

Chapter 7

Youth work and social inclusion

This chapter aims to explore the role of non-formal education in social inclusion projects as well as present the main inclusive youth work practices. The chapter also presents the characteristics of the main educational approaches used by youth workers and youth organisations.

NON-FORMAL & FORMAL EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

In Europe, most people have gone through some form of schooling in their lives. This formal school education is commonly based on a “vertical” relationship between the teacher and the pupil/student, that is the holder of the knowledge (the teacher) and the receiver (the learner). The teacher mostly delivers knowledge to the student in the form of courses and curricula. At the end of the learning pathway a written document certifies the knowledge acquired by the learner according to official criteria. These certificates and diplomas are often necessary as keys to open doors into the labour market and society. Academic diplomas mostly refer to theoretical knowledge.

Non-formal education, on the other hand, can be summarised as “learning by doing”. The learning methodology lies in the interaction between the learners and the concrete situations they are experiencing. There are usually no teachers or lecturers providing the knowledge ex-cathedra, but the learners and facilitators construct the knowledge and skills together, in a horizontal relationship. The educator or facilitator may be more or less active in the setting up of learning experiences for the benefit of the learner. This is what happens in youth work. It is possible to maximise non-formal education benefits for young people through the use of different methodologies such as peer education, project work, mobility projects, and more. The learners are at the centre of their own learning process and the youth workers support them in it. Unfortunately, at present there is not much certification of the competencies acquired by non-formal learners.

Sometimes there is confusion between non-formal and informal learning. We consider informal learning to be spontaneous, as it happens in everyday life; non-formal learning is planned and thought through by a facilitator, trainer or youth worker who also provides support during the entire learning process.

	Formal learning	Non-formal learning
Learning methods implemented	Courses where the main vertical relationship takes place between the holder of knowledge and learners, with clear educational objectives.	Interactive relationship between the learners and their environment: "learning by doing". Peer education and mentoring are often used and the educational objectives are well defined.
Contents	Mainly general, and defined by educational authorities.	Chosen by the learner, no definition except concrete experience acquisition.
Certification	Usually provided at the end of the course and conditional upon success in an evaluation of knowledge. Set up according to criteria defined by educational authorities.	Not necessary and not standardised. For the Youthpass certificate for Erasmus+ Mobility of Youth Workers participants, see www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass
Length	Usually: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ from six to 18 years old: primary and secondary education; ▶ above 18 years old: up to 10 years of studies (university). 	Lifelong learning
Strong points	Obligatory for all (usually up to 16 years old) in order to provide a base of knowledge. Often almost free in the public sector. Certification through official academic diplomas.	Accessible to all at any moment of life. "Second chance" for young people with fewer opportunities.
Things to be improved	Academic diplomas may remain general and further specific studies or training need to take place. Not adapted to all. No Europe-wide recognition (difficulties with transferring the value of the diplomas abroad).	Better recognition for the learning experiences acquired through activities based on non-formal education methodologies.

YOUTH WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

MY Future, social enterprise for young people in youth work, UK (Alex Collop, ENTER! participant)

The aim of the project was to promote awareness of and access to social rights for young people in Muirhouse and the surrounding areas of Edinburgh. The project worked alongside young people involved in the MY Future (training and development) and MY Adventure (social enterprise) projects in various activities and actions designed to develop better understanding of and access to social rights especially relating to education, employment and access to sport, outdoor and leisure activities. The project was implemented for the Muirhouse area, where approximately 37% of the entire population is income deprived. Young people in the area are three times as likely to be unemployed as the city average and are much more likely to be among the lowest performing 20% of pupils. The project offered to 17 young people who dropped out from school and to 35 young offenders and migrants the opportunity to achieve a better awareness of social rights. Many of the participants of the MY Future project are now employed or volunteer with MYDG or MY Adventure and are working directly to increase awareness and access to social rights for other young people. The ENTER! project has helped in making social rights more visible and explicit within MYDG's organisational structure.²²

24. Available at www.coe.int/en/web/enter/ltrc1-project27, accessed 24 October 2016.

Even though formal education institutions in Europe have made efforts to improve the balance between theory and practice at school since the second half of the 20th century, the differences outlined above remain largely intact. Some initiatives have been taken to tailor methods of teaching to learners' needs and expectations, like Philippe Meirieu's concept of "differentiated learning approaches", but they remain limited. Hence, many young people leave the formal education system without having finished their studies or having acquired a qualification.

Young people who have left school early or who are in precarious situations in society could benefit from non-formal education as a second chance that could have a strong impact on their lives. This educational approach needs to be thought through, prepared and implemented with the active participation of the young people themselves. Moreover, its use must be coherent within the young people's lives; their prior history has to be taken into account, and afterwards the results should lead to a further step towards social inclusion.²⁵

INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK IN PRACTICE

Ethos

When working with young people with fewer opportunities the youth worker consciously or unconsciously adheres to certain moral guidelines, a so-called ethos. It is important to be conscious about your ethos in youth work and its consequences. This section does not intend to tell youth workers which moral guidelines are better or worse, as there are probably as many concepts of ethos as there are organisations working in the educational field. However, it is important as a youth worker to have a similar ethos to that of one's colleagues, partners or employers. If there is a discrepancy between the moral guidelines for youth work among different actors in the same field, this could make working together properly impossible.

Ethos linked to work with young people with fewer opportunities

Youth workers should be conscious of the ethos on which their educational actions are based, as they may have important roles such as providing support and mentoring to the young persons they work with:

- ▶ this support should be regular but should avoid creating dependency-based relationships, as these lead to obstacles to young people's empowerment and personal autonomy instead of enhancing them;
- ▶ youth workers should aim to become superfluous once they have coached the young persons to achieve independence;
- ▶ youth workers can provide young people with different opportunities that hopefully inspire and boost their empowerment and active participation in society.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF...

- ▶ My values: what are my conceptions of society? Is youth work coherent with my values?
 - ▶ My motivations for working with the target group: do I want to integrate youth into society or do I want to create spaces to enable them to participate in public discussion?
 - ▶ My role as a youth worker: do my motivations and actions match my employer's policy and the needs of young persons? Do I have influence on young people that goes beyond my remit? How can I manage this?
 - ▶ How to avoid creating dependency-based relationships with the target group: am I able to limit my involvement with the young people? Am I too emotionally committed? Do I network sufficiently?
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25. *T-Kit No. 6 Training essentials*, EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, available at <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1667921/tkit6.pdf/459e262b-11f9-4af8-834f-c10c4cf4d30a>, accessed 24 October 2016, can help youth workers structure educational activities based on non-formal education methodologies.

Step-by-step approach

In order to develop the intervention models to work with young people with fewer opportunities, youth workers should get acquainted with the stories of their target group as well as identify the causes that have led to the current situation of exclusion. Getting to know their stories, working on a trust-based relationship, and involving them in the choice of their future are essential before you can start steering young people towards better horizons. It is paramount to adapt your approach and activities to their pathways, providing tailor-made programmes that take into account their expectations and possibilities. You can start with little challenges and build on that, reaching, step-by-step, where you want to go.

How to build a step-by-step approach?

Different essential ingredients are needed to work efficiently with the target group in the context of youth work. As a principle, any work with young people with fewer opportunities should be built on trust and not be forced upon them. Youth work should be based on young people's expectations and needs. If they do not have any specific wishes or do not know what they want, the youth worker can help them find out where they want to go in life. The youth worker can do this by proposing a variety of activities that the young people may feel attracted to and thus help them identify their areas of interest (See section in Chapter 4: "Attractive activities")

International projects could be an opportunity for certain young people to change their lives. It goes without saying that people who are not used to such international experiences need a fair amount of preparation, continued support throughout the entire project and, of course, active involvement (see more on this in the T-Kit on International Voluntary Service).²⁶

Building trust

Young people who have been emotionally or physically abused in the past – particularly when that abuse has been at the hands of those whom the young person had every reason to believe they could trust – may find it easier and safer not to trust anybody again. Some may take personal responsibility for what has happened to them. They may come to believe themselves somehow unworthy and undeserving of anyone's attention, care and love. The consequent self-hatred and lack of self-esteem can blight lives and future relationships forever. Similarly, young people who have been belittled or criticised in a hostile manner by a teacher or another authority figure may find it difficult to believe that their experiences in a similar situation might be more positive.

Just as the teacher and the social worker need to build a trusting relationship with young people, so too does the youth worker. All of them, in their different ways, may need to recognise and try to tackle deep-rooted problems that may take years to resolve, if indeed they ever can be resolved. At the same time, anyone working in this sensitive territory should be alert to the potential consequences once the floodgates of emotion and trust are opened, since people who have experienced such damaging events may have nursed for years a longing to unburden themselves. Once they start to trust someone, there is always the possibility that they may, at least initially, become dependent on the object of their trust and confidence. This is why specialist help and ways to access it should always be considered.

So what are the qualities needed to start to build trust? There are four key areas where, often through your own behaviour, you can demonstrate to the young person that the world is not necessarily permanently chaotic, and that trust, when invested in the right people, can offer safety and comfort:

- ▶ mean what you say: "Hear the words, but watch the actions." If you say you are available according to an agreed timetable, be available. If you promise not to pass on a confidence entrusted to you by a young person, respect that promise;
- ▶ take responsibility: people who can be trusted take responsibility for their actions. Show that you recognise that everyone makes mistakes: admit to your own shortcomings, and avoid offloading the blame onto someone else. Part of taking responsibility, just as with self-esteem, involves learning



²⁶ Available at <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kit-5-international-voluntary-service>, accessed 24 October 2016.

to take account of other people's interests. Working on trust will often involve presenting young people with the experience of both trusting someone else and having someone trust them, then exploring the different emotions – vulnerability, fear, discomfort, empowerment, confidence, for example – they may have felt;

- ▶ show understanding: when you believe that another person to a greater or lesser extent understands your situation and why you feel as you do, it is easier to trust them. Empathy and compassion, shown sincerely, un-patronisingly and consistently, can help to persuade a young person that you are trying to see the world through their eyes;
- ▶ create a safe space: we tend to trust those with whom we feel safe. For some young people, particularly for those with fewer opportunities, the lack of security is a crucial factor in their unwillingness to trust. When life lets you down and time and again your hopes are betrayed, and it is not surprising if every encounter is greeted with suspicion. Through empathy and non-judgmental exchanges, the youth worker can help create an environment that feels safe, and where the young person can start to relax and let down their guard to some extent.

The youth worker working with young people with fewer opportunities can try to provide an open setting where even for a few hours a feeling of safety and security can be experienced. In an uncertain world, they can also try to ensure that they themselves behave as someone worthy of another's trust.

Exploring self-esteem

Increasing self-esteem is probably one of the most talked about outcomes of youth work. Its value is rarely questioned and helping to "raise self-esteem" is a familiar goal of much of the activity undertaken by youth workers. Nowhere is this truer than when working with young people with fewer opportunities. Low self-esteem is often perceived to have a causal link with a wide range of social ills. Yet the evidence to support these causal links is divided and we should recognise the complexity of this issue.

Branden (1994) describes self-esteem as "the disposition to experience one's self as competent to cope with the challenges of life and as deserving of happiness."²⁷ Other definitions refer to having the ability to be accountable for one's own actions and behave responsibly towards others. Achieving this richer level of self-esteem rests upon a sense of personal efficacy (self-efficacy) and a sense of personal worth (self-respect). This better explains why a young person largely excluded from society might struggle to have a sense of worth and efficacy in a world that so consistently undermines confidence, creates obstacles to achievement and is largely hostile.

Self-esteem comes from within, but a key element in its development is the personal construction of self-worth resulting from interactions with others and with the environment. Young people with fewer opportunities have, by definition, fewer opportunities to experience those interactions that engender confidence, generate positive feedback and provide a sense of personal worth. This is not to suggest of course that low self-esteem is restricted to a certain type of person – poverty of experience, of achievement, of affection is common across all society – but our concern in this T-Kit is young people with fewer opportunities.

Youth workers often refer to the satisfaction they feel when watching a young person grow in self-confidence and in so doing increasing their self-esteem. However, we should be cautious about leaping to conclusions. The transformation that they witness will be the result of a wide range of experiences for the young person and, not least, the qualities of the individual young person. This is not to devalue the worth of a session or project in a safe and non-threatening environment that enables a young person – perhaps for the first time – to experience a real sense of achievement and justifiable pride in what they have done. It is rather to acknowledge the reality of a life that within seconds – perhaps just by stepping outside – can revert to the familiar daily struggles and frustrations. What is important is that the youth worker recognises

27. Branden, N. (1994), *Six pillars of self-esteem*, Bantam Books, New York.

their contribution to the complex jigsaw puzzle that makes up an individual's self-esteem. We must also trust the evidence of our own eyes.²⁸

Youth work, particularly with young people with fewer opportunities, can encourage confidence to develop and is integrally bound up with the creation and building of trust.

Elements of self-esteem:

- ▶ unconditional self-acceptance;
 - ▶ sense of capability;
 - ▶ sense of purpose;
 - ▶ appropriate assertiveness;
 - ▶ experience of fulfilment;
 - ▶ sense of responsibility and accountability;
 - ▶ sense of safety and security;
 - ▶ sense of belonging;
 - ▶ sense of integrity.
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28. There are different views in research about how exactly self-esteem and the effects thereof should be interpreted in youth work. For a recent, critical look at this issue see P.J. White in the magazine *Young People Now* (issue 162, October 2002), published by the National Youth Agency in the UK, available at www.nya.org.uk, accessed 24 October 2016.