

Empowerment Training with Minority Youth Leaders at European Level

Working towards a fuller inclusion and representation of disadvantaged young people in youth work and society is one of the current priorities of the European youth programmes. Empowering youth leaders from minority communities to take up a stronger role in changing their status in society is an essential part of this process. Effective empowerment training at European level, as the author of this article argues, needs to strengthen confidence among the participants but also enable them to recognise and challenge existing forms of oppression at the personal, cultural and structural levels in society.

Empowerment training with minority young people at European level is a new development in European youth work. It is even valid to assert that it is still not as popular as one may think. There are some reasons responsible for this, firstly most youth organisations particularly those established at European level still do not work with minorities and in most cases have little or no contact with minority communities. Secondly there are still very few structures at the European level that consider this area of youth training as a priority. But with the greater awareness and need for the promotion of human rights and citizenship education there is an implicit value in encouraging "traditional" youth organisations in Europe to widen their scope of work to include young people who are targets of human rights abuses.

If, however, this new awareness is to gain credibility within minority communities, then they should be seen as equal partners in the process. This thus comes with the political will on the part of the institutions and structures to accept the level of oppression faced by minorities and the need to train minorities themselves to become self-fulfilling by constructively challenging such oppression, on personal, cultural and structural levels. This article will attempt to define oppression as perceived by minority communities and how empowerment training with minority young people can contribute to the eradication of such oppressions. Two key concepts will be explored, empowerment and oppression, with the clear objective of introducing a model, which could complement other models already used by trainers at various training levels.

Why look at oppression?

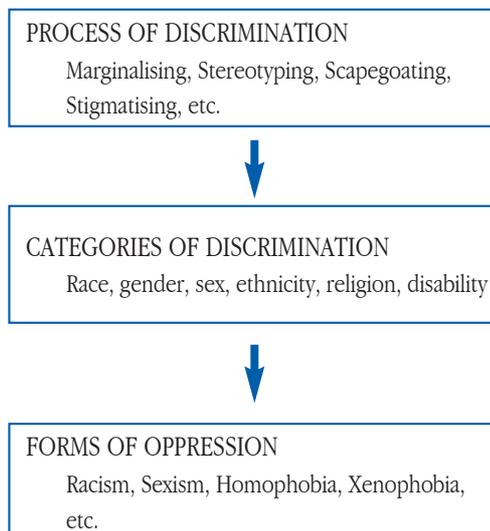
Many training programmes at national and European levels have been dedicated to anti-discrimination, intercultural and anti-racist practices. While one may argue for the full legitimacy of such training programmes, it can also be attested that they usually look at specific areas of discrimination rather than looking at the wider perspective of the processes of discrimination. The key discourse in minority

youth empowerment training is to embrace the different categories of discrimination, and their interconnectivity through oppression. While discrimination can be defined as the set of processes by which people are allotted to various categories with unequal

rights and opportunities, oppression can be simply seen as the effects of such processes which are constructed at personal, cultural and structural levels. Neil Thompson, an outstanding English writer on anti-oppressive work in human service supports this view by writing: "One of the main outcomes of discrimination is oppression. The relationship between oppression and discrimination can therefore be seen largely as a causal one: discrimination gives rise to oppression". (Thompson 1998. P. 78 - 79)

This is further explained in the diagram below, which demonstrates the inseparable relationship between discrimination and oppression. Minorities in the context of minority youth work could be defined as those who are affected by the various forms of oppression based on race, gender, sex, religion, disability or ethnicity.

by Mohamed Haji-Kella



According to Shahid Ashrif, professor and frequent writer on multiculturalism in Europe, oppression is about power and its misuse. He argues that oppression is about collective power of some groups within society to exclude, deny, control and define other groups and individuals that belong to those groups. (Ashrif, 2000).

Oppression occurs at three interconnected levels - the personal, the cultural and the structural. At the personal level, oppression reproduces itself as the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of one individual towards another. At the cultural level, there is assumed consensus about what is true, right and good and perceived as normal about others, while at the structural level, institutions within society act and perpetuate social divisions, prejudice and discrimination based on the assumed cultural norms. Thompson refers to this as the "PCS model", he argues that personal discrimination takes place not in isolation but within the context of culturally assumed norms in a broader societal framework of structures and institutions. As advocated by intercultural models, empowerment training should challenge not only the personal and cultural levels of oppression, but also vitally the institutions, which support those attitudes and behaviours.

Oppression and minority youth leaders

Most minority youth leaders who attend empowerment-training programmes clearly demonstrate the effects of their oppression at all levels as described in the PCS model. At the personal level most participants demonstrate a low level of self-confidence which reproduces itself in their attitudes towards trainers. In most circumstances minority youth leaders find it very difficult to accept trainers, especially those from majority backgrounds who they feel are part of the perpetrators of personal oppression within their communities. This attitude is often fuelled by the reaction of the trainers who often see such attitudes as a personal attack on them. The challenge here is how to effectively deal with such participants on the personal level, while at same time conducting the training in a professional manner.

At the cultural level, participants often cocoon themselves in their own community and fail to see the wider aspect of oppression either to other minority groups or to some extent within their own groups. A colleague once commented that it was impossible to work effectively with minority youth leaders who do not work with other minority groups or refuse to do so despite their training. Such behaviour is a direct reaction to oppression at the cultural level - where minorities are put into pigeonholes - and which is legitimised and sustained by the institutions. This effect often exposes itself in training courses where various minorities are formed into sub- groups or makeshift alliances usually not connected to the objectives of the training programme. Such situations often perceive the needs of participants to engage in deeper discussions of their oppressions. Minority youth leaders in many circumstances feel much more confident to discuss certain issues with groups they can identify and feel comfortable with. Some trainers see this as a threat to group atmosphere

and the learning process, but in fact this is not the case. What many trainers fail to understand, is the effect of the cultural level of oppression which often reproduces itself in training programmes. The challenge for the trainer is to try to understand this cultural level and work with the participants to effectively challenge it.

At the structural level youth work and youth organisations are very often formalised, making it difficult for minorities especially those socially excluded to access the services they provide. Such situations often reflect the policies of the institutions which exclude minorities either because of their status, for example refugee children, whose needs are often neglected, or for other reasons. As a result, most of those who access European empowerment training lack basic youth work and youth participation skills. In fact for most of them, European training is usually the first or only training programme they are likely to be involved in while working within their communities. Their needs and expectations therefore often go beyond the planned objectives of the training programme. Time constraints and the lack of youth work skills among trainers often pose a major challenge to the effectiveness of empowerment training.

If minority young people are to become part of our perceived European dream, they should be empowered to confront oppression at all three levels. Empowerment training therefore should be a tool, which gives the confidence and rigour to minorities and their communities to constructively work together, firstly to deal with the mutual prejudices among them and secondly to challenge the oppressions afflicted upon them by majorities within society.

What is empowerment training?

The concept of empowerment is a rather "dodgy" one, as it is used in every sphere of emancipatory work, in business, welfare and health, in anthropology and most recently by right wing politicians and in youth work. I have started in this way to warn us against the fluidity of the term and its openness to misuse and abuse. For example, right wing politicians have used the concepts to effectively campaign for self-reliance as opposed to collective-reliance or state measures. For the purpose of minority youth training, I will rely on the concept definition of Thomas and Pierson, the two most renowned English writers in human service and anti-oppressive practices, as being "concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives, so as to achieve their interest as a group, and method by which to enhance the power of people who lack it". (Thomas and Pierson, 1995. P. 134)

This definition clearly follows the line of minority young people and their need for empowerment training. Empowerment training is about providing the necessary tools, which will enable minority youth leaders to work constructively together to challenge oppression and thereby bring about change in a society that is characterised by inequalities and discrimination. It is about personal development, it is about social reconstruction of societal norms and it is about promoting institutional change. Any

empowerment training particularly at European level should address all three levels of oppression.

PCS model in empowerment training

The PCS model in empowerment training clearly advocates two key principles:

1. Oppression occurs at all three levels and training should be designed to challenge it at these levels.
2. All forms of oppression should be challenged, not in isolation of one from the other.

Both principles further validate the need for a training programme which secures training of minority young people to firstly develop their personal growth, such as developing their interpersonal skills, secondly, raise their awareness about the need of looking at oppression beyond their own cultural or minority boundaries and thirdly give them collaborative skills for working together. The model also advocates for the minorities to stand up against other forms of oppression and not to deny one form simply because they are different (and thus might not feel directly concerned). For example, most blacks believe that racism is a black issue while a Roma young person can tell you that the situation of Roma is unique and should not be equated to any other oppressed group. Or a white gay man might not see how he can contribute to the fight against racism or gender discrimination, when he is neither a woman nor a black man. What is mostly responsible for this is that the cultural level of oppression helps to sustain oppressive divisions among minorities. What this does is disempower the very groups by isolating them from other groups. Anti-discrimination and intercultural learning models have been culprits of such instances, where training is directed towards specific issues, which can only yield short-term results. In using the PCS model, empowerment training should address the following issues at each level.

Personal: Participants are supported and trained to gain self-confidence and self-esteem thereby having greater control of their lives and role as youth leaders.

Cultural: Participants are trained to understand oppression in a wider context. Given skills to logically comprehend ideologies and oppressive practices of the dominant culture and how to effectively challenge them. According to Thompson, at this level empowerment training is about consciousness-raising. (Thompson 1998)

Structural: Participants are trained on collective action for change directed at policy development, constructive criticism of institutions and engagement in dialogue with these very structures.

Principles in designing and delivering empowerment training programmes

It is usually convincing to conclude that the PCS model is in use anyway. This may equally be true, but what is most lacking in various empowerment training models is the

maximum involvement of participants, especially those specifically designed for minority youth leaders whose training needs are usually described as being complex. Most programmes developed and delivered are designed with the perceived knowledge of trainers who in most cases and with all good intentions have very little or no knowledge of the profile of the individual communities. This is in no way a handicap on the part of the trainers, but the limited time and resources just can not help to plan in advance a constructive and inclusive programme. This fact is rarely identified by trainers. Usually programmes are unsuccessful because of problems associated with time, lack of clear team work, lack of new dimensions in terms of content and attitudes of participants. Any empowerment training with minority youth leaders should be a partnership between the participants and the trainers based on the following principles:

Involving: Training contents and methods should be group directed and not trainer led. The most traditional way to ensure participants involvement has been the identification of participants' expectations and most recently through mid-term evaluations. For minority youth training this may not be adequate or out of context with the actual realities of the participants. A real involving programme should take into account the needs and aspirations of participants collectively negotiated within the programme. Regular feed backs at every stage of the training with clear openness on the part of the trainers are key elements in putting the principles of involvement into practice.

Motivating: Where participants feel involved in a training programme, the level of their motivation becomes overwhelming. They are able to question each other's needs, share experience and are open to work together with each other. After a couple of years running motivation workshops, I have had the opportunity of meeting minority youth leaders who become enthusiastic to share their wealth of experiences in working with their communities. What is responsible for this is the method of involvement, which is based on mutual trust, and understanding of their individual needs. A successful empowerment training involves the motivations of participants to pull together their aspirations and experiences.

Participatory: Participation is the principle advocate for the active inclusion of the participants at every stage of the empowerment training process. While involvement seeks for their regular feed backs and constructive negotiations of the needs and aspirations, participation occurs when participants are given full control to propose and contribute to programme contents and methods of delivery. For empowerment training this helps to support the professional growth and the feeling of worth among participants which they are often denied. It also helps to bridge the power relations between the trainers and the participants as equal partners in the learning process. The most interesting advantage of this principle is the added value and new dimension it readily brings to the training process. Trainers usually underestimate this wealth of participants'



participation. The easiest and often used means to bring a new dimension into the training is to seek new trainers, who often have little experience with regards to the specificity of the programme and the inherent purpose of the participants. Ragg, an American writer on participatory learning methods argues: "It is not so much matter of adopting new methods and those who facilitate such methods, but establishing the current methods and participants within a new framework... There is nothing inherently radical or conservative in any method. It is the purposes and involvement of those using them that breathe in to them one or the other of these characteristics". (Ragg, 1977. P. 145)

Empowering: Training programmes should aim at empowering participants as multipliers. Empowerment itself should be regarded as a process which participants have to go through in a training process. For minority young people the empowering level of the training is the consciousness raising about oppression as a collective problem and is facilitated through self-directed group work. At this level, participants should be able to make visible their own experiences about oppression and be given the tools to collaborate with other minority groups in developing strategies to challenge oppression at cultural and structural level.

The success of any empowerment training relies to a greater extent on how these key principles are taken on board in the planning and delivery of the training. It should be seen as a progression where participants are invited to be aware and become equal partners in the process, as indicated in the diagram below.



Conclusion

"Empowerment if connected with a notion of oppression... can become a distinctive underpinning for practice, and one which does not become colonised or domesticated in the service of the status quo". (Ward and Mullender, 1993, P. 22)

Mullender and Ward, both Western accredited readers on empowerment, largely summarise the rationale of this article. What I have tried to highlight was the relationship between discrimination and oppression where minority young people are in a clearly disadvantaged position compared to their counterparts from the majority. I have argued that if minority young people are to become equal stakeholders in the construction of a modern Europe, then they should be given empowerment training which will give

them the tools to challenge oppression at the personal, cultural and structural level. To achieve such an ambitious aim, the PCS model, I believe, should be the line that runs through the training programme without prejudice to intercultural learning, anti-racist and anti-discrimination training courses.

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