

A REPORT OF THE GROUP INTERVIEW HELD IN MAINZ, 27/3/2018

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The group consisted of eight people, and Tanya Basarab and Tomi Kiilakoski as facilitators. Total length of the discussion was 1 hour and ten minutes. The topics covered their motivation to become a youth worker, support and learning in the early years of the career (the induction phase) and the important learning experiences and the role of networks. The interview was recorded for research purposes. The interview followed the thematic structure described in the Appendix 1.

Following observation can be made based on the discussion and the analysis of it. (The record has not been fully transcribed. I have listened to a recording two times and have transcribed the comments that I thought were essential.)

Time used for the interview: For a group interview such as this, the amount of time was a bit too tight. Therefore the recommended time should be around 1h30min to 2h. The number of active participants was 6 due to two participants leaving early. This probably is close to ideal size of group.

On the role of peer learning: The participants talked a lot about their personal experiences and the importance of their informal and professional networks. Clearly, when talking about the educational paths of youth workers one needs to pay attention to the importance of peer groups, a factor which was not studied in the previous phase of Mapping the educational pathways- research.

The role of mentoring: was emphasized in an interview, and was seen as inadequately arranged in many of the countries. Most of the participants came from southern Europe. It seems that at least some of the youth work structures do not provide systematic support of youth workers either in the induction phase or when working with the marginalized young.

The role of formal learning: Many of the participants talked about their formal learning or trainings, but felt that it is not adequate alone. The importance of peer learning and networks was emphasized. It seems that at least in this group the learning paths combine personal experiences, peer learning and peer support and theoretical understanding gotten from formal learning.

The following pages include thematic interpretations. I have left many of quotes in the text, to enable readers to see how participants talked and how they described their learning paths.

Motivation to become of a youth worker

Motivation to become a youth worker at least in this group seems to be based on the positive experiences in youth work as a young person, and a personal significance these experiences held for them. The role of formal learning in this group in youth work was rather limited. The role of experiential learning as a participant seems to be what got most people started on youth work, but it also plays an important role in the development of their professional identity.

None of the participants came to youth work through student guidance counseling or other paths outside youth work field. In comparison with social work students: at least in Finland the students of social work do not have personal experiences on the field itself, but they are aware of it's societal meaning and/or impact and feel that this suits their value basis and their personal traits. This probably tells something about the recognition and awareness about youth work as well? – The reason to get into the field as a professional is based on one's own experiences, not because it is seen as a legitimate career path per se.

The participants emphasized their personal growth and the subsequent motivation to contribute to the field:

“My first motivations were trainings that I did in outdoor education which lead me to personal realization about myself.”

“Some people saw that I want do stuff, and that I'm not satisfied with everything. They invited me to trainings. Then they voted me as a president of regional youth council. So, small steps.”

“I guess it was personal experiences, as it is the case for most or many people. For me it was through youth participation and the opportunities to be a student leader and youth leader on a national level, and school level first et cetera. I guess the question in my mind was how can I make a more systemic impact to this field. Studying youth work and becoming a youth work was a way to make a more long term impact even then I am not a young person anymore.”

“I started as a youth worker when I was 18 years old. The reason was that I had fantastic youth workers who helped me when I was a teenager. This was my motivation: I would have to give back something I had received. After this it became more professional. “

LEARNING, MENTORING, TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN THE INDUCTION PHASE

Early years in one's professional life have a lasting impact on the job. In the youth field, of course, not all the people move from the induction phase forward. Therefore understanding the support structures for professional learning is needed to find out the conditions that enable youth workers to build lasting careers. Based on the discussion, there is a need to talk about well-being of the youth workers as well during this phase – and in the other professional phases as well.

“The whole community – not only the youth workers – really helped me. ... We do not have support systems for people who are doing it. There is no mentoring system for people who work on the ground with young people. ... Working with young people with fewer alternatives is more demanding than working with all the young people. A youth worker in X is quitting because she cannot take it anymore. A pure youth worker who does not have a safety net around her. Mentoring and emotional support and I would say insurance [are lacking for youth workers],”

For some of the people, learning by doing or on-the-job learning was an important way to master the craft of a youth worker. However, they felt also that needed theories which would connect their learning experiences with wider frameworks. This way, they were able to understand better what is happening in the field. Especially in the beginning of their career they did not get support to understand the processes.

“I used to be a Scout, and we had these experiences but we never reflected about them. ... I started as a volunteer, as an animator, kids with social difficulties and so on. And I always lacked this social support system as well. It was really difficult for us, we were like 19 or so and not having education. You learn by putting yourself in a position there you just have to cope as a human being in the end. So when I did EVS in X for ten months. I always kind of learnt by doing this. It felt really good when I started working as a trainer: all these theories of how groups work and how to help the young, there actually were some frameworks that taught me why the group was working in a certain way. And I spent five years working in a network for youth centres.”

Youth work, as a practice-oriented field, is usually about doing. Training is needed to understand also the reasons for doing things in a certain manner. One participant described how she actively sought apprenticeship learning, which she combined to more theoretical studies. It should be pointed out that participants did not describe systematic ways of supporting apprenticeship learning, and talked a lot about their personal ambitions in seeking support.

“Mentorship was something I was actively seeking out. ... In this work you work with a personality and if you get insecure when it's a downward spiral. Thing I did in my personal learning pathway was that I did two one-year courses simultaneously. One was more theoretical about outdoor education and consultancy. We did not have much chances to practice, but there was a group to discuss the theoretical matters and try out things. In the place there I still work I participated in all the trainings for whole year. So I was working as a trainer for free. I learnt so much with the trainer and [was able] to see what he does and how he does it. I think one would have not been enough for me without the other. To just see how they are doing without understanding it. Just asking why they do it would not have enough for me. ... Two together really with helped me.”

LINEAR AND FRAGMENTED CAREER PATHS

Some of the participants describe the linear movement from the participant of the youth work activities to being a youth worker or a person working with the administration. Their career paths moved from adolescence to the professional field through different phases as described in the previous chapter. Other described more fragmented career paths, either moving from related field to youth work or moving away from youth work and back:

“I am not an educated youth worker, I have a business background. I have gone through all the processes of learning about youth work and all the skills.” / “I worked around six years in different organisations and countries. ... [Mentions countries-] Then I got sick of youth work. I was completely broke all the time, had no money, no health insurance. You are becoming a grown up, you have a master’s degree, you are not a student anymore. I remained a trainer in the field of business and consulting. I stayed there for five years supporting all the NGOs I had worked before. When I got sick of that world because it is not a value-based world. It’s profit-oriented, not for the development of young people. Then I came back to youth work.”

COMMUNITIES BESIDES YOUTH WORKERS

The importance of communities was talked from the perspectives of learning and social support alike. The role of friends working in the same field was emphasized: *“I spent my free time with people who work in the NGOs. It’s easy to talk about matters with them.”* The role of parents was mentioned as well. Besides these, the informal networks that were formed during the trainings were important for some of the participants:

“I usually went to different educational workshops, for example on non-violent communication. ... This is one of the communities that are still meeting.”

““I tried to kill my insecurity with trainings. The biggest thing it gave me was a network. We organized these meetings where they came to other to the trainings with other people and discussed those.” / “Sometimes I bring a question to a group, and realise that it is a question to others as well. This helps me to cope with the matters.”

Besides the informal networks, the role of professional associations was seen as important. *“Networking in other forums and platforms with other colleagues who are doing the same thing”* helped those who came from the countries there this was possible. This was not the case in some countries. *“Youth work in my country is tabula rasa. My family or my friends do not understand what I do.”* The importance of joint European meetings were emphasized for providing support and maybe even empowerment. *“It’s important to meet colleagues from other places and know that you are not alone. Maybe concretely learning about concrete stuff like digital youth work.”*

Appendix 1. The educational paths of youth workers

Focus group interviews, Tomi Kiilakoski methodological draft 22/3/18

Theme interview is a form semi-structured interview where the respondents are asked to reflect on the predesigned themes. It is widely used in qualitative research. Compared to rigorous forms of structured interviews theme interviews leaves room for narratives, stories and thoughts of the respondents. Using this approach we are able to talk about the themes that can be analysed while at the same time leaving room for personal stories.

Below is the list of questions arranged thematically. The basic idea of the interview is to cover these themes, usually not all the questions. The themes can be discussed in any order. The questions are arranged chronologically starting from the beginnings of career as a youth work career and proceedings to present day. Usually the theme interviews start with easy questions so respondents are able to warm up and get used to talking.

Background and warmup (app. 10 min):

Start by telling the purpose of the study and the actors involved in the study. Point out the need to study the role of non-formal learning, on the job learning, the ethical codes or guidelines

- How did you become a youth worker?
- How long have you worked as a youth worker?
- What type of expertise as a youth worker do you have?

I Becoming a youth worker (15-20 min)

What motivated you to become a youth worker?

- What competences and skills did you have that you thought would be useful for a youth worker?
- What values did you hold that would be useful as a youth worker?
- What did you know about youth work?

Did you take courses in training or did you have an education in youth work?

Did you have background in working in other fields?

II Induction phase: the first years as a youth worker (app. 20-25 min)

Start by saying that we are talking about the first years of the career, from 1 to 4 years in working as a youth worker (however the participants want to define what counts as working). Ask them to provide narratives, thoughts or descriptions of their learning paths.

How did your work community support you as a new youth worker?

1. Support for personal identity? What boosted your identity or self-esteem as a youth worker?
2. Support for professional skills?
3. The existence of mentors
4. Were there other meaningful social communities supporting yourself?

Did you take courses or other non-formal learning such as meetings, seminars or get-togethers in youth work provided by the NGOs, youth organisations, formal institutions or employers?

Did you get new ideas or support for your work from people coming from other fields?

What were your most meaningful learning experiences in youth work at this phase? What actors influenced those experiences?

Was there any role for European institutions or programs at this phase?

III The continuing professional development phase (app. 20-25 min)

Start by saying that after a few years at work people generally move on to phase that might be called continuing professional development.

What have been most meaningful learning experiences in this phase?

Are there any systematic efforts to improve your working community?

- In your opinion what would training and education would be needed to help youth work community to develop?
- How have you helped other youth workers professionally?

What training and education have you taken at this phase?

- Have you taken courses or other non-formal learning such as meetings, seminars or get-togethers in youth work provided by the NGOs, youth organisations, formal institutions or employers?
- Have you taken or thought of taking further education or retraining?

Have you got new ideas or support for your work from people coming from other fields?

What is the role of social media/digital media or ICT in your learning paths?

What is the role of European institutions at this phase?

How has your education helped you to be a competent youth worker? What is the quality of your education?

IV Looking at the future (app. 10-15 minutes)

Start by stating that the respondents can either take a personal perspective (*what do I need in the future?*) or a professional perspective (*what does the youth work community need?*)

- What competences and skills are needed in the youth work in the future? How many of those have we today?
- Where would you hope to learn those competences and skills that we don't have at the moment?

- How would you develop the learning/educational paths in different phases of youth work careers in a country where you work?