

Youth work for all?

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SALTO Inclusion

Youth work is about learning by doing, so let's start with an exercise.

Simply read the following text:

Imagine: You are going for a walk in the park. At the gate the park guard nods at you when you walk by. You smile back and enter the park. The birds are singing. On the grass a group of children is playing, their parents watching over them. A bit further on a bench, a young couple is kissing. Spring is in the air. You stroll to the other side of the park where you order a cone at the ice-cream kiosk. Yummy!

That was the doing, now the learning:

While you were reading you probably created images of the different people in your head. Now, how many people in the story had a different skin colour? Did anyone have a disability? Were the parents or the kissing couple gay or straight? Were the park guard and the ice-cream vendor male or female?

The world would be an easier place to make sense of if indeed everybody was the same, preferably similar to yourself, wouldn't it? But this is not the case. The world is full of diversity: different cultures, genders, educational levels, religions, sexual orientations, abilities, social backgrounds, geographical origins, languages, social skills, family situations, health, etc.¹



Is your youth organisation inclusive or exclusive?

The next question is: 'Where is this diversity in your youth work?' In your activities, do you reach people from different cultures, social backgrounds, educational levels, sexual orientations, etc.? If you don't, it is time to think about why your organisation 'excludes' specific target groups. I can hear the offended youth worker in you say that your organisation doesn't exclude anyone. But there must be a reason why certain groups don't find their way to your activities.

Are your buildings and your activities accessible for people with a disability?


Do you have youth leaders from both genders and with different cultural backgrounds?

Are you sensitive and respectful towards expressions of culture, religion and sexual orientation?

Do your activities require young people to have a certain intellectual or economic level?

Do you actively encourage minorities or young people that are different to take part?

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Maybe you have a good reason to work with a target group of similar young people. Gender issues are sometimes better discussed amongst men or women only. Working on personal identity is maybe best done in a safe, accepting environment of like-minded people. But in general there's no added value in limiting a sports activity, a music session or a youth exchange to white middle-class students. On the contrary, we could ask the question whether youth work has the moral obligation to bring different groups together to foster inclusion and solidarity.

Do you have what it takes to attract young people? ²

In a 2007 survey, only 8% of young people (in the EU) were members of a youth or cultural organisation. So where are all the others? In addition young people with a higher level of education tend to participate more in non-formal education activities than their peers with lower levels of education. So who takes care of the 15% of early school leavers? Who works with the 20% of 18-24 year olds at risk of poverty? Where are the 15% of unemployed young people? The 16% of people with a disability?³ To name but a few exclusion factors.

If young people are not so keen on participating in our wonderful youth work activities, what kind of activities do they do in their free time? Some 49% of young people are members of a sports club. Some other favourite pastimes are 'meeting friends and going out' (40%), Internet (21%) and music (17%).

Number crunching

You can find these and more figures regarding youth in the 'EU Youth Report 2009', published by DG EAC, European Commission

A story about the Sun and the planets?

If youth work wants to reach particular target groups (for example those that usually fall by the wayside) it needs to go where those young people are and offer what interests them. For example, if young people are increasingly surfing the Internet, new formats of youth work need to be developed online. If half of youngsters play sports in a club, it's time to create partnerships to insert youth work principles on the pitch.

It is time to put the Sun back in the centre of the universe; that is, it is time to put the young person in the centre of your youth work. When was the last time you checked with young people with fewer opportunities about what their concerns, needs and interests are in life? If they lack support to get through their education, there is a role to take. If they are unemployed, you can work with them on employability. If they have health issues, lead them to the healthy lifestyles and care they need. And if they are looking for 'fun' or 'hanging out with friends' that is a fine way to attract them too.

The Earth turns around the Sun, remember? It's not the other way around.

Working strategically on inclusion

Set up a strategy for inclusion within your organisation. The Inclusion by Design booklet leads you through this process step-by-step: www.SALTO-YOUTH.net/InclusionByDesign/

How to sell this to the funders

The big challenge for youth work is to justify to funders and authorities that working on young people's needs (even if this is 'fun' or 'hanging out') is in the long run more beneficial for their social inclusion than forcing them into 'corrective' youth work (that is focusing on government targets rather than on the young people).

The task of youth workers is to engage with young people with fewer opportunities, to stimulate them in their reflection about where they want to go in life, show them the consequences of their choices and support them on the path towards their goals. This way they become truly active citizens that are responsible for their own lives and for their communities.

Now it's up to you to marry active support for young people's lives with the demands of youth policy. It is possible! Many youth workers have done so for ages. Good luck with it.

1. As described in the definition of 'Young people with fewer opportunities' in the Inclusion Strategy of the Youth in Action programme: www.SALTO-YOUTH.net/InclusionStrategy/. 2. Figures from the 'EU Youth Report 2009', DG EAC, European Commission. 3. Disability in Europe-25 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>, 3 December 2007.