

Client Participation in Youth Care

▶ Slowed down by underdeveloped education and training of social pedagogues (or social workers)?

Motivating and enabling young people to participate in shaping the conditions that concern them, as a means to promote active citizenship, is an important aim for training in European youth work. The approach is also of relevance for youth and social workers dealing with young people in situations of social exclusion. Using the possibilities of two actions within the YOUTH Programme - European Voluntary Service and Future Capital - and later also his university studies, the author of this article has carried out some research about this issue focusing on client participation in youth care institutions. In his talks with people in such institutions he encountered resistance to promoting participation. In his article, he traces possible reasons and puts forward some ideas for change.

Introduction

During the year 2000 I have enthusiastically investigated and compared the situation of client participation in youth care in Austria and The Netherlands. I see client participation as a form of structural and frequent co-operation between clients and the rest of the youth care sector – from research to practice – in shaping the policy and methodology of this sector. The youth care sector is for me an institution of the modern welfare state aiming at preventing or reversing the social exclusion process of individual young people and to some extent their families as well.

The investigation was in the context of both my studies as well as for my Future Capital project. In 1999/2000 I studied for an MA degree in Comparative European Social Studies course at Hogeschool Maastricht in the Netherlands. Future Capital is part of the YOUTH programme of the European Commission in which volunteers can pass on experiences and skills gained during a European Voluntary Service project to the local community and to other young people, and increase their professional and personal development. In my Future Capital project I exploited my experiences from a European Voluntary Service project that I did in the United Kingdom in 1997/1998. The aim of the project was to prepare a seminar on client participation in youth care institutions. Despite the cancellation of the seminar, the project generated useful information and tools for those involved.

The main part of the investigation consisted of workshops and interviews with a total of more than 40 youth care clients and 25 experts from different

organisations, levels and disciplines in the youth care and welfare sector. The institutions involved were regional as well as local residential and semi-residential youth care institutions in Dordrecht (The Netherlands) and Vienna (Austria). They mainly aimed at helping their clients to deal (more) successfully with different challenges in their lives. The youngsters in these institutions came from very different backgrounds and thus formed a very heterogeneous group. And similarly, they were clients of these institutions for very different reasons. Their problems were mainly family or individual related and ranged from social-emotional to social-psychological problems. They were either experiencing severe problems or causing problems for their surrounding. The age of the interviewees ranged from nine to twenty-one. About fifty-five percent had been a client of youth care for more than three years (sometimes even their whole life!). Most of them had seen more than three different places and tens of social pedagogues, trainers and helpers. They can thus be seen as an expert group on youth care institutions.

This article highlights some striking aspects of client participation in youth care today which I encountered during the process of the project. It seemed that disharmony in the youth care sector has slowed down the development of client participation. In this article I take a brief look at what the possible causes might be and at the end I summarise three possible approaches to these causes.

Why client participation?

Client participation in youth care is in my eyes, and increasingly in the eyes of others, an indispensable means of modern preventive social care. It is a



by Hayo de Vries



complex topic. Many issues are involved, such as the competencies of the client, national and local youth policy, pedagogic methodology and even the organisational culture of the youth care institutions. Furthermore, social pedagogy and sociology and of course the international and national legal framework are also important dimensions. And in all those areas a solid ground can be found indicating that client participation in youth care is important.

The following perspectives stress the importance of both social and political youth participation. Firstly, social-pedagogically it can be seen as a supplemental means that contributes to combating the vulnerability of youth. Through participation young people can train specific skills and social competencies. These competencies are at the same time essential in dealing with individual social-psychological as well as social-emotional problems.

Secondly, legally it has been determined that young people have the right to participate. This is embedded in both national and international legislation of many nations in Europe. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a good example. With regard to quality assurance, a third perspective, the youth care sector could use client participation as a method to improve the service. In the Netherlands some unique experiments with this were carried out at the time of the investigation. One example is a joint project of the Dutch Platform for Wandering Young People and the Foundation Youth Participation 2000. Young people living in the streets were trained to interview other youngsters living in the streets. Not only were youngsters given a voice, but also unique first-hand information could be gathered.

And finally, in the perspective of the “democratic deficit of society”, client participation contributes to combating the lack of young people in decision-making processes that affect them directly and indirectly. After the democratisation wave of the 60s, the topic seemed to be out of the picture some ten to twenty years later. A stable political climate appeared to have led to the “de-politicisation” of society. “Politically sensitive issues were not solved through hot conflicts, but in the back rooms of the involved politicians” (Vink 1999). Young people therefore do not see the need to formulate a political opinion, and are not able to participate. Furthermore, according to Rietveld (1999) “...young people with major problems do not become members of youth structures in society”. So, especially to young people inside youth care – and to those outside and in need of help even more so – client participation also gives them an opportunity to work on their participation in social structures. In Central and Eastern Europe, countries are still practising with democracy. Hopefully they are willing to learn from the lessons of Western European countries.

Different attitudes to client participation

What I increasingly started to notice during the project was that there are different opinions in the youth care sector about client participation. And I could recognise two traditionally separated parties: those who work directly with youth care clients – “the work floor” – and those who work indirectly with youth care clients. In this article I will refer to the first group with “the work floor”. In this case the youth care clients also belong to this group. I will refer to the latter group as “the management”, although in fact, researchers, policy writers and so on also belong to this group.

The “work floor” seemed to be more reluctant to client participation than the management. And to some extent I do not find this surprising. In the interviews most social pedagogues (those who work every

day with youth care clients in practice) find themselves rather limited in organisational resources and methodology. Organisational limitations identified by this group ranged from insufficient time and money to lack of space and a work-overload. Methodological obstacles that were indicated were a lack of knowledge or (positive) experiences with client participation. Many social pedagogues were thus also disappointed as well as frustrated by failure of client participation experiments in the past.

Youth care clients also expressed a negative attitude to client participation. This however had clearly other reasons. They ranged from the very practical to motivational. At first, most clients did not understand what client participation meant. Secondly, despite the fact that clients had already participated in different elements of shaping their “care programme” most of them were still unsatisfied with their participation. It seemed that they also wanted to co-determine issues on which they had no influence. These were very practical things, such as: house rules, pocket money, visiting hours, etc. Thirdly, most clients in fact stayed too little time in one place to feel the need to co-determine the practice of “their” organisation. And finally, clients were sometimes frustrated by the failure of their organisation to help them. A lack of trust was then the main problem.

Referring to the latest international, national, regional and even local developments as successful examples, “the management” on the other hand were unequivocally positive about client participation. They referred to developments such as the ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, the changed child sociological science paradigm (which has become child-centred), the child rights movement and the increased attention the democratic deficit in society. The contemporary child sociological science paradigm considers society as becoming increasingly demanding for children and adolescents. Consumerism, job-hopping, personal success, a good health, cognitive and emotional intelligence and strong academic skills have become the credo of today. And unfortunately this has widened the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” (Euro-social Report 45, 1993).

Generally children are thus being considered subject to an increased risk of social exclusion. The “management” in the youth care sector sees youth participation as a means to combat this. It gives the clients a voice so that they can better influence their lives, as well as develop their social competencies. These will then help them to deal better with the demanding society of today. And especially the latter consideration sees client participation as an excellent and modern means of combating the social exclusion process of youth care clients.

Underdeveloped client participation dimension in education and training

Having asked both “the work floor” as well as “the management” to come up with an explanation for the above, a common thread emerged in their answers. The following trends were recognised:

1. The training and education of social pedagogues (or social workers) does not have a strong client participation dimension. This is mainly a result of today’s socio-political developments, where there is prioritisation of result-oriented rather than process-orientated methods. Curing has become priority. Client participation is however a more preventive tool and thus less compatible or useful for the practice of youth care in its current climate. It is therefore also not so much an issue for social work schools.
2. There is a lack of on-site tools, support, training and material as

well as non-material resources to develop a successful client participation dimension in the organisations.

- There is a lack of exchange of good-practice and knowledge between local organisations as well as between different levels and sectors in youth care. The sectors being: education, research and practice.

With all the interviewees together, from clients to policy writers, we talked about the possible approaches to reverse these disturbing trends. This exchange either took place through interviews, questionnaires or workshops. The results seem logical as well as obvious:

- Specific training modules should be developed for social work and social pedagogues' schools. There should also be an increase in the possibilities for students to personally experience what it is to participate in their school. Practical work with a client participation dimension should be stimulated. This could be for example setting up or evaluating client participation elements in practice. This will increase their familiarity with the phenomenon of client participation as well as with its dynamics and different shapes and forms. A research report of Foundation Youth Participation 2000, Lelystad, The Netherlands, gives some good suggestions (Gerrits et al, 2000).
- Specially tailored democratic training modules, programmes and projects for individual youth care organisations should be developed. These would aim at stimulating and developing the client participation dimension in these organisations. They should involve everybody in the organisation: from the clients to directors.
- The means of co-operation and exchange of knowledge and experience between local organisations, different levels in youth care and different sectors of youth care (such as: education, research and practice) should be further stimulated, renewed and increased

These possible approaches should not be seen as universally true or valid. They are only based on the comparison of the youth care sectors in Austria and the Netherlands.

However, I think any next step in the development of client participation in youth care should focus on education and training. It should involve both "the work floor" and "the management". In my Future Capital project I have experimented with this and developed guidelines for a workshop for youth care organisations. It still needs to be fine-tuned, but it is, I think, a good start. The results were at least very positive.

I hope this article will inspire people in all areas of the youth care sector that are trying to develop client participation in their organisation. Youth participation seems to be a hype, but we should not underestimate its importance! Besides that I hope that it encourages social pedagogues educators as well as youth care managers to take up a more active attitude towards client participation, if that is not already the case. To those who are still or already working hard, I would like to thank them for all their good work and wish them good luck for the future.

For more information about his Future Capital project or any other questions, you can contact Hayo at: Erzsébet tér 5b / IV 1a, H - 1051 Budapest, Hungary, phone: +36 1 317 7773, email: ha_yo@hotmail.com.

References

- Bakker et al (1999). Kwetsbaar en competent. Sociale participatie van kwetsbare jeugd. Theorie, beleid en praktijk. Nederlands Instituut voor Zorg en Welzijn, The Netherlands.

- Eurosocal report 45 (1993). Politics of Childhood and Children at Risk. Provision, Protection, Participation, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Vienna, Austria.
- Gerrits et al (2000). Serius nemen en serius genomen worden. Een onderzoek naar wat serius nemen betekent voor ouders, jongeren en groepsleiding. Stichting Bevordering Jongerenparticipatie 2000 (JP2000), Lelystad, The Netherlands.
- Rietveld, G.J. (1999). Factsheet. Youth participation in The Netherlands. International Centre of the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (NIZW), The Netherlands.

Recommended literature

- Eurosocal report 61 (1996). Children on the Way From Marginality Towards Citizenship. Childhood Policies: Conceptual and Practical Issues. European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Vienna, Austria.
- Friesl et al (1999). Die Ergebnisse des Drittes Berichts zur Lage der Jugend in Österreich. Österreichisches Institut für Jugendforschung, Vienna, Austria.
- Vries, H.S.P. de (2000). Client Participation in Youth Care. Governmental Policy and the Practice. An International Comparative Study of Austria and The Netherlands. Dissertation for MA in (Environmental and) Comparative European Social Studies, Hogeschool Maastricht, The Netherlands.

Quotes from the interviews

From social pedagogues (working with the young people in the institutions)

Reserved attitude towards client participation

"... there always has to be a minimum set of not-discussible rules ..."

"... they can talk about anything they want, but in reality they do not take initiative to discuss organisational matters or methodological issues. So why bother them with it? ..."

"... we have tried it many times before, but it always died a silent death ..."

"... they need a structure, because it is hard for them to structure their own lives ..."

"... they are not interested, because they can survive ..."

From clients:

Somehow reluctant towards client participation

"... We don't know everything for making the right decisions ..."

"... I already have problems enough! ... just let them (the social pedagogues or carers) decide about what should happen ..."

"... I am not interested in the others; I am here for myself ..."

"... Sometimes we can say what we like, but often in the end it is the carer or my parents who decide what is happening. "It is a rule!" they say ..."

From experts:

Clearly positive about client participation

"... it could be much more ..."

"... we should do some research about it ..."

"... not enough ..."

"... it is in the planning ..."

"... we have just installed a commission to investigate possibilities ..."

