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A story of youth work in Lithuania

Introduction

I call it a story, not a history, for a reason. When I was invited to make a presentation (on which this chapter is based) during the third workshop on the history of youth work in Europe, at first I felt happy and a bit flattered. But then a doubt came to my mind: would I be useful in any way to the workshop participants? I am not a researcher or historian. And I was aware that a perfect report on youth policy, including a quite-detailed description of the development of youth work in Lithuania, had already been compiled by an international group of experts (Williamson 2002; Council of Europe 2002).

But then I decided to contribute by focusing not so much on historical facts as on a story from the perspective of a person who has been involved in the development of youth work in Lithuania since it regained its independence. This experience allows me to share a view on how our thinking has changed and what kinds of intentions people had when making one or the other decision in the field of youth work. Of course it is a subjective story: probably I should say something about where it comes from and what my experience is in the youth field, so that its limits are clearer.

I started as a volunteer in the youth psychological aid centre. I worked there for a couple of years. Then I worked as the head of the youth division in the Ministry of Education and Culture (later Ministry of Culture) between 1993 and 1994. So initially I had experience of working on a grassroots level, moving immediately afterwards to a government post with responsibility for the development of youth work and youth policy in the country. From there my career went up or down or probably back to a more practical field, that of youth work training. I started in Lithuania but later worked in other countries of Europe in close co-operation with the National Youth Council of Lithuania (LIJOT), the Youth and Sport Department (YSD) of the Council of Europe, and the European Youth Forum (as a member of DEVDEMCOM, a committee for the development of democratic youth structures).

The training I was involved in was almost never about pure skills training. Even when this was the case, it was almost always also with the intention of developing the structure or quality of youth work. At the same time I was doing youth work myself by running outdoor experiential learning programmes for youth at risk and conducting training for youth workers and youth trainers on the subject. This is the experience that informs my story of youth work in Lithuania.

The Soviet paradox of participation

We in Lithuania, as in many other post-communist countries, have experienced an interesting phenomenon, which we can call a Soviet paradox of participation. At the very end of the Soviet era the level of youth participation in youth organisation (not in organisations, because there was only one correct organisation – Komsomol) was very close to 100%. But the first research conducted on the subject in independent Lithuania, just a couple of years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, found that the participation level was down to 3%. I believe 3% was also the real number in Soviet times. Real participation and belief in youth participation had long been decreasing; only fake participation in Soviet documents was increasing.

We had to face this situation in the post-Soviet area from the very beginning, because it was not hidden anymore. But the lack of a belief in participation turned from a passive attitude to that of active disbelief, or cynicism. Everything that was related to youth enthusiasm, with any idea-based movement, was immediately associated with Komsomol. And Komsomol had mostly negative or very negative connotations.

So it was an obvious challenge to re-establish a positive picture of participation, to patiently encourage new forms of youth participation in society. This became a primary goal of youth policy and youth work in the first decade of independent Lithuania (or the last decade of the 20th century).

The general situation from 1990 to 1993

Luckily it is wrong to say that we had nothing at all in the youth work sector. First, youth organisations and youth movements were created. This happened thanks to the enthusiasm of certain individuals and some foreign partners.

Almost all the traditional youth organisations were set up in Lithuania. Most were related to and sometimes initiated by foreign partners (for example, scouts, Youth for Exchange and Understanding, Red Cross youth, YMCA, young farmers association, and youth organisations associated with political parties such as the young liberals, social democrat youth and young conservatives). There were youth organisations drawing on roots from before the Second World War, in many cases supported by Lithuanian emigrants in the United States (for example, scouts, *Ateitis* or Catholic youth, *Lituanica*, young *Maironieciai*, the *Valancius* movement). And there were also very new youth movements born of the authentic movements of those days (for example, *Atgaja*, *Young Romuva*). In many cases these youth organisations had shallow roots among young people. This was so, in my opinion, because of the sometimes unclear idea of what exactly one was to do in life in those days. Organisations had strong ideas, but relatively poor pedagogical concepts, a lack of youth leaders, and youth workers almost did not exist.

Alongside these developments, there were non-profit youth (or sometimes for youth) service organisations (*Actio Catholica Patria*, the youth centre *Babilonas*, youth information centres, youth psychological aid centres, and so on). Some were initiated and created by adults for youth but in almost all cases they were joined by young people who were providing services for youth.

One more thing should be mentioned about the situation in those days. Youth organisations organised themselves into an umbrella organisation – the Lithuanian Youth Council, which LijOT succeeded in joining the Council of European National Youth Committees (CENYC). Even more: LijOT survived and did not split into alternative national youth councils, which was the case in some countries of the former Eastern bloc.

So the non-governmental sector was more or less developing in its own way, which was not the case at governmental level. There was no policy and/or budget for youth work at the national level or in municipalities. The only active player in this field that had a more or less clear policy and funding for youth work was the Open Society Foundation (the Soros Foundation). It had a very clear idea – the empowerment of youth initiatives. The Open Society foundation began the tradition of funding the non-governmental sector, which was followed by the state at a later stage. The foundation also had a very direct influence on the creation in 1993 of the youth division in the Ministry of Education and Culture. Its main influence was through good practice examples, which became possible because of Soros Foundation funding. But the foundation was also influential in encouraging and advising the creation of the first state institution to take over responsibility for the development of youth policy and youth work.

Additional education instead of youth work

Some colleagues from Lithuania would almost certainly disagree with me about my assertion that there was no state youth policy on youth work from 1990 to 1993. And they would be right in a way. There was a range of out-of-school education programmes (additional education, to translate it literally) paid and run by the state: music schools, art schools, leisure time centres, sport schools,

hobby circles at schools, and so on. People from the NGO side and from the newly established youth division in the Ministry of Education and Culture felt (but did not yet know how to explain) that this kind of youth work was not quite what they wanted and that it would be too easy an escape to say that everything was all right and that all this additional education should be accepted as youth work or as the only way of doing youth work. They may have felt that way, but often they did not have the arguments to explain that perspective. Nevertheless, this process of self-definition had started and I will come to the results of it later in my story.

→ Where to go?

The creation of the youth division was, without doubt, the starting point for the intentional development of youth work. This development was obviously influenced by different actors from abroad. The Soros Foundation, international youth organisations and CENYC have already been mentioned. They did what they did before that and continued doing their work. But other actors should be mentioned here as well.

The Council of Europe had a great influence by creating possibilities to learn about the experience of other countries. When the youth division in the Ministry of Education and Culture was established all the staff of the youth division had a fantastic opportunity for an extended study visit. Six countries – Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, France (the European Youth Centre, or EYC, in Strasbourg), Liechtenstein and Slovenia – were visited on the trip. Later, a big group of youth leaders and civil servants had a seminar at the EYC in Strasbourg, which enabled the establishment of a network of people working in different institutions on different levels who had a shared understanding of what kind of youth work we wanted to develop in Lithuania. This knowledge helped to decide how youth work had to be organised.

But another question was how youth work should actually be implemented. In this field, on the grassroots level, different partner organisations from different countries have shared their experience and knowledge, especially Catholic youth from Germany, including Katholische Junge Gemeinde itself, which had a big influence on the understanding of youth pedagogy. In particular, the very experienced social pedagogue Andrea Mewaldt was working in Lithuania for many years, first in Actio Catholica Patria creating a project for a youth voluntary work year, and later in co-operation with LijOT training youth leaders and youth workers, which helped to create a base for the tradition of youth work-based emancipatory practice. This is the approach that continues to have influence to the present day.

The influence was important, though very useful and very risky at the same time. The risk lay in blind “copy-pasting”, with the structure of youth work taken from somewhere else without an understanding of its roots and intentions. There was a risk of falling prey to the illusion that something could be created very quickly, without patience and reflection, forgetting that, for example, German youth work has a relatively long history with its own ups and downs. It was very important in Lithuania for us to understand that we had to go through our own process of step-wise development. It was our responsibility to reflect on the experience of others wisely, to keep growing on the basis of our own authentic experience, and to be patient in discussions and in our own discovery process. And I think

youth workers, youth leaders, youth trainers, youth organisations, LijOT and the youth division in the Ministry of Culture (later the State Council for Youth Affairs and then the Department of Youth Affairs in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour) did their best in this regard.

What it is not to be done

We started from what is not to be done.

NO EMPTY BOXES!

What does this mean? It means that the structure for youth work should follow the development of youth work itself: that the structure should be developed together with the actors of youth work according to the changing situation.

The aim for this was a flexible structure encouraging authentic experience, in order to avoid a scenario wherein the structure suppresses the content. There were other core principles regarding what we wished to be done:

- yes to an emancipatory approach;
- yes to a subsidiarity principle;
- consequently, yes to the participation of NGOs but with a clear role for LijOT.

In order to move in this direction there were three main aims:

- developing competences: knowledge, skills, attitudes of youth workers and leaders;
- creating a legal structure;
- creating a financing model for youth work.

A lot of energy and money was invested in people through long-term training courses for youth leaders, youth workers and youth trainers. This served both to improve youth work quality and provide a space for a self-defining process whereby people active in the field could meet, reflect on their practice and also formulate their ideas for youth work policy. Thanks to this process, or in parallel with it, examples of good practice of emancipatory youth work appeared and a youth policy concept was adopted in parliament in June 1996. This was probably the moment when the basis for a new quality of youth work for Lithuania was created.

Youth for Europe has arrived: big push, new quality

The EU youth programme Youth for Europe probably had a similar general influence in Lithuania as everywhere else in Europe, but additionally its arrival was a big catalyst for the development of youth non-formal education as an independent field. The National Agency for Youth for Europe decided that it was not enough for people to learn how to fill in application forms and how to do book-keeping correctly; after the receipt of a grant, the recipient had to be trained so quality

educational experiences were provided as well. Since the programme was open to a very wide range of applicants – youth organisations, non-formal youth groups, school groups – and since youth leaders came from different contexts and different fields, the idea of emancipatory/empowering youth work spread and reached a much wider population.

Youth workers had to explain themselves

Though it is suggested here that the basis for youth work was created more or less successfully and reasonably quickly, it should also be said that the process of defining youth work was never easy. People from the field naturally had to explain and define themselves and this still continues. As noted already this story is not a document on the history of youth work of Lithuania. Rather it is a story of how thinking about youth work developed. Examples of youth non-formal education should be mentioned here as an example of how youth workers have to explain themselves and what they do.

Naturally, when it comes to public funding, everything should be defined. Youth non-formal education is no exception. In many countries youth non-formal education is described in a very simple and clear way as education that takes place beyond formal education settings. But in our case it was felt that if only this criterion was adopted, those coming from the context of emancipatory or empowering youth work would have no chance in the invisible competition with what was called “additional education” in Lithuania. So the field of non-formal education had to be defined by two criteria: in terms of the space where it happens and by the method employed, as illustrated below.

Table: Educational fields and methods

	Field of non-formal education	Field of formal education
Empowering/emancipatory approach and methods, formative assessment	A	B
Directive methods, formal programmes, summative assessment	C	D

A. Non-formal education: This is mostly organised by youth organisations and open youth centres, but also by some teachers, enthusiastic individuals at hobby circles, youth exchanges and youth initiative projects. The content covers life skills, social/emotional competences, space for improvisation, and learning by discovering. Content and method is decided on by educators and young people together. Assessment is mostly formative, though it can sometimes be summative when recognition by third parties is needed.

B. Interactive teaching: This involves interactive teaching of formal curriculum subjects. It is often used for developing generic competences.

C. Additional education: This is mostly organised by state-funded additional education schools, and includes, for example, music schools and art schools.

It provides additional high quality training in specific fields (such as music, art, sports, technical skills). Content and methods are approved by the Ministry of Education. The assessment is mostly summative.

D. Traditional teaching: Traditional teaching is mostly used to impart conventional knowledge.

I will not go into the details of the table above partly because it is not an officially recognised table, and also because I am not writing about the pedagogical aspects of youth work here. But there are a couple of issues that require underlining.

If non-formal education as part of youth work were defined only according to the method, we have had very reasonable comments from teachers in schools who are already using a vast range of different group work methods and experiential approaches that contribute to emancipatory/empowering relationships with their students. They would say that they do the same as youth work, but the space or field in which they do it distinguishes it from youth work – it is “non-formal education” within the formal education system.

If non-formal education as part of youth work were defined only according to the field where it is organised, we would be in deep conflict with additional education, especially music and art schools, but also sometimes with sport schools, because if non-formal education appears in the same pot as additional education it does not serve the interests of either. Though both fields are important, useful and needed by young people and society more generally, the funding arrangements need to be separate and different. One funding approach is needed when we talk about preparing a high-class pianist and another kind of funding is needed when we organise non-formal programmes for groups of young people for a musical expression session. And it is not only about funding; the competences of the “youth workers” need to be different, and the learning environment is different.

This is just an example of how the youth work field had to be defined and it had to be defined in the context of the reality of Lithuania. The realities of other countries can give hints and inspiration, but decisions needed to be taken here and by us, and of course the consequences also had to be experienced here and by us. And this is where the tension and anxiety comes from, because it is so tempting to give in to the illusion that the right answer and the right decisions have already been made somewhere else, so we just take them and implement them. Then it is much easier and... less responsibility falls on our shoulders.

Recent developments

Before writing this story I talked to people who are involved in the field of youth work in Lithuania now. I asked them how things looked today, and what follows is a short summary of their perspectives.

All the varieties of youth work, in the sense of target groups, methods used, and geographical coverage, exist in Lithuania. But a striking view was that accessibility is limited. Youth work has become very rich and lively, but it has not become a massive phenomenon known and accessible to everyone everywhere. There might be different reasons for this. One of the reasons could be a pitfall of the

subsidiarity principle. Since this principle was established from the very beginning, it could be seen that it was implemented in a way that the responsibility for the development of youth work lay very much in hands of youth organisations. From one perspective this is good – youth organisations have real power in decision-making processes concerning youth work at all levels. But at the same time it seems to make it easy for the governmental sector to escape their share of responsibility. Sometimes one gets the impression that youth work is not the business of senior politicians anymore. It seems that they are happy that youth work has its own “sand box” (instead of an empty box) and they are happy to let youth work play there. Maybe this is not the reality quite yet, but there is definitely a risk. And if such a situation develops, it will be difficult to expect movement towards a new quality in youth work. By new quality, I mean the recognition of professional youth workers not only on paper, but also in the budget lines of municipalities, where there is a proper budget for youth work at the grassroots level, thereby creating equal access to youth services all over the country for a wide range of young people including those who are less motivated. This is especially important when it comes to professional work with youth. Voluntary youth work and project-based work with youth is there and it grows in its own, natural way, but professional work with young people is done by committed individuals at the cost of their free time and sometimes their health. We – the people from the field – know that things like this never last too long. And such enthusiasts are leaving the field already. They will continue to leave if the state is not able to buy their services now. If the state is not able, or willing, to buy their services now, we – actually us, the citizens – will have to pay much more later.

This is the dilemma or the challenge for the youth work story in Lithuania today.

Remembering the future

The story continues. Some areas that are now being dealt with are:

- the development and implementation of the concept of the youth worker;
- the development and implementation of open youth work;
- the concept of open youth centres (a pilot project is running, and nine open youth centres have been opened).

Regarding open youth centres, a new concept of open spaces/areas for youth is being tried out. This is a space or a room open and adapted to work with youth that can be in an existing institution (for example, cultural, educational, sport or social centres) but is adapted and applied for open work with young people using existing tools or a methodological framework. A new system of financing youth non-formal education is also under construction: a pilot project is running in four municipalities, to be followed by a national project in all municipalities.

Concluding remarks

As I have said this chapter is a very subjective story, more like an essay. It would probably be very different if written by another representative of youth work from Lithuania. By way of conclusion, I simply want to stress the main idea of this chapter – whatever we create (including youth work), it is a projection of our

thinking. So reflecting on the history of youth work might turn into a reflection on the way of thinking in the field. What I regret is that I did not have a chance to conduct proper research for this, to make my story less subjective. But youth work histories are also the histories of the people who were involved...maybe subjectivity is the beauty of the story?

References

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