

Non-formal Experiment

I feel a bit like receiving a prize when talking about the White Paper on youth policy.

It is almost obligatory to start by saying “I would like to thank...”, “it has been a surprise for all of us...” “it is a great pleasure for non-governmental youth organisations...”, “I didn’t expect this...”

It has been almost a surprise that there was finally a White Paper on youth policy. It has been a pleasure to finally find in a political document of the European Union a mention and recognition of non-formal education. I didn’t expect the lack of ambition that we have finally found in the contents.

In this article I will try to analyse how non-formal education issues were tackled in the process of consultation for the White Paper, and how the apparently successful outcome was reached.

The results of the White Paper: a new impetus for European youth have been quite far away from the demands of young people in general and, more specifically, from the proposals made by youth organisations.

During the process of consultation, many people, organisations, institutions and experts participated giving their opinions, making proposals, and contributing to the process of creating this document.

The White Paper will “rule” the youth issues at the EU level for the coming years (maybe decades) and it will influence not only the EU member states but also those other countries which are part of the different programmes and co-operate in various actions lines of the EU.

We have to make a positive evaluation of the inclusion of the value of non-formal education in this White Paper. We also have to be concerned about the fact that it has been mentioned as an “area of experimentation”. It is not true that the non-formal education field is something new - yes, it is an area of continuous experimentation, that is probably one of its main values. But it is my concern that how this is described in the White Paper it seems that it is a field of work that has just started - when we know that this is not close to reality.

This shows an odd way of treating this field of work

as the Council of Europe has considered non-formal education as a priority for many years already. Even if the European Union refuses to mention this in the White Paper, in daily life it recognises this experience in different ways; the Partnership Agreement signed by both institutions is an example of this recognition. Also the “still small” amount of money of the EU allocated for International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations is an example of the support that the EU has been giving to this field in the past. We can affirm then, that non-formal education is not a new field of work for the EU.

One of the reasons why I consider that this “misunderstanding” keeps on happening is the lack of knowledge that still exists in the EU institutions about this field of work and its different aspects, values and methodologies.

It is not only a matter of the concepts and theory that young people acquire through non-formal education (which of course are also very valuable), but also the values that a young person “absorbs” when being involved in youth work and that are impossible to be gained in any other educational sphere. These are, for instance: group work, intercultural and communication skills, values like democracy, participation, negotiation... and I could go further but I guess that there are already plenty of researches that can show and explain in a deeper way what I just mentioned.

by Conchi Gallego



In order to explain what I want to say with this statement, I will just give some examples of what I have seen in the process of consultation for the elaboration of this White Paper. This process has been once more a clearly missed opportunity to involve youth organisations and non-formal education methodology effectively in the process, and practise the so long requested co-management with youth organisations.

The consultation started on the National level, and each country decided how they would reach young people, and how they would “consult” them.

Some examples of these methodologies were: internet debates and chats, a weekend on a boat, training and debate seminars of young people, questionnaires... Some of these methodologies were inappropriate in order to reach a representative group of people, to gain a valid input, or a legitimate contribution. For instance, the anonymous inputs done through a web page don't give in my opinion enough credibility to the results, on the one hand because it is impossible to check that the personal information that someone gives in order to participate in such a debate is true (it could be older people or even people from other countries giving their opinions), and on the other hand the way people give their opinions when they are “anonymous” varies from a “face to face” moment.

At the European level, the EU has “forgotten” in some specific moments of the process the role of representative bodies such as youth organisations, youth councils and of course the European Youth Forum. It is remarkable that there is not even one mention of International Youth Organisations in the whole White Paper (at least in the main body of the document where the Commission sets up the priorities and defines partners and their roles).

The Commission goal was to reach as many people as possible, not understanding the point that - at European level - consultation on different matters must be done on a qualitative basis and not on a quantitative one.

One of the mistakes of this process was to ignore what has been practised successfully by youth organisations over the last decades: non-formal methodology and experiences. This led us to quite unfruitful discussions on most of the

occasions, with debates about debates and various conferences with no real objectives or aims.

This is maybe then, the reason why the EU keeps on considering non-formal education as an experimental field. It is based on the lack of knowledge among the different institutions, and the civil servants working in them (who in the end are the ones organising the different activities), the lack of co-management experience and work with young people. It is a great challenge to learn from each other and I hope that the example of co-management in the Council of Europe, mentioned so often in the process of consultation, is seriously taken by the Commission. It is maybe time to “open the doors” of our houses in order to get to know each other better.

Anyway, we have to take this opportunity to claim for better knowledge and understanding of youth issues and specifically of non-formal education. We have to give our opinions in other open debates that have a direct link with the work that we do, such as the Lifelong Learning, governance, the future of Europe.

The voice of youth organisations in these debates has to be heard in the European policy discussions.

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