Fix the system or ourselves?

By **Tali Padan**

For every person that gets the opportunity of a learning mobility programme, there are thousands that don't. For every person that gets the opportunity to complete high school, there are thousands that won't. And for every person that has a job in a European institution there are millions that are not employed by such a governmental body. Before we decide if that is "bad" and then attempt to fix it, let's spend a bit more time looking, without fixing.

There is an immediate judgment on who has "more opportunity" and who has less, on who is disadvantaged and underprivileged. The unemployed, Roma young person, for example, is inevitably labelled this way. Instead of looking at who is behind this label, let's take a look at the labels themselves: more opportunities, advantaged/disadvantaged, privileged/underprivileged. We need to ask the following questions: the opportunity to do what? Advantage for what? Privilege to do what? Is it a privilege to have a well-paying job? Is the advantage in making money? Having a job? Having a degree? Do we all have the same opportunity to be happy?

One thing we humans have in common is our search for happiness. Somewhere along the way, we started thinking that **having** will get us this happiness. Having a relationship, having a job, having a degree. Rather than loving, working, learning, we see these things as objects to be owned. Instead of living, we spend our time planning how to "have a life". Instead of being, we focus on what to become. Based on what we want to have, we spend a lot of time planning a future that we imagine for ourselves, and if that future arrives, we are too busy planning the next future to even see it. We want freedom but we are imprisoned by our own beliefs. Perhaps true happiness lies not in **having freedom** but in freedom from **having**. Many people find their most peaceful moments when they are unattached to both the future and the past; when they are free from thoughts about what they need to become in order to be happy.

This kind of freedom has little to do with how much education you have, what kind of job you have or how much money you have. In fact, such "havings" can even be further distractions from this freedom. Our belief in having is a cultural conditioning which we forget to question as simply a belief – a thought that the mind gets attached to. The media help with this conditioning, as do our parents and our schools – by preparing us to become something, to get a job, to be important, to own a house, even to **have** a family. You only have to listen to the voice in your head to hear how much it takes over – the voice that is planning what's next, the voice that tells you what is missing, the voice that is now saying: "I agree with you, but".

Therefore, the conversation about how to better include the disadvantaged into social mobility programmes requires some more exploration. Travel and mobility are accepted as learning experiences, but we also have examples that prove the opposite – people that have been on exchange programmes and have strengthened their stereotyped ideas of others, or their national identities. There are also those who have never left their country but somehow have the wisdom and strength to question their assumptions about other cultures.

Rather than seeking a solution, I find it worthwhile to examine the problem just a bit longer. What is it that we are trying to solve? The intention seems to be to level the playing field and give equal opportunities to all for learning mobility programmes. This is a noble cause. And it also provides an opportunity to look further into where we would like to include people – not through research or statistics, but through examining what motivates us. What kind of learning do we value? What is it that we want more people to have the opportunity to learn?

From my experience, it is the "unlearning" that makes the most difference. In our divided world, filled with separation, division and conflict, more knowledge and information are not really leading us towards peace. Learning through mobility programmes only "works" if you question your assumptions, not if you strengthen them. This kind of unlearning breaks down your borders, so as to see less of a difference between "you" and the "other". That this happens through a learning mobility programme is hard to guarantee, and it depends on many factors, most crucially the experiences and maturity level of the participant. This maturity level cannot be predicted from their socioeconomic background.

If the young person is ready to have their beliefs questioned, and through the learning mobility programme becomes more open, trusting and inclusive, this naturally impacts others. While the attempt to make these programmes more inclusive is generous and comes from good intentions, this conversation might be blocking us from looking at some more fundamental questions – inclusion into what? Learning what? Which belief system do we value? Who are the "disadvantaged" and what are their disadvantages? These questions are important because they help us focus on what is important. Rather than jumping towards the answers, let us linger in the questions for a little bit longer, contemplate and turn them around in our heads. **That** may be the most inclusive thing we can do.