

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe”

Expert Seminar

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Reflections on a Youth Worker’s Experience with Young Refugees – Interview with Julia Lauer, Diakonie, Germany

For the seminar: *Journeys to a New Life, the Role of Youth Work in Integration of Young Refugees in Europe*

I am a social worker in a welfare association (“Diakonie”) in rural Bavaria. In a team of seven people we take care for 16 minor refugee boys from six different nations (Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, Mali and Togo). Most of them live in Germany since one year, some since a shorter time.

How do the refugee kids feel here

- 70% of them are overstressed with all the parallel challenges: school (especially language and maths), gain cultural access and understanding of law and governance system, getting adapted to climate.
- 60-70% are frustrated because of the low social status and the slow progress in terms of learning the local language and getting integrated in the system
- Pressure from home to send back money, however, it takes 5 years until they can really work and earn money.
- Totally wrong expectations about the wealth people in Germany normally have and what they can achieve: They believe they will soon have an apartment, a car etc. This lie about how easy it is to get rich is reinforced extremely by traffickers
- No idea about refugee policy in Europe. Wrong ideas are systematically spread by traffickers
- Football is the most important thing for 99% of the boys: Here they have fun, get fit, are part of a team, have easy non-verbal interaction with locals, have success

What is the background of the refugees with whom you work (ex: generally age range, gender, conflict)

Age 15 to 18, all male, 6 different nations, they all came to Germany without family, various conflict backgrounds, mostly military is involved somehow

What are their expectations and yours of your work with them – how do you feel it? Do you feel they have other expectations than what you can offer or do you feel it's generally coinciding but there might be other factors, such as pressure, few resources?

What they want from social workers:

- Accompanying to all sort of events to bridge language gap
- Normal "youth needs": Spend time with them, eat together, do nice things. Actually the best activities for them are those aside from "social work" activities – normal things like having a coffee in a café
- Ensure structure and fairness in the community: Social workers as rule keepers who might also punish rule breakers if necessary, as communication facilitators in case of intern conflicts
- Depend heavily on support to deal with very complicated bureaucracy – they might not expect this but whenever there is a question they rely on the social workers

What I try to do for them:

- Give them a point of orientation in their new home, answer all their million question from "Do I have to go to church on Christmas" to "How do you cook this vegetable in Germany"
- Introduce them to German culture by speaking about experiences they make and rumours they have heard about what is German
- Act as role model – by watching the social workers acting in the public sphere they learn a lot about communication habits in Germany
- Give them a feeling of safety and acceptance

My perception is that these young people really mobilize all their energy to get along in the new environment. My expectations that they learn German as soon as possible and that they respect the German laws have been more than met.

Can their expectations be met:

- School and apprenticeship are the most central topics for them. They are shocked when they learn how long it takes to get into the apprenticeship system.
- They think they can learn German within one year. This is not possible. It is all taking much more time that they think.

- Their expectation that the social workers are always there for them cannot always be met: There are 16 of them...

What are the issues you are dealing with in your daily work (for example, education, translation, language issues, paperwork, conflict management, do you have to deal with trauma? – do you use any non-formal techniques such as story-telling or, sorts or other methods in your work with the refugees?)

- Few resources: there are 16 young refugees living in a small house with no single rooms. This means they don't have the space to really relax, they sleep bad, they sometimes have conflicts about different ethnical habits
- A lot of language issues like talking, explaining, helping with homework. There are frequently heavy misunderstandings due to the language gap. Solving those misunderstandings needs a lot of time and patience
- I do a lot of paperwork
- The health-sector (visiting doctors etc.) is quite big
- Building networks to locals (sport, economics, school)
- Helping the boys to get along with their education. for ex. : find stages for the time of the holidays
- Keeping the mood and atmosphere in the house balanced
- I deal with trauma sometimes. The kids have the possibility to contact a therapist. As in most of the cultures it is unusual to talk about inner conflicts or problems. Maybe for that reason, the boys don't choose to go to the therapy. For 'heavy' cases we contact psychiatric doctors.
- Good learning and understanding processes I noticed while working together on a project like: gardening, building furniture or cooking.

Of course issues and needs change a lot according to the time they already spend in Germany: in the first months questions, orientation and communication differ a lot from those after living in a new country for more than few months.

Do you feel supported in your work or are there challenges you might need more support for?

- it would be great to have more intercultural education
- one more challenge is that as a social worker you have to be up to date with the dynamic and quick changing and very complicated refugee-laws.

I have to deal with the individuals, their needs, their emotions on the one side and with the very bureaucratic and unemotional laws on the other side. Might be nice to focus on one: law or human. But as the refugee theme is quite new stuff for the area where I work (rural) even those institutions who should know about laws etc. sometimes don't know everything.

What has been the biggest learning experiences you have had since working with refugees?

- It is important to listen. Every single person I met during that work has quite a lot of resources. It is important to see those and to help the boys finding ways and situations to live those resources.
- Stay human in every situation... don't hold on too strong on your pedagogical concepts.
- The recovery skills of humans can be huge!

What recommendations can you make generally for better youth work with integration of young refugees?

- Give them more time: They are expected to learn everything within a very short time – that's too much pressure
- Reduce the care key. Smaller groups would be much better.
- The more "natural" the process the better: They would love to be treated as normal kids, live in families, not always be part of a group
- For the social workers: Do not follow too much pedagogic concepts but be more open and humane. That is extremely important when working with other cultures.
- Support social workers in learning intercultural competence
- Practical interaction creates the biggest learning effects and activates their resources. Can be cooking together, home improvement etc. Social workers should get some skills for practical interaction.
- Learn from the football-example: Teach through games. Create fun, not pressure.