



# Between Ages



## Walking to the future

Concept of the first developed way in  
**Belgium**

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## 1 Some history

Alba/Oikoten offers youth at risk the opportunity to 're-source' by organising uprooting projects. In this text we share our experience with 35 years of organizing life(changing) experiences, particularly we focus on the walking projects. Something to keep in mind is that, when we use 'him, himself, he,' etc, throughout this text we always refer to male and female.

The organisation Oikoten was founded in 1982 by two social workers as an attempt to work out alternatives for minors who are staying in Childcare institutions. More specifically, the initiators were moved by the situation of those minors for whom the traditional institutions didn't seem to offer a solution and for whom extensive institutionalization, maladjusted behaviour, criminality and little education became a vicious circle. The Greek name of the organization has a double meaning: 'away from home, and 'on one's own forces.

The initiators were inspired by a Native American tradition, the 'caravans of the last chance' of the American organization 'Vision Quest'. In 1982, Oikoten organized the first hiking project. They asked permission to take two teenagers out of a closed institution and walked with them from Vézelay in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Santiago was not a religious choice, but they felt it was important to have a symbolically powerful destination. If the boys made it, they would be free to take their future in their own hands. The experiment was a success, and Oikoten was born.

Oikoten's offer of 'up-rooting-projects' has expanded over the years. It was made accessible for girls and a variety of destinations since then was reached. Oikoten also experimented with bike tours, horse trekking and even a circus project.

For some youngsters, a stay within a family was preferred to a trip: this was the start of 'work' projects in host families in Belgium, France, Scotland and Portugal. In this text the focus will be on the walking projects.

Today the organisation is situated near Leuven in Belgium, and has organised over 300 projects for more than 500 youngsters. Oikoten is now part of the larger organisation Alba, which also engages in related aspects of youth welfare, like alternative measures and mediation. We now talk about the 'Oikoten-method' referring to long term uprooting projects for youngsters. And although Oikoten has gone through a great evolution over the last years, the ideas behind the very first trip have always been maintained.

## **2 Target group and prescribers**

The youngsters we target in the projects are between 16 and 18 years of age and most of them have a long career in institutions and foster care. Most of them come from dysfunctional families and had a childhood of neglect, physical or sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences. These difficulties often lead to psychological and behaviour problems and criminal behaviour, often in combination with drug abuse and/or school drop out. "Most of these teenagers lack confidence in their abilities and have difficulties managing impulses and emotions. They may feel anger towards the system and blame society for their situation. On the outside they look tough and cool but just like other adolescents they crave acceptance and belonging, while seeking to establish their own identities." (Houtteman, 2016)

These youngsters have ended up in a vicious circle, with few future perspectives and at risk of losing connection with themselves and with society. When they join the program most of them have ended up in youth detention centres and it seems that all other options have failed. The application for the project is their free choice, but often it feels like the project is the last chance to give their life a new direction before they are confronted with the responsibilities of an adult life. The motivation for the project might be a negative one, since they have no other options left. The project wants to offer them the opportunity to develop new perspectives and the chance to take their life in their own hands.

The organisation is mainly targeting young offenders or youth living in problematic family situations. They are allocated to Alba as a pedagogical project by the juvenile judge or the Flemish Supportive Centre for Youth Care (Ondersteuningscentrum Jeugdzorg or OCJ).

## **3 Ontheming/uprooting**

"Oikoten conceived the artificial Dutch word '*ontheming*' for their approach. This term is a combination of the prefix 'ont-' which means 'no', 'not' or 'without' in Dutch and the ancient Dutch word 'heem' which means 'settling' or 'dwelling'. The term implies being removed from an environment where one was 'stuck' and secondly it refers to the process triggered by such a removal.

The English word 'uprooting' has a similar connotation. The participants, both the youths and their companion, are uprooted in order to leave their 'familiar situation'." (Houtteman, 2016)

The up-rooting character of our projects means that we temporarily and radically take our minors out of their familiar surroundings. We challenge them to take up a role with totally different social expectations, i.e. the pilgrim on his way to Santiago versus the incorrigible delinquent.

The minor, by actually taking up this role, gets the chance to come to another definition of himself and how others perceive him. Jan Masschelein (1996) describes the

uprooting effect as that what impedes us to remain the same, that what activates us, so new relationships become possible and experiences shine with a new light or perspective. It is not the developing of a new identity, nor the acquiring of new capacities or insights, but something more simple, less observable or controllable, yet not less important. It is a wake-up call, a call for change.

By participating in an uprooting project, the minor is also able to make his efforts clear, and, although this may seem like a paradox because of this temporary stay abroad, communication with the systems surrounding him at home is made possible again. The distance gives people a resting period which can create a new openness to give each other a new chance.

One can easily recognise similarities between the approach of Oikoten and the traditional ideas on 'pilgrimage', detached from the religious or spiritual context in which this concept is conventionally understood. This includes "the aspect of healing or becoming whole and the process of self-transformation, empowerment and stress reduction." (Houtteman, 2016)

## 4 Pedagogical vision of Oikoten

The **educational aims** of the projects are:

- to break the vicious circle and bring hope and new perspectives
- to enhance resilience, problem solving capacities and a positive self- image.
- to repair the connection of the youngster with himself, his surroundings and society in general to enhance his chances of integration.

The projects are built on the following ***principles and values***:

- An empowering approach with an emphasis on self-responsibility and the ability to take the future in their own hands.
- An emphasis on restorative work in the conflictual relationships of the youngster and his 'self', his family, society.
- Participation with respect for the particularity, the opinions and story of each person involved.
- A belief in the strength of authentic relationships and true encounters.

**Essential elements** in the Oikotenmethod are:

- An **experience-based or action-oriented learning**: We strongly believe in learning by doing. The experience we offer gives the youngsters plenty of opportunities to learn in 'real life' and 'in action'. Another challenge often encountered by these youngsters is their difficulty with sustaining their projects. Therefore to complete the walk is a real victory.
- **The activity of walking**: we choose the activity of walking because of its accessibility for everyone, its simplicity and its inherent invitation for introspection. There is not only the physical movement, but while moving, the context and our mental status is moving along. Physically and mentally it makes us stronger.
- **Time and space** ('vrijplaats'): The hike provides an 'open space' to explore new aspects of the self, to experiment with new behaviours, to create new perspectives, to bring distance into complex relationships, ...That's why we offer 'long term' projects with a lot of possibilities to experiment and take responsibility. The unpredictable and the uncertain are essential features to the process of uprooting. Goals are not predefined, except for the expectations and hopes the youngster and his surroundings set for themselves.
- **Nature**: We look at nature as an environment to resource, to find tranquillity, to reflect and an environment that offers intense experiences, elements to accept and challenges to overcome.
- **A personal approach**: For the youngsters in our target group intensive individual attention is important. The first years Oikoten experimented with group hikes of around 4 youngsters but the experience was the roles and dynamics of the group were taking so much attention and energy that it impeded a personal reflection process. Because we want to offer maximal opportunities for personal reflection we organize hikes for a maximum of 2 youngsters.
- **The restorative idea**: The youngsters we work with have often been rejected many times in their lives. We try to give them new chances as much as possible. Reaching the destination is an important goal. In case of a mistake or the breaking of a rule we will rather give the youngster a chance to repair the damage or regain the confidence of his companion than expelling him from the project. To make this possible a personal approach is necessary.
- **Multidirected partiality**: Family relationships are often complex and conflictual. The time out created by the distance paradoxically offers chances to open up to each other and creates more connection between the youngster and his family. In the beginning parents often don't believe their child will succeed in this project and sometimes they have even completely given up on them. But the project triggers everyone's curiosity and the hope that this project might finally make a difference, can make parents open up to their child again. Project leaders from the Oikoten staff essentially have a professional attitude of multidirected partiality. This consists of empathic turns towards each member of the family in which both acknowledgement and expectation are directed at them. It requires an appreciation of each person's point of view. The project leader informs the family members at home of the evolutions in the project and as such form a 'bridge' between the youngster and his family. Empathy and a non-judgmental attitude are important skills to coach this process. The youngsters are stimulated to have contact with their family through hand-written letters. This form of slow communication invites people to reflect on what they really want to tell to the other and prevents that impulsive reactions dominate the communication.
- **Reflection**: Reflection is inherent to the activity of long-distance walking, but it is also encouraged during the entire process we go through with the youngster . It starts with writing the letter for the selection procedure and the following interview. It is crystallized in the agreement and affirmed by the rituals. During the walk the lonely moments of walking, the discussions with the companion or

the encounters with local people or fellow pilgrims are opportunities for reflection. The weekly reports and the use of slow communication, like writing letters, is another way of stimulating reflection. By not taking mobile devices and music players we want to create space for this process of reflection.

- **Equivalence and authentic encounters:** It is a deliberate choice to work with non-professional adult companions. Most of the youngsters have grown up in institutions and have developed some kind of aversion to professionals in youth care. We believe that a relationship of equality where a real encounter is possible offers new opportunities for the development of the youngster. We want the companions to immerse themselves into this relation with the youngster as a person', not as an 'expert'.

In order for the companion to get through to the youngster, he needs to open up, question his roles and put down his weapons as well. For a professional, the strongest weapon would be his professional expertise, which tends to draw a line between the youngster and the guide. It creates an opposition between the companion that knows everything and the youngster that is lost. Hence, by choosing a companion without a field-specific degree, Oikoten sidesteps this opposition. This leads to an opportunity for equality and trust between both parties, an equality that is shown by the fact that the guide can say: "I do not know either". Youngsters are not seen as clients, but as responsible agents. (Houtteman, 2016)

- **Voluntary basis:** We believe that it is important that the participation in the project is a free choice for the youngster. You cannot force someone to walk. It is a decision they have to make for themselves and it is the starting point of an empowering approach that wants to awaken the ability to take their future in their own hands.

## 5 Operational procedures

The essence of the method is simple: to walk from departure point to destination, 1600kms, 25 km a day, while surviving on a small budget and with a written agreement as a guideline in the backpack. They carry everything they need to survive 'on their own force'.

### 5.1 Selection

Application is based on free choice. A minimum of motivation is required. To show their motivation the youngsters have to write an application letter. This is the first step they take. The staff of Oikoten selects those applicants who they think are most in need of a walking project. Selection is based on their application letter and a long in-depth interview with the candidates. Most youngsters experience their participation as " a chance to prove something, as a possible way out, and therefore not as a sanction." (Houtteman, 2016)

### Criteria for selection are

- age: between 16 and 18 years old
- motivation: The candidates must have a minimum of intrinsic motivation, though this can be a negative motivation, like having no other options or just to get out of the detention centre. An external motivator can also be important, e.g. the fact that the judge will give them a new chance if they complete the project successfully.
- the physical condition needed to undertake a long hiking trip
- lack of other perspectives
- a well-balanced group composition: in case of a hike with two youngsters we prefer a good match, where both youngsters complement each other and we avoid to make risky combinations, e.g. two boys with the same (criminal) behaviour.

Contra-indications for participation are: acute addiction, acute psychiatric problems (psychosis, ...) or mental disability.

**Non-professional adult companions in a professional framework:** The selection of the companion is also a very important aspect in this project. The task is complex and demanding. During 3 months the companion is responsible 24/7 and lives in close contact with the youngsters.

“Guides are interim workers who are freelance and usually give up their normal job for a period of time. Potential companions go through a strict selection procedure. They are expected to be open-minded and tolerant to enable them to develop an authentic relationship with the youngster. They should be over 26 and have developed some life experience. They should also be physically and mentally fit and be aware that the process of ‘uprooting’ is also theirs. The walk should be a new experience for the companion too.

Formal pedagogical and psychological skills are not required. A professional may use strategies, tricks and methods which he learned during his or her training as a helper or coach. Such an approach may easily push the youngster into a role of dependence and this is considered to be counter-productive. In my own opinion, the main quality of a companion is the ability to deal with the youngsters in an open and non-judgmental way.” (Houtteman, 2016)

The most important element is to be authentic and close to himself and to respect the differences in values and way of life of the youngster. To be in constant presence and support also means he has to be aware of his needs concerning self-care and recuperation possibilities. The project leader introduces the companion in the pedagogical vision and concept of the project and coaches the companion during the trip. The selection of the youngster is confirmed after a first meeting with his companion.

## 5.2 Preparation

After the selection of the youngster, the project leader, a member of the educational team, contacts the relevant persons in the context of the youngster. The most important are the family, the juvenile judge and the social case worker. This first contact with the network of the youngster is an important step in repairing the connection between the youngster and his family. In this first encounter they are being informed about the aims and procedures of the project, and they are invited to share their story, hopes and concerns. The content of these encounters is written down in the agreement where all parties express their expectations and responsibilities as equal partners. Five days before the actual trip begins, companion and youngster come to spend a **preparatory week** at Oikoten. This involves the physical preparation of the walkers by slowly building up their physical efforts: they start with a walk of 5 kms without backpack and at the end of the week they do a daytrip of 20 kms with backpack. Preparation also includes collecting and getting to know the equipment: they buy walking shoes, learn how to put their tent and how to cook on a campfire.

Another important aspect in this preparation week is to spend time together to develop a relationship of trust and an open communication between the youngster, the companion and the project leader. The project leader will be the coach and back-up of the walkers so it is essential they feel at ease with him. He organises some group talks in which the basic rules are discussed and the companion and youngster express their mutual expectations. The evening before the departure, everybody is invited by Oikoten to sign the **agreement** for the youngster. The agreement is an important tool to work with the often troubled relationships between the youngster and his family and to try to make a constructive connection again. Everybody obviously starts the Oikoten project with a certain reason, a motivation or perspective he or she wants to reach. Most minors want to prove to themselves and to others that they deserve to be trusted, that they can finish a project, that they are able to take up responsibility. This signing of the contract is usually a somewhat official and often also an emotional moment. In the contract, all the parties have the chance to extensively formulate their story, concerns, hopes and commitments in their own words. The different persons involved read out loud their chapter directed to the youngster.

It is not an aim to reach a consensus in defining or solving the problem. Each person's story is respected as his unique and true experience. The experience of 'difference' and of the fact that the social case manager or the juvenile judge does not use their authority to put an end to this difference, is identity-building and reassuring for the minor. Starting from the individual, unique sense of the different parties, everybody is centralized around the project of the minor. The heads all turn in the same direction and everybody is curious about what is going to happen. In the agreement the youngster is seen as an equal partner, a responsible agent.

The contract works if the parties involved can identify with it and if a number of arrangements come about. By signing the agreement the youngster accepts the challenge of the trip and the basic rules. The judge confirms the follow-up track as proposed by the youngster and the social case worker engages to organize this.

Afterwards, a small farewell party is held and the group has the opportunity to say goodbye to their family and friends and feel they are supported by a group of people following their project.

The 'celebration' of the departure and - in the end- the arrival of the group is an important ritual moment. We believe that rituals confirm the choices that are made and enhance the integration of the experience. The next day the group leaves on the actual trip.

### 5.3 On the road

"In the walking projects, the four rules, the route and the destination form the framework in which transformation can take place during the walk. The daily routine is very simple: in the morning, the camp is broken up and the group starts to walk until they reach the new destination. In the meantime, tasks are taken to buy or prepare food and to read the map. Evenings may be spent around a bonfire as guests of local people or in a local pub. Time takes the group slowly but steadily through different landscapes and moods towards its final destination, each carrying a backpack of about 18kg and with a budget of about 13 Euro a day for expenses and pocket money." (Houtteman, 2016)

**The route** has to offer moderate challenges, without getting too extreme. The possibility of encounters with locals and/or fellow pilgrims is a plus and a strong symbolic destination is important. The pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela and the Via Francigena in Rome are the most frequently used, but a lot of alternatives have already been experimented with. The preparation of the route is the responsibility of the companion. The walk takes three months, with an average of 25 km per day and a day of rest every 10 days. The companion chooses a destination, maps out the way and draws a time schedule from start to finish. (Houtteman, 2016)

Oikoten chooses to set out only four **clear rules** which should be respected:

- Every metre on foot (no hitchhiking or public transport)
- No mobile phones or music players; restricted access to internet
- Respecting the laws of the country
- No behaviour that endangers the integrity of the project or the group

Other arrangements are discussed and decided by the group. There are no sanctions given, but after infraction of a rule some kind of repair is expected. In cases of severe infractions the project leader is contacted. If there is a continuous disrespect regarding the rules or the people in the group, the project leader can decide to organize a crisis visit or end the project prematurely. This decision is always taken in close consultation with the group. If the project breaks up, the judge decide what happens. It usually means the youngster has to return to detention. Therefore, this option is postponed for as long as possible.

**The Paradox of freedom:** The contrast with the youngster's life in an institution is big: if they come from a detention centre it feels like they are gaining a lot of freedom. On the other hand they are faced with the responsibility of making their own decisions: "will I continue walking or will I give up?", a decision to be made every day. There are not

many rules, but the route schedule and the daily routine offer a structured framework in which the youngster and his/her companion have to take a lot of decisions. They can decide to sleep late in the morning but then the sun will be at its hottest point while walking. They can have some drinks and stay up late in the evening, but the following day the 25 kilometres are to be walked. Freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility, as it is in normal life. And the amount of freedom is also limited by the respect for the other. As such it is a good preparation for the independent living which is often waiting after the trip or at least when they are 18 years old. As such, responsibility, equality and participation are stimulated in the whole concept.

### **Professional framework and coaching**

The walkers are under the supervision of the educational team in Belgium, that consists of several project leaders and a coordinator.

Coaching is assured by 2 project leaders, who follow the project from the selection of the youngster till the end. They receive information from the walkers in written reports, sent every 2 weeks by post or email. Telephone contact can be made if coaching is needed and can be frequent in case of crisis situations. Project leaders are available by phone 24/7. If necessary, a crisis visit is made. "Both the young person and his or her companion are allocated an adult supporter, referred to as the 'achterban' (literally 'those behind'), who they choose in consultation with the staff. The role of this person is to support the walkers during the walk and in the case of the youth also after the project." (Houtteman, 2016) Halfway through the walk, a 'support-visit' from Oikoten is organised where the 'achterban' and the project leader come to support the walkers. They spend two days together and celebrate progress, evaluate, listen to the stories and prepare the future.

**Authentic encounters with adults** Often these youngsters have lost their feeling of belonging to society and the development of constructive relationships with others can be an important factor in their reintegration.

It is a challenge for everyone to live together 24 hours a day and this in basic and sometimes extreme circumstances. But these youngsters often have had a lot of negative and even traumatic experiences in their important relationships and most of them have difficulties to trust an adult. This makes it even more difficult to bring this challenge to a good ending. A good match between companion and youngster is often an important factor in the success of a project. Otherwise tensions and conflicts can make it extremely difficult to reach the destination together. In those cases the contact with other people on the road can be helpful. Not only the relationship with the companion is important. There are a lot of opportunities during the project to meet other people. The encounters with other pilgrims or local people they meet on the road offer unique experiences that can be very enriching for the youngsters. It also happens that people are invited to join the walkers for a couple of days or a week. This brings new energy in the group and in the relationship of youngster and companion. It can be of great support for both youngster and companion. These 'co-walkers' can be ex-

companions or friends or family of the companion or the youngster. New companions are expected to participate as co-walker as a preparation for their own trip.

#### **5.4 Arrival**

When the group reaches its destination they take a day or two to rest and celebrate their arrival before returning to Oikoten. “Finally, reaching the destination may somehow seem paradoxical. On the one hand, there is a sense of pride and great achievement, but at the same time, the challenges of a life back home suddenly become very real.” (Houtteman, 2016 ) The return to their old environment and starting up a new life there, is as hard or even harder than the trip itself. Because of the difficulties in the transition to normal life, we added a transition period to the end of the trip. In this feedback- phase the youngster, assisted by his companion and the project leader, reflects on the walk, including any changes that may have occurred and what course he has decided on for future re-integration into society. On the last day a celebration is once again organized for friends and family of both youngster and companion. Again this is an important ritual moment supporting reflection and integration of the experience into the self-image and environment of the youngster.

The celebration at the arrival of the group, which takes place the evening the youngster is officially leaving the project, is an important boost to consolidate the success of the youngster and to stimulate his self-esteem. He receives congratulations and a warm welcome and his/her photo gets a place on our ‘wall of fame’. Now the role of Oikoten is over and another social service is ready to start up an intervention for the youngster, for example a reintegration in the family or assisted independent living.

**Preparing for the future:** The adolescent's future, i.e. after returning to Belgium, is an important subject throughout the walk, starting already in the selection interview.

The possible perspectives for his return to Belgium are discussed and it is essential that the youngster can make a proposal to the judge. The social worker and the judge have to give their permission but in general a realistic idea is accepted by the judge if the youngster completes the hike. This is part of the agreement. Also the parents are involved in this decision.

The adolescent's Social Worker also has an important role. He has to organize the situation the young person will choose in terms of place of residence, educational structure etc., together with Oikoten's project leader and of course after receiving authorisation from the Judge. The plans for the future can change during the trip but , in general, a decision is to be made on the half way visit. The project leader is in charge of preparing the youngster's future perspective in Belgium. He contacts the family, the social services and schools.

After the walk a fluid transfer is organised to another social service offering the support the youngster needs to realize their new perspectives (return to family, living independently). If possible a ‘round table meeting’ is organized with the responsible social workers to guarantee a good start-up of the new care track. In the first weeks

after the project the project leader regularly contacts the youngster to know how he's doing and if necessary accompanies the youth in visiting their new school, etc.

### **5.5 After the walk**

After one month a follow-up meeting is planned with the youngster and his parents to evaluate the project and reflect on the first weeks of their new start. An outsider witness interview is offered to the youngster with an independent therapist, specialized in narrative therapy. In this method the youngster is being interviewed about his project in relation to previous life experiences, hopes and dreams and two 'witnesses' are invited to listen to the story and give their reflections on it. The youngster receives a DVD and a letter from the therapist with the content of this interview. The method is used to enhance reflection and integration of the experience in their everyday life.

## 6 Theoretical Framework

### 6.1 The concept of “Pedagogical places” by Jan Masschelein.

A concept that is closely related to the Oikotenmethod is the concept of ‘Pedagogical Places’, in dutch called ‘pedagogische plekken’ described by Jan Masschelein (2012). Masschelein, a Belgian pedagogue, sees education not as telling youngsters what to do, but as opening the world to them, making it possible that the world speaks to them, appeals to them. It is this opening of the world that makes a new start possible. Education is therefor about making time, time and space, not for yourself, but to be occupied with something outside yourself, the world, so that the interest of a youngster in the world can rise. Pedagogical responsibility is bringing the youngster to the world and the world to the youngster. It involves two tasks: ‘letting them be’ and ‘waking their interest’. It is by taking responsibility in the world that things can speak to the youngster and wake their interest. It is about showing and sharing how you take care of the world. Pedagogical places are places where not the choices are central, but exposure to something, where it is not about identifying needs, but about offering help in realizing them, where the world is presented and disclosed in such a way that this world is brought to life and can wake the youngster’s interest.

This means the educator is not an expert. It is about his way of ‘being in the world’ and the way in which his presence might inspire others, can become an opportunity. It doesn’t ask for knowledge but for self- care. By taking care of yourself and of yourself in the world you create the space in which the other can take care of himself and can take a new start, can prepare a future. It assumes equal ability.

The pedagogical lives by the practical hypothesis that we are not inevitably determined by our past or our context or the inherent development of our innate nature. It believes in the possibility of a new beginning.

We have to take the youngster out of their past and future and pull them into the world, in the now. By waking them up and opening the world to them, you are creating a possibility for a future. This making a new start in and with the world is a central idea in education.

### 6.2 Lieu de Vie et d’Accueil: Fernand Deligny

Masschelein refers to **Fernand Deligny**, a French pedagogue who worked out alternatives to work with children with handicaps, delinquent youngsters, autistic youngsters, etc. For him the object of pedagogy is not the child but our self, our being in the world.

Deligny developed the concept ‘**Lieu de vie et d’accueil**’ (L.V.A.), that is also used by Seuil. In 1967 he started an ‘L.V.A.’ a community taking care of youngsters as an alternative for closed institutions- in the Cévennes, France. He wanted to bring together young delinquents in open communities. The concept assimilates with the Oikoten idea of ‘vrijplaats’. For these places the ‘reflected’ sharing of daily life is the first educational support, a personal approach and an educational relationship of proximity, based on the full acceptance of a person in its singularity.

### **6.3 The strategy of disarmament (Jan Masschelein)**

The strategy of disarmament is described by Masschelein (1996) as one of the principal ideas in the concept of Oikoten walks. He starts from the point that the youngsters are stuck in a certain situation or perspective in which they continue to play the same roles over and over again because this protects them from their environment and from the pain they have to face in their life. The youngster is stuck and doesn't get the chance to think about what happens, his life, his choices. Masschelein believes that we can, in interaction with others, be challenged about our way of living. This presents itself all the time but is being blocked by the youngster. The pain is not allowed. Something inside the youngster is withholding him to think about his "I", his life and his choices, nevertheless it is this thinking that could bring some changes. The guide plays an important role in this encounter. Before the guide can disarm the youngster he has to disarm himself. Also the guide has to question his roles, put down his weapons and reveal himself. One of his strongest weapons being his professional expertise which is drawing a line between youngster and guide. The guide that knows everything and the youngster that is lost. By disarming the guide, by choosing a guide without a specific diploma, Oikoten makes possible the trust and equality between both parties, an 'equality' shown by 'I do not know either'. Youngsters are not seen as clients, but as responsible agents. As such the youngster is equal to other actors. On top of this there is the unpredictability of the situation which makes the equality of guide and youngster possible.

### **6.4 Empowerment**

In recent years the paradigm in social work has changed from a medical model to an empowerment model. "Empowerment implies reinforcing and connecting people, organizations and groups in society. The paradigm prioritizes vulnerable individuals and groups, focusing on their strengths as well as recognizing their vulnerabilities and respecting their experience. Empowerment implies strengths-oriented care which is based on the two basic premises of a positive basic attitude and suitable participation. Empowerment can be put into practice by means of appropriate methodologies." (Van Regenmortel, 2009)

Empowerment is a process of reinforcing in which individuals, organisations or communities get more grip on their situation and their environment and this by gaining control, sharpening their critical consciousness and stimulating participation.

In an uprooting project the youngsters get time and space to think about themselves and encounter themselves. An inner dialogue about the past, the present and the future and a growing consciousness that the responsibility for their life and the way they live it, is principally theirs. The youngster starts to see himself as the driving source of change. The name of Oikoten, meaning "on their own force" is a strong illustration of this idea. (Carremans, 2014)

Participation is important in this reinforcement process. The central aim of empowerment is 'full citizenship'. It is a multi-level construct, working on an individual level (power from within), a collective level (the power with) and a broader political-

society level (the power to). The paradigm is giving primary attention to vulnerable groups in society. They focus on the problem of connection, with the self, the others, society and the future.

The focus is on strengths and potential and healthy factors and not on problems or risks, but always starting from the fundamental recognition of the vulnerabilities. But this vulnerability is understood from the insider's perspective, giving importance to experience expertise. Hope is central in the empowerment process. This frames in the broader approach of Positive Psychology.

Empowerment can be defined as 'force oriented care'. A force oriented care starts from 2 basic premises: a positive approach and participation. Fundamental is the relationship between youngster and adult. Equality is a condition.

A positive attitude is essential. Nobody receives the stamp of hopeless case or untreatable. The force approach starts from people's inherent capacity to learn, grow and change. It calls on the potential forces in everyone. This call on the resilience of people and the stimulation of support sources in the environment is the key to strength oriented care.

Participation is about seeing the client as a responsible actor in his process. This partnership shows itself in different aspects of the relationship: engagement, equality, connection and reciprocity.

Involvement is about the personal **engagement** of the professional, in contrast with the professional distance expected in other approaches. This engagement needs to take into account the personal limits of client and professional and the context. **Equality** is about the equality in 'being human' without denying some differences in responsibilities. **Connection** is about the facilitator opening new ways, showing different choice options and building bridges. **Reciprocity** is about the balance between giving and taking or receiving. The adult can also learn from the youngster, the youngster can also take care of the adult. The adult is being touched, learns things, is changing prejudices.

## 6.5 The presence approach (Andries Baert)

Closely related to the empowerment paradigm is the presence approach, described by Andries Baert (2002), who investigated the work of pastoral ministers in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Netherlands. Characteristic for this approach is “being *there for* others without focusing directly on problem solving.” Problem solving can emerge from their efforts, but is not their overt intention. The most important thing these pastoral ministers bring is the faithful offering of themselves: being there, making themselves available, coming along.

The focus goes to the cultivation of caring relationships, and the approach is deemed successful even when there is no evidence of concrete problems being solved. Over time exposure leads to intense forms of engagement and the assumption of (manageable, role-appropriate) responsibilities. On the level of individual methods, special emphasis goes to the winning of trust, the maintenance of personal contact and participation (support / coaching) in the handling of existential questions and critical moments of decision.

Patience, unconditional attentiveness and receptivity are key concepts in this approach.

Central to this approach is attention and presence. These are also important elements in the empowerment paradigm. Attention is the keyword meaning encountering, authenticity and coming close. An important feature of the presence approach is openness. There is an open agenda, goals are not predefined, though there is a goal direction. But open is also about not knowing, being surprised by the other, not judging. Being open as being respectful for another way of life, the otherness of the other. Respecting the autonomy and accepting the fact that one cannot understand everything of the other.

“The work of Andries Baart (2005), who advocates “being present” as the first and foremost quality in care, is very well suited to understanding the relationship between companion and youngster. He describes presence as “*a practice through which the caregiver is attentive and dedicated towards the other in order to see what is at stake for the other – from desire to fear – and in connection thereto, what can be done and what s/he can be for the other. What can be done is being done, which can only be realised with a sense of subtlety, skills, practical wisdom and loving fidelity.*” (Baart, 2005, 40-41, *my translation*).” (Houtteman, 2016)

Trust, skills, wisdom and love are the key words here, referring to full acceptance and a strong sense that the other is doing the best he could from within his own views and perspective.

## 6.6 Resilience: Boris Cyrulnik.

The concept of Resilience is an important condition for empowerment. The French psychiatrist Cyrulnik talks about “le resort intime”. Resilience is the ability of a person or a system to live a good life and develop positively despite harsh circumstances and this in a socially acceptable way. (Van regenmortel, 2009) Resilience also refers to the extent an individual is able to cope with stress and adversity.

Boris Cyrulnic has published several interesting and controversial ideas on the subject of resilience. “He challenges traditional psychology in thinking like car mechanics when looking at childhood trauma, as if these traumas could explain all subsequent suffering in a similar way that a blocked carburettor explains the splutter of the engine. For Cyrulnic, “*our history doesn't determine our destiny*” (Cyrulnic 2011, 13). Human beings are far more capable of dealing with trauma and fighting back, if they get the chance to reformulate their life stories into positive ones rather than being victimised and believing they are victims, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Important in Cyrulnic's view is the role of a positive story about oneself and a positive self-image. Hence, Oikoten have added a so called ‘outsider-witness conversation’ into aftercare . (Houtteman, 2016) Cyrulnic states that almost any experience can be reshaped if those who have endured it are given the power to write their own narrative.

## 6.7 Narrative therapy

The story people tell about themselves and that is told about them is important in this approach which asserts that the story of a person's identity determines what they think is possible for themselves. The narrative process allows people to identify what values are important to them and how they might use their own skills and knowledge to live these values. Narrative therapy is a collaborative and non-pathologizing approach to counselling and community work which centres people as the experts of their own lives. A narrative approach views problems as separate from people and assumes people as having many skills, abilities, values, commitments, beliefs and competencies that will assist them to change their relationship with the problems influencing their lives. It is a way of working that considers the broader context of people's lives, particularly in the various dimensions of diversity including class, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability. The narrative therapist focuses on assisting people to create stories about themselves, about their identities, that are helpful to them. Through the process of identifying the history of values in people's lives, the therapist is able to co-author a new story about the person. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy))

In narrative therapy it is important to put alternative, positive stories next to the ‘problem story’. An uprooting project gives the youngster the opportunity to write a different story and enrich his personality by doing this. The outsider witness interview after the project is used to embed this new ‘life story’ in the daily life of the youngster. It also strengthens it by looking for similar experiences in his past and by inviting other people to give their own experiences and impressions and as such consolidate this new story in the personality of the youngster. In this particular narrative practice or conversation, outsider witnesses are invited listeners to a consultation. Often they are friends of the consulting person or past clients of the therapist who have their own knowledge and

experience of the problem at hand. During the first interview, between therapist and consulting person, the outsider listens without comment. Then the therapist interviews them with the instructions not to critique or evaluate or make a proclamation about what they have just heard, but instead to simply say what phrase or image stood out for them, followed by any resonances between their life struggles and those just witnessed. Lastly, the outsider is asked in what ways they may feel a shift in how they experience themselves from when they first entered the room. Next, in similar fashion, the therapist turns to the consulting person, who has been listening all the while, and interviews them about what images or phrases stood out in the conversation just heard and what resonances have struck a chord within them. In the end, an outsider witness conversation is often rewarding for witnesses. But for the consulting person the outcomes are remarkable: they learn they are not the only one with this problem, and they acquire new images and knowledge about it and their chosen alternate direction in life. The main aim of the narrative therapy is to engage in people's problems by providing the alternative best solution. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy))

Many youngsters with difficult life histories like the youngsters of Oikoten tell fragmented, chaotic stories with hardly a feeling of control or influence. The stories are like chopped or frozen.

Vermeire (2011) describes her experience with the outsider witness interview or, what she calls, the biographical interviewing, of the youngsters of Oikoten. The biographical interview tries to enhance a sense of coherence. Enhancing a 'sense of coherence' is an important aspect of resilience. Coherent stories are safe stories in which a person understands what happened and no longer feels helpless.

The aim is to create stories of repair. During the interview we reflect with the youngster about the different experiences, events and moments in their life. Different events are connected and can be looked at from different perspectives. The biographical interview is a reflective interview about the different processes in someone's life. These processes are in relation with their actual situation and their future projects. We try to enhance the feeling of being significant by looking for experiences in which their efforts had influence on others. By making moments of change and choice-making explicit the impact on events becomes more visible. We interpret the experiences in such a way that the youngsters become active participants in their life course.

We try to detect which ideas, values and expectations are important to them. Which dreams they still have, which values stayed intact, what adult do they want to become? In this way we try to reconnect the past, present and future.

### **6.8 Experiential learning:**

"The concept of using outdoor activities to transform and heal fits in with a long tradition of outdoor learning going back to the German educationalist Kurt Hahn, and even before to ideas proposed by J.J. Rousseau in his *"Emile, ou de l'éducation"* from 1762. The main focus in these approaches is that nature is the best environment to learn in and that action methods are more conducive to learning than merely talking. For Hahn *"it is the sin of the soul to force young people into opinions – indoctrination is of the devil –*

*but it is culpable neglect not to impel young people into experiences”* (Hahn 1965, 3). Hahn’s main goal was to build ‘strength of character’ and he believed outdoor activities were to best way to reach that goal. Hahn’s ideas have been developed over the years and have taken on many forms, such as the outward Bound School.” (Houtteman, 2016)

Experiential learning can be defined as the creation of a specific situation that enables youngsters to live concrete experiences that can motivate them and bring them to reflection on their own situation. A good combination between concrete experiences and reflection leads to new learning processes that make the youngsters acquire new autonomy, which in turn leads to new perspective for the future. ( Ruikes, 1994)

The Oikoten method has similarities with experiential learning in the way that it uses experiences and activities as the basis of its method. But there are some important differences with this vision as well. This framework is elaborated more in detail in the text of Yvan Houtteman.

### **6.9 Contextual therapy: Yvan Boszormenyi-Nagy**

The contextual approach to family and individual psychotherapy is founded by the Hungarian-American psychiatrist Yvan Boszormenyi-Nagy. It is a comprehensive model which proposes four dimensions: the facts (ethnic-cultural facts, life events, genetic input, etc) , individual psychology, systemic transactions and relational ethics.

Relational ethics is in the centre of the contextual approach. People have the need to feel connected with significant others. Connectedness includes being seen and acknowledged as a basis to build enough liberty and trust to be of significance yourself. The most important source of connectedness is in the family, especially the parents. From this basic connection one can reach out and connect with others.

Contextual therapy tries to mobilize the longing for connectedness, to start a dialogue with significant others. This dialogue opens the possibility for the development of the freedom we need to live, to be of significance for others and for the next generation in particular.

The focus and nature of contextual therapy is influenced by the ethical dimension of relationships. An important ethical concept is called multidirectional partiality. This concept focusses on the best interests of each individual and relational fairness. It consists of empathic turns towards each member of the family in which both acknowledgement and expectation are directed at them. It requires an appreciation of each person’s point of view. Contextual therapy asks families to work on the increasing fairness in their relationships. Fairness is being based on an understanding of the other person’s side, being responsible and accountable for behaviors and taking action. Contextual therapy has an aim to induce a dialogue between family members to take responsibility of their actions. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ivan\\_Boszormenyi-Nagy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ivan_Boszormenyi-Nagy))

## **7 To end**

In the book 'Ik dus naar Compostela' the experiences of 30 boys and girls from the history of 30 years Oikoten are collected. A boy says: " Those four months have shaped a space in my head, a space where I can find rest and where my good experiences are. There I can resource in periods when things are not going well."

And a man, 46 years old now, who did the walk in 1989, says: " I 've had a lot of ups and downs in my life, but at this moment, things are going fine actually. And that is because of that inner growth and it started during that walk. It still lives on, even if it is 21 years ago."

Or as Marc testified: "almost every day, I think back to the walk. This was the beginning of my life. Before, I had no life." (De Aguirre & Vermeulen, 2012)

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy)

## Also available in this project

<http://www.betweenages-project.eu/results.html>

Youth in Stress – Prerequisites for European projects in regard to socio-pedagogical walking	Output 1 English
Jugend im Stress – Voraussetzungen für europäische Projekte zum sozialpädagogischen Pilgern	Output 1 German
Pilgrimage as starting point in a process of encountering, discovering and perceiving oneself	Output 2 English
Pilgern als Einstieg in einen Prozess der Selbstbegegnung, Selbstfindung und Wahrnehmung von Selbstwirksamkeit	Output 2 German
Socio-pedagogical Walking as an European Alternative in the Work with Young People in NEET and young Offenders. A theoretical perspective	Output 3 English
Sozialpädagogisches Pilgern als Europäische Alternative in der Arbeit mit benachteiligten und straffälligen jungen Menschen – eine theoretische Einordnung	Output 3 German
The Who is Who of Walking as an Instrument to Work with NEET's and Young Offenders in Europe	Output 5 English
Walking to break with the past – the 3 month way from Belgium	Output 7a English
Walking to break with the past: the French way	Output 7b English
Walking to the future – Concept of the first developed way in Belgium	Output 7c English
Five days between imprisonment and Santiago de Compostela Social educational pilgrimage in Saxony	Output 8 English
Fünf Tage zwischen Haft und Santiago de Compostella Sozialpädagogisches Pilgern in Sachsen	Output 8 German
Ergebnisbericht zum sozialpädagogischen Pilgern mit Menschen in schwierigen Lebenslagen	Output 9 German
Report on the results of walking with NEET's and offenders	Output 9 English
Requirements for the route - Handbook for socio-pedagogical walking tours with delinquent and disadvantaged youths	Output 10 English
Voraussetzungen für den Weg - Handbuch zum sozialpädagogischen Pilgern mit straffälligen und benachteiligten Jugendlichen	Output 10 German
In die Zukunft gehen – ein Projekt für Straffällige und Menschen in schwierigen Lebenslagen (Videodokumentation)	Output 11 (Film) Dutch/French/German/ Italian/English
Strategy for re-engagement of young offenders and NEET	Output 12 English
Sozialpädagogisches Pilgern als ein neues Instrument für die Arbeit bin benachteiligten und straffälligen jungen Menschen Anregungen für Politik und Gesellschaft	Output 13 German
White paper to force walking as an instrument to work with NEET's and Offenders in Europe	Output 13 English

Selected texts are also available in French, Dutch and Italian

Project aim is the development of alternative methods and measures to imprisonment of young offenders and increase the chances of NEETs for social inclusion. *Between ages* evolves strategies towards juvenile crime prevention via the implementation of a platform for policies and practices. The network combats social exclusion, prevents recurrence and early school leaving, promotes social security in community and contains crimes related to petty crime, promotes commitment and empowerment of young people and positive initiatives into adulthood, and enforces last but not least public spending with regard to health issues, welfare and judicial affairs. The overall objective is hence to promote the Europe2020 strategy in the field of youth and the creation of a European association for coordinating pilgrimage activities for young offenders and NEET.

Seit 2011 wird in Sachsen das Pilgern als moderne Methode der sozialpädagogischen Arbeit erprobt und entwickelt. Als spezielle Form des „Sozialen Trainingskurses“ werden Maßnahmen erarbeitet, bei denen Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene in schwierigen Lebenssituationen die übliche Beratungs- und Trainingsumgebung verlassen und sich auf einen längeren Fußmarsch begeben. Diese begleiteten Wege dienen der Reflexion und Selbstwirksamkeitserfahrung und werden mit Arbeitseinsätzen und methodengeleiteten Reflexionen flankiert. So wird den Jugendlichen und jungen Erwachsenen außerhalb ihres gewohnten Lebensumfeldes die Chance zu einer Neuorientierung und einem Neuanfang gegeben. Allgemeines Ziel des Vorhabens ist die (Weiter-) Entwicklung, der Transfer und die Umsetzung von innovativen und bewährten Verfahren im Bereich Jugend bzw. Jugendstrafrecht und NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Im Rahmen des Projektes „BA-Network“ wurde die Forschung zum sozialpädagogischen Pilgern auf europäische Dimension ausgedehnt und Daten aus der langjährigen Erfahrung von Oikoten (Belgien) und Alba (Frankreich) einbezogen. Seit mehr als 20 Jahren führen diese zwei Partner Pilgerprojekte mit straffälligen Jugendlichen durch, die bis zu drei Monate unterwegs sind und mehr als 2000 Kilometer zurücklegen. Aus Italien sind zwei Partner dem Projekt beigetreten: zum einen unterstützt das Justizministerium Italiens bzw. die Abteilung für Jugendjustiz (DGM) die Partner dabei, die anvisierten Ziele zu erreichen und insbesondere den Zugang zu den europäischen Institutionen zu öffnen. Zum anderen wirkt die non-profit Organisation „L'Oasi Società Cooperativa Sociale“ und „Associazione Lunghi Cammini“ mit, um das Pilgern für junge Menschen zu testen und in Italien einzuführen.

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Between Ages: Network for young offenders and NEET

