MOOC – ESSENTIALS OF YOUTH WORK

Youth Research
TRANSCRIPT

Dariusz [00:00:01] Hello to the next podcast we are organising within the MOOC on youth work essentials. And today, we are going to talk about youth research. And we have invited today three people. We have Lana Pasic who is from the Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the field of youth; we have Tomi Kiilakoski from Finland and Adina Serban from Romania. Welcome. So, can you tell us maybe Lana, I know that you work for the Partnership, but you are also youth researcher. How did you become a youth researcher?

Lana [00:00:41] Thank you, Darek. For me, it was an experience that started both through my professional work, but also through academia, because I worked with the youth programmes in an NGO in Bosnia. And then after that, when I went to do my postgraduate studies, I started looking at the programmes that would focus specifically on youth activism and how do NGOs and civil society can support young people in becoming more active members of their societies and also demanding more of their rights and standing up for causes that they believe in. This made me more interested not only in research in young people, but also how can society support young people?

Dariusz [00:01:23] And Tomi, what's your story? How did you become a researcher?

Tomi [00:01:27] By accident. I never wanted to become a youth researcher. I used to work at the Department of Teacher Education, so it was training teachers to become better teachers. And I thought that I was a critical educational scientist. And I wrote a book in Finnish, which was on a critical pedagogy and on how schools would be better. And then I got invited to a meeting with a lot of researchers and they asked me a really simple question: why don't you have perspectives of young people in this book? And I started, you know, being self-critical and asking myself, why didn't I have young people in the book? So, I started to become more and more interested about youth research. And I was working as a trainer of youth work at the time. So, youth research was, of course, needed. So, it was important in itself. So, those two steps sort of led me to being a youth researcher.

Dariusz [00:02:25] OK, that's an interesting story. You can become a youth researcher by accident. Adina, what about you?

Adina [00:02:32] For me, youth research was the last angle of the youth triangle that I was trying somehow to cover it because I started as a grassroots youth worker, then I moved a bit on youth representation and being part of different bodies that were trying to do support youth participation. And then, of course, that everyone was asking always for evidence-based and everything had to come with evidence. And they said, OK, let's start doing that. Then I combined my grassroots youth work activity with a bit of research at the beginning and somehow step by step

from grassroots youth work, I moved more to do you research. So, I'm always moving within the triangle, but somehow trying to stay close to youth research and then somehow providing what I'm documenting in the youth research to my peers, youth workers that are working, especially in small communities and also to policy makers.

Dariusz [00:03:33] I was asking this question because there are apparently very different paths to becoming a youth researcher, just like there are very different paths to becoming a youth worker. And I know many youth workers that actually became youth researchers. So they actually have the experience being in youth work. And there was always this question in my mind, do you really need to have youth work experience to be a youth researcher? Is it really necessary?

Adina [00:04:04] I think it's not an obligation. But it helps because, especially when you are running participatory youth research or when you do work with youth workers or with young people directly on documenting your research and using the research instruments that you've built. It's very useful to speak the youth language and to have the youth friendly approach. But it's not an obligation because you might also go to the other risk of somehow assuming that you know things in advance. And it's always hard to see where's the balance. So, I would say that it helps, but it's not an obligation.

Dariusz [00:04:43] All right. Lana?

Lana [00:04:45] Well, I think it's very important when we talk about youth research and youth policy and youth work, but also young people to understand that neither one of these three sides of the triangle or now as we refer to it as a pyramid because young people are the centre of this, that neither one of these sides can operate within its own bubble without having these connections. So, while it is not crucial for one to be a youth worker to be a youth researcher, it is very important for youth researchers to be very well aware of what youth workers do. But then also in terms of what youth policy makers do in the youth field so that they can communicate the results of what is happening on the ground, the practise from the youth work to the policy makers, and that they can also involve young people. So, I think now in every field we're looking at things from more interdisciplinary perspectives. And we also have to see how these sides work together and at the Youth Partnership, actually, this is what we try to connect - these different sides of the triangle. So, just like one does not need to be a policy maker in order to do your research or a researcher to be in the policy, there should still be a basic understanding of what every side of the triangle does and how to communicate with each other.

Dariusz [00:06:14] So, it's about maintaining the relationship, maintaining the connection between different, let's say, aspect of what we say, youth workers policy on youth research. So, you've told your stories about becoming a youth researcher. So, you are the right people to be asked the next question, which is what is then youth research about? What is it? What kind of methods it uses?

Tomi [00:06:40] If I may start. I work in an organisation called Finnish Youth Research Network. It's an NGO, basically, but it's funded by our ministry. So, a lot of my colleagues come from different fields. Some are social scientists, some are educational scientists, some have engaged in cultural studies and so forth. So, it sort of combines different disciplines, different scientific approaches and tries to understand what is going on in the lives of young people today and how the society responds to young people. So, it can be about policy studies as well. Usually, it has sort of a critical edge and trying to defend young people and trying to stand up with the young people. So, to improve our societies in general. But it's a lose field, so it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is

about. But what has to be there, it has to understand how the young people themselves see their lives and see their society and see the policies. So, not all the research that is done on young people, for example, on the health or on their criminal activities and so on - it isn't necessarily research - it has to have this element of being interested in young people and trying to understand young people's point of view on society. And if I may add one thing, a lot of us want to oppose the problem-oriented approach. So, we don't want to see young people as a problem, but as a resource to a society and something that has to be studied in their own right. Because if you are not interested in young people, you are not interested in the future of our societies.

Dariusz [00:08:23] All right, Lana?

Lana [00:08:25] I think just to build on what's Tomi said, I mean, youth research can be many things and the different researches focus on different topics in different areas of young people's lives. But I think one of the most important points here is that your research looks at the lived experiences of young people. So, it can do so through more of a quantitative approach, trying to get data on certain aspects, such as, for example, young people's employments statistics, mental health and wellbeing of young people, young people's participation, and the numbers regarding that. But it can also look at, and this is now, I think, a bit more understood that we are also looking at qualitative experiences of young people. And your research is moving more in that direction so that we want to see how do young people experience their lives, how do they experience the society, how do they interact with each other, but also with different layers within the society. So, it depends how do we define what we want to look at in terms of young people, but I absolutely agree with Tomi - it does have to have the element of being interested in young people, but also in young people's wellbeing and development.

Dariusz [00:09:46] OK, that's an important point. I think that you mentioned both of you, that being interested in young people is one of the most important elements of your research and also that youth research is not treating young people as a problem. Of course, I think that important thing is to look at the challenges young people experience in their lives. But it's not focusing on problem. It's trying to see that, like you said, Lana, that lived experience, look at the lived experience of young people. OK, so this is more or less a kind of definition, but it is still research, right? Because it is research, it also uses research methods, research methodology, right? I mean, every science has to use certain methodologies.

Dariusz [00:10:33] Are there any special methods or methodologies that are used in youth research or what kind of methods the youth research is using? Maybe Adina, you can continue?

Adina [00:10:45] Yes, I will. I'm somehow linking my answer to what you were answering earlier, because for me, your research is the entry ticket to the youth universe. So basically, if you are trying to do things with and for young people, you should better understand what's their universe about in terms of the challenges they're facing, in terms of interest they have, in terms of needs and definitely in terms of resources, because we always want to claim as having youth as the main resource, but then we should understand this resource. In terms of specific methodologies, and Lana was earlier mentioning the qualitative and quantitative was that we're using, but I will just speak about my favourite ones on documenting my research projects, and that would be working with participatory research methodology. So, trying basically to build up the research methodologies around the experiences of young people so that the qualitative data. So, I really enjoy doing all this wonderful focus groups where young people come together and they would be empowered to answer by the answers that their peers are giving or having the interviews where

you could really look at the authentic experiences of young people. So, not really specific but going closer to their lives wherever young people live. So, moving closer to their communities, understanding what are the dynamics in their communities. So, because youth is a transversal concept, we always speak of young people, but we're mostly looking for young people related to the labour market, education, whatever. So that would be for me the universe and the participatory approach is definitely my favourite one.

Dariusz [00:12:37] OK. So participatory approach, Tomi.

Tomi [00:12:40] Yes. Thank you. So, the problem for me with the youth research is trying to understand the richness of the lives of young people with their opportunities and threats they might be facing. So, we need a lot of different methodologies to be able to do that. And they really have to be sensitive to what's going on in the lives of young people and how technology changes, how our society changes and how youth cultures change. So basically, if I look at the youth research that I know of, the two basic tools probably are surveys, asking young people to fill in the survey and then analysing what's going on. And then qualitative interviews, talking to young people and trying to get deeper into their experiences. But it's clearly not enough. So, we need a new type of methodologies. And like Adina was talking about participatory research, I myself have done a lot of action research, which tries to improve society through research. And then lately we have been, me within my organisation and with my colleagues who have been trying to develop different art-based methods to study young people. So, using these expressive methodologies to understand what is going on in the lives of young people and try to tackle with the matters that aren't easily expressed by words. So, it's a combination of different methodologies and they need to be really sensitive. But the core thing, of course, is that it has to be intersubjective. So, I have to be able to communicate my research to, you know, to the wider research community, to youth policy makers, to youth workers and it has to be a convincing story. People have to have a reason to believe what I'm doing. And the methodologies are part of giving a convincing story so people can cheque that, OK, this is how we used these methods, this is how he made this stuff. And it has to be really transparent. So, it's not a part of my personal opinion or my political views. It's about, you know, the rigid scientific stuff.

Dariusz [00:14:42] OK, Lana?

Lana [00:14:44] Well, just to build on that in terms of the methods, I think that one of the starting points for researchers is always the question, why do we need to know and what type of knowledge do we need? And once we have that question answered, then we can look into the methods, because if we want to find out more large-scale information or data about young people, then we would look into having kind of surveys and large datasets. But if we want to really focus on specific groups of young people, which we have done, for example, through our research and studies on social inclusion, digitalisation, and if we are looking at specific topics or if we would like to do more of a consultative research, so that research for the purpose of participation of young people in decision making, like some of the research is supported through the youth dialogue process, for example, then we will look more into the qualitative research, such as the focus groups or having the participatory research or even action research in the local communities. So, I think the main question before launching into the research, into the world of research is thinking, why do we need this. And when we think from the perspectives of the policy making, one of the main reasons why we need research is to actually base the decisions on knowledge and evidence so that whatever decisions or policies are developed or even in practise of youth work, whatever programmes are

developed, are actually based on us knowing what works, what has been done so far and what are the needs.

Dariusz [00:16:32] OK. I think it's very clear and in the course, we talk a lot about it - what's the importance of youth research and contribution of youth research to youth policy. And I think that's more or less clear. We also talking in our course about contribution of youth research, for example, to evaluation of youth work. What may not be that clear, or maybe if you can a little bit elaborate on that is what is the use of youth research in everyday youth work practice. I mean, should youth workers care about it or what they can actually get from youth research?

Tomi [00:17:17] So I think the answer is yes, although in some cases it might be really hard to read research. Well, taking the example of Finland at the moment, we are trying to develop how to better integrate human rights approach to youth work. And we are thinking how to build sustainable societies. So, combining environmental education to youth work and also working with the migrant youth better. The benefits of your research, they are especially easy to see when we are trying to find out how to improve our practices, how to maybe build new practices. So, we need information, we need knowledge, we need ideas, we need concepts and each and everything and all of these things: knowledge, concepts, ideas, theories, points of view can be gotten from reason. And, of course, research can offer a critical perspective as well. Maybe you haven't been thinking about these matters and maybe we should discuss the better within youth field.

Dariusz [00:18:17] Adina, you were a youth worker and you are a youth researcher. So how youth workers can use actually what you are producing?

Adina [00:18:25] What I'm always telling to my peers, to the youth workers who are, of course, complaining that what the researchers are producing, it's not all the time, written in the language that everyone would understand also, except for what Tomi said, it's also a matter of being inspired by what the others are doing. In that time, with the research, we're also translating the policy framework, in a nicer language, if possible. So, as a youth worker, I would always look for the information that youth research is providing because I would like to be inspired to see what's the wider context. Also, to look for future trends, if possible. So, trying to understand what would happen with young people in the future. So that's myself as a youth worker would be prepared to respond to those challenges. So, for example, we've been speaking a lot about digital and smart youth work. And nowadays, within this context, like all of us, we have to use it. So, it's showing you a bit of the steps that you should be making. And I think that the greatest part with the Pool of European Youth Researchers, is that what we are writing we're just trying to write it the language that would be easy to understand by the general public. So, youth workers included.

Dariusz [00:19:54] Yeah, I think that's important because I think that the biggest problem always is the accessibility in terms of language, that sometimes there is this need to get to know more and maybe to have a wider perspective through youth research, but sometimes it's very difficult if you are not really an academic to understand different concepts and so on. And I think that this accessibility is very important. You were mentioning several times this Pool of European Youth Researchers, maybe Lana you are the person I should ask about it. What is it for, what is it actually within the Partnership?

Lana [00:20:29] Well, the Pool of European Youth Researchers is actually a group of thirty-five researchers from across the Council of Europe member states, and these are the people who focus through their professional research experience on different aspects of young people's lives. So,

within this pool, we have researchers who focus more on quantitative research and working with datasets, but we also have researchers who are doing more of participatory research or action research. So, it is basically a collection of different research professionals who have a variety of expertise in the youth field. And the role of the Pool of European Youth Researchers is to both gather the knowledge from the countries, from both local and national levels, but also the knowledge at the wider European level about young people, and then to translate these into kind of research outputs that can then be used both by the policymakers when they are making the decisions, policies or plans within the field, but also by the youth workers. And I think that the Pool of European Youth Researchers over the last years has also focused more on translating this knowledge and evidence for different audiences. So now we're not working only on the complex research and studies and knowledge books but we're also trying to really bring it closer to the youth workers, through illustrations or infographics or having different summaries, but also different audio and video materials. Because I think youth research is important for everybody. But as you said, it is not necessarily always packaged in a way that everybody has time to actually invest into reading complex studies.

Dariusz [00:22:24] Okay. We were talking about how youth workers or youth work can benefit from youth research. And so, another question would be how actually youth workers can contribute to youth research. Is there the way they can contribute? How can they contribute?

Tomi [00:22:44] So I can offer a personal answer. The situation is different in different European countries. But talking from the Finnish context, Finnish work, community and Finnish youth field in general has tried to open up forums where youth workers and youth policy makers and your researchers can actually meet. So, through this meeting, there has been, you know, people trust each other better, they understand what the others are doing. So that's a core thing. So, it's easy to contribute to your research if you have these forums and, you know, you have meeting places, you have e-mail addresses and you know "the guy". He or she is not somebody who is familiar only through writings, but in in person as well. So, in my own studies, I talk a lot with the youth workers and test my ideas: is this important? What have you been thinking about? And then a lot of the times youth workers, you know, they might criticise youth researchers for being too specific. Well, or ask for forgetting certain features. But one of the case examples is rural studies. So, a lot of youth workers who work in the small communities were dissatisfied with our emphasis on urban young people. And they wanted us to concentrate, concentrate more on the rural studies. So, we tried to take that challenge and provide information on rural young people as well. So that's one example. And environmental issues is another one, which we are trying to answer at the moment. But it doesn't happen automatically. There has to be forums, they have to be meeting places, sort of social platforms for having that type of dialogue.

Dariusz [00:24:31] So it's about creating spaces as well for youth workers, I mean, the places where they can actually contribute to youth research.

Tomi [00:24:37] And it's a slow process. It's a marathon instead of a short run.

Dariusz [00:24:43] Any thoughts on that Adina or Lana?

Adina [00:24:46] Well, I also find it very important the fact that youth workers are the closest to young people within all these environments. So, thinking now of what we as youth researchers also expect from youth workers would be to help us with that accurate information about youth experiences, would be to get feedback if the research that we are writing is not in the language that

they were expecting. And to update the research community always with the changes that are happening in young people's lives, especially in terms of interests and challenges that they're facing. So, they're definitely a great resource for the youth researchers' community.

Dariusz [00:25:34] OK. If I can ask to maybe the last question, it's, in your opinion, actually what are the newest developments in youth research that you observe recently? Where is it going?

Lana [00:25:48] I think some of the main things that we can observe in the last couple of years, especially with large youth movements and youth activism that we have been witnessing, is also from the perspectives of the researchers really looking into young people more as active participants and as actors and the subjects within the society and starting from that perspective. I mean, youth research has always done this. But now there is really more of a move toward the participatory research and towards the action research. This is not to say that other methods of research are no longer relevant, but rather to kind of trying to combine different methods and trying to see what kind of information we can get from different sources. And to kind of build them together is a kind of a puzzle or collage of different information and different knowledge so that we can have a full picture. I mean, there is a growing understanding that one type of research cannot give us full answers. And I think more and more there will be greater collaborations between different actors, different sides of the triangle, but also different methodologies in trying to understand young people's lives.

Dariusz [00:27:12] OK. Any thoughts on that?

Tomi [00:27:15] Yes, if I may continue. What Lana was saying about increasing cooperation between perhaps youth workers and youth researchers or youth policy makers and researchers. Some of the people have called that the practice turn, meaning that youth researchers are more and more interested in understanding different practices where adults and the young people meet, like youth work at schools and hobbies and maybe sports and arts and so forth. And it's a big change because, you know, a couple of dozen years ago, lots of the youth researchers were interested in youth cultures and self-expression of the of young people. And not on how adults and young people cooperate. One of the increasing themes probably is an interest in the young people's political participation and the way they are trying to change the society connected to environmental issues or dissatisfaction to the precarious situation, changes in the labour market, feeling betrayed and so on.

Dariusz [00:28:22] All right, Adina?

Adina [00:28:25] Well, I would say that I think that if we were speaking of this transversal dimensional of youth and then of your research, I think that youth research would get to be even more important than it used to be before for the successful development of the new programmes and policies, because basically this is why programmes fail when they are not like sufficiently documenting on youth needs. I think that would be assisting a lot on trying to look at the new challenges and interests that young people are having related to the way we are providing education at the moment and the challenges that they're facing on the labour market, but also on the opportunities related to all this artificial intelligence, on using digital tools and moving to smart youth works. So, it would be a lot in terms of developing all the fields around young people and then young people included in this development.

Dariusz [00:29:25] OK. I think we got a lot of information about youth research and thank you for sharing your also your personal experience and also your personal perspective on youth research. Like in many fields, when we talk about young people, this is also a very dynamic field. So, it also changes because the situation, the social situation, political context and so on, it's changing. So, the lives of young people are also changing and everything that surrounds these lives of young people, youth work is also changing. And now I imagine that youth research has to follow as well. So, or sometimes it has to be maybe in certain situations, a little bit a step before as well to provide a kind of guidance to youth work practice. Thank you, Lana. Thank you, Adina. And thank you Tomi. I think that this is what we actually wanted to cover with this podcast on youth research. And we also, of course, invite you to our course again and also to the next podcast. Thanks a lot.