some children and their parents are also worried about this phase. Smooth Moves created opportunities to discuss these concerns.

Smooth Moves was partly devised by children and young people via a youth advice group. During creative workshops, children talked about what they were worried about and what they looked forward to. In addition, trial sessions and a three-day summer camp were organised. School staff, outreach workers and parents received training in this area. Finally, Priority 1-54 trained pupils aged 12 to 14 years to become 'Transition Ambassadors'. These Transition Ambassadors ensure that new pupils feel safe, valued, respected and welcome during their first year of secondary school.

Priority 1-54 has presented their approach in a number of striking videos. Their work materials can also be downloaded for free via this link: https://priority154.com/resources/transition/

in Leiden, used a tool to identify what children were learning during their activities, but they were not really able to initiate a conversation with the school about this. VRAC Mechelen used talent as a line of approach to create a connection between learning at school and during leisure. They organised *Talente-vents* at school to introduce children to different career and study choices. But this offer also ran parallel to what the school offered.

Several pilot projects developed an offer to support children and their families in the transition between primary and secondary school. With this offer, the projects are taking the first step towards better cooperation with the schools. Schools experienced the added value of working with an external partner, and via the project, partners were also able to provide input to schools on ways to ease the transition for children and their parents.

MAP (Norwich) and SOL (Leiden) also conducted a few classes. At the invitation of the teachers, MAP came into the classroom with various learning programmes on mental wellbeing. These ranged from one-time workshops to a longer series of classes. MAP was also present at school when the pupils received their results – to celebrate this with them and provide comfort if needed but also to talk about the next step in their educational journey. SOL introduced children aged 11 and 12 to the secondary school curriculum. During school hours, SOL worked with young people aged between 15 and 16 years on the topic of school motivation.

Some leisure projects succeeded in building bridges between children and the community. VRAC East Sussex's PACE project encouraged children and young people to volunteer in the community, and SAAMO in Mechelen set up two sub-projects to give children and young people a say in the development of their neighbourhoods. We will describe the latter project in detail in the chapter on participation and co-creation.

FOCUSED ON WELLBEING

Closing the gap between wellbeing and school

The projects focused on wellbeing also found it difficult to link their approach to the school's approach. In principle, they were working closely with one or more schools. But in reality, they too often worked in separate worlds with little common ground

Case study from VRAC Mechelen

In VRAC Mechelen, several organisations and professionals have come together to form a network called '*Het Mechelse netwerk nieuwe autoriteit in de wijk*'. This network inspired professionals by drawing ideas from the New Authority framework (introduced by Haim Omer) and brought them together in an intersectoral network to provide integrated support to children, young people and families. A two-day training programme offered every six months is the starting point for all partners. Based on the basic approach, principles and tenets of the New Authority framework, the network created a common language and mindset for working together in an intersectoral and integrated manner.

In addition, VRAC Mechelen facilitated monthly peer review meetings and supporters' meetings at the request of the partners. If there was a specific request for support, VRAC Mechelen summoned partners to a supporters' meeting to provide concrete assistance to the partner in need. In Mechelen, the network was also affiliated with NETSTERK, a local and accessible point of contact for all professionals concerned with children, young people and families. A staff member of VRAC Mechelen explained the value of the network, peer reviews and supporters' meetings:

"Today, the network has more than 130 professionals from Mechelen (counsellors, social workers, youth workers, neighbourhood police, etc.) who speak a common language that unites them: New Authority. At our monthly intervision moments and supporter meetings, everyone asks themselves the question 'What can I do for you?' From lending a sympathetic ear to working together in each other's workplaces. The network brings partners from school, neighbourhood and home contexts together based on a positive and equal position and focuses on this relationship. If you understand each other and each other's professional contexts better, you can call on each other more quickly and in a more targeted way. Caring for children, young people and families together becomes feasible in practice. The concrete examples in Mechelen prove that." (VRAC Mechelen staff member)

between them. The pilot projects took the initiative to close that gap between wellbeing and the school. In Leiden, for example, PIT, together with the University of Leiden, identified the child's talents and qualities. Based on this, the PIT coach drew up a plan in collaboration with the child, parents and school. After six months, this plan was evaluated, adjusted or finalised.

PIT also worked with the teachers. Here, it was important to work with a preventive approach. In some cases, the parents didn't perceive there to be any difficulties (as yet). But teachers could not provide the kind of education they wanted. In Leiden as well as in Lille, the importance of a timely intervention was stressed.

> *" It can sometimes help to ask teachers: 'Can you describe the child's qualities?' Then a teacher is sometimes forced to admit: 'We're still a long way from being able to do that.' And then the question is whether the teacher is still able to invest in this child. Because that's something we ask for in advance. We say to them: 'Listen. We're here and we want to provide inputs. But we also ask for something in return from the school and the teachers'." (PIT staff member, VRAC Leiden)*

> *" If there is a lack of understanding between the family and the school, or if the relationship between the family and the school is complicated, they can reconnect and work together via the VRAC project. With the child and for the child. This is important to avoid a break and prevent a situation where the child has to change schools or that things get out of hand." (Enseignant référent* from Lille)*

Staff at the CMPP in Lille found that schools are sometimes too quick to attribute behaviour perceived as difficult to individual, psychological problems. They tend to label children as 'disabled' and then refer them to specialised help from a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Especially when children become aggressive toward teachers or fellow pupils, the school no longer wants to deal with them. The label of 'disability' is often also a way to get the necessary help, even if that label is not justified. But young people may also be tired of school, be in the wrong study track, have a lot of problems at home, find it difficult to connect with classmates or feel that their views and ideas are not valued. There may be all kinds of reasons for unruliness, and individual, psychological help is not always needed.

A network that provides support right down to the activities on the ground

To better support families and schools, the pilot projects also work on creating mutual cooperation and developing networks among wellbeing services. For this, they used the same working methods as those used to arrive at a shared vision. They organised consultations, exchanges and meetings between partners and set up courses and training programmes to arrive at a shared frame of reference. Across projects, there are a number of factors that can influence the success of such network development.

- Building a network required different competencies and sustained effort from the project coordinators. They formed a bridge between the needs and the available offer, but their role went beyond merely referring people to the appropriate help. It was also their job to promote concrete cooperation between organisations. The coordinators embodied the vision of the VRAC project and managed to apply it in the day-to-day practice as well as convey it to the partners within the partnership. Some coordinators and their staff had to emphasise the urgency of the situation and the need to improve services.

* An *enseignant référent* is the main contact person for children with disabilities and their parents with regard to everything related to education. They act as a link between families and all the professionals who assist pupils with disabilities throughout their school career.

- A local government usually has a greater mandate to steer and facilitate the process of network formation and collaboration. A civil-society organisation, as one of many partners, does not always have the authority to bring similar partners of matching quality on the same wavelength.
- The scale of operation also played a role: it was sometimes easier to form a network in a relatively small city or town. In a large municipality or region, it was more difficult to facilitate collaboration across communities, neighbourhoods, geographically demarcated departments and regions.
- The expansion of the collaboration was also dependent on the extent to which a network was actually successful and added tangible value in practice. It proved important to come to each other's aid and take over concrete tasks from each other instead of simply giving each other tips and advice. The Mechelen network NETSTERK put a lot of effort into doing this.

Interaction between wellbeing and leisure

The different VRAC projects ensured that they included some links between wellbeing and leisure. Welfare themes were addressed during leisure activities, and youth counsellors also actively tried to find recreational activities as part of the support they provided. Despite this, there were not too many examples of a more intense collaboration between projects dealing with wellbeing and those involved with leisure. And this collaboration was particularly complicated when the pilot projects assigned these two work packages to different partners from different domains.

5.2.3. Towards an integrated offer

VRAC aspired towards integration: an integrated educational offer with partners from education and leisure and a frontline wellbeing team supporting schools and families in an integrated manner. Given the extent of commitment and creativity required from the pilot projects, it seems like quite an accomplishment to ensure that the necessary meetings, exchange and coordination actually take place between different services and partners. The goal of integration has not yet been fully achieved. We note a number of factors that have made integration difficult.

The coronavirus crisis threw a spanner in the works. Due to the various lockdowns and coronavirus measures, activities, meetings and trainings could not take place. Activities and appointments were organised digitally as far as possible. But the physical distance took its toll on the motivation to work intensively together. While the initial lockdown initially boosted mutual cooperation, over time organisations increasingly refocused on their own operations.

Apart from the coronavirus crisis, achieving an integrated offer was also hampered by constrictions and barriers that prevented cooperation. We noted four types of barriers:

- Constrictions and barriers within organisations, between employees with differing visions, beliefs, expertise, job assignments, projects, goals and interests
- Legal constrictions and barriers that limit organisations' room for manoeuvre (legally defined assignments, mandates, subsidy agreements) and geographic demarcations (limited scope and authority)
- Constrictions and barriers between organisations in the same sector: differences in vision and approach

as well as competition between organisations
- Constrictions and barriers between different sectors: resulting in a limited knowledge of each other's operations, limited recognition of the added value of each other's approach, differing visions and expertise concerning the topic, focus on guarding one's own position and competition between large and small players in the field

'IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD A VILLAGE'

Nevertheless, the pilot projects continued to focus on an integrated service provision as an ideal scenario and this was where their efforts were headed. With reference to the title of the project, we believe that the duration of the pilot project proved too short to fully realise the ideal scenario.

Various discussions with the project staff and key partners made it clear that time is an important condition for tapping into the existing networks, establishing new contacts and building trust with the different stakeholders.

PARALLELS WITH OTHER PROJECTS

VRAC is not the only project committed to an integrated service provision. We also see parallels with other programmes that are experimenting with the integration of different forms of family assistance into a single plan. What we learn from these programmes is that integration takes shape in two different ways. Some partnerships second youth counsellors to a new intersectoral team, with its own workplace, where these counsellors receive, discuss and guide the requests for assistance*. In other partnerships, the organisations themselves continue to counsel families within their own offer. The intersectoral team consultation consists of peer reviews and a process of coordination between the services.

Based on an interview with Bie Melis, who studied these partnerships, we learned that both systems have their advantages and disadvantages. Working in a single team strengthens interdisciplinary collaboration but leads to a situation where the newly-created team starts to work more on its own initiative and, as a result, less information flows back to the other organisations within the partnership. The pros and cons of the other option run counter to this. Working in collaboration was more difficult, but this had a greater impact on the regular activities of the partnership.

The road to integration has been laid on several fronts. However, there is still a long way to go to break through the constrictions and barriers and find good systems that can optimise the cooperation and create a balance between intensive cooperation, on the one hand, and sufficient flow-back of information to the core operations, on the other. Further research and practice development are needed to maintain and set forth this evolution.

* Serrien, L. (2021). 'Eén gezin, één plan' gaat met hele gezin aan de slag. https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/een-gezin-een-plan/

Practical tips and recommendations for achieving an integrated offer

1 – Give people the time, space and mandate

Creating an integrated offer is a long-term effort. The staff members who monitor and manage this process need to have adequate room for this within their range of duties. This is not just something to be taken on as a side job. The staff also need to have a long-term perspective. Make sure they have an adequate mandate to coordinate the activities of the various organisations.

2 – Start with a thorough analysis of the specific context and environment

Define the problem quantitatively but also via testimonials from children, parents or teachers. Take your time to thoroughly question all the parties involved. Draw up a list of all potential partners and their offers. Identify the constrictions and barriers that stand in the way of the collaboration. Examine whether you can connect partners in a shared analysis.

3 – Look for shared objectives

Formulate objectives that are common to the partners: 'What do we want to achieve together?' 'How can each partner contribute, based on their own expertise, to achieving this goal?' Assume that everyone has the best interests of children and young people at heart.

4 – Ensure that the added value of collaboration is quickly made tangible via concrete actions

Do not simply tell others what to do, but do it with them. By focusing on concrete actions quickly enough, you make the contribution of the different partners immediately clear and visible. You can show that the network *works*.

5.3. Participation and co-creation

A third and final challenge for the pilot projects was to shape their offer in consultation and co-creation with children, young people and their parents. In this way, better services were created that took into account the actual world of the end users.

Moreover, participation was a key focus area, especially because organisations were moving towards a more integrated vision and service provision. Indeed, during the integration process, professionals paid a lot of attention to mutual coordination and consultation. A real risk was that they would gradually lose sight of the end user and move towards standardised and uniform formats and procedures. That is why, as part of the integration process, it is important to pay extra attention to end-user participation and co-creation.

In this chapter, we describe how the pilot projects approached the participative processes. Once again, we will go through the different steps: taking initiative, initiating interaction and promoting integration. In each step, we highlight the programmes set up by the pilot projects focused on leisure and wellbeing.

5.3.1. Taking initiative together with children, young people and their parents

FOCUSED ON LEISURE

During the leisure activities, participation was initially understood as *taking part*. Some pilot projects introduced children and young people to the existing offer and sought to lower the barriers to participation. They looked for a local sports club or hobbies club matching the child's interests. They also guided the children during their initial contacts with the club and its activities.

Furthermore, the pilot projects provided an additional offer. As we described earlier, these leisure activities are important for providing additional developmental opportunities for children. Disadvantaged communities often do not have access to a leisure programme that makes a link to school learning. In Mechelen, for example, VRAC worked together with the Summer School, an initiative to provide children and young people with additional learning opportunities during the summer months.

Children, young people and their parents were given a say in the interpretation and organisation of that offer. Counsellors made home visits or gathered information via a questionnaire. They sounded out the children and their families regarding their needs and desires and tailored their offer accordingly. In East Sussex, for example, a youth advice group provided inputs for developing a programme to assist with the transition between primary and secondary school.

Gradually, children and young people became co-owners of the leisure offer. In this way, participation became *partnership*. Children and young people took on roles and responsibilities within the organisation of the offer and helped in steering the activities. MAP in Norwich and SOL in Leiden, for example, wanted to create an open and safe place for young people. Over time, the participants themselves interpreted the themes being discussed and the actions that were being set up.

Case study from VRAC Leiden

SOL organised an after-school programme in Leiden for girls aged 8 to 12, called the '*Girlz Lounge*'. The 'girls', as they are called, met right after school, ate together, chatted, and did activities together either on their own initiative or at the suggestion of the counsellors.

"You start by getting to know the girls, then you bring them in and do something fun with them, because that's how you can connect with them. But after a while, you also want to accomplish something. It's not just bringing the girls together. You also want them to become more resilient through play. Therefore, I put in more time having individual conversations with the girls. More than my colleagues with a similar programme." (SOL staff member, VRAC Leiden)

The counsellors improved the group dynamics and relationships among the participants, but a lot also depended on how it clicked between participants.

"I'm really proud of my girls. It makes me happy to see them when they come in here. They differ in age, but things are going very well. Culture, religion, none of it matters. It's all okay, it's a safe situation. Sometimes there's a minor argument or a comment here and there, but we have a safe atmosphere here, and we talk about feelings and friendships." (SOL staff member, VRAC Leiden)

Within this safe atmosphere, they helped participants talk openly with one another.

"My colleague had asked the girls how they felt. All of them got a little stuck because they thought: 'How do I express that?' In such a situation, you often get a factual answer. Then a girl suddenly said: 'I feel sad' and started to cry a bit. It was striking how difficult it was for her to say this openly. So we decided to ask the 'How are you feeling today?' question every week. These life skills are never discussed at school. That's not where you talk about how life works. And parents don't always do that either. So here's a place where it can be done, supported by a tool from the university college, which will subsequently conduct further studies on this. I feel there's such a beautiful connection taking place here, and I think that's really something that should be happening everywhere." (SOL staff member, VRAC Leiden)

The counsellors also considered whether to link actions to the young people's stories, with sufficient respect for their feelings and pace. They assisted children individually but also as a group.

"We always start with lunch and then all the stories start coming. For example, a story about bullying came up. There are a few girls in our group who get seriously bullied on a weekly basis. We don't even know why, but it happens. We offer a listening ear and a safe environment, but in the meantime, we're also trying to see how we can do something more by maybe talking to teachers and parents. You also realise that they can help each other a bit. And I myself have already asked: 'How can I help you? Would you like it if I join you for a talk with your mother? Her answer was: 'Yes, but you don't have to tell everything I've told you, you know.' That's what they say then." (SOL staff member, VRAC Leiden)

In Norwich, MAP gave pupils a chance to meet and relax during their lunch break. In one of the schools, the pupils also took this opportunity to support each other during the exam period. Young people were able to relax and listen to each other. But we also focused on exam stress and study methods.

This process towards co-ownership was seemingly spontaneous but required a lot of feeling and know-how on the part of the counsellor: to establish meaningful relationships, create a safe climate, encourage initiative and, as a counsellor, follow the pace of and path taken by the participants.

Parent involvement in extended learning time

The above example shows that it is not always the obvious choice to involve parents in the learning or other experiences gained by children and young people in their leisure time. Young people have created their own space among themselves, developed their own initiatives and confided to the counsellors information they did not want to share with their parents. The parents, for their part, were not always strongly committed to the leisure programmes and the learning experiences their children gained there.

VRAC wanted to increase parent involvement in the extended learning time activities in order to build a more sustainable programme, tailored not only to children and young people but also to their families. The pilot projects conducted a survey among the parents at the start of their initiatives. One of the partners developed a training package on this topic for the other pilot projects. Some of them adapted this package to their local context. Despite all of this, the topic was somewhat relegated to the background in VRAC, both in terms of the project and our research.

But it is worth the effort to create a connection between parents and children in connection with their leisure activities, as SAAMO in Mechelen illustrated with one of their participation projects in a vulnerable neighbourhood. As part of the process, they asked young people what could be improved in their neighbourhood. “More contact between local residents” was one of the responses. Therefore, SAAMO tried to find out whether the local residents felt like organising a community gathering. The young people definitely wanted to help but could not organise such a gathering on their own. So, some parents and local residents decided to get involved and together they organised a gathering with the support of SAAMO. This helped young people realise that they had a say in the neighbourhood and that they could create ties. The parents and local residents, for their part, got a different perspective on the young people and their involvement in the neighbourhood.

Case study from VRAC Leiden

In Leiden, the assistance provided to children by PIT was based on the principles of Wraparound Care. In this respect, it was crucial to involve the children and their parents in designing the assistance plan.

“The school contacts us because it is concerned about a child’s behaviour. Often by then, they’ve already tried various things, but their plan has not quite succeeded. Often, parents find it difficult to cooperate in the assistance programme. This cooperation happens in fits and starts. But the concern and the child’s behaviour remain perceptible. That’s a good time to use the PIT approach, because we work in a very accessible manner and take the time to first build trust.” (PIT staff member, VRAC Leiden)

PIT built trust with parents by showing itself to be trustworthy.

“From the beginning, you try to live up to what you say. So when people message, call or want to make an appointment, make sure you respond quickly, that you’re available. If you say: ‘I’m going to find that out for you’ or ‘I’ll get back to you on that’, you need to get back to them as promised. And it shouldn’t take too long either. It sounds very simple, but there are lots of bodies providing assistance. People often deal with many different providers. They are all very busy too.” (PIT staff member, VRAC Leiden)

FOCUSED ON WELLBEING

Inspired by Wraparound Care, children, young people and parents were involved in designing and evaluating the help provided. They indicated where the needs lay, according to them. They reviewed the youth counsellors' proposals and gave their final approval for the assistance plan. They were also involved in the evaluation and adjustment of that plan.

Afeji's project in Lille showed that this participative approach can help remove the initial distrust of parents. After observation of the children and discussions with parents, children and various partners, a diagnosis was made or updated. The Afeji staff member also reconstructed the assistance pathway followed by the family and helped the families with their administrative issues. Based on this diagnosis, Afeji proposed a concrete support plan. Parents and children saw that many of their concerns had been addressed in the plan and usually they approved of it fully. In cases where the parents did not agree with a particular proposal, the relationship was given priority. After all, the objective was to provide assistance on a voluntary basis.

In this phase, the pilot projects primarily shaped their own offer and approaches in a participative manner. In the next step, they tried to inspire other actors to do the same.

5.3.2. Initiating interaction

The pilot projects undertook various initiatives to improve the participation of children, young people and their parents at school, in the community and in the organisation of assistance services. They worked with well-defined projects in one class or in a particular community, and at the same time, sought to give those initiatives wider exposure and prominence and to disseminate the learning effects.

FOCUSED ON LEISURE

In Mechelen, *Team Leerrecht* worked together with a secondary school to develop a programme for pupil participation to prevent early school leaving. Based on this programme, *Team Leerrecht* also developed the participative workshop *De leerling-expert* that has since been used in several schools in Mechelen. *Team Leerrecht* staff did not have the most extensive expertise on participation at the start of the programme. By initiating the programme and listening carefully to the young people, they were able to more prominently highlight the expertise of the young people themselves.

Bringing parents and the school closer together
The Mechelen team also took initiatives to increase parent involvement at school. Under the title 'Sterk(h) ouders', they set up two pilot projects, one in an elementary school and one in a secondary school. Each time, they started working with one class.

Based on various conversations with children, young people, parents and schools, VRAC Mechelen staff learned that parents find school very important but often do not feel that they themselves can contribute to their child's school development. They are aware of the school initiatives but feel that there are barriers

preventing them from participating in these initiatives. Non-native-speaking parents have a particularly difficult time assisting their children with their homework and following up on things in the context of the school. The parents are usually contacted by the school only when there are problems and rarely when things are going well. Young people also behave differently at home or during leisure than at school. This sometimes complicates communication with the school because parents cannot recognise their child's behaviour as described by the school.

Schools, in turn, make efforts to reach out to parents but also experience barriers in doing so. Schools that rely heavily on digital communication have difficulty reaching some parents and find that their efforts (e.g. contacting all parents at one go) do not prove sufficient in the long run. Sometimes young people conduct all the communication between their school and their parents. This makes the contact with and connection between the school and the parents more difficult. Both the school and the parents would like a more intensive partnership.

VRAC Mechelen set up a programme with one class per school with the goal of strengthening the partnership and connection between school and parents. They chose talent as a line of approach for this programme involving pupils, parents and teachers.

For the elementary school children, two talent workshops were organised in the class and a talent interview was also conducted with each child. In secondary school, an additional workshop on resilience was organised for the pupils. Parents were invited to participate in two workshops: a group session on homework and one on communication with the school. Staff members also engaged in individual discussions with each parent about their child's talents and the themes from the workshops. The schools facilitated the programme: they provided the time and infrastructure and organised a feedback session to communicate to the teachers the inputs obtained from the workshops held with the children and parents. The school also indicated its expectations regarding homework and the communication with parents.

Participation in the community

Two of the pilot projects also helped children get involved in their communities. East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) partnered with Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA) for the PACE-programme. The SCDA offered a 12-week programme committed to leisure, wellbeing and learning at three secondary schools. Their goal was to introduce young people to learning that was not school-based. After the programme, SCDA committed to keeping young people engaged in their youth teams even, as volunteers for activities for 8- to 11-year-olds. Young people were also encouraged to do volunteer work within the local community and provided support for this.

In Mechelen, SAAMO provided support to children and young people in two neighbourhoods so that they could help shape their communities. The projects ranged from the concrete design of a neighbourhood playground to a more in-depth approach to a disadvantaged neighbourhood. The SAAMO staff member helped the children and young people to collect their ideas and convey them to policymakers.

Case study from VRAC Mechelen

At VRAC Mechelen, the voice of children and parents were given centre stage, because the project believed that children and young people can have valuable ideas about their school career, wellbeing or community. Children and young people were brought together to brainstorm on what could be improved via projects at the VRAC schools as well as via the programmes for children and adolescents and in the community.

SAAMO developed the *Buurtbouwers Kids* and *Jongeren Donkerlei* initiatives in Mechelen. Children and young people received the support they needed for communicating their ideas to policymakers. For example, young people from the *Donkerlei* neighbourhood participated in a communication workshop and subsequently engaged in a dialogue with the aldermen and police. A young participant in the project said:

"I learned to say what I wanted to achieve in a calm, polite and positive way. That helped me talk to the aldermen and the police. The conversation went well. It was cool that people listened to what we had to say. We weren't immediately told 'Yes' or 'No', which made me feel that we were being taken seriously. I'm glad that the hard work of the past period was worth the effort and that we were able to work towards something." (*Jongeren Donkerlei* participant)

For the SAAMO staff member involved, open communication and workable expectations were key concerns: *"The young people in the community feel that there is no open communication from above. For example, when the square was renovated, no one asked them what they wanted or what the community wanted. Young people really wanted a youth centre to be set up and apparently that's not happening. But why is that? That's not explained to them. So they feel frustrated about it, but no one's talking to them."* (VRAC Mechelen staff member)

"A youngster said: 'I'm definitely open to a conversation.' And the police were also open to this because we had a lot of questions around identity checks and cameras and so on. And then it occurred to us: we could certainly initiate those conversations, but shouldn't we first prepare them for it? Shouldn't we make them strong in communicating?" (VRAC Mechelen staff member)

"When the programme was kicked off, I did make it clear that I wouldn't be able to help realise the ideas the youngsters come up with. No matter how much I want to. I'm not the one to decide on that. So I try to communicate this openly. And also the main thing is: we want to make you stronger. So that you can express your opinions and better understand how to achieve what you want for your community. Because that's what it's about for us: how can the young person be stronger as an individual to carry out that conversation?" (VRAC Mechelen staff member)

FOCUSED ON WELLBEING

The interaction initiated at the school or in the community remains close to the world of children and parents. Assistance and wellbeing policies are often decided from higher up, way above the heads of the children and their families. Therefore, it was not easy for them to make their voices heard directly at the level where the decisions are taken.

In Lille, Afeji made several efforts to bring parents together and empower them collectively. However, there was little response to this. There was little that connected parents except that they were all in need of the same service. Parents lived far apart, the concrete requests for help varied widely, and the socio-economic differences between parents also played a role. They did not feel the need to share their concerns with other parents.

As a result, the youth counsellors saw it more as their job to support and reassure parents in their search for help, while their supervisor tried to make the parents' voices heard in the relevant forums.

> *" My job as a counsellor is to reassure the family and to say: yes, there are shortcomings (in the assistance), but you can count on us. And at the other end of the chain, more at the level of the school principal, we collect the experiences of families with respect to the waiting time, the failures and the many children who do not find a suitable school. After that, it's the school principal's task to convey that information to the policymakers. My task is to provide that information." (SESSAD staff member, VRAC Lille)*

5.3.3. Towards integration

Allowing children and parents to directly and systematically participate and have a say in school and community policies was not yet well established by the end of the VRAC project. Several factors contributed to this:

- Participative working is not common practice in schools and in the area of assistance.
- This requires a leader who is open to this, staff who feel adequately supported in various forms of participative work and partners who can support this in the long term.
- The organisers, educational professionals and youth assistance professionals rely heavily on their professional expertise and know-how. Therefore, there is less room to recognise that children and parents are experts in their own life situations.

Case study from VRAC East Sussex

East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) organised surveys among children, young people and parents. They asked them questions about general topics, such as the impact of Covid-19, as well as about specific issues, such as the transition between primary and secondary education. The results of these surveys were presented in a report, accompanied by concrete recommendations, to organisers and policymakers.

ESCV also assisted a group of young people who visited schools to offer advice, based on their own experience, on how to deal with mental wellbeing issues. This Youth Inspect & Advice Group gave advice on the accessibility of the offer, the involvement of parents and youth counsellors, how to build trust and how to refer young people.

The pilot projects were able to demonstrate that participation is possible and yields positive results, but there was not enough time to structurally integrate this approach into the way in which the offer and policies are created. VRAC partner East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV), which has been working on this topic for some time, gives an idea of how this participation can be structurally embedded.

Practical tips and recommendations for achieving greater participation and co-creation

1 – Provide support and a framework for participation that develops spontaneously
When you bring children and young people together in a safe setting, it is quite possible that they will help you carry out the activities and gradually take charge. But this seemingly spontaneous process needs to be supported and provided with an appropriate framework, and this should preferably be done in a subtle manner. Herein lies the expertise of youth workers.

2 – Organise concrete participation processes, at school and in the community
In addition to processes in which participation can grow step by step, you can also organise well-defined and goal-oriented participation processes at school or in the community. These processes have a clear end goal and a more fixed and controlled course. Clearly formulate the purpose of the participation process and what participants can and cannot expect from the organiser.

3 – Assist children, young people and parents in putting their ideas into words
Children, adolescents and their parents have expert knowledge of the world they live in. But sometimes their experience needs to be translated into words and advice that are meaningful in a school or policy context. You can help children, young people and parents engage in dialogue directly with teachers or policymakers, or you can mediate this process, for example, by combining their experiences into a report, possibly along with recommendations.

4 – Represent the interests of children, young people and parents when they are not present
Some decisions are made when the end users are not present. If direct participation is not possible, it remains important for organisations to play a signalling role and represent the interests of those who are not heard or recognised.

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6/ VRAC policy recommendations

Among children and young people in socially vulnerable situations, school delay and early school leaving remain persistent problems. There is a growing understanding that schools cannot tackle these problems on their own. Over four years, seven pilot projects have undertaken various actions and initiatives to encircle schools and families with additional learning opportunities and better integrated assistance. What lessons can local policymakers draw from their experiences?

1 – Invest in sustainable basic facilities on which you can build a network
Within the scope of local policymaking, provide for structural and sustainable funding for the basic offer of leisure, community and wellbeing organisations as well as for their efforts to cooperate with other partners. Include the instructions for collaboration in subsidy agreements. Avoid short-term project calls that put organisations up against each other, but instead work towards a long-term integrated approach.

2 – Facilitate an integrated approach through local management and coordination
The projects on the ground are often the experts in fostering networks and collaboration but do not always have the clout to get or keep other organisations on board in a collaborative effort. A local government has more leverage to foster cooperation and networking but sometimes lacks the grass-roots mandate of the projects on the ground. Local government should acknowledge the mandate of VCSE organisations and use their clout to bring them together and connect them in a shared vision and an integrated offer.

3 – Break down the walls
Constrictions and barriers between organisations and sectors hamper collaboration. Sometimes organisational interests and personal visions can get in the way. But more often, regulations and subsidy agreements form an obstacle. Identify policy barriers between organisations and break them down or temporarily create a low-regulation environment. In policy plans, include objectives spanning different areas of policy. Draw the attention of other public authorities to the regulations that hinder intersectoral cooperation. In doing so, maintain a long-term vision and strategy. It takes time to break down walls and barriers.

4 – Involve children, young people and their parents in your approach
Support children, young people and their families to make their voices heard. Recognise the expertise of children, young people and their parents and focus on a range of participation strategies and forms of participation. Use the input and feedback from end users to design your offer and policies, and

involve children, young people and parents in evaluating these policies. Make the form of participation visible and inform your network.

5 – Create time and space for vision development because that is a necessary building block

Take the lead in the vision development process. Identify relevant stakeholders, both in education and in the area of wellbeing and leisure. Acknowledge their expertise, point out the value of a shared vision and invite them to be part of this process. Commit to consultation, exchange and education. Give a team the necessary mandate and options to guide this process. Be sure to also involve the children, young people and parents. Identify differences and similarities between visions and provide frameworks and concepts that can connect different visions. Assist stakeholders so that they can arrive at a common and positive use of language. Assist stakeholders in formulating and disseminating their shared vision.

6 – Enhance learning opportunities in leisure time

Lower the barriers to existing initiatives and create an additional offer in vulnerable communities. Strengthen the connection between learning at school and in leisure time. Facilitate meetings and collaboration between schools and external partners. Highlight how learning in and out of school can reinforce each other. Be mindful of the fabric and infrastructure of the school and facilitate the connection between community and school.

7 – Provide an approachable point of contact between wellbeing and education

Designate accessible points of contact at the school and neighbourhood levels who identify and follow up on requests for help in and around schools and promote a tangible cooperation between partners.

8 – Support the development of an integrated counselling service

Encourage services and organisations to provide each other with specific and tangible assistance, right down to their activities on the ground. Organise trainings and peer reviews to establish a shared frame of reference that promotes collaboration. Highlight the added value of collaboration.

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Bronnen

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- European Toolkit for schools. Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools.htm

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