



Knowledge-based or civil society?

Can recognition of youth non-formal learning aim at both?

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“Despite all visibility and undisputed success rates, the youth work record in education, training and learning is easily overlooked or simply made a subcategory within education by decision-makers and stakeholders in established fields such as education and vocational education and training. But, youth work is more than a sub-category of education and training. It has to be seen for its own sake, but also for civil society purposes. Hence, the youth sector has to constantly reemploy strategies for recognition in tune with social changes and new overall educational objectives such as the preparation of young people for a knowledge based economy, for lifelong learning and for civil society.” (‘‘Pathways’’ paper, 2004, emphasis added)

Lisbon Process... Copenhagen Process...
Prague Process... Common European principles...
Common guidelines... Recognition... Validation...
Europass... Youthpass...

Without any doubt, the field of recognition and validation of non-formal learning seems to be one of the most dynamic policy and practice development fields of the past decade. And the youth field has joined the wave strongly, seeing its own benefits within the bigger picture. Today it is clear that working on recognition of non-formal learning in the youth field means working with other sectors and other stakeholders, joining the lifelong learning agenda and overall European efforts in becoming a knowledge-based society. However, despite its great educational value, as the ‘‘Pathways’’ paper expresses clearly, youth work could not be treated purely as a sub-category of education and training; it prepares young people not only for knowledge-based society, but also for – civil society. And there we have an interesting situation. No matter how much we believe in lifelong learning as a great idea (as I personally do), the ‘‘Pathways’’ paper encour-

rages us to critically examine our practices and safeguard the political and citizenship-building role of youth work. What do I mean by that? Inevitably, working on better recognition brings a bit more formalisation to the field, along with quality assurance mechanisms. One could argue that recognition and quality are two sides of the same coin, and I would certainly agree. However, assuring quality is a sensitive issue, due to its natural connection to some kind of control mechanism. This is a sensitive point. To illustrate this I would like to share a story I heard from a friend of mine. He told me that his country’s ministry for youth affairs, in the name of quality assurance, wants to establish a system of accreditation of all youth work programmes and projects. Only after the accreditation process is over could these non-formal education activities be done with young people. Wow! One could say that this approach would easily work in the field of education and training, but what about the civil society aspect of the youth field? Indeed, we should be aware that when asking for better state recognition, we don’t get pure state control!

Secondly, if I understand it well, civil society is not supposed to be only the means to make up for the failures and shortcomings of the state (for example, its compensatory function in the social sector). Although it often plays this compensatory role, it should rather be a corrective mechanism towards more social justice and participative democracy. In order to do that, civil society organisations (including youth organisations) have to be able to play a ‘‘watchdog’’ role, remaining at a critical distance and maintaining relative (if not absolute) independence from state structures. Being the watchdog assumes developing a set of competences in action, including critical thinking, policy analysis, advocacy skills, negotiation, etc. Needless to say, the youth sector is potentially a wonderful arena for development of these competences, thus preparing young people to take an active role in civil society. Non-formal education in this context is a tool to help young people not to accommodate, but to transform the society.

So, what should we do in terms of recognition? Personally, I’ve never been in favour of ‘‘either-or

thinking’’ and believe it is all a matter of goodwill and awareness of both practitioners and policy makers. Knowing that the good questions point the way, I am not suggesting any solutions, but rather leaving the following questions as food for thought:

- ◆ In the process of policy developments on recognition, how do we manage to ensure that the civil society aspect of youth field is not jeopardised by other objectives and institutional agendas, but that it is rather nurtured and valued as one of the core ingredients of youth work?
- ◆ What kind of youth structures do we need in order to create equal dialogues with other, usually more powerful, stakeholders?
- ◆ When developing further recognition practices, how do we ensure that these tools would effectively recognise the essential civil society competences developed by young people through youth work at local, national and European levels?
- ◆ What should be the means to value better the ‘‘civil courage’’ of young people and youth organisations actively contributing to transforming their societies?