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ROLE OF EUROPEAN ARTS AND PARTICIPATION IN

Value and specificity of trainings for youth with disabilities

Non-formal education, trainings and the active learning they provide, are more inclusive for young people with disabilities than the formal education system.

From discussions at various European youth meetings I could see that many disability organizations are aware of the importance of training. However, even though many young disabled people learn about the possibilities to organise study sessions in cooperation with the European Youth Centres, some are afraid to fill in and send an application because of lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem.

A greater number of young people with disabilities lack foreign language skills in comparison to their non-disabled peers, due to limits of special education in some countries or social exclusion. Training is therefore especially vital for people with disabilities, because it builds up the social skills and expertise otherwise unattainable for them through formal education. That is not to mention the fundraising skills, organization management, lobbying and other skills that disabled youth can learn at the trainings; the skills that help them to participate fully and to raise disability awareness in society.

One of the major prerequisites for participation of disabled youth is information.

When it comes to cooperation with the European Youth Centres and other structures, and participation in the trainings, one of the reasons for abstaining is simply that there is no information on how accessible the venues are - whether there are ramps for wheelchair users, induction loops for hard of hearing, Braille computer keyboards for blind people, audio-tape, large print, easy-to-read materials at the training venue. Provided with such information, young people with disabilities would feel more welcome and respected in their right to participate. Sometimes an obstacle is the lack of information about the educational value of such venues. There is a wealth of information as Mark Taylor pointed out in previous Coyote issues, but young people don't know where to find it, and all this creates a vicious circle.

Generally, there are few structures in Europe that consider specifically disability/mixed ability trainings as their priority. Usually the disability aspect might be more or less explicitly evident in training programmes concerned with minority/social inclusion/anti-discrimination and intolerance. Therefore, disability organizations and networks try to participate within the limits of these programmes; they also try to take care of organizing disability and mixed ability trainings themselves - with funding and support from European institutions. In 2003, the European Year of People with Disabilities, it was gratifying to learn that SALTO-YOUTH organized mixed ability trainings on Inclusion and Disabled. There were more disability-related 2003 year activities held even outside European Union borders, and that is a good sign.

Often disabled young people perceive themselves either as "incapable" or "helpless" or try to become "over-achievers" and reach the sky. These two are examples of extremes, of course - they are cited here only to indicate main tendencies in the self-perception of disabled youth. But in any case, we are restricted by our own self-images, and we are performing roles imposed by public opinion.

We need to train ourselves out of that lack of assertiveness. Both tendencies above can bring out another one that I call self-centeredness/self-centrism. In Russia where I come from, it is often perceived that if you are a disabled, the society and state owe a debt to you and are there to serve you - even though state assistance is below the poverty level. This point of

view suggests being an object of charity rather than a producer and active initiator of social change. As a person who comes from a post-communist country where a transition from **disability as a taboo subject**, with allusions to a charity model, to **disability as a human rights protection issue** has just started, I was rather surprised to sometimes see a similar self-centeredness in other parts of Europe.

(A charity model, also often called a medical model, places the problem with the individual and assumes that only a cure will solve it; it depicts disabled people as victims of circumstance, deserving of pity. You can find more about models of disability at http://www.vertou.demon.co.uk/models_paper.htm).

At trainings, self-centrism and low self-esteem may create an obstacle for participants and a challenge for trainers. Participants might be pre-occupied with concerns that relate to their type of disability - blind, hard of hearing,



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wheelchair users - which prevents them from responding to needs of other disabled participants. For instance, hard of hearing youths can be so tense trying to follow every word that they are involuntarily less able to help other participants. In this case, group work is what matters most - it should make participants learn about personal and others' attitudes, raise empathy for each other. **A participant's resistance can occur towards a non-disabled trainer who might not have the same expertise in the field of disability and understanding of the underlying complexities.** This resistance also has to do with fear of change (as in any kind of training) when a participant deals with the breakdown of his or her traditionally accepted role. "Over-achievers" are highly motivated and can lead the rest of the group, but they also tend to be unrealistic about programme tasks, time frame and other limitations at the training courses. The trainer's task will be to bring the participants in roles of "incapable/helpless" and "over-achievers" to their balanced contribution to a training. It is certainly justifiable that disabled young participants need a more sensitive approach from trainers, but in a way that they (participants, not the trainers) don't use it to their advantage.

There can be a language challenge too.. At a study session of the International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People, lack of participants' command of English created a "double disability". At the same time, at another IFHOHYP study session external trainers were surprised that deaf participants performed exercises on intercultural communication with much more acute reactions and quality than non-disabled trainees. IFHOHYP regularly runs study sessions in the European Youth Centre Strasbourg that tackle issues such as "How to Cope with Information", "How to Make a campaign on hearing disability", "Building communication for hard of hearing youth: breaking barriers and stereotypes". The European Youth Centre in Strasbourg is well-equipped with a special "induction loop system" and provides a text-to-screen service for the hard of hearing.

Another challenge for trainers is to avoid superficiality and pity in methods and approaches, and to be prepared usually for a slower group dynamic than in regular trainings; it takes more time for a blind person or a wheelchair user to get around a plenary room.

Re-adjustment to each other's differences is done almost every time in working groups: disability cannot be changed, it is something that environment and people can be adapted to. These challenges imply a constructive composition of the programme, time frame and - as far as possible - learning about the special needs of every participant in advance. At the study sessions and trainings for disabled youth we had to adapt games and exercises or choose them very carefully, considering different kinds of disability. Our task then was to run them in a sensitive, well-balanced way, without being patronizing to certain groups of disabilities. (Games with closed eyes are not that exciting for deaf or hard of hearing who need to read lips in order to understand; wheelchair

Benefits of disability trainings

We can speak of many obstacles for youth with disabilities - environmental, structural, informational...

But the main obstacle that exists at all levels of society is an attitudinal barrier: it still exists among many people who see the disability and not a person. It is a paradox that in order to be heard in the local environment, a young person with a disability should first speak out at a European youth meeting. Then this young person is treated with more respect and welcome in local structures: not only because of the increased self-confidence and skills, but also because of the nice printed report from the European meeting. The doors open easier for an ambassador of European youth work issues.

And so, what can a training give to young people with disabilities?

- shift from self-centrism to an increased self-awareness and appreciation of others' differences
- greater self-confidence and self-esteem
- motivation for social action and increased control of their lives, impetus for counteracting stereotypes and breaking down attitudinal barriers
- integrity (this also implies identifying, recognizing own strengths as well as limitations, and accepting them)
- better social and problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills
- examples of good practices and powerful role models

All this serves to empower disabled young people - even if the main aim of a training is not empowerment training as such.

users may not be able to do some group building exercises which for example require a lot of physical contact or movements as in a "Crossing the river" exercise). At one of the European Human Bridges mixed ability trainings disabled young participants invented a few sport games and exercises suitable for all kinds of disabilities. Here is a description of a very simple game, which can be used for example in group building for young people with different disabilities: players line up behind each other, and the game is played by passing a figure from the first member of the team to the last. The figure or a word is passed by drawing it (usually by fingers) on the back of the next player - players are to remain silent unless they need any specific assistance.

The set of figures is the same for all teams and should be not changed during the process. Due to the simplicity of the game it is accessible for anyone - blind and deaf persons, wheelchair users and persons with mobility restrictions. Every person is to be placed in line in accordance to the needs (e.g. in a chair, wearing warm clothing, etc). Since no equipment is required the game is safe and has no technical restrictions. In disability trainings, participants are mostly process-oriented rather than task-oriented. In the course of the training, the group work process, relationships with each other and socializing can be more important than the formal result



After you have read this, you might think that I am somewhat reluctant about disability or mixed ability trainings. Not a bit! I only want to be realistic; I always greet such trainings with optimism and enthusiasm. In fact, I think such trainings suggest a tremendous development potential for all involved, and can be a powerful learning process for both non-disabled and disabled trainers. Speaking about methodology in general, it is known that at generic training courses many ICL games and exercises give opportunities to draw participants' attention to nationality and gender issues. **The exercises and role plays that bring participants in touch with a new dimension including the disability dimension that some may never have encountered before, could give an added value to the trainings.** (OK, maybe it's just that self-centred approach speaking in me!). But indeed, learning about disability can deepen our understanding of diverse social, cultural and physical environments that make up the world society.

► Disability and Arts

European Human Bridges – a quest for humanity.

One example of good practice is European Human Bridges - an integrated long-term project networking non-disabled and disabled young people from Europe since 1996, when it came to existence as a result of participation by young disabled people in the Council of Europe Youth Campaign "All Different – All Equal" in 1995. The focus of EHB is anti-discrimination.

At the end of 2003, EHB will run a training seminar "Integration of Youth with Disabilities through Arts and Education" in Turkey [Editor's note: this article was written in October 2003]. The EHB event is devoted to exploration of disability in an intercultural context. It was performances of Russian wheelchair dancers and wheelchair dance workshops at the "Disability and Sport" training seminar in 2002 that raised the issue of arts in integration of people with disabilities.

Why Arts?

For people with disabilities, the arts represent a world of resources, providing an outlet for unlimited possibilities for personal, academic, and professional development.

And as the Arts is an infinite and unconditional field, it allows people to express themselves freely - without physical, social or attitudinal barriers. From my experience of working on rehabi-

litation through arts, I know that not all youngsters with disabilities who attended art studios, become professional artists. But **there is some inner freedom, flexibility, adherence to ideals about them, which is noticeably contrary to young people who have never been involved in arts. Art followers acquire a creative approach to problem solving, and they endure social oppression easier.**

On the other hand, the Arts is an effective tool in disability awareness-raising. For example, while people with disabilities can be associated with consumers and beggars, musical and dance disability performances, exhibits of exquisite artworks break these stereotypes. One can rock rostrums speaking about youth disability rights – or give this young person a chance to perform in public with their musical or theatre masterpiece. The effect would be startling and will evoke a positive attitude coupled with respect. A wheelchair dance performance of deaf dancer with partners in wheelchairs will be a more obvious example of inclusion possibilities than any paper declarations. **The language of art is stronger than words – it is universal.**

In Izmir, Turkey, young disabled and non-disabled people from 15 European countries will explore the ways arts and education can combat intolerance. The team of EHB trainers want to stimulate creative actions that can raise disability awareness.

The aim is to bring participants to an understanding of how arts-based education can improve their learning and social skills; to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of art in the development of self-identity.

Interactive Arts-based activities, master classes and creativity workshops (theatre, clay, dance, painting) will allow participants to look at disability beyond cultural boundaries. Mixed ability groups will mirror society and underline the notion that learning from each other's differences and abilities is the best education towards inclusion. Role plays, pantomime and interactive theatre provide a fun approach while encouraging deep and serious insights, and they help participants to abstract themselves from traditionally accepted disability roles. Participation in theatre will also help building self-confidence and mastering public performance skills that will later allow participants to stand up for their rights and battle local bureaucracy.



► What do we expect as outcomes?

At a personal level: while being art-therapeutic to an extent, creative training elements will raise self-confidence, motivation and the ability to publicly speak about arts as a way of integration; they are expected to develop a deep urge for creative development, and problem-solving skills.

At local and European levels: using creative methods in their organizations, promoting positive images of a disabled person through arts. Participants will be encouraged to find means of integrating ideas about disability into art, documentaries, media, news, comedies and so forth. For the creation of healthy societies it would be invaluable if celebrities and well-known disabled artists assimilated the practice of creative work with disabled young people and served as role models in a way it is done in some Western European countries and largely practised in the U.S.

There is hope that participants will gain the attention of local educational and decision-making institutions that will recognize the importance of arts in the integration of all youth. There should also be a mobile disability art exhibition, starting with artworks produced at the training seminar 2003! It will travel around Europe with temporary displays in EHB partner organizations, along with video presentations. Such projects with an inclusive approach give impetus to young people for further development as well as strength to combat discrimination.

► Participation for All in Europe

The European Youth Conference "Towards a Barrier Free Europe for Young People with Disabilities" held in Athens in May 2003, worked in this direction as well.

The Madrid Declaration adopted in 2002, provided a conceptual framework for action for the European Year of People with Disabilities at all levels. It was the first European conference of its kind where both disabled and non-disabled youth could participate and it emerged as a result of cooperation between the European Youth Forum and the European Disability Forum. **The objectives of the conference were to increase the political participation of young (disabled) people, to mainstream disability in youth policy, to set up disability youth networks, and adopt a common Declaration, which is to be disseminated.** For me, one of the biggest achievements of this conference was that its mixed ability setting allowed for open discussion where contrasting, almost radical views could be juxtaposed – about independent living, for and against inclusive education. Furthermore, the conference allowed participants to speak of dis-ability in terms of ability, equal opportunities and participation. I was pleasantly surprised to see the interest and inspiration with which non-disabled participants approached the issues of rehabilitation for ALL young people. Most participants came from national or local organisations, which made me think how many disabled young people are indeed active at European level. Participants seized the chance to express their concerns in the presence of Pierre Mairesse, Head of Youth Unit, European Commission DG Education and Culture. Such a direct contact

with decision-makers was an example of getting away from a trend when professionals take decisions on behalf of young disabled people without asking their opinion. The creation of a Declaration recalled the model of open-coordination used for the White Paper on Youth: about 200 young disability representatives, social workers and pedagogues, volunteers, experts from different countries of Europe contributed their comments to it. Being a speaker on behalf of the European Disability Forum, I highlighted the aspects of information and participation for ALL from a disability perspective and facilitated discussions on how to improve communication channels for young people with disabilities and how the EU programmes can be further improved for youth with disabilities. For me, as a person who is concerned about youth work and training, it was pleasant to see that the Declaration adopted the call for such actions as the use of people with disabilities as resources both in governmental and non-governmental sectors, e.g. trainers, educators, and encouraging inclusion in educational policies, vocational training and permanent training.

Theory calls for action. In our time of unrest, ethnic conflicts, terrorist attacks and catastrophes none of us is insured against disability. ■

Further information and contact: ✕

- **International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People:** www.ifhohyp.dk
- **Models of disability:** http://www.vertou.demon.co.uk/models_paper.htm (accessed 10 December 2003)
- **IFHOYP study session:** http://www.coe.int/T/E/cultural_co-operation/Youth/1_News/100.asp#TopOfPage (accessed 10 December 2003)
- **Athens Declaration:** http://www.edf-feph.org/en/policy/youth/youth_pol.htm (accessed 10 December 2003)
- **Madrid Declaration:** www.madriddeclaration.org

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