



by Marit Kannelmae

Looking for non-formal education
in the countryside of

Estonia

Everything is possible!

Imagine yourself in a small village in Estonia. I assume it is not easy for a lot of people who have never been in the country where this article is born, but not to worry, I will help you on that. Estonia is a country where almost two thirds of the people live in the cities but at the same time there are rural areas where 32% of young people go to school, work and spend their youth near woods and fields. From one side it is a good thing to grow up and live near to nature but more and more it seems that the possibilities for those young people are much smaller than for those who grow up in a city. Can this be changed? How and who can make this change? Let's look into it more deeply a bit later, but I will first tell you a story that made me concentrate on this subject with my heart and mind.

During my visit to a small community in Estonia a few years ago, I had the chance to talk to one of the people who was responsible for youth work there. The meeting made me sad. The youth worker said that since all the young people are gathering around the bus stop they need to build another one so that young people would not disturb older people who are waiting for their bus. We only talked very little about activities that should be open for young people or learning possibilities that could take place after school. It seemed unfair for the young people spending their life there without possibilities to fulfil their ideas and interests. **I was disappointed, because in my mind the countryside was still the ideal place to spend youth and childhood.** I was determined to find out if this is the reality everywhere in Estonia. Luckily I had the possibility to write my thesis on this subject as part of my studies.

► Youth work and policy in rural Estonia

My thesis focused on youth policy and youth work in Estonian rural municipalities. The main emphasis of the research was put on the importance of youth participation, looking at how much can young people have a say in developing possibilities for out-of-school activities and other issues concerning their

lives in the community. I also tried to find out how much non-formal education is known and valued in local communities. The research was carried out by sending a survey to youth work officials to complete in all 202 rural municipalities in Estonia. The conclusions were based on the 123 surveys that were returned to me.

Estonian youth work has gone through a series of developments within the past decade: from the big changes in the beginning of 1990's, when the system of youth work in the Soviet Union collapsed and the need to replace this with something new arose, to the compilation of youth policy and youth work strategy in 2005 that aims to support the quality of youth work. You can read more about those processes in the article by Reet Kost in *Coyote* issue 1 from 1999.

The main aims and activities of youth work in Estonia were specified in the Youth Work Act of the Republic of Estonia and in the Youth Work Conception and Development Plan of the Republic of Estonia for 2001-2004. Neither the Youth Work Act nor the Conception and Development Plan contained direct acknowledgement of the value of non-formal learning. **There are only a few hints in those documents about the educational importance of youth work.**

Now there is fortunately more focus on the quality and educational value of youth work than ever before, which means that youth work is not seen only as a possibility to spend leisure time, but also as having value in youth development. One of the first awakenings was in 2003 when the national conference on non-formal learning was organized by the Estonian National Agency of the Youth programme. **For many people it was the first time to hear that non-formal education is a big part of youth work.** The next big step forward happened in 2005 when the Summer School on Non-Formal Learning was held in Estonia and this time I was there to witness it. I will come back to this wonderful and fruitful event later.

Non-formal education gives young people the possibility to build up their confidence, to learn the skills and knowledge and to develop those competences they need to tackle the challenges awaiting them. There are more risks in young people's lives than we can imagine. This is something that hit me lately while having a conversation with 15-year old youngsters from Tallinn. **They need to find the balance in what they want to achieve in their lives and what the society expects them to do.** In some ways young people grow up faster, but at the same time the duration of the youth phase is getting longer - so it seems to be a struggle between the traditional and modern ways of life. This is difficult - especially for young people from rural areas. On the one hand young people are trying to fit in and on the other hand they hope to be different. More and more I hear from them that their parents do not have time and they spend a lot of time alone or with friends; family support is getting weaker which means that youth work is needed more than ever. That is why, in my opinion, it is important to strengthen everything that is strong and good in young people.

► A “eureka!” moment

A “eureka!” moment for me was when I read an article by Ragnhildur Bjarnadóttir about modern adolescents' leisure activities. She states that young people must be strong to deal with the new challenges and they need to use their inner strengths to face the risks in their lives. The new social situations provide new possibilities but may increase the gap between the strong and the weak: between those who experience themselves as successful or not in dealing with the challenges of modern societies (Bjarnadóttir, 2004). This gap is also present in the results of my research where a lot of

youth workers support the already active young people - but at the same time consider the ones who have not yet engaged with youth work activities, as problematic and hard to deal with. This is strongly connected to the attitude youth workers take towards young people – are we doing something “to” or “for” youth or “with” them? And this takes us to the active role of young people in local communities. How much can they have a say about what is important for them? Marc Jans and Kurt De Backer, in their article “Youth (-work) and social participation” (2003), say that youth work can only succeed in stimulating participation when young people are open to it, when young people see enough challenges in the initiatives of youth work. Secondly, young people need the capacity including specific knowledge as well as experience, skills, insights and strategies, to make a difference. **Finally young people have to feel connected with and supported by people, communities, ideas and activities in order to work together on the challenges.**

► Research results



Turning now to the results of the research I made at the beginning of 2005 among the rural municipalities in Estonia... One of the most remarkable discoveries was that for most of the municipality youth workers enabling NFE for young people is not a priority in youth work. 7% of the respondents stated that providing non-formal learning possibilities is not an important aim of youth work. It is of course a small per cent, but this statement was marked as “not important” and

“little important” most often from all the named aims in the list. Only 38% of the youth workers said that non-formal learning is a very important objective in youth work. The biggest percentage – 78% - was given to “preventing youth problems” as a very important aim of youth work. Of course we cannot underestimate the value of preventing problems, but having this as the main aim leads us to seeing youth as a “problem” instead of “resource” for themselves and the community (IARD-report, 2001), meaning that youth work sees young people “at risk” and concentrates on solving their problems without seeing the potential in them.

The second surprise for me was that lack of free time activities and active participation among young people are seen as being serious problems like alcoholism among parents, education that is not compatible for the labour market and consumption of alcohol and smoking among youth. It seems that young people not only have to cope

with serious problems within their family and education, they are also lacking possibilities to develop their skills and competences and to get support during out-of-school time, which could actually help them to be stronger in dealing with those difficult issues. For all the problems and risks young people face in rural Estonia, NFE possibilities can be part of the solution. If the officials see the importance of providing possibilities for young people to be active and to spend their free time actively then something can be done about it. One way to acknowledge the importance of non-formal learning would be to educate youth work stakeholders because despite many activities being offered, the educational value often gets lost due to lack of informed awareness.

The question about youth participation brought also positive results, since almost 80% of the respondents said that it is important that young people take part in decision-making when the questions concern the lives of the young people. Still, it was seen in other answers that deciding about their free time was the only question young people could participate in – their chances were much more limited when looking at such areas as education, security, health, environment and social issues.

Despite gaps in provision, there are different activities available for young people in rural municipalities. Many young people find things they find interesting and useful. I am sure that many youth workers give their best to support the learning in these activities whether they are aware that this is called “non-formal education” or not. **My concern**

is, that many young people, the ones who gather around the bus stops, are considered passive, problematic and in some ways hopeless. The reasons for not being involved can be very different and I am sure that only very few if any of the young people enjoy being bored and unmotivated. It appears from the research that two of those reasons can be lack of resources, interest and support from parents, and as already mentioned, lack of challenge.

The two main questions remaining after I finished my thesis were: how to make non-formal learning possibilities available for as many young people as possible? And, how to make youth workers see that in many ways they are already involved in NFE and that there are so many things to still to learn and develop?

► The Summer School on Non-formal Learning

This is the reason why the last part of this article focuses on the Summer School on Non-formal Learning that took place from 27th of July to 3rd of August 2005 in Pedase, which is also a very small place in Estonia. This event showed me that things concerning non-formal learning are developing and there are people who have taken the responsibility to spread the information about the importance of non-formal learning. This was the first time that such an event has ever happened in Estonia but I hope it will not be the last. Made up of people from outside and inside Estonia, the team made a week full of discoveries, learning, reflecting, planning and a tiny little bit of confusion on the way for all the 26 participants.

Timetable – SUMS – Programme 27.07.05 – 03.08.05

	Wednesday 27.07.05 (chair of the day: Reet)	Thursday 28.07.05 (Lynne)	Friday 29.07.05 (Ülly)	Saturday 30.07.05 (Mark)	Sunday 31.07.05 (Lynne)	Monday 01.08.05 (Ülly)	Tuesday 02.08.05 (Reet)	Wednesday 03.08.05
09:30		Forming the group Planting the seeds	Why this Summer school on non –formal learning? Theories and concepts in NFL	Experiences of Learning (coffee break included)	NFL in Youth work in Estonia	NFL in youth work in Europe Lifelong learning and NFL	Group work on action II Personal action plan	Farewell
13.00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
14:30	Arrival of participants	Who is here? Daily glossary Daily weather report Peer reflection groups	How do I/people learn? Results from Eurobarometer Daily glossary Daily weather report Peer reflection groups	Methods and methodology in NFL Daily glossary Daily weather report Peer reflection groups	Free time	Links between Estonian youth work structures and European youth work structures Daily glossary etc.	On group processes Evaluation of SUMS Final glossary Final weather report Peer reflection groups	
19:00	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner		Dinner	Dinner	
20:00	Getting to know/icebreaking				Campfire night organised by participants	3 work shops organised by the participants	Final ritual (planting a tree) Certificates ceremony and then Party	

For many of the participants it was the first opportunity to reflect on their work and think of it as “non-formal education” or make links between their work and non-formal learning. Finally this valuable part of youth work got a name and theory around it. Of course every one of us had an opinion about it. The reason for differences came from the variety of the backgrounds and positions in youth work among the participants. This was in many ways a unique event, since for the first time there was a training that concentrated together on both youth workers from Estonian and Russian speaking communities and also on many stakeholders in youth work: trainers, local youth work officers, youth leaders, representatives from the Ministry of Education and Research, representatives of the Estonian National Agency, youth workers in youth organisations and open youth centres and also representatives from Estonian Youth Work Centre. As you can see there was microcosm of Estonian youth work created right there for everybody to learn from and reflect on.

The imagination, creativity, skills and knowledge of each participant were put to the test. There were important inputs from the team: theories and concepts in non-formal learning, theories on how people learn, ideas on how to use methods in non-formal education and a lot more. Everyone wanted to learn; we had been given time and space for it and we saw the value and fun of learning – it was non-formal learning at its best!

One of the discoveries the participants made was to see that there is a connection between all the organisations and institutions and it is possible to make mutual plans together. It was seen that to promote non-formal education in Estonia some things can be done at local level and some things are better done by the ministry. **Many of the methods used showed that cooperation is the solution to the development of youth work.** The second, quite personal thing that I noticed during the summer school was, that there is so much informal and non-formal learning happening that we do not notice and due to that do not have a chance to value. Thirdly, I am sure, many of the participants can say after the week that non-formal and formal education can be combined and there are many links between them that should be used to make learning a more enjoyable and continuous process.

The result of this week has not yet shown itself in many ways, it comes up every day in all the participants’ work, but at the end of the week all of the participants were more aware of the importance and characteristics of non-formal education. From there came the motivation to multiply the feeling and knowledge they have gathered during the week and also few seatrain plans how to make it happen.

From the Summer School week I got at least part of my second answer. For the rest I know that there are many things to learn, read and experience as for every other student of SUMS!



Notes and references :



- Bjarnadóttir, R. (2004). Modern adolescents’ leisure activities. A net field for education? Nordic Journal of Youth Research. Young. 12(4). 299-315.
- Jans, M., Backer De, K. (2003). Youth (-work) and social participation. Elements for a practical theory. JeP (Jongeren en Participatie). URL: <http://www.alli.fi/nyri/links/pages/flemish%20report.doc>
- Study of the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe. Final Report. Executive Summary and Comparative Report. (2001). European Commission D.G. for Education And Culture. IARD – Instituto di Ricerca S.c.r.l. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/doc/studies/iard/summaries_en.pdf
- The SUMS team was composed of: Üllý Enn (Inclusion officer from the Estonian National Agency for Youth programme), Reet Kost (The head of the Estonian National Agency for Youth programme), Lynne Chisholm (Leopold-Franzens University of Innsbruck), Mark Taylor (Freelance trainer and writer) and Andrea Nagy (student of Leopold-Franzens University of Innsbruck)

Contact :



marit@noored.ee

