



**Stories
from the Learning
Journey:
MAKE CHANGE
YOURSELVES**





Stories from the Learning Journey: MAKE CHANGE YOURSELVES

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Preface

Nine organisations across Europe (Armenia, Belarus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia, Ukraine) agreed to undertake a journey to develop and pilot the learning programme” Make Change Yourselves: turning challenges to your advantage!”.

The learning programme had as an aim to develop empowering and sustainable work with “Youth on the Margins”.

The programme participants worked with a local group of marginalised young people, who were engaged as active subjects of their own change process. Therefore, there was a ‘double learning process’ throughout the programme.

“Make Change Yourselves” was the leitmotif for this double learning processes as it led to change in the practice of professional or long-term voluntary workers and change in the young people with whom they work.

This learning initiative is one of the series of interdiac learning programmes which started in 2010 with so-called “Mobile Workshops” in the different countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Georgia, Serbia, Armenia, Ukraine and Czech Republic) focussed on working with disadvantaged young people. This enabled interdiac and its partners to test a new model of learning. This practice related learning has been complemented by a research process examining Youth Diaconia in 6 different countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The result was the publication of “Voices of the Young People in “M” in 2020 and this is available on the interdiac online space. These activities underpin the work of the present project.

‘Make Change Yourselves! Participants Stories and Reflections’ is a collective effort of participants and expert resource people from Latvia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Finland, Belarus, Estonia, Slovakia, Armenia and interdiac acknowledges the contributions of all the young people, as well as the programme participants and experts.

Each partner organisation created space in their working environment and supported the whole process of personal and peer learning locally and through international workshops and bi-lateral co-learning exchanges between participants.

The booklet was co-produced by Oksana Prosvirnina & Tony Addy and edited by Tony Addy. I would like to thank them and also Anete Ankmane and Miroslav Sedláček who accompanied the processes of personal and organisational learning.

This booklet represents the richness of diverse voices and is an expression of the huge variety not only of contexts but also of the personal, professional and cultural lives of people working and living with young people who are sometimes “invisible”.

These narratives represent lives of people who experience pain, passion, compassion, love and through their work express their desire for better and more just, peaceful life. The transformation of the world starts with personal transformation.

This booklet tells the stories of transformative learning, and it is presented as your invitation to join the journey to discover the essence of this process and how it has affected personal and professional lives.

But the stories are also call to us to take action and together to join in a movement of new diaconal practice of work with young people on the margins!

Janka Adameová
Director



Introduction

This Book of Stories is an invitation for you to explore the participants' learning journeys in the interdiac programme 'Make Change Yourself: Turning Challenges to Your Advantage!'. The Programme brought together youth workers and volunteers from 9 countries for a one-year practice-embedded learning process with marginalised young people in their workplaces. The stories in this book relay personal reflective accounts of the participants who share about their lived experiences of work with marginalised young people and bring it together with the reflection on their learning during this process.

The term 'lived experiences' means that the learning in this programme was transformative, as it aimed to bring change with the participants through their engagement with a group of young people. Learning was made possible because the time spent together with the young people was free from pressing tasks and 'working performance'. The programme aimed to create a safe space where the interaction is brought about by genuine and mutual interests, active listening and a caring presence together with the young people in their own lived realities. Under such circumstances everyone is a learner: the worker gets to know young people and their perspectives from their own context and resources, while young people learn to speak out for themselves, engage in community with peers and adults and form trustful empowering relations. Consequently, they develop self-confidence and their 'own' agency for making change to own lives.

Such a free-formed engaging process allows workers to reflect on their own professional service, assess their everyday practice with the young people critically and find resources for work with them in personal biography and motivation. These constituent elements were underlying the programme and the specific learning tasks. This is how the stories were born. They express confusion and questions, joy and inspiration, hopes and disappointments. The relations with the youngsters who are marginalised and thus vulnerable in their social contexts, struggling with betrayals, social stigma, anxieties and insecurities cannot be built easily or sustained according to a certain 'standard'. However, in the stories shared here you will find ideas and approaches that open ways for empowerment and which exemplify a rewarding commitment to the future of the world where none of the young people are left behind.

We welcome your feedback and we are pleased to share our approaches for transformative learning in this and other resources from this project with you.

interdiac Programme Leader
Oksana Prosvirina

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Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi

My Journey in the Learning Programme

Background

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is the main Christian denomination in Oulu and about 70 % of the population belongs to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. There are seven Evangelical-Lutheran local parishes in the large area of Oulu and the Church in Oulu is operated and administered by the structures of the Oulu Evangelical-Lutheran Parish Union.

At the time of the programme, I worked as a youth leader in Oulu Cathedral. In the center of Oulu live 22 571 people and among them **16,000 are members** in the parish. The center of Oulu is also a home to 1969 youngsters from the age of 13 to 18 years. There are altogether 23 workers in the parish of of which, in Christian educational work, there are two youth leaders, two children's leaders and one priest.

Description of the activities with the group

I got the opportunity to participate in the programme a bit late. So, my first task was to gather a group of young people for participation in the project as quickly as possible. I contacted young adults (three girls and three boys) between the ages of 18 and 29, some of whom I had known for over ten or fifteen years. What they all had in common when the group was founded were the challenges of different areas of life. The group members had challenges with mental health, insomnia, obsessive compulsions, fears, eating disorders and self-harm. Starting the group required me to discuss with each young person the idea of the group, its goals, and forms of operation.

I knew from the very beginning that while my strong intuition told me that while being a group and doing activities together were good for the group members, we would often discuss the challenges of participating in the group for the group members due to the challenges in young people's lives. However, I feel that even though the group's mini projects have not been implemented in the way that the project guide aims to achieve, the result was significant for the issues in the group members' current life situation that I want to highlight.

At first, our group planned an afternoon of silence together on 4.2.2023. The theme of the day was the verse from Psalm 139: „I am a miracle, a great miracle, and I thank you for it.“ Four young people from the group participated to the day. We first attended a devotional together, descended into silence and dined together. After that, we conducted a therapeutic, individual painting process based

on the Japanese Kawa method. At the end of the day, the paintings were on display, and we were still in devotion together.

The group's second project was born, which dealt with young people's concerns about climate change. They had a wish to brainstorm and implement an Earth Hour at Oulu Cathedral on 25.3.2023. The main idea was to share words and deeds of hope in an uncertain world at the event and candlelight mass, and to reflect on how we can individually and together act to protect nature and promote a sustainable way. Young people were asked what they wanted to do together, what they wanted to plan and implement. And even more significantly: young people and their talents and ideas were trusted, valued, and given responsibility. Right from the start, however, it became clear that many of the young people in the group were not able to take on responsibilities or come to the event themselves due to personal reasons. In the end, one young person in the group was involved in organising the event, who performed with a friend, and another young person in the group participated in the event. My opinion, about the event for this group, is that the idea and knowledge that were shared in the encounters during event preparation was already a significant impact for the group. And when during the planning phase



of the event we realised that most of the responsibilities in terms of planning and implementation lie with the employees, we contacted the young people and discussed the event and the fact that even though they do not have the resources to implement it, the event will be implemented based on their ideas. Through the increased appreciation and trust in the encounter, I believe that the young people in the group felt that in their current life situation, this project had been successful. They made their voices heard.

The group's third project was related to the experience of being in nature, joining a small pilgrimage. Two of the young people in our group felt that they had enough resources to go on a small pilgrimage of the young adults of the parish



SHORT PILGRIMAGE
Nature in the path of pilgrimage
©Juho Karvonen

SHORT PILGRIMAGE
Nature in the path of pilgrimage
©Juho Karvonen



to the Sanginjoki landscape, about 20 kilometres north of Oulu. The group met three times before the actual hiking day, which was on 27.5.2023. The group planned and brainstormed the day together with church workers.

Reflections on my learning in the programme

As an employee, the most significant and important approach for me in encountering the young people in my group has been presence with them and active listening. I offered young people the opportunity to speak openly and express their feelings. I tried to be a 'present listener' and show interest in their experiences. I identified for each member of the group what kind of practical help they need and can get. Helping may have begun, for example, by helping with homework,

filling in applications or arranging meetings with different professional workers. If young people needed expert help, I helped them to get in touch with such resourceful people as health professionals, school nurses, social workers, or psychologists.

I have learned that defining my work helps me understand my own professional roles and responsibilities. I believe that clearly defined boundaries have enabled me to act in the best interests of young people. Setting boundaries has created a safe environment where young people felt protected and trusted the professionalism of the worker. It also helped to create clarity and predictability, both within themselves and in the group, as well as in the relationships between the individual young person and the employee. It was easier for young people to understand what to expect from me as an employee and what acceptable practices are. This created stability and helped building trust within the group.

For me, as an employee working with this group, showing gentleness has also been meaningful. **I feel that genuinely listening and trying to understand youngster's perspectives has helped young people feel valued and heard.**



COMMUNION CUP
in Domchurch before the mass
in earth hour- happening
©Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi

Showing kindness has helped to build trust and (hopefully) strengthened young people's self awareness. I have learned that **even simple gestures**, such as words of encouragement, a smile, or an expression of gratitude, **can strengthen young people's self-esteem and create a positive atmosphere.**

I have used 'feedforward' with my group. It is a coaching and communication technique that focuses on providing constructive suggestions and guidance for their future improvement rather than dwelling on past mistakes. It is a positive and future oriented approach that empowers young people to take control of their own development and make meaningful progress towards their goals.

It should be emphasised, that long-term support for young people in my group is extremely important for their overall development and well-being. For these young people, the support cannot be provided short-term, only for the duration of the project, but they need long-term support and guidance. Once we have built a trusting relationship, it creates a strong foundation for long-term support. Each young person in the group is unique and therefore it is important to identify and understand their unique needs and challenges. I have had individual discussions with each young person in the group, and through that I have tried to support them persistently and consistently both in their own lives and in our group. Our journey together continues.

I feel that through this group, too, the mission of diaconal youth work has crystallised: in this time, in this project, it is important to offer these young people support for their growth and development. Through this project as well, young people have been provided with resources, guidance and opportunities for learning, education, leisure activities and spiritual community. Manifesting love in these situations has hopefully helped young people feel that their potential and dreams are important and achievable. Showing love in diaconal youth work lays the foundation for support, growth, and well-being of young people. It helps young people feel valuable and create meaningful lives.



Recommendations and conclusions

To develop diaconal youth work in the local context and the wider professional field requires assessment to understand the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities of the local community and youth. Therefore, there is a need to conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather insights. The work should have partners with local community organisations, churches, and schools to create a network of support and resources. **The work needs to be customised.** Through the projects there is a possibility to tailor diaconal youth work approach to the cultural, social, and economic context of the local community. **It is also important to ensure that the programmes resonate with the values and aspirations of the youth.** Evaluation and adaptation are necessary tools to gather feedback from both the youth and the community. This should be done regularly to assess the impact of the programme's projects.

It's necessary to raise awareness about the importance of diaconal youth work within the broader professional field and to share success stories and research outcomes to demonstrate the value of initiatives. It is important to keep diaconal youth work programmes relevant and effective. I want to underline the importance of staying updated on emerging trends and research in both diaconal work and youth development. Diaconal youth work is a long-term engagement, and by doing it workers can build lasting relationships with the youth and the community.

I have learnt through this interdiac programme **that diaconal youth work is about nurturing the holistic well-being of young individuals and enabling them to contribute positively to society.**



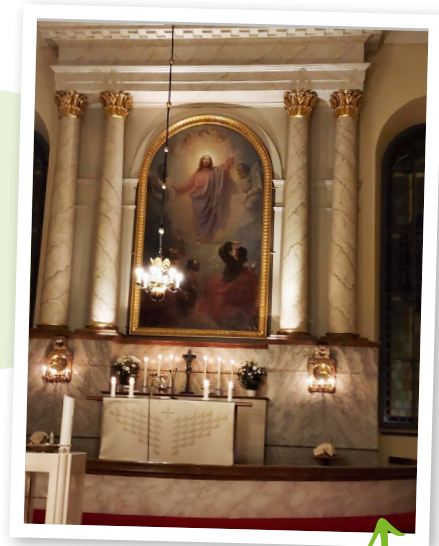
CREATION OF THE EARTH
Girl is drawing while
she hears Bible from Genesis
©Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi

When developing a learning programme for diaconal youth work, it should always take into consideration incorporating practical skills such as active listening, empathy, and community engagement. It is important to encourage reflections and open discussions to promote critical thinking. Through the active involvement of young people in the planning, design, and decision-making processes of projects, they are empowered to take ownership of their initiatives. It's important to collaborate with young people to co-create programmes and activities that align with their interests, aspirations, and needs.

Through developing projects, diaconal youth work can provide opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles. This helps them to **develop leadership skills, boosts their confidence, and encourages responsibility**. When young people are encouraged to share their stories, perspectives, and ideas through various mediums such as art, writing, videos, and social media, **it amplifies their voices and promotes positive change**. Just as important to acknowledge and celebrate the successes and achievements of young people's initiatives. **This boosts their confidence and motivation to continue working towards change.**

I have consulted with Jouko Porkka who a Senior Lecturer in Diaconal Work at the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak) is, and we are proposing that triple-learning approach to method in project work for diaconal youth work developed by Interdiac could be presented to the youth workers in the Lutheran church of Finland.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who made my participation to this programme possible.



The altar of the Domchurch in Oulu
©Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi



David Balakay

The Story of my Learning in the Programme

Introduction

Hello, dear friends, I am a priest of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. My name is David Balakay, and I am the leader of the Orthodox Youth Fellowship at St. Varvarinsky Cathedral in the city of Pinsk. Today I want to share with you our experience of participating in the training programme „Make Change Yourself: Turning Challenges into your Advantage!“. But first things first.

First, it is necessary to introduce the context of work with youth in the Belarusian Orthodox Church. One of the most important tasks for our Church is work with youth, which should be organised both at the level of the diocese and at the level of the parish. The leadership of the Church has repeatedly emphasised that „it is necessary to intensify youth work in dioceses and parishes. It is necessary to create youth associations. It is necessary for Orthodox youth to feel personally responsible - every young person - for the future of the Church“.

According to the concept of the organisation of youth work and youth ministry in the Russian Orthodox Church, the goal of the Church's work with youth is bringing young people to Christ, which is facilitated by the following main tasks:

1. Christian mission among young people;
2. Spiritual enlightenment and catechetical teaching of young people;
3. Introducing young people to liturgical and community life;
4. involving young people in church and community service.

The fulfilment of these tasks is greatly assisted by the activities of youth Orthodox brotherhoods which operate in parishes.

In general terms, nowadays a „brotherhood“ is a community of people, male and female, who are united by common interests, goals and beliefs. Orthodox fraternities, in turn, are voluntary associations of lay men and women (usually in parish churches) for the purpose of charitable, educational, missionary and informational work.

The history of Orthodox brotherhoods began long ago, in the twelfth century. At that time such organisations were called

Sharing our stories
©David Balakay





brotherhoods. The purpose of the brotherhoods was to support the church around which they were organised. Such an organisation was formed of representatives of one estate and had a headman, who had to be elected annually at a meeting.

Later the activity of the Orthodox brothers went beyond the boundaries of one parish. They began to unite and create kinds of educational institutions. Subsequently, they developed into fraternal schools. They not only helped to maintain churches and monasteries, but also engaged in missionary activities. They also published church and liturgical literature and created book printing houses.

At the end of the 20th century, together with the revival of church life in Belarus on the initiative of Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeev), the activity of Orthodox parish brotherhoods began to resume. Currently, the most famous of them are the youth fraternities „AGIOS“ and „Fraternity in honour of the Holy Apostle John the Theologian“ of the Minsk diocese of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

The Youth Fraternity

On October 14, 2003, in the city of Pinsk at St. Varvarinsky Cathedral (the oldest active church in the city) on the initiative of active young men and women of the parish „Youth Brotherhood in honour of the Monk-Martyr Macarius, Hegumen of Pinsk“ was founded. The Brothers cared for nursing homes, orphanages, social shelters and hospices, studied and discussed the Holy Scriptures, organised summer camps and holidays for children, participated in gatherings of Orthodox youth and pilgrimage trips, and held discussions on issues of faith.

The brotherhood was active until 2017, after which it resumed its activities on February 15th, 2021, the day of the Presentation of the Lord.

The activities of the fraternity have various directions:

- education and development of Orthodox youth according to the teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church - holding thematic spiritual talks and quizzes, studying the Holy Scriptures and the fundamentals of the faith, watching and discussing videos, „question-and-answer“;
- psychological support for the brothers: conversations with the priest, emotional support and creating a friendly trusting atmosphere within the brotherhood;
- participation in the activities of the parish and the diocese: assistance in the divine service (the brothers perform obedience in the church: in the altar and the choir); distribution of missionary leaflets (with information about church holidays); duty in the temple during divine services, during the stay of relics;
- active participation in the organisation of parish holidays (musical numbers, visiting and congratulating elderly parishioners, helping to decorate the church and its grounds) and festive events;

- maintaining contacts with youth orthodox brotherhoods of other dioceses (joint participation in meetings and other youth events, volunteer activities);

- joint leisure activities (pilgrimage trips; live fellowship and board games; visits to a movie theatre, amusement park, mass skating, etc.).

The activities of the fraternity (with photos and videos) are highlighted on an Instagram page. During the holidays, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, fraternity members distribute leaflets to parishioners with information about the youth fraternity of the parish.



The priority directions of development of the youth brotherhood at St. Varvarinsky Cathedral in Pinsk are:

- 1) Following the current directions of activity;
- 2) Creation of a creative youth space: for meetings and events it is necessary to organise and arrange a room that will correspond to the growing number of brothers;
- 3) Establishing and maintaining contacts with community and volunteer organisations for joint social work.

Our fraternity is a community of young people who are united by common faith, interests and values. There are about 55 of us and we meet regularly for different activities. We study the scriptures, provide psychological support to each other, especially in difficult moments. We do charity work, helping people in need, we participate in volunteer work, organising various actions and events for our city. We also do not forget about leisure entertainment, organising hikes, games, movie nights and other forms of recreation.

And, of course, we love music and art, so we organise and participate in city concerts, exhibitions and festivals.

We believe that our brotherhood is not just a group of friends, but a family that is always ready to support and help each other. Therefore, we are always happy to make new acquaintances and to take opportunities to share experience and knowledge. That is why it is very valuable for us to participate in the training programme. Within this programme we had the opportunity to apply new practices for developing personal and professional competencies, as well as to perform several practical tasks that helped us to better understand ourselves and others, and to come up with new ideas for our fraternity.



one evening together
©David Balakay



Programme Activities

One of these assignments was biographical work or working with biographies of teenagers. The practical assignment for this session was to set up a group of youth, get to know them, and do biographical work with the participants. I was sceptical about the biographical practice because it was difficult for me to share some personal experiences with people I didn't know. By that time, I had already coped with the first task: during a year of work as a fraternity leader, I had gathered a small team of 15-20 teenage boys. The question remained: how well they fit the criteria for participation in this programme. In June I managed to gather 10 more people. So, I decided to do some biographical work with them. The result shocked me: outwardly well-off kids, many of them children of parishioners, turned out to be deeply traumatised children. Many were brought up without a father, some were abandoned by their mothers, some were subjected to physical and psychological abuse at school and at home, in a personal conversation they confessed to me that they were sexually abused, many had thoughts about or even attempts at suicide. Hearing these stories, I was very impressed. After this practice, we introduced a small rubric in our youth meetings: At the beginning of the meeting, everyone shares their victories, as well as the difficulties in their lives. We try to support the teenagers during difficult times in their lives. Over time, I began to notice how they began to support each other, that the initiative comes not from me as a leader, but from the boys. It was an interesting and useful experience, we learned a lot of new things about ourselves and others, and also discovered a lot of similarities between us. This assignment helped us to unite as a team and strengthen our friendship ties.



Summer camp
©David Balakay

Another assignment we did as part of this training programme was the 'Future Lab'. This is a workshop that allows participants to discuss problems that are relevant to them and come up with ideas and projects to solve them. We ran this activity at one of our fraternity meetings. First, we divided into six groups of five people each. Each group chose one problem that was relevant to them. For example, one group chose an environmental issue, another group chose an issue of violence, another group chose an unemployment issue, etc. Then each group discussed their problem for half an hour, analysed its causes and consequences, looked for possible solutions and developed their project. After that all the groups got together and started to present their ideas and projects in front of the whole fraternity. We listened to each other with interest and attention, asked questions, expressed our opinions and criticism. After all the presentations we voted for the most successful and promising projects.

This practical task became a very valuable experience for us, because we not only learned a lot about different problems that concern us and our society, but also learned to work in a team, to express our thoughts and feelings, to listen and understand others, as well as to propose our own solutions and act together. The main conclusions the teenagers made was that they realised that they can be not only consumers but also creators of social change if they act together and in solidarity.

From this practical assignment was born a new format of meetings in our fraternity - youth conferences. Thanks to this format, we can effectively manage a large youth movement like our fraternity. We decided to discuss important and relevant issues for our fraternity, as well as to propose our ideas and projects for their realisation. In other words, initially we slightly changed the format of Future Lab, then this changed format evolved into the format of youth conferences. Thanks to this approach, we can listen to the opinion of each member of our fraternity, we can also discuss all the important issues and projects for us, as well as vote for the most interesting and promising projects that we would like to realise in our fraternity or in our city.



Social activism
©David Balakay

At one of these conferences, the teenagers came up with a further new meeting format - a discussion club on social issues. We decided to continue to discuss various topical issues for our fraternity and society and to propose our ideas and projects to solve them. But we decided to do it in a more systematic and organised way. We have chosen one day a month when we gather for discussion. In advance, we choose a topic for discussion from a list of topics we have proposed. Then we choose two people from our fraternity who prepare a short presentation-lecture on the chosen topic. They study information related to this issue, analyse different points of view and approaches, formulate their position and arguments. At the meeting they make their presentation-lecture in front of the whole fraternity and then propose questions for discussion. We listen to them with interest and respect, ask our questions, express our opinions and criticisms, and offer our ideas and projects on the topic.

We also vote for the most interesting and promising projects that we would like to realise in our fraternity or in our city. We believe that the debate club is a great way to develop our communication and critical skills, as well as to expand our knowledge and horizons. We are also happy to share our experiences and results with our counterparts from other countries who can also hold similar discussions in their communities.

Evaluation

I believe that the work we have done can be called a success. I see that the teenagers who are constantly involved in the life of our fraternity have become more conscious of their destiny and the activities of the fraternity. Many young people who initially needed support from me have begun to support other teens who are still in crisis. I also noticed that these teens began to take a more responsible approach to their religious life and their relationship with God. I believe that this was one of the main reasons for the improvement of their psychological state. Unfortunately, there are also difficulties in my work. In our community there are young people who are in crisis, but do not want to take change seriously at the moment. But, strangely enough, they regularly attend our meetings, but often contribute to misbehaviour. Fortunately, we have been able to partially deal with this problem. If the teens want to discuss some news among themselves or just chat, they go to the kitchen, where they will not interfere with the activities of the fraternity and can enjoy each other's company.

In the course of my work, I noticed that I myself was beginning to change. I stopped worrying about how to work with young people. After all, participation in the training programme gave me the most important thing: the direction in which to move in my work. During this year I managed to build trusting relationships with teenagers. Because of this, the fear of communicating with them disappeared (before I thought about every word I said, I was afraid of hurting them in any way). Also, because this year we experimented a lot with the format of meetings, I got a lot of new ideas and inspirations, and therefore I started to enjoy my work more.

Connecting through
performance
©David Balakay

Recommendations

In my work with young people, I would like to make a few recommendations: develop sincerity, the ability to listen and hear, and consistency in your work. Do not forget that activities with a large number of young people only 3 times a year is less effective than work with small groups regularly! Furthermore, do not devalue the problems of adolescents, because these are the first serious problems they face in their lives, try to support them, but do it sincerely, if you do not know how to help them in specific issues - admit it, but help them to find a person who can give competent advice or professional help. It is important to give them more freedom and responsibility, based on how they at first see the problem, but do it sincerely. Don't forget discipline either, create rules that build a healthy, respectful and safe atmosphere in the community. Listen to the ideas of teenagers, they are very creative, but try to give them the right direction. Be more open: share your stories and experiences of being a teenager. Speak sincerely if you are tired or in a difficult emotional state, (oddly enough, you can get support and understanding from those you are helping). But I don't believe they need to be privy to the context of your personal life or burdened with the details of your work processes. Be brave: experiment with the format of meetings: meetings with interesting people, outings, walks around the city, discussion meetings, listening to music, etc. Teenagers really like a change of scenery, and this can also bring your team together for the better. As for our context: I would like to see more working interaction with youth leaders in Belarus - this would help many aspiring youth workers to build on the long experience of their elders to work more effectively. This could also help to share effective practices and formats of meetings, and to move towards our goals more efficiently with the least loss.



In conclusion, I would like to thank the organisers for giving us the opportunity to participate in this wonderful project. We really appreciate your support and mentoring, as well as your interest in, and respect for our activities. Participation in this programme helped me to cope with things, to see the right direction for our activity, to see the prospects for our work and to gain a lot of new knowledge and learn about useful practices.



Agnese Blaua
Ice-cream city



My story of learning describes the journey to a new place called “Ice-cream city” which is the beginning of something valuable, fresh, and tasty. This is a place created by young people who started on making their Ice-cream city as individuals, but, as the time of the learning programme continued, they became more sensitive to each other, more understanding of each other, more accepting to each other, more passionate about them being together... All of this is a central part of the city that they co-created.

I have been working for the Diaconia of Latvia since 2021, as a social carer for children and youths from 7 to 18 years old. The day-centre where I work with a group of youngsters is located in the Kurzemes district of Rīga, at a place called Bolderāja. This district has many Russian speaking residents.

Day-centre “Dzīvības aka” is located in one of the ‘social houses’ of Riga City council and provides essential support to many local residents. I have joined the learning programme ‘Make Change Yourselves’ at some time between the 1st and 2nd learning periods. My first face-to-face Workshop was the 2nd Programme Workshop and it took place in Torre Pellice (Italy). At the beginning it was a struggle to comprehend the purpose of this learning programme and of some of the tasks in it because I joined it later. If the youngsters would have asked why we are doing, for instance, the biography task, I would not have been able to answer their questions at the outset, which I could do after some time.

The group of youngsters with whom I have been working with since the beginning of this learning programme are from 11 to 14 years old. They are from different backgrounds, but common to all of them is that they are living in foster families, one parent families, or families with divorced parents. In the group there are 3 girls and 4 boys. When we started the group, there were a few more teens, but they stopped coming to the day-centre. At the beginning, before our group was created, we came together to draw our life stories with 2 groups of youngsters at the day-centre. Some youngsters took this task with interest and drew the most meaningful things of their lives, for example their day of birth, house, family, kindergarten, school, Christmas., etc. Some youngsters just drew jokes, because of their traumatised childhood, where their memories were negative or there were no memories, they would like to share.



Explaining my journey of learning
using metaphor of Ice cream

Before start of the main project event

- Joke show

©Agnese Blaua



The second task for youngsters was to imagine and present in a creative way – draw, make a collage etc.- the best and the worst scenario of their lives in the future. This task was not clear for everyone. Some of them couldn't think that far, some of them presented scenarios of games where a personal look on your own life was missing. After the first coming together we started to meet separately from other groups of youngsters. And this is when they started to get more involved, more bonding, and more personal as well.

The first things we did as a separate group – we voted for the name of the group, which became our mini-project no. 1. Since then, the name of our group has been 'On One Wave', with the meaning that ,all youngsters are on one beautiful, challenging, crazy and enjoyable wave of thoughts, feelings, sharing, needs and love.'

As we continued with planning our next projects, the first and the biggest challenge that came up was arranging the meetings with the group, especially during school year, when youngsters have activities following their own interest after the school. It was quite demanding to get a time when they could all meet up. From that moment it was very helpful to create a WhatsApp group to keep in touch and arrange our meetings.

The purpose of the next step in our meetings was team-building when the youngsters could really get to know each other better, get used to each other, and start to feel as a one team. During the learning programme we did a few team building activities, such as "Drawing a City", where the youngsters had a task to build their city by drawing it on paper. The purpose of this task was to see, how they could work together, and what roles each person played in that 'construction' work. They generally worked separately rather than together, but still most necessary things in their city were done at some points when they met each other. They gave a name to this city "Ice Cream City".

Other team-building exercises for the youngsters included going together to the Laser Paintball, organising a cinema-evening in the Day-centre, and taking marble lessons at Latvian National Library, where teens had a chance to learn techniques of making paper look like a marble texture with colouring it in particular way with oil colours added in the bowl of water and paper dipped in it.

Eventually, we created our main project: "Joke Show" with the idea of uniting day-centre youths and kids with the people around – people should feel free to come and to laugh together and tell their joke.

Since then, the group meetings were about project planning, where the purpose of meeting together was to talk about something that was coming up – to discuss, to share, to brainstorm, to prepare. The youngsters enjoyed these meetings, because they made them feel important, gave them a voice to create ideas for projects, taught them to accept each other and how to take responsibility, plan the steps and take action for projects.

In the end of the day all the meetings (via the WhatsApp group and for team-building and project-planning) were directed towards one purpose – to build them as a team and to make them do projects together.

My Journey to Ice Cream City

When I started this journey in my air balloon, I was not sure where I had to land. It was everywhere and just an empty sheet of paper which eventually began to form in beautiful colours, shapes and tastes when I stepped out of the balloon and met a few girls and boys...

What did I learn in this one-year learning program?

This learning programme has brought to me new discoveries for myself as a person, as a diaconal worker, as the leader of a group, and about group work, affection for young people and how important it is for the young people to be involved and to see results. Also, I learnt how important it is not to give up on young people, even if some things are not coming together easily. I learnt that it is necessary to find some activity that the young people will always be able to manage. In this way, I worked step by step on their empowerment.

I did many practical things for the first time, for example, working with young people, working continually with the same group, the steps of doing projects with youngsters and, eventually, I gained leadership and motivational skills.

During the learning programme I discovered a useful tool for myself about structuring a view to the future by using the idea of 'utopia' and 'dystopia' in order to broaden personal and group ways of thinking and to look to the future through these lenses.

Before the learning programme, I had never thought about how community work develops, where it begins and how it moves on involving more followers; also, how it



Team building project. Youths had a task to draw, to build their imaginary city. Task is with purpose to see how team can work together.

©Agnese Blaua

Process of team building project.
Drawing they City.
©Agnese Blaua



affects young people when they have a chance to create, to be responsible, to be leaders of ideas and to spread those ideas more widely.

I learned about focusing on persons' strengths and to begin with those when thinking of community development approach. I discovered motivational theories and the meaning of the question of power when planning projects with young people. I gained knowledge of the tools for developing a project, for example: explaining the need to have an idea and the purpose of a project and to develop it by brainstorming, listening to opinions, writing down ideas,

being aware of the sparkle in the eyes of youngsters about some particular idea and asking questions about what the group needs in order to make it work.

The NAOMI evaluative tool for the project development, was helpful in terms of organising and reflecting my work as was the information about asset-based community development. Through these tools I also learned steps towards implementing projects.

Another learning activity was the chance to have an unforgettable co-learning exchange experience in Oulu, Finland. I was there for one week and visited the parish of Oulu Cathedral. During those days I had the opportunity to see and explore youth worker meetings, work planning meetings, family service activities, to meet children and youth groups. I could also visit the Cathedral, listen to an organ concert, meet the priest, see the children's church and the building named "State of the Soul". What was especially touching and new for me, was seeing a part of family service, where little children had their worship service, and how important and well-developed the work there is with little children from the age of 2-5 years.

During this time of learning, of course, I faced some struggles and difficulties as well. I can think of the challenging example of understanding of the aim of each task which was presented through a large amount of information in the English language. Sometimes it felt difficult to explain the purpose of a task or project, because I was not confident that I understood those tasks correctly myself. It was also challenging to organise meeting the group of youngsters on a regular basis because of the intensity of work and school-life.

However, the biggest challenge for me was to find the leader in myself, to believe that I can lead and manage this kind of work.

One of the remaining challenges in the work is to deal with the behaviour of the group when they should stay quiet and listen to each other, when they should accept group members who they don't like as much in their group and be kind to each other.

However, eventually, during the time of joint learning and project development, the youngsters in my group became more supportive of each other. They became open, were actively involved in brainstorming and came up with their own ideas. In this time, through becoming one team, the youngsters began to accept each other more, they showed interest in being a group and showed leadership through the wish to take responsibility for leading some activity, although they still needed my support. I noticed how being involved in this project has raised their confidence. Their faith in themselves was growing and it will keep on growing because the youngsters got interested in doing new projects again.

To conclude my learning story, I feel grateful for what I have gained in this year of learning in practice. It had an educational and eye-opening effect on both my work and personality and I will keep these in my practice, memories and heart.

For the development of diaconal youth work, I would suggest the need to keep on educating and training staff to work with youngsters and to make it as a systemic process. Also, it is important to develop youth work by giving youngsters responsibilities themselves, to involve them as leaders in diaconal projects, taking them as volunteers and to train them for some specific events or long-term projects. It is important to reward the young people in some memorable way, for example, taking them to concerts, sport games or excursions, or giving some gifts as gratitude and recognition for their importance.



Rita Eglite

The story of my learning in the Programme



Introduction

In my everyday life I am working as a leader of day-centre “Paaudzes”, which translates as ‘Generations’, in the Diaconia Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. In Latvia and especially in Riga, diaconia provides many different social services. At my centre we provide social services for people from marginalised groups. We work with adults, seniors, kids and families from various marginalised backgrounds, and lately our work embraces Ukrainian refugees. The funding for our work comes from the Riga City Council, department of Welfare. Youngsters, who come to my centre, are sent to us from Social Services, which implies they come from families at social risk. They are marginalised young people and each comes with a different life story and their disadvantages.

Sometimes I think, but also God does. I came into this learning programme not really knowing what to expect from it and what the ending would be. For years, I had lived and worked with the thought that as a teacher (my first work at that day-care centre), and then as its leader, I should build up a youth group with a specific agenda for youngsters. But then the reality came: the workload, the lack of time, endless duties, lack of personnel, doubts on how to start and what do differently with the youngsters. Overall, I did not put this task as a priority. Therefore, after many challenges, a lot of excuses and one more project later, “Paaudzes” finally has a work-group of young people, that has now been growing and getting stronger for more than a year.



Summer camp.
Coming together
©Rita Eglite

The Young Peoples' Group

My group consisted of “Paaudzes” youngsters who are varying in age from 12 to 18 years old and who are members of the day care-centre. Their attendance at the day-centre is not obligatory, and that was one of the biggest challenges throughout the programme. Every day different youngsters came, and it made a proper group-building, which was the first programme task, almost impossible. What is more, this



Brainstorming
project ideas
©Rita Eglite

year most of them were motivated to complete their schoolwork. Some stayed late at school, doing extra consultations, preparing for exams, while others were just wandering around, or were sick. Some youngsters were busy with after-school activities, such as folk dancing, singing in a choir and sports etc. On top of the poor attendance, the other biggest challenge to the group dynamics was their (and my) low motivation. Most of the year that we worked together, the youngsters did not want to take part in the programme tasks, apart from those activities that were fun. So, when they were asked of something responsible, they did not want to participate and only wished to make jokes, have fun and rest. Some of the youngsters are part of day centre for many years, and only when I started to think and analyse reason why youngsters sometimes are hesitating to come and take part in our youth group activities, I realised that for so long time we have been mixing youngsters together with younger kids in one big group and not separating activities for them, we always prepare plan and give everything ready to our kids and youngsters and they are used to this comfort that they don't need to think, they just need to come and do something. Therefore taking part in my youth group for some of them was stepping out of their comfort zone and it took some time while they realised that they can come up with activity ideas, their voices can be heard and we can realise those activities which they want.

In the work with young people time is essential. I can plan something, but it does not always happen according to my plan and vision. Every youngster is different, every group is different and not all methods work well with them. I had the vision that all of them would open up and be willing to come regularly and that it would be easy to involve them in project activities. However, few of them were able to start right away, and for most of the group it took a long time to open up and set out with us on our journey. As often happens with marginalised young people, they need time to explore surroundings, time to develop trust and see the necessity for an activity.

For me personally, my work duties were already enough, and it is not my direct responsibility to lead youth group activities. That and my personal challenges had a big impact on my mental health. My energy level and motivation to commit myself to some extra work plummeted. It of course is my passion to work with youngsters and I pull myself out of my office and I get to work with youngsters, at the end of the day I am satisfied because I have had a chance to see my youngsters in action and see the fruit of work which we are doing together.

Renovating the hall
©Rita Eglite



The ,mini-project‘

Thinking about the mini-project, which was the final programme task, it was only in the spring of 2023, almost one year later, we finally arrived at a point where the youngsters in my group were able to think more deeply and beyond their own comfort, needs and wishes. As it happened, it was almost the end of the school year when one afternoon we came together and something had changed. First, we shared about our recent events in life, as we always do. Then I asked them to brainstorm and share what were the things that they personally would want to change in our day-centre, and which everybody would benefit from. To my surprise, they were full of energy and ideas. When all their ideas had been written down, we discussed what is that one thing that we could complete by ourselves, in a short period of time, given the circumstances of us all being constantly busy. From all the ideas (they wanted to realise all of them) youngsters chose improving the entrance hall of our building, so that

everybody would feel lighter and better, when coming into the day-care centre. They suggested painting the walls with a brighter colour and making some drawings.

The group completed the idea of the colouring project, by choosing the colours, making the drawing of a tree. A girl, age 15, the artist behind the idea and realisation for the wall-painting said: “I am thankful that here

I have a chance to do something I would not be able to do otherwise, I am gaining a new experience”. The youngsters themselves and other visitors have been happy about the change in the entrance hall. And since our mini-goal has been reached, this is only the beginning. As the next future step after this project, they also want to refurbish the entrance hall, so that it is even more welcoming and comfortable for everyone who comes into the building.

Therefore, this learning programme for me and my workplace has been like a kick-starter for launching the work with the young people. And that is the best thing to know, that nothing ends



Finalizing the project
©Rita Eglite



Renovating the hall
©Rita Eglite

with the conclusion of our learning and work together. Colleagues and I will continue to work with our young people, improve the work that has been started. Marginalised young people are not seen as a project with a deadline. They are amazing persons who are, like nature, go through different seasons and it is our plan to be with them through it all. Of course, it means that my group in the future will face different phases and challenges. In the next season we are planning to create a youth room in our facility, where they could create and have their own safe space. And after that, we will continue with all their ideas.

Crafting a Different Approach

Without the programme I would not have been motivated to start crafting a different approach for the work with the young people. I have learned that they need personal adult approach, sometimes it is even more important than the group work with the peers. My motivation and energy level will never be the same as before - or lower with them. I am learning to trust them, give them tasks and freedom for self-actualisation; listen to them and meet their needs.



Co-learning
Ex-change
©Rita Eglite

Out of my experience and co-learning exchange, which took place in Slovakia, I have concluded that work with youngsters is quite simple. Firstly, it needs the creation of a space for regular meetings and talks when needed. In Slovakia, while I observed their work there, I saw different approach to youth work as I have been doing before. There came some thoughts to my mind which I think after my co-learning exchange, goes together well with otherlearning points which I have learnt during this programme. So I learnt that not all the activities have to be grand, outstanding, rather being present is what counts. Secondly, of course, shared adventures and experience is essential for young people. As they are still growing up, as a group leader you can create unforgettable 'first times' for them: their first hike, laser tag activity, boat ride and camp, etc. The memories from those moments bond the group together and will motivate them to work together and create exciting new experiences! I will not say here anything ground-breaking, but to help others, firstly you must take care of yourself as it is in the plane during an emergency landing – put the mask on yourself first! Without work with myself, without nourishing my body, spirit and soul with food that it needs, I have nothing to give to others; I become powerless. So for me, it is important to have relationship with God, to sleep well, eat healthy (or eat at all!), do physical activities and have time for hobbies.

What I have found out during the learning programme is that it is great to work in team, to have at least one more person with whom work together. Being only one leader I can get stuck, and if I am not available, youngsters are left without support and then all the work with them stops. I am thankful that one of my workplace colleague also was part of this programme and together with her I could start the group and go through this project activities. I strongly believe that we can do better by working in a team.



During the programme the online meetings of our group helped me to stay focused. All the peer stories and examples inspired and motivated me. A great support for me was our supervisor Anete Ankmane, who continuously encouraged me and saw the good and challenging aspects of what I was doing. Although I was sick and felt really bad during the 2nd Contact Teaching Workshop in Torre Pellice, Italy, it was the workshop that was the most helpful to me. There were great ideas for activities, a lecture about motivation and the valuable sharing of our stories. It helped me to get out of the swamp, where I was stuck back then, in the middle of our learning programme. Also the experience of co-learning exchange between Latvia and Slovakia was helpful. I gained new experience, made sure that what I am doing was ok, because it works just as well in another country and environment, and also that the struggles I have are not mine alone. What is more, during my time in Slovakia, I got inspired to incorporate more spirituality in the work with youngsters.

Noticing the Changes

Regarding my group, I have noticed big changes in it. I have noticed that youngsters have become more creative, active, open minded and ready to do something. I recall some time back when all what they wanted was to party and just have fun. Looking back to that I can be proud of how far they have come. The youngest person in the group is aged 12 but they are all slowly growing up and becoming a part of the group; a persons behaviour can be a challenge to the whole group, but in the process of cooperation they all gain new skills and valuable experience. They discovered more about themselves as persons, found themselves in a group and learned to grow through all challenges. The greatest changes are happening to the youngsters individually. For example, one girl, Dina, age 15, initiated and organised one day for all the kids at our centre and kids from another day centre “Dzīvības aka”. She planned, researched the tasks, thought of a programme, food, prizes. I was supporting her during the process. Together, we involved other youngsters in the organisation process and Dina learned a lot from her engagement, eventually understanding that this kind of work needs a lot of planning, nerves and patience. Her struggle was to be flexible and to adapt to the changes on the actual day of the event. Afterwards, when we sat down to evaluate and reflect, she said that she will not do it ever again. But despite that experience, she is now considering studying work with people professionally, perhaps, as a teacher, social worker or psychologist.

For myself, I noticed how God is using the challenges, and even the hardships and dark periods of the programme. He used to turn it into advantages. In the winter I thought of giving up, cancelling the group work and dropping out of the programme. Eventually, I just decided to do my best, by doing and giving as much as I could. And in the end, it has resulted in an amazing group of young people. I am overjoyed to see that they show up regularly now, communicate between themselves, enjoy each other and the time spent together. Seeing them rowing the boats, most of them, doing it for the first time made me think that all will be fine. No matter the challenges: wind, current, rocks, shallow river bank, lack of snacks and energy – we will continue moving forward and celebrate our accomplishments.

Growing together
©Rita Eglite



In Slovakia I saw how my peer-learner, Denis brought together church youngsters and people in the work with his group of youngsters, and I think that is the way to move forward in our diaconal work with young people because youngsters are part of the community and also their opinions and point of view matters. I think that part of diaconal work with young people is to make the gap smaller between the young people if the community and the adults. More church people should know about youth group activities, about the way they could join and be an example for the youngsters. I think that this mutual experience exchange is very much needed because adults can share their professional skills, life experiences and just be

as a support person when a youngster needs a shoulder for support. But youngsters can be the ones who create meaningful activities and events where the whole community can take part. Youngsters can use their talents in order to organise concerts and other activities where everyone is welcome.

To conclude, This learning programme was understandable, the team and support (availability of it) was outstanding. Our supervisor was more than great and without her I would not have finished it. Having more concrete deadlines and requirements would be helpful for me personally, like it was when Anete motivated us to fill in the Event Diary during the programme workshops. There should be some clear regulating rules: for example, no participating in the workshop if the home tasks have not been accomplished or there was no attendance at the online meetings.

Young people have a voice, they have ideas and they are a power of energy and vision; but they have been silenced or did not even have a chance to express themselves. Start to work on them individually, their own biography, give them time, listen and hear them, create safe and open environment for them, show up for them and have lots of fun! All youngsters are the world's greatest advantage, fuel and future!



Kadri Kesküla

International Learning for Diaconal Youth Work

Introduction

Estonia is a democratic parliamentary republic in Northern Europe, which has a population of 1.3 million people, making it the least populous country in the European Union. The majority of the population does not belong to any church, but the society is generally open to the spiritual message.

The institution for which I work. Estonian Diaconia is a foundation established by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia for the organisation of diaconal and social work.

The activities of the EELC Foundation for Diaconia and Community Work include the development and provision of social services; community work; mentoring and training of members of NGOs and congregations; the development of pastoral care; support for the care of people with special needs; the enhancement of crime prevention and social rehabilitation; and the care of vulnerable groups. Here is a link to the web site: <https://diakoonia.eu/>

My Work in Context

My work with marginalised young people includes people with special needs. The Estonian Diaconia has a long-standing cooperation with Katikodu. This is a residential home for people with special intellectual needs, where 14 young adults live together. You may learn more about this place via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwqsxv-QK1M&t>

Katikodu also has a work centre at the Kohila centre, where people with special needs from the surrounding area come to work every working day from 10:00-16:00 pm. People come to the work centre through the local municipality. They can do woodwork, handicrafts, work in the laundry, cook together in the kitchen, and food is also brought to the mostly elderly people in residential care. Counselling in occupational and art therapy is provided.

The opening of a job centre for people with intellectual disabilities in the Kohila centre in early 2017 was met with strong opposition from the surrounding community. However, over time, relations have become friendly and mutually supportive. The laundrette is used to wash the laundry of the local kindergartens. Young people from local schools come to the workshop to do woodwork. Commonly expressed attitudes show that there are prejudices and fears in society towards people with intellectual disabilities, which initially leads to their exclusion.

RHYTHM INSTRUMENTS
Process of making instruments
by people with disabilities. ©Kadri Keskiöla

Our young adults have different abilities. Some can travel alone on a train if you help them to find the right time. Some take home meals and chat to people in residential care. Some consistently do only one activity at their workplace day after day. They generally lack abstract thinking and initiative. Some have a very strong sense of empathy and are very caring, friendly and helpful. You need to be very clear, firm and honest in your dealings with them. For example, there is no point in asking what you would like to change in the world. But you can ask, 'what do you like?'

Therefore, there was no possibility to sit down together with the group and discuss what kind of project we would like to do together. The very concept of a project is incomprehensible to most of our young people. The planning of this project actually took place through collective action. Together with the people in our workshop, doing everyday things, noticing, working together, understanding what someone likes and what they enjoy. For example, in our group we have a big funny young man Raul who is a very good crocheter, Karli and Kust like to sand in the woodworking shop, Siiri likes to sew.

At the same time, we felt a lack of simple rhythm instruments that everyone in the group could play, creating unity and having a therapeutic effect. We started making instruments together. When a small step was done, a whistle was finished and the young people saw the final result and their contribution to it, they became very happy. When they realised that their work was needed by someone, that it would become available for others to use, it filled them with pride and satisfaction.

We planned to make 20 rhythm pipes. Now 7 are ready. I am sure these instruments will be ready in time and will be used in music therapy. However, just as with the term 'project', the word 'deadline' is a meaningless expression for us. Sometimes just waking up in the morning and arriving at the workshop is an event worth celebrating.

The most important thing about our project is a participant's experience of being able to do something for others and that it matters to them. Doing something for others is always therapeutic. It makes you more confident and helps you to make peace with the world.



CARPENTRY
WORKSHOP
Castanets carving
in the carpentry
workshop.
©Kadri Keskiöla



SHAKER INSTRUMENT
Rice inside of a shaker
instrument.
©Kadri Keskiöla

The Learning Programme

The knowledge that I gained from this programme for my work relates in particular to the life experiences of the other participants. What they told me about their lives, their country, their work, their people. The questions and difficulties they faced may sometimes have been ones I had never thought about. Going along with their stories and trying to understand, to see situations through the eyes of the narrator - it teaches and widens the world enormously.

The profound benefits of the interdiac learning programme for marginalised young people in my neighbourhood are illustrated by the story of Tambet. Tambet is a 14-year-old boy in a mainstream school who attends our workshop to build self-confidence and reduce anxiety. I had my fifth art therapy session with him whilst Dávid Pobežal, another member of the MACY project, was visiting me on a study exchange. Tambet has a very wide supportive network of support workers, psychologist and therapists, all of whom are women. He rarely meets his father. So I thought it might be nice for Tambet to meet David. When we had finished art therapy, I told him I had a visitor from Slovakia and asked Tambet if he would like to meet him. Tambet said yes, but a little hesitantly. We went to the workshop where David was staying while I was doing the therapy. I introduced David to Tambet. Tambet hid right behind me and seemed to be getting

anxious again, but he was very brave and didn't run away. I asked Tambet if we could go to the therapy room and show David his artwork for today. Tambet dutifully agreed. So off we went. David took Tambet's artwork in his hands, looked at it appreciatively and said what he saw there. Tambet didn't say much, but from his widening smile, straightening back, loosening shoulders, and deepening breathing, you could see the profoundly encouraging effect it had on him to have a young man from a foreign land notice him and appreciate his work.

An important part of my professional development was to get to know the living library of Torre Pellice and the Waldensian Church in Italy. Education, literacy and the appreciation of books and reading are very important in Estonian culture. The realisation that, although despite the many differences between the culture, history and people of the Italian Alps and those of the people on the flat terrain of Estonia, there is something quite unexpected that is also so profoundly similar.

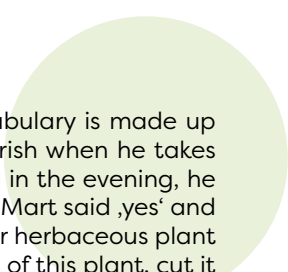
My biggest challenge in participating in this programme with my young people was fitting in with the demands of the programme as our young people are not normal in the most charming way. For example, Mart is always present and always



LOOMS

Kadri Keskküla, David Pobežal and looms in Kohila
working centre for people with disabilities.

©Merilin Niilop



smiling and open. His motor skills are almost normal when he is very careful. His vocabulary is made up of „yes“, „no“ and „thank you“. Mart likes gardening very much and all the plants flourish when he takes care of them. One day he had been tidying up and tidying away in the workshop and in the evening, he was still washing the soup pan after the others had left. I thanked him for his diligence. Mart said ‚yes‘ and waved me into the other room. He led me to a large pot of flowers, where an unfamiliar herbaceous plant was growing, with beautiful white flowers. Mart asked me if I would like to have a sprig of this plant, cut it off and explained with the help of a clue how I could root it. I followed the instructions and now I have a lush houseplant that I still don't know the name of. Can this case also be called a mini-project?

For me, the biggest challenge was to find the strength to cope with all the deadlines and the simultaneous tasks, to keep on track and not drop out. I soon realised that I couldn't do it. Then I felt like a failure, I wanted to leave the programme. I discussed the situation with my colleagues, who told me that many had already left and that it was impossible to find someone new. So, I thought that in every single moment I can still give my best and let it be. I decided to carry on exactly as I am, accept myself and be happy.

There has been a shift towards a deeper sense of self among young people. They are a little more comfortable with who they are. Those around them have also become more friends with young people. They have begun to understand what our young people bring to the community.

Evaluation

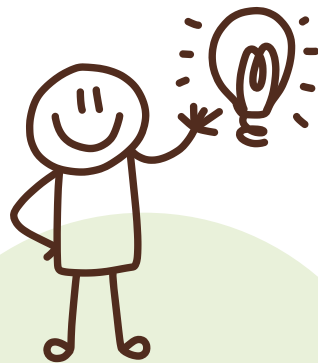
Based on my experience and the new knowledge I have acquired during the programme, I consider the most important thing in the development of diaconal youth work to be the noticing, unconditional recognition and understanding of each person. Also, patience and trust to allow the person to arrive at and implement their own decisions. For example, in our work centre, Juhan got a phone and stored my number on it. I told him it was just in case and asked him not to call or send messages every day. After that, every time we met, Juhan asked me why he couldn't call me - I was his dear friend. I replied that we could talk about everything when we met at the work centre. Juhan was still not satisfied. Finally, he asked if he could write letters. I thought it was a good idea. So now we are pen friends. Whenever we meet at the workshop, Juhan gives me a neatly folded letter with a few sentences written in big letters. I give him a drawing and a few sentences in return. This creates a warm and happy relationship between us and doesn't come across as intrusive or burdensome. I would not have thought of such a solution. The correspondence was suggested by the young person with intellectual disabilities, entirely on his own initiative. When we allow things to happen, that is what happens in the work with young people in the diaconia.

The greatest value of the international learning programme is meeting people from other cultures in the same field and learning from their experiences. Hearing and seeing what issues are important to them, and maybe I've never been able to ask questions in this way before. Maybe if I asked the same

question in my own community, we would reach a much more valuable level. The answer is certainly not the same as the one given where the question came from. After all, our culture, needs and opportunities are different. This kind of exchange of experience provides an opportunity for deeper understanding of being and for creativity.

On this basis, I propose to focus the development of the programme on making the experience of participants visible. Sharing life experience as wealth. How can we encourage young people to change their lives and the world around them? For me, as a diaconal worker, the most important thing is to build a relationship of trust, consisting of a sincere committed presence in which I notice myself and the young person and am honest with both; of unconditionally recognising the other person as valuable simply because he or she is there; of realising that if I had grown up in those circumstances and lived through everything he or she has, my decisions and behaviour would probably be the same as theirs. Once this is in place, change will happen on its own.

In conclusion, participating in the programme has been an adventurous journey full of rich learning opportunities and insights, for all of which I am extremely grateful.



Denys Kravchenko

My personal story - the starting point of my voluntary work with marginalized young people

My name is Denys. I am 21 years old, and I was born and raised in the Odessa region, which is part of Southern Ukraine. Three years ago, I moved to Hungary. The reason for this tremendous move in my biography was the offer to participate in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) a programme which offers all young Europeans the possibility to volunteer in another country. This programme is available to all youngsters despite their background. Therefore, since October 2020 I work, volunteer and live in Budapest. Luckily, I was already out of Ukraine when the war started in February 2022. I had the opportunity to apply for international volunteering thanks to the work of an NGO that supported me and many others during childhood and adolescence.

My childhood was spent in a small village just 60 kilometres north-east from picturesque Odessa, Ukraine. Once it was a small cosy place where every day was filled with the joy of discovering new things, and meetings with friends were the most precious moments. In 2013, like a ray of sunshine in grey everyday life, Living Hope NGO opened a day care centre for children facing difficult life situations, such as poverty, sickness, addictions and therefore lack of opportunities. Attending this centre was a real event in my life. From the very first day of the centre's opening, I became an active visitor. Here I not only learnt and developed, but also found a myriad of friends who now remain my reliable companions and an inseparable part of my life.

However, this was only the beginning of my amazing story. One day, during our conversations and discussions at the centre, one of my friends shared some sensational news. It turned out that there was a unique programme called European Solidarity Corps (ESC) that allowed young people to volunteer in other countries and our NGO was an accredited partner organisation. From my experiences at the youth centre, I felt empowered to become a volunteer and supporter to others.



*4th Contact Teaching
Workshop in Tallinn
©Denys Kravchenko*

Working with young people living on the margins

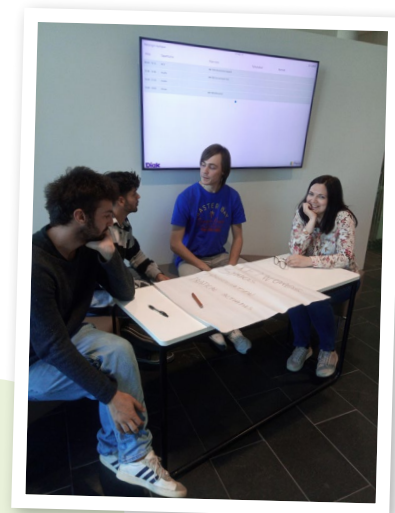
Since the outbreak of the war, I have found my path in ministry. Before that, I had some experience as a group leader at summer camps for kids growing in difficult life circumstances back in Ukraine. At the moment, I work as an interpreter for the United Nations and Reformed Church of Hungary. My job is to help Ukrainian refugees arriving in Hungary.

It makes me feel good to be able to do this important work, supporting people in their time of need and helping them adapt to their new environment. This work has taught me a lot and I am ready to share my experiences and recommendations for the development of diaconal youth work and training programmes.

Unfortunately, the experience of organising a youth group was not smooth and did not happen immediately in my current work context. My work as an interpreter for the United Nations and the Reformed Church was full of various responsibilities and free time was a rare luxury. Because of this, it took me some time before I was able to gather around me a group of young people who were interested in spending time with me.

Nevertheless, I was persistent and not discouraged. I started actively engaging with the young people, participating in their activities and looking for common interests. After a while, I managed to form a group that shared my values and aspirations to help Ukrainian refugees. This was an important step in my work and allowed us to work together on our projects and ideas. This experience taught me patience, perseverance and the importance of connecting with young people, even in difficult circumstances. It has also been one of the key aspects of my professional development and allowed me to better understand how to engage young people in working on their own stories of change and improvement in their environment.

I was impressed by the number of ideas the young people came up with concerning the task how we can make change in our community. One, which we succeeded to implement I want to share here: The youngsters recognised that every time the Ukrainian refugees come to our organisation to receive the food and aid packages they have to queue and wait sometimes for several hours. So, the aim was to make this waiting time more useful - maybe even fun. So, we set up a little game station, where the people could come and play with our youngsters. We had a variety of board games they could choose from. The feedback from the refugees was very good. The goal to make this waiting time more bearable was reached and the youngsters learned that small actions can really make a difference in someone's life.



First Contact Teaching
Workshop in Helsinki
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Co-learning Exchange
in Riga
©Denis Kravchenko

My reflection on the interdiac learning programme

Besides theoretical knowledge, this learning programme gave me the unique opportunity to gain valuable experience by communicating with youth workers from different European countries. Being the youngest participant in the project, I was interested in listening to experienced colleagues



First Contact Teaching
Workshop in Helsinki
©Denis Kravchenko

from Finland, Estonia and Armenia etc. In our conversations and discussions, I benefited from their rich work and ministry experience. But nevertheless, I didn't feel inferior but rather valued and taken seriously. This allowed me to take away many valuable lessons and ideas for myself.

One main finding for me was as that I realised that having a common language with young people becomes much easier when you are young yourself and can more easily understand their needs and interests. However, professional interaction and developing communication skills with young people takes time and effort and has to do with professional knowledge. In my practice, sometimes I had to start meeting groups again several times, but each experience taught me something new and made my work more effective. This experience has enriched my knowledge and skills, allowed me to better understand young people and to find effective ways to engage them in working on their own stories of change.

Project work is always an ongoing process. Progress never stops, and this applies to both project participants and organisers. We all developed gradually, learning new skills and obtaining knowledge in the process.

Obviously, the study trip co-learning exchange to Latvia was one of the highlights for me. I was very impressed by the work Diakonia Latvia is doing with marginalised children and youngsters. It was interesting to accompany my colleagues from our learning programme in their everyday work routine. In many ways their ministry reminded me of the work my sending organisation, Living Hope is doing back in Ukraine. That means we can use similar methods adapted to the local context and we can learn from the practice of others. I benefited a lot from this trip also through learning about the social system in the Baltics and how they have organised the work to support Ukrainian refugees. The invitation to join certain activities, for instance like an "educational cinema" I enjoyed greatly. Altogether it was an inspiring and positive experience for my personal and professional development.

Organising a project like our learning programme is a complex task that requires many factors to be taken into account. Participating in this learning programme was sometimes quite challenging. At some point honestly speaking I was close to cancel my participation, but I am glad that thanks to open communication and the valuable help of the mentors I was able to overcome these difficulties.

However, despite all the challenges, our progress from the first workshop to the last has been great. The learning process, lectures, workshops and experience sharing were organised perfectly. The technical part was also well prepared. Henceforth, however, in my opinion we may consider increasing the practical component and reducing the amount of theory. This could make the training more interesting and applicable to every day real life.



Agnese Mikne

Story of my Learning in the Programme

Introduction

I work at the LELB Diakonia Centre Day Centre „Well of Life“. I work there as a psychologist. We work and support children, young people and their families, as well as adults.

How did my youth group form? Was it easy? Definitely not, it was a whole process. And yet, the group was formed. As there are two of us who work at the day centre who participated part in the project, we initially formed one group, which we both led. But it didn't last long, because new young people joined the Day Centre, and some of them had reached the required age. So, each of us was able to start our own group. I approached the young people individually about taking part in the project. Thus, a nice and challenging group of young people aged 12-15 years old was formed with whom I was able to experience and enjoy all that this programme 'Make Change Yourself: Turning Challenges into Advantages' had to offer. In the end, I definitely feel like a winner, because the project changed my perspective on working with young people and gave me opportunities to learn new things, but more about all that in my story below.



*Making the room for youngsters
©Agnese Mikne*

Practice Period

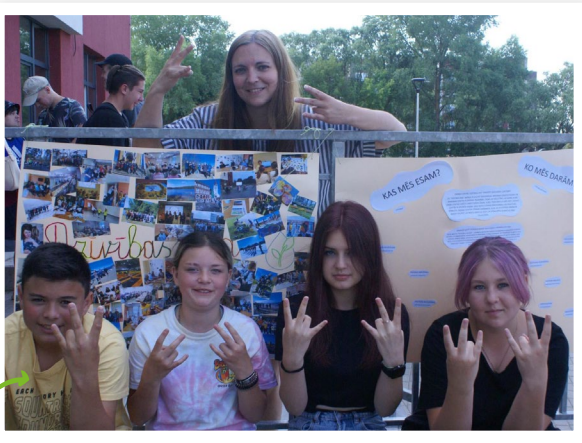
I remember the first big task that we had to do ourselves as the programme participants. We had to write a biography about ourselves. I remember how nervous I was about it. Probably because it was the very beginning of the project, and I didn't know anyone and wasn't ready to share this material with others. At the same time, reflecting on ourselves, on the important moments and turning points in our lives was very valuable, because what has happened to us in our lives has shaped who we are today. Also, through past experiences we can learn and create new experiences for the future. It is so important to look back. It was important for me, too. And it is also important to talk about it, either individually or in groups, as we did during the first week of the face-to-face meeting in Helsinki. It was so special to hear other peoples' experiences too. It helps to understand their downfalls and achievements, what seems more significant and what seems less significant. It helps to develop understanding of how to react to certain events,

what activities are desirable to include and what are not desirable. This exercise opens up a wide range of possibilities for future work. All that remains is to look deeper.

The formation of the group was an interesting and changing process. Initially, my colleague and I started leading one group together, but then circumstances changed, and we started leading our own groups, which I think gave us a chance to express ourselves individually, and it was also a great opportunity to reach more young people with not too many young people in the group.

During the first Practice Period we had the opportunity to watch a video of a lecture on how we can use the environment for our benefit. Not only by exploring the mountains and meadows, but also by getting to know interesting and talented people, and by exploring local institutions and their resources. Initially I didn't know what to do with it, if it was even possible to reach out, but if any of it can be useful, then we should definitely use all the resources available.

Dystopia and utopia were new to me. I hadn't heard these words in my daily life, certainly not enough to pay attention to them. It is good to think about the worst that can happen in some things, even something as simple as education. In my practice, I also used to ask people: 'What is the worst that can happen?' And fantasise about the unrealistic scenario - what if. This practical part gives you the opportunity to look at reality, find the resources to achieve your goals and move forward step by step.



Mini-project with youngsters group.
©Agnese Mikne

In our work, we must not forget the presence of God. I think I felt it the most during the Contact Teaching Workshop 3 in Riga, when we worked a lot in groups, taking Bible passages, reflecting on them, sharing reflections, connecting with ourselves, with our youth group. It is necessary to look at things from a different perspective, because not everything is as we see it. This also helps to see the hidden things in young people, the real things they need, not what they want people to see. During this time, I started to think more about each of the young people in my group individually, so I liked the exercise where we had to write about each of the young people, highlighting their talents and positive qualities. This assignment gave me a new lease of life, because I was able to see the beauty in young people again.

Each practical period allowed me to get to know the young people better and better, to try to work with them on different tasks that I had done before. Looking through the notes, I realise that there is so much and different material that I have not yet been able to use. Also, what we have already done can be adapted to the situation and continued.

Mini Project

It was interesting how we came to do the project, how the young people shared different ideas and thoughts, how their hearts and eyes lit up when they did what they thought was interesting.

As the young people wanted to stay overnight in the Day Centre, I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to slowly introduce them to thinking for themselves. An important thing they all like to do is eat. So, I asked the young people to agree on what they would like to eat, what they need for that, and also to learn how to fit it into a budget. This was their first task to do together.



Making pizza on pijama party with youngsters at Day care center
©Agnese Mikne



Having fun at pijama party with whipped cream
©Agnese Mikne



Eating pizza that we made on pijama party
©Agnese Mikne

Later on, I started thinking that it was time to start with the idea of the mini-project itself. What could I do? How to bring it to young people? How to guide and motivate them? Then, just when I had decided to get down to it, only 2 young people come to the Day Centre. I thought - it's okay, let's do it! So, I decided to go out and walk around the neighbourhood with the young people. Why? Because you can see more by walking around than by sitting in a building. Also, the young people were happy to change their daily routine. At the end of the walk, one of the young people came up with the idea that it would be good to plant trees in the neighbourhood. I asked various questions about what it would take to do this, to take the idea further, to not just have an idea. As only 2 young people participated in the process, we left the idea for further discussion. I thought it was a nice idea myself.

It was heart-warming to see the whole group come together. I asked the young people who were on the walk to tell me about their idea. I asked the young people to share their thoughts on this idea and if there are any other ideas, be sure to share them too. One young person expressed a wish to lead

Having time together with other Diaconia Day care centre MACY project youngster group and Evelyn Plitman.
©Evelyn Plitman

the process. He had already shown leadership talent. He wanted to do it again this time. And I am glad that here he was able to develop and use his talent in a good way. Young people started to think and share their ideas. So that I would not want to control what was happening myself, I decided to leave the young people and let them work on their own. When I came back, they had several ideas from which, by voting, they chose to make birdhouses. We planned to meet another time to start thinking about how we could make this happen, but it was difficult to arrange a meeting until I realised that there was not enough time left for this project.

Then the Day Centre organised an event for a wider public and this came as a wonderful opportunity for young people to work, discover their talents and abilities and find new opportunities. And so, the big preparation phase began. We had to figure out how to tell the story of the Day Centre - what happens there and what we do there. I asked the young people to think about what else we could offer on this day when people would come to visit not only from the local area, but also from other parts of the city. It was decided to make a poster using photos of the Day Centre. Together we searched for pictures that we would like to use, the young people cut and pasted until we had a big poster with lots of different photos from the life of the Day Centre. During the process, the young people reminisced about the different events and activities they had experienced at the Day Centre. There was laughter and sharing of memories. It was a joy to feel the sense of the important work we do here, that the young people are forming beautiful memories of it. It gives a feeling that our work is important. Thinking about extra activities, the young people planned what handicrafts to make and what else they could give to the people who would come. We ended up making a flower out of napkins (the craft had to be easy). The young people wanted to bake fortune cookies with text inside. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to bake them, so the young people prepared different wishes in both Latvian and Russian, which the guests could pull out and take with them in their hearts. It was impressive to see how they worked together, as they had to help each other with the translation. It was a pleasure to see the young people smiling on the day, it showed me their own satisfaction as they did a cool job. They were proud and they deserved it because they had put in the work. It is so beautiful to see the fruits of your labour.

Co-Learning

The exchange trip was a real adventure in both personal and project experience! It's great to see other people's work. On the one hand it is so different, but at the same time so similar to what we do in our workplace. The approaches,



Terhi-Liisa having an activity with kids/youngsters in Latvia. Co-Learning exchange.
©Agnese Blaua

methods and activities we work with may be different, but the goal is the same: to love, to build, to understand, to accept, etc.

With another worker from the Centre, I spent a week in Oulu. We experienced many different things - many meetings including those planning the diaconal work and those planning the work with the people who attend the activities. We also met the staff and got to know their work, enjoying some activities and classes, being with the young people and just enjoying being together in love.

As I said, we have the same goal, but the methods and approaches may differ. I think a lot also depends on the mentality. Finland seems to have a more relaxed way of life in itself, most definitely in the part of Finland where I was. I liked the idea that meetings and events are planned a year in advance, that you think in advance how to prepare for certain activities, when to plan what, in order to move towards the planned goal. It was good to have a meeting about how to get people interested in coming to church, how to give them opportunities to serve and how the church can help them. It is wonderful that this is being thought about. In our church we are also facing these kinds of difficulties and ways of dealing with them.

It was especially beautiful to be with the young children. Terhi-Liisa herself is not involved in the day-to-day, but she knows what is going on. The young children meet with their parents or grandparents for a devotional time, fellowship and creative activities. We hit on the theme of Mother's Day. It was really so sweet and touching and thought so much about the little children. First of all, there are soft sofas on which soft toys are placed and the little ones and their companions can sit there quietly, get used to the place, cuddle the toy. Secondly, the whole service is tailored to the needs of the children, so that they participate with interest. There are songs with movements, there are nice song books, there are some musical instruments that the little ones are involved in. And that beautiful ending with everyone blowing out the altar candles together. My heart was full of love.

I was especially happy to meet the young people. Some of the young people we met were around 12/13 years old. And the others were close to 18 years of age and over, and this was the group that Terhi-Liisa works with. All the young people come voluntarily (you have to write an application to the social services). The younger group comes 2x a week, the older group 1x a week for a couple of hours. It was interesting to observe the children and their behaviour, fascinating to talk to them and just spend time with them. The young people come with joy, knowing that they will be welcomed, accepted and loved. Yes,



Selfie with youngsters.
Celebrating school ending
at Diaconia Day care center.
Everyone needs to be kid
sometimes.
©Agnese Mikne

Having time together with other Diaconia Day care centre
MACY project youngster group and Evelyn Plitman.
©Agnese Mikne



it seems that love is the most important and the biggest thing that I also experienced on this exchange. And everything that comes from a loving relationship. This was evident in the relationships with the young people, with colleagues and towards those of us who visited the workplace for activities and meetings. Another important thing was the individual attention, which is so important. Certainly, young people are not always ready to talk about things in a group and the individual approach is very valuable. So Terhi-Liisa met with her young people individually, which enabled her to listen to them more, understand them more and have deeper conversations that lead to a positive outcome. It was a pleasure to hear (talking to the young people in the group led by Terhi-Liisa) that they have plans for the future, bigger and smaller ideas, that

they have hobbies that they would like to do on a more serious level and earn money from, that they want to continue their education. When you see that real love and a personal approach is not just theory, but a real practical experience that one person gives to another and it works wonderfully, you want to incorporate it into your work. Of course, I still have to learn to love to that extent, but nobody said it was impossible. With God all things are possible!

On such a visit, you have to meet and get to know a lot of strangers. Communication is in English - I remember how scary that was. I have learned about myself, how much I can overcome, accept and change and how much I can do if I don't let fear take over. The same applies to working directly with young people. That feeling of insecurity, of not knowing quite what to do, leads to doing nothing. It seems that if I don't see an immediate result, then nothing will happen, but in fact everything is happening, just baby steps, which are so important. During the process I also realised how important it is to pay special attention to young people, to create lessons and activities that suit them, to look to the future and to find their abilities, talents and resources. As an example, there was one boy with whom I found it difficult to work at the beginning, I saw him as a racist who could not take things seriously. As time went on, his talent for being a good leader emerged, which will serve him well in life if he knows how to use this gift as a resource.

My Learning about Youth Work

The project helped me to remember, rediscover and learn many things. For example, how much young people need to just be together without doing anything serious or important. Although, being together is important and meaningful. It's as simple as picking up a packet of crisps, having a Coke and putting all responsibilities aside. There are already many responsibilities in the daily life of young people. Open, non-staged, honest and relaxed relationships are also important when working with

Agnese Mikne –
presentation of project.
Workshop in Riga.



young people. Such an environment creates a sense of security, a feeling that you can be you and you don't have to play. Yes, of course, as the leader of the group you have to have authority, but it is so important to show that you are a person, just as they are, that you have made mistakes and you are still making them, because only those who do nothing make no mistakes. I saw how important it is to learn to listen, to hear and not to judge. Yes, sometimes it can be difficult, but not impossible. A safe environment. The young people may not be able to express themselves so safely (at least at first), but it happens with time if we give them that feeling of safety. That is why we also need to put a special emphasis on one-to-one meetings with young people, where we can open up and be one-

to-one. Even if you are doing some other important thing in your office at the time, if a young person has come in, it means that they need to have this conversation and you need to put down whatever you are doing and give them your undivided attention. If you say one or more times that you don't have time for them, then you will be just another person who doesn't have time for them. If you don't have the opportunity to focus at that moment either, it is so important to say these simple words: „Right now I have to finish what I am doing and in 10 min I will have all my attention on YOU“. All this attention, encouragement and acceptance are so important. I can feel how the relationship with the young people is changing, how my heart and theirs are changing, how they are longing to be together.

It seems that finding the motivation in young people is still the most difficult thing for me. But the more I understand their needs, the better relationships we can build. I am not talking about the superficial needs, but the hidden needs that lie beneath their behaviour. These are the real needs through which we can work and find resources.

Through it all, love is important. Not the human love that we mean in the everyday use of the word. I am thinking of God's love. If we do things in God's love, then all things are possible. Even what seems impossible at first. But above all, I also understand that by listening to young people and helping their voices to be heard, it is easier to work with them and they want to hear what I have to say to them, and then there can be room for expressing to God's love.



Visiting Latvian
Evangelical Lutheran
Church parish
of Bolderāja
with youngsters
and Terhi-Liisa.
Co-Learning exchange.
Having an activity
about meaning
of prayers.
©Agnese Blaua



Co-Learning exchange.
Terhi-Liisa in Riga. Painting
activity „My Spring“.
©Agnese Mikne

Hasmik Mkhitarian

My journey in the learning programme

The Armenian Context and the Armenia Round Table Foundation

In the context of the triple crises of 2020, 2021 and 2022 namely Covid-19, the war started by Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), and sovereign territories of Armenia and the blockade of Artsakh, diaconia and faith-based institutions faced multiple challenges to meet massive needs of war affected people. Nowadays Armenia continues facing various struggles related to political instability, unpredictable prospects and economic uncertainty.

The WCC Armenia Round Table Foundation (WCC ART) was established by the initiative of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the World Council of Churches with the participation of the Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches. The Round Table Foundation started its activities in 1996. It now operates under the auspices of His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians. Working in close collaboration with church-related and non-governmental organizations, ART works to actively contribute to the development of local communities and civil society in Armenia.

The Foundation addresses problems of poverty and migration through strengthening socio-economic participation and the growth of local communities, self-help capacities and social mobilisation. ART has established and co-funds operations of 9 church related multi-purpose social Centres in different regions of Armenia. These centres operating with ART support are further empowered to mobilise resources and become actors for change in their communities.

Participation in the Programme

In the framework of Erasmus+ funded programme “Make Change Yourself: Turning Challenges to your Advantage!” (MACY) ART suggested that I could be a candidate to participate in the programme. Currently I am working as the manager of Gai “St. Nshan” Social-Educational Centre in Armavir region. Gai is small village close to the Turkish border, which has a population of 3,800 people. The users of the Centre are school-age children, youth from socially vulnerable families and unemployed women from Gai and seven nearby villages.

The “St. Nshan” social-educational (ART) Centre started its work in 2000 in a small wooden cottage. Over the years it developed more activities and enlarged the premises with the support of ART and the contributions of private benefactors. The goal of the Centre is development of the rural community,

which is based on revival of spiritual and cultural values. The Centre offers various study-groups for children and youth: singing, painting, ceramics, dancing, embroidery, sewing and tailoring, tapestry and computer literacy. Overall, the programme of the Centre aims to build and promote capacities of socially vulnerable rural children and adults through out of school education and internships The methods used by the Centre have practical impact on young people, because they have been constantly involved in the programmes of the Centre, such as domestic violence, first aid, community development, environmental issues and work with war affected people. The MACY programme provided a good opportunity for the youngsters who use the Centre to test new approaches to youth work in practice as I participated in the programme and become familiar with international practices used by the participating organisations.

Starting work with the young people

During the preliminary phase I tried to use the ABCD (Asset-Based Community Development) approach suggested during the Contact Teaching Workshops of MACY. The approach involves the community in identifying and addressing needs. With the advice from local teachers and the school director 16 youngsters from 14-18 years old were suggested and became involved in the learning programme.

I built the conversations and discussions with the group primarily with the idea of how to motivate young people who find themselves in the margins of the society. I aimed to invite them to contribute to sharing the light of hope and involvement in community life. The Centre provided and created an environment where the young people could feel empowered and discover themselves. The group was supported when they analysed their life world and contributed to creating a better future. They were given space and time to think, discuss and develop their own project in a joint effort. In this regard the task 'Biographical Work' served as a mechanism for dealing with difficulties. This joint work helped young

people get to know each other and made the individual meetings and conversations more open. My observation of doing biographical work is that it provides an excellent opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of personal experiences and life stories which, by focussing on the main aspects can also be a helpful experience for others.

The initial group meetings were aimed at enabling participants to become familiar with each other and overcome the distance between group members. Eventually the group started getting closer. All this time



BIOGRAPHICAL WORK
The conversation
©Mery Egiazaryan



↑
MEETING WITH
YOUNG PEOPLE
Topics discussion
©Mery Egiazaryan



← AUTUMN WALK
Game
©Mkrtich Krtikashyan

the interactions with the group members were carried out and reflected through the ethical rules in youth work. Topics of our conversations were about the village, their friends, the school and the church, their interests, community problems, etc. It is important to underline that the meetings always started with spiritual talks. Everyone in the group felt that they were under the care and support of the church.

In the process of discussions on the Future Lab and the ideas of Dystopia & Utopia, the group started talking about the micro project initiatives which should be developed further. “No matter what difficulties we face in our life, we always should stay strong, positive and happy. Only positive thoughts can help us get

everything we need in life. Happiness, success and satisfaction in life can come if our mind is peaceful, if we allow positivity to rule our lives” – These are the main reflections expressed by the young group members.

When giving their feedback on these activities, the young people underlined that searching for solutions to different types of problems in their daily life was helpful to them to get rid of negative thoughts and live a positive life. They also mentioned that everybody should talk more and more with people, because a good attitude brings good change, while a bad attitude causes negative changes in our lives.

Later when they were thinking about micro project ideas, I found it very important that the group should be motivated to do something. When young people visit the Centre, the main focus of their motivation is that they do entertaining activities, gain new skills and ambitions. Our experience shows that helping youth to set goals, rebuilding trust and providing them with opportunities to act are key approaches to sustain their motivation. Motivation is action, without action there is no motivation.

Preparing and implementing the project activity by the young people.

As previously mentioned, the preparation of the micro projects started with analysing the context together with young people and thinking about their perspectives and interests. After completing the analysis, the group shared their needs and based on those, they started developing ideas and building plans which included related activities and responsibilities.

During the period of ‘MACY’ programme, 3 micro participatory projects were implemented: Christmas Star, the Eco Environmental Project and Giving Waste a New Life. The motto of these micro projects was “Always be active”. The group was very motivated when they divided their roles

HAPPY CHRISTMAS
Happy Holiday party
©Gasparyan Srbuhy

and responsibilities. I can underline that during these micro projects the group developed capacity and experience mostly on how to form a teamwork, develop a project idea, implement time management, choose team leaders, divide responsibilities based on skills and interests, etc. Here I describe the three projects:

Christmas Star. This idea came during our brainstorm discussions. Young people thought that the Christmas is coming, and they could develop a mini project for community children. The group started preparation work which was very motivating and challenging. In this small project everyone had their own roles, duties and responsibilities. A group of young people prepared performance, made handmade cards for the invitation, found clothes for performance, baked cookies and a large Christmas cake for guests. The event planning took 20 days of hard work for the group, which brought smiles and happiness to the children of the community. The young people worked together and shared the cooperation and work process. During the project they understood what responsibility in a teamwork is. Becoming a leader not a follower was appreciated by everyone.

Eco Environmental Project. This project was a fantastic opportunity to engage young people in environmental awareness and action. The group of young people paid attention to create and enlarge eco environmental approach in our life. One of the volunteers prepared and shared a presentation about eco environment, caring for nature and flowers. The group of young people understood how important is to take care of our planet. Children did their work with love and willingness. In the frame of this small project the group organised a clean-up of the Community Centre garden and organised a flower/tree planting event for the community. The group realised some sustainable practices which they can incorporate into their daily lives, such as reducing waste, saving energy and supporting local, eco-friendly businesses. This helped them to be engaged in the environmental activities of the community for future.

Giving Waste a New Life. During the lifetime of this project, a group of young people had the opportunity to raise awareness regarding environmental issues, the development of environmental thinking and cleanliness. Young people became aware of the harmful impacts of waste on air, water and human health. They developed skills aimed at protecting the environment by learning to recycle household waste



CHRISTMAS
PERFORMANCE
Happy holiday
©Mkrtich
Krtikashyan



GRAPE VINE
Grape care
©Julieta Pogosyan



Eco PROJECT
Growing flowers
©Mkrtich Krtikashyan



and making waste-friendly items, souvenirs and jewellery from plastic, journal paper, bottles, etc. Before we started this small project, we had visited the Sergey Parajanov museum of modern art. Parajanov was an Armenian artist and movie director. The children did creative work based on Parajanov's style and were impressed by sharing their experience with each other.

The group members remarked that they were encouraged to work together and share the work process, and it helped them to develop communication skills. Later, the group members implemented all the planned tasks in a very responsible way. They felt more confident to do something. What I saw between group members was that they were enjoying performing the tasks and spending their time with group members. After completion of the micro projects the young people received gifts and prizes from the Centre as a sign of successful work. Comments from the group after the micro-projects were completed were *"We learned that something new can be created from nothing, we are used to spilling, polluting, we always ignore and destroy. We learned how God created this world for us, the Lord gave everything for our benefit, our Lord gave us intelligence and knowledge to use everything correctly"*



In our programme, a group of young people visited art and social centres, our visits and discussions were accompanied by spiritual talks. In my assessment, the group of young people will stay in our centre as volunteers, they feel like in their home and environment. They are used to find solutions and to take care of each other by sharing all worries together. Following the lovely Parable from the Bible they became Good Samaritans; they understand how to support marginalised people and engage them in our society. In the year I was engaged with them, I could see how they changed and became creative day by day. During our pilgrimages with the participant from the Czech Republic, we visited different historical and spiritual places, spent time in forest, listened to the stories, communicated with each other in different social and art settings. These events had a positive impact on creating new ideas for young people, exploring different places and with different people.

Evaluation of the outcomes and overall work of the group over the year.

The MACY Programme activities brought together the young people. An environment was created where youth could feel empowered and discover their own role in society. I realise how important and effective was every moment spent with young people. In the framework of the programme, I can underline that youngsters were inspired and ready to do changes for their better future. In the beginning, when I started to form a group and held conversations, it was difficult to motivate young people and they did not want to talk and discuss any ideas. But ever since then, the ice melted and moved. Now they can philosophise,

express their opinion, analyse ideas and conduct a group work. The group of young people started to understand what responsibility is and how to be proactive in their community. The programme assisted the group to create a life experience, which leads them to success in their personal lives. Participants stated that *“We started creating and communicating”*, *“We want to pray and listen to Bible stories, movies and conversations”*, *“We are getting stronger together”*. Considering the overall work, I did with the group of young people in our community and the reflections on it, I want to share several points. I consider them to be both tangible outcomes and the intangible impact on participants’ lives:

- » Our life is like a flower and it is important how we plant and care for it.
- » One of the keys to empowering the youth is skill development.
- » They like to be responsible.
- » They feel happy trying new things.
- » They have confidence to take risks and are aware that failure is a step toward progress, not a sign of giving up.
- » They try not to use opinions of others to guide them in their lives.
- » They start standing up for their values.
- » They know that they build a basis of self-empowerment.

The Centre is always in touch with parents, and they are the ones who talk about the first impression and change of their children. The parents stated that under any circumstances the young people must believe in their own power and motivation.

Through interactive workshops the participants learned essential skills such as community development, micro-project planning and implementation, and eco-environmental activities. Several participants showcased their newly acquired skills by leading their own community initiatives. Almost all participants shared stories of personal growth, such as overcoming shyness and stepping into leadership roles within the group. The participants reported that the skills and values learned in the group positively influenced on their personal relationships. Some participants expressed interest in continuing community involvement beyond their time with the group.

ECO ENVIRONMENTAL
PROJECT
Cleanliness of the garden
©Mery Egiazaryan



PALMS DAY
our group
©Mkrtich Krtikashyan

Reflection on my learning in the programme

It's really a pleasure when you see development in your work. Sometimes a moment comes when your group, which used to be very closed and introvert, starts sharing and generates new ideas and gives you feedback on what can be good and influential for the community. I enjoyed the moments that we worked together and the goal, which was set for me worked absolutely in a right way.


The journey which started in the framework of MACY has several levels. The first one was the planning of our work and understanding where we want to go. The second one was the roadmap on how we should reach the goals. The third was about discovering the needs and skills that we should equip ourselves with during the journey. The programme offered lot of exciting and useful tips on how we can build a community together in a way that starts with a focus on 'what's strong' and not 'what's wrong'. After having meetings with the group of young people I followed with full attention the outcomes and saw how they changed and started to analyse and grow. Meeting with other programme participants representing different churches and organisations brought community development experiences together. In our practice and work we used the participatory approach to community building, which was shared during our Contact Teaching Workshops. I believe that sharing experience and assisting each other in our work is a most powerful tool and often a beautiful human impulse.

A valuable part of the programme was the co-learning exchange when we got familiar with and collected new experience from other participating organisations. This learning experience influenced my professional growth. As a guest from Armenia in the Czech Republic I understood how an organisation like mine was shaping their activities, finding solutions to different types of problems and bringing everything to the professional field. During the visits and meetings with other organisations, I made comparisons to my Centre and tried to find new changes, fresh ideas that can enrich my work and activities of the Centre. I discovered anew the importance of individual and teamwork as well as coordinated volunteering. In a short period of time I explored the field where professionals in psychology work with addicted people.

I realised how important the combination of spiritual and psychological approaches is in our work. While discussing different situations and cases I always used the spiritual approaches, on the other hand my colleague suggested psychotherapeutic methods. It is important to combine these two approaches together to get a more effective result. When we start to follow and use the experience of other organisations in our daily work, we are developing our capacities by helping ourselves to learn how to evaluate and analyse the changes we have had in our personal life.



PILGRIMAGE
Visit to haghartsin
monastery
©Mkrtich Krtikashyan



We should clearly understand the fact that during community development work we will always meet challenges, so that we should be ready to confront and not avoid them. If we want to see changes, we should identify, connect and mobilise, build relationship with each other. The ABCD approach suggests that for supporting communities and individuals, we should identify what is strong within them and figure out how to use the strength to address the needs and problems.

Recommendations and conclusion

The success of the ABCD approach in addressing community highlights the importance of continuous community engagement. To sustain the positive drive, we should consider establishing regular community meetings, workshops, or online platforms with the aim of fostering ongoing collaboration and feedback. As a recommendation I suggest that each organisation could conduct a comprehensive needs assessment within their local community to identify specific challenges and opportunities that young people are facing. This will provide a solid foundation for tailoring diaconal youth work initiatives to address the most pressing issues.

Next, we should actively involve young people in planning, design, and implementation of diaconal projects. Their input and perspectives are invaluable in creating projects that resonate with their needs and aspirations. As diaconal organisations we should foster partnerships with local schools, community centres, religious institutions, and other relevant organisations. Collaborative efforts can amplify the impact of diaconal youth work and provide a broader range of resources and expertise.

As a continuation of MACY, ART offers training opportunities for individuals working in diaconal youth work to enhance their skills and knowledge. Workshops, conferences, and online courses can provide insights into best practices and innovative approaches. Additionally, the programme participants should establish good networking and information sharing to facilitate platforms for professionals in the field to connect, share experiences, and exchange ideas. Incorporation of these recommendations can contribute to the growth and effectiveness of diaconal youth work both at the local level and within the wider professional sphere. By addressing community needs and empowering young people, diaconal youth work can play a crucial role in fostering positive development and social change.

In conclusion, the application of the ABCD method during the preliminary phase demonstrated its potential to facilitate meaningful community involvement and address pressing needs. By focusing on the strengths and assets within the community, this approach not only resulted in innovative solutions but also fostered a sense of ownership and empowerment among community members. The success of the participants highlights that personal growth and positive life experiences are attainable through the right guidance and effort. The programme's ability to contribute to the success of individuals demonstrates its value in empowering people to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. This experience underscores the idea that personal development is a continuous journey. Success is not just about achieving specific goals but also about continually growing and evolving. The success of the individuals does not benefit only them personally but also can create a positive ripple effect in their families, workplaces, and communities.

Produced by Hasmik Mkhitarian and supported by Harutyun Karapetyan, as an advisor and expert.

Evelyn Diana Piltman

The story of my journey with this programme

Every participant of this programme had a different kind of journey. If I had to relay my journey in a story, it would be a 'story for children'. One of those stories, where a fearful little mouse leaves her home to discover the world outside. As the story goes, on her way she encounters many new different characters, who give her various tools and advice for her journey. Through a lot of ups and downs she learns that emotions are important and okay. Even more, she learns to face and solve challenges all by herself. However, the most important thing, she learns to believe in herself. That's exactly what my story is about. About someone who has just started to work and then especially due to this learning programme had to leave her comfort zone. About someone who had to face several difficulties on the way, learn new things about herself and up until now is discovering her weaknesses and strengths.

A bit more about myself, I was born and grew up in Germany, but now I live and work in Riga, Latvia. In the beginning of the learning programme I volunteered at a diaconal day-care centre "Paaudzes" for marginalised families. In our centre we work with adults and children. Such centres aim to support their clients - to offer them a warm meal, to help them with their school materials, to support the process of socialisation, etc.

The Centre has existed for more than 10 years, so there are children who joined "Paaudzes" years ago. They are now in their teenage years and some of them keep attending the Centre. Through this programme we founded a youth group. The age of youngsters eligible for this programme was from 13 until 18 years old, but this is not a hard and fast rule. However they were expected to form a group and have activities only for them, away from the younger children in the Centre. Depending on their capacity, I mostly succeeded in motivating the 12-year-olds to participate in our youth group, and I also gave them the option to choose to join. In rare cases I invited 11-year-olds to participate in some activities, when I saw that it was beneficial for them and for our group. As a rule, groups of youngsters are not particularly delighted about younger newcomers joining, but in our group, they slowly learnt to accept and integrated them.

During this time I had a personal change myself, I was employed by this day-care centre as a youth worker and started my first regular job. However, my focus is now on our youngsters.



Final seminar in Tallin, my learning journey



Practice periods

We started this project with an „**introduction**“ phase, which helped to build up group trust. This phase for them consisted of games to get to know each other, sleepovers, trips, and many other activities for strengthening a group spirit and cohesion.

At the end of the first Practice Period of the Programme, I moved on to the **biography** task. Even after discussing the importance of this topic, the youngsters did not comprehend it and acted in a way which showed they were pretty annoyed about it. Only a few of them felt comfortable enough to share their stories with me in private and almost none shared in the big group. Some directly left as soon as they heard the task. One youngster commented that he doesn't want to do it because the “past is in the past” (Boy, 13).

Afterwards, I reflected on how vulnerable this task made them feel. It came at a time when those few youngsters had already shared quite a lot in very little time given to build trust in their group.

Moreover, I thought about those youngsters who immediately closed up and withdrew. Perhaps, just listening about biographies sometimes is not enough. Almost inevitably it triggers thoughts and emotions that may be better brought up with a psychologist. In general, work with youngsters, especially marginalised youngsters, requires direct work with a psychologist. I often felt this when doing this biography task.

“It was difficult to open up. I wrote only the bad things that happened. After the task, I thought again and realised that there were so many good memories. Then I realised that the task was to realise that the first thing that we think of is bad. When I understood that I liked the task but at the beginning I hated it.” (Girl, 15)

As the next step in the programme we had to do task called ‘Future Lab’. My first attempt was to discuss the different scenarios of the future in the big group of the youngsters. They were pretty creative but it seems that they didn't understand the general concept of the task. Afterwards, I decided to try to make it with individual work. I interviewed some youngsters with questions about ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’ and discussed their answers with them. This approach gave a good result for me, but unfortunately for the youngsters the task questions were “random, so that they couldn't even think about what to say” (girl,14). Anyway, the youngsters shared a lot about themselves on subjects that they initially did not consider being of any importance or did not even understand themselves in a conscious way before this task.

Mini-project

The final programme task was to carry out a mini-project with the group. And it was the biggest challenge for me. I was stressed. Eventually I accepted that this is a learning-by-doing process with many ups and downs and it helped me to calm down. I started to think more rationally. Instead of having one ‘big pile’, I divided this project into smaller steps. I started by organising many smaller projects with

the youngsters and we got into a good routine. We were painting walls together, multiple times they were leading different games and quests for other kids. Some activities I told them to lead or for some they came up with ideas themselves. In this way I managed to have a good balance of encouraging them helping with concrete tasks but at the same time providing a space for their creativity. I understood that this kind of balancing tasks together with the balance between activities for them and led by them is a very important key for keeping the youngsters motivated, feeling needed and appreciated.



Painting walls,
process wall
©Evelyn Diana Plitman



Painting walls, process door
©Evelyn Diana Plitman



Painting walls, final result
©Evelyn Diana Plitman

Finally, for the mini-project we organised a festival for children that coincided with the 1st birthday celebration of our youth group. We started the festival with an orientation game, distributed self-made cakes, then had different stations - volleyball, fireball, chess, and making bracelets.

To sum up, through implementing many various smaller projects, I found my way of supporting and leading the youngsters for bigger projects. Therefore, for preparing the festival I followed the same checklist.

Planning phase - First group meeting

First, I met with all the youngsters to brainstorm. Everyone got a piece of paper and wrote down their ideas for a project and then we shared them. Finally we agreed on one idea for the project and 2 project leaders. Those youngsters took over the lead over the rest of the discussion. Next step was the second round

of brainstorming for this particular project. Again everyone wrote down their ideas and shared them. Then in the group they discussed who wants to take over which overall responsibility with the agreement that you can always ask for support. Together we decided to invite one of the other day-care centres, “Dzīvības aka”, which was also participating in this learning programme.

The second planning meeting

The second meeting was only with the project leaders. It was about their tasks and what was needed for the project. In between those meetings it was their responsibility to remind the other youngsters about the responsibilities and gather everything that would be needed during the preparation phase and for the event itself. At that point I was still supporting them a lot and asked many questions to make sure that everything was thought through.

However, in this meeting my project leaders were also the ones who were creative. Therefore we planned the decoration and the baking together. To support a community spirit, we designed a logo on canvas and decided to order a t-shirt for every youngster with that logo and their name on it.

The last meeting before the festival

The last meeting was with the bigger group and took place on the day before the event. Again, we reviewed all responsibilities for that day, what still needed to be done, ensured that all questions were answered.

The day of the event

The youngsters came earlier to prepare the last steps for the event. They built up the photo place, brought out the tables for their station, and hid the questions for the orientation game. There was still enough time to talk through the event schedule and remind them again of each of their responsibilities.

During the event I mostly observed and only interfered when the youngsters asked me for support. Shortly after the first activity it started to rain which made the youngsters nervous, so I jumped in and we quickly improvised together. We let everyone inside and changed the schedule to have more time to think about possible solutions. While the children were eating cake, we brought their stations into different rooms in the centre.

By then our youngsters started feeling confident again and could solve the problems themselves. For instance, playing volleyball for 20 minutes was too long, and the children began throwing the ball too aggressively, so the responsible person took a notice of that and changed to a different game. Another person who was responsible for leading Fireball, noticed that it had stopped raining, and he moved his station back outside.



Easter orientation game
led by youngsters
©Evelyn Diana Plitman

Mini project, giving out
the self-made pie
©Evelyn Diana Plitman



Mini project, preparing
the photo corner
©Evelyn Diana Plitman



Mini project, dividing the children
into teams for the orientation game
©Evelyn Diana Plitman



The celebration

After the festival our team sat down together. We ate the cake that they baked, reflected on the event and simply spent some quality time together.

Reflection

I had a hard time believing that I could manage this mini-project. Therefore, this achievement gave me even more **confidence and calmness**.

For the first time I engaged our 12-year-olds in such project with granting them responsibilities. Until the festival they only participated in fun activities. I was a bit nervous about it but at the end of the day it had a wonderful outcome. With them I wasn't as strict as with the other youngsters. I allowed them to be less included in the planning process as long as they contributed their part. However, I expected that I could rely on them and I was not disappointed.

This time I had to be the one who is calm and supports the youngsters to stay relaxed and enjoy the event. It was very useful to have this **change of perspective**. While everything seemed so extremely new and overwhelming at the beginning, now I finally start seeing a grounding and a routine. I am slowly finding my **personalised guideline** to follow.

Step by step I started to feel confident in my decisions at work. The successful festival contributed its part to my newly found confidence.

During the preparation of the mini project I questioned a lot about how to support my youngsters in the best way. Reflecting on the success afterwards, I realised that the foundation for this achievement and the support I gave them was there way before this mini-project.

In general, in youth work the individual approach is key. That means **listening** carefully to what is said and unsaid by the young people – listening to their love language, their boundaries, their potential but also to their struggles. It is about loving them the way they are and allowing them to be the way they want to be. Such **interest and acceptance** create a safe space which is important for building mutual trust. For getting to know them better, it is important to simply **spend time together** without any agenda or specific learning approach. Play games, go on excursions, or just provide them undivided attention.

From my side as a youth worker, it is about showing all my sides and all my emotions. To say it differently, it is about **being authentic** and showing that they can do the same.

Especially during my voluntary year, my goal was to get to know them as much as possible and to bond with them. Primarily it is then that I organised different station days with different activities out of my own initiative. Some youngsters got interested in helping and taking over some responsibilities. This was the first step in engaging with them. The next step was organising together, including their ideas, and **“burning”** for something together. It doesn't matter what the idea is, everything is valuable.

All these steps and elements combined have facilitated a good outcome of this project. So altogether, it is my way of working, our joint activities, the atmosphere we have in our day centre and the opportunities we offer to the young people to be engaged.

Co-learning exchange,
visiting EXIT
@Evelyn Diana Plitman

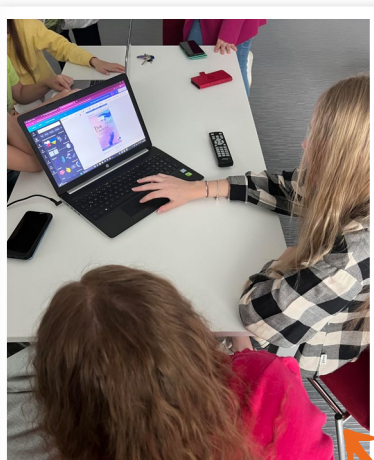
Co-learning Exchange

I found the co-learning exchange, which was a part of the learning programme, was a good way to reflect and grow. My place for the co-learning was at the Slezská Diaconia in the Czech Republic.

Through visiting various Centres there and learning there about their services I got new inspiration for my own work. In one city I saw two centres separated by age groups, but in a few years the children can join both activities. It inspired me to include 12 and sometimes 11-year-olds in the activities of our youth group, because I understood the necessity for a smooth transition.

After the exchange I started PowerPoint courses for children in my centre. It was an old idea that I never realised because of my self-doubts. Supporting the youngsters in the Czech Republic with Canvas and PowerPoint encouraged me to try it out. It showed to me the positive effects of leading activities that you develop based on your own motivation.

Co-learning exchange, helping youngsters
to make the poster for their project on Canvas
@Evelyn Diana Plitman



Most of my time in Slezská Diaconia I was accompanied by someone from their office and it gave me a proper insight into project writing. Accordingly, I developed interest in project writing for our youngsters and now I have some ideas for the next few years.

The co-learning exchange was a wonderful time to become aware of how social services work best, I could reflect on it for my workplace too. Actually, then I realised how similar the day centres were. Some **basics** are needed everywhere and then each centre develops its **personal touch**.

Overall, my time in the Czech Republic got me to reflect on many different topics that I usually just oversee or take for granted. One of them is that a **supportive team** is everything. The system of services was not created by practitioners, so we need to **fight for** what we think is **right**. A little **success** is still a success and there is never too much of your own appreciation and **celebration** for that.

My Learning Journey

The process of this whole MACY programme felt for me like building a tower. It is not only about gaining knowledge from each session all by itself, but rather about connecting it, reflecting on it and then building the tower in your personal working style, which is grounded in your unique experiences.

Each tower needs a foundation to be stable. In this case it took me a long time to understand what the actual grounding to my tower was: working with youngsters is always alive and **fast-changing process** but it is a **long-term process**. From a purely rational point of view this seems like an obvious fact. However, acceptance of it took me almost the whole period of this programme. I was frustrated way too often because I had high expectations and felt time pressured. I needed to see direct success, otherwise it felt useless. This became clear after many individual supervision sessions and talking with other people from the project, I started to slow down and work on my **patience**. Eventually, I noticed **small successes** and the **unspoken gratitude**. So my energy and motivation grew up again. I understood that the calm that I need for this job only comes when I **accept** the thought of **ongoing constant changes** and let go of the fears that come with it. At the same time, the patience that is necessary for this job only comes when I regularly come back to my **motivation** and grounding for this job.

Throughout this programme I **learned to acknowledge** my successes and my way of learning. It helped me a lot to be in dialogue with programme participants. For myself I understood the importance of **reflecting**

correctly. Sit down and write down all my thoughts and emotions - doubts, successes, challenges and next steps. These reflections forced me to think rationally and revisit every situation, no matter how emotional it was.

From the face-to-face programme workshops I took many smaller parts that filled small gaps in my tower. Those are ice-breakers, team games, different ways of reflection and different inspirations. There are many tools that I can reuse with the youngsters but also for my reflection. It is what makes my tower beautiful and alive.

The lesson I learnt that I cherish the most throughout the year: my youngsters are a treasure. They are real diamonds with various talents, extremely different characters and potential. They are a real help to our centre and grew a lot during this time. Way too often I got stuck in my thoughts of what did not work and what we did not have instead of seeing what gifts I already have and achieved.

To sum up, this programme helped me a lot to grow in many different aspects. I was able to learn many things from different people in this project, learn about myself, get out of my comfort zone at work, and always seek a bigger goal.

This is one of those stories with an open ending. A little mouse who widened her horizon and is ready for more. It is not clear what is next but what already happened were many bigger and smaller steps in the right direction.



David Pobežal, Denis Válek

The story of learning in the Programme

Local context

Our ministry 'Royal Rangers' operates under the umbrella and is supported by the local protestant church (ECAV Záríečie). Children can learn about us at school during the religion class or through parents who attend church. Further, the church helps us with all our activities, including our weekly meetings, as well as summer camps and other activities. Thanks to the church, we have a budget for all of this, including facilities and all the necessary equipment. The church helps us reach out to children and youth from all over the area. However, participation in 'Royal Rangers' is not limited to children who come from the protestant church. Anyone with any faith background can come and join us. In our area, the youth are also supported through other organisations such as SEM (Spoločenstvo Evanjelickej Mládeže), which works with Relevant, so the youth in our area have a choice of several places to visit and the possibility to participate in different activities or camps that these organisations suggest to them.

Description of the organisation

Royal Rangers, (of which I am a part) was established in our region as a service to reach out to children and adolescents to give them opportunity to use their free time effectively. We create a space where they can develop their skills, discover new talents and gain valuable life experience and friendships.

The main aim of 'Royal Rangers' is to bring children and the younger generation together. We believe that by working together and sharing values, they can build up not only themselves but also their neighbourhood. Our organisation is based on the fundamental principles of Scouting, which help us to form character and promote a responsible approach to life. At 'Royal Rangers' we teach teamwork, love of the outdoors, love of others and self, self-control, and many other values that will help young people grow and thrive. By building themselves up, they can later become able to reach out to their communities and contribute to their development.

An integral part of this process is the Word of God on which underpins all the principles we teach young people on. In other words we try to base everything on the Bible.



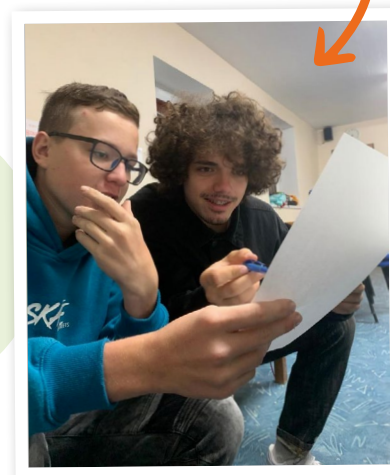
Presentation of our work with kids
©Rita Eglite

In addition to teaching them to develop their personality and social values, we also teach them various practical skills, such as: making knots, building fires, pitching tents, preparing food in the open air, working with wood, and so on. We also develop their physical fitness by organising various outdoor activities and games, trips to the countryside and other ways of encouraging them to move.

Our service consists of regular weekly meetings and a summer tent camp which lasts one full week and takes place in the countryside. Here is a link to a video of the camp. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Kdlyx3dprg>

Regular weekly meetings last 2 hours. For those meetings we always have a pre-arranged programme that changes each week. The programme usually includes coming together, a biblical theme, praise, games together, learning different skills, and working together on 'tribal identity' (the kids make their own flags, anthem, shout out, etc. in their 'tribes').

Boys thinking about the most important part of their lives (biography task)
©Denis Válek



Description of programme activities with a group of marginalised young people

Our 'Royal Rangers' youth group is full of energy and enthusiasm.

It includes children between the ages of 8 and 15, who are full of curiosity and open to new experiences. In this diverse group we meet pupils from a variety of schools and family backgrounds.

At the beginning of our work, we take the time to get to know our members in depth. We seek to understand their life stories, desires and fears. We tailor our activities to their needs and interests. We find that the children have different experiences and views on current social issues such as technology, societal goals and the values they want to achieve in life.

One of the activities we did with the children was a programme activity called „biography task“, where we investigated the past and reflected on important moments and stages in their lives. It was interesting to see how the children opened up to us and what they have experienced in the families and communities where they live.

Another programme activity was thinking about future in terms of 'utopia' and 'dystopia' in relation to technology and social networks, their positive and negative impact on society, health and their surroundings. The children discussed what would happen if technology



Boys thinking about the most important part of their lives (biography task)
©Denis Válek

Co-learning exchange
©Kadri Keskiöla



or artificial intelligence wanted to destroy us? Or how social networks affect our mental health and physical health, etc. Discussions like this allowed us to think more deeply together about the problems of today's society and, perhaps even ourselves, and what possible solutions can improve this future perspective.

Discussion and planning of a small-scale project.

After gaining the insight of our members, we held an open discussion about possible project activities for the group. We collectively agreed that we wanted to not only develop our skills, but also positively impact our community and our surroundings.

We talked about how we can use our skills to help others and improve our neighbourhood. This led to different ideas: the children had the idea that they could make traditional homemade products with their grandparents and then sell them in a local shop, where the profits would go to help the community, e.g. repairing roads, revitalising parks and playgrounds and helping

the elderly. Next, the children came up with ideas of how they could beautify all the ugly walls in the town and suggested of painting them with artistic graffiti and 3D paintings. Or, for example, they entertained the idea that a tree could be planted in the village whenever a new citizen is born, and thus to show respect and equality to every resident of the village. One more idea or need of the children was that the streets should be tidy. Eventually, the children took the initiative and came up with the idea that they would organise a clean-up in the village to make the streets and parks cleaner and more beautiful.

Preparation and implementation of the project activity by the group

With the support of the ideas from the group, we set about preparing and implementing the project activities. The children felt deeply motivated to improve their neighbourhood and take concrete steps to benefit the community. Our first initiative became cleaning and revitalising our community.

With determination, we decided to change the visible appearance of the village of Záríečie. We organised clean-up events that included picking up litter along the roads and local parks. Along with this, we set about painting fences, sheds and railings on the bridges to bring them back to life and colour.



Renovating vilage
©Denis Válek

Renovating village
©Denis Válek



This activity brought us together as a team and showed that together we can make a big difference. Every fence painted and space cleaned was a small step towards creating a beautiful and welcoming environment for our community. We also found that our work could have a wider impact as we received positive feedback from residents and other local groups.

With the support of the children, we have been involved in organising a variety of fun and educational activities. These included laser games, paintball, communal barbecues and cooking meals in the countryside, outdoor sleepovers and trips into the countryside. These activities not only allowed us to create shared experiences, but also to learn new things and strengthen the bonds within our group.

Interestingly, some children showed interest in improving their public speaking skills and sharing their life stories. This desire inspired us to support them in developing these skills. This resulted in informal discussions where the children had the space to talk about their experiences and opinions, which contributed to their personal growth and self-confidence.

These activities showed us how important it is to provide a space for children to have fun, learn and develop within the community. Encouraging each other and learning from each other is a valuable asset to the overall growth and well-being of our young participants.

Evaluation of the results and overall work of the group during the year

The evaluation of the results and the overall work of the group during the year was remarkable. The children showed their ability to think deeply and propose solutions for their community. Their initiative led to organising clean-ups and revitalising the community and various activities.

The whole process turned their words into actions. With their determination and energy, they have become a source of inspiration for all of us.

After the project activities were over, we looked back to take stock of our year's work. I was impressed by how openly the children communicated in all the discussions. I was often inspired by their expressions about the impact of technology, values and community.

The overall experience with this group of young people showed us how much potential they have for society and what valuable ideas and perspectives they can bring to us. Our journey with the 'Royal Rangers' has been full of adventure, learning and collaboration, and we are excited to be a part of their growth and formation.

Workshops and Co-learning Exchange by David Pobežal

What I probably enjoyed the most from the workshops was working in smaller groups, where we as people from different parts of Europe could come together and work on the tasks and activities we were given in the workshops, and at the same time we had the opportunity to get to know each other better and discuss different topics together, whether it be about the project, working with young people or even ourselves.

We were also able to exchange with each other various valuable experiences from the situations in which we found ourselves and how we handled them or what methods we used. For example, I learned something about working with drug (or alcohol) abusers or how to help people who want to commit suicide, how to behave in case someone talks about wanting to do such a thing. I think that even though we come from different countries, backgrounds and even though our work is different, we were able to advise each other and share and, maybe, in this way enrich our own knowledge about working with young people.

Another inspiring and interesting experience for me was the Co-learning Exchange in Estonia, where I had the opportunity to visit Kadri Kesküla and see her work.

One method that stuck in my mind was the one that Kadri uses in therapy sessions with her clients. It was a drawing therapy, where the client was supposed to start drawing what they felt without any strict rules, just letting their hand guide them and draw whatever came to mind or could express their feelings and thoughts, and then they would talk about it together and the client themselves could tell what the lines or drawings meant.

In Tallinn I visited the Peeteli Church - Bethel's Centre of Pastoral Care, which is a very interesting place with a rich 25-year history of stories of young people who were struggling with homelessness and various addictions and started a new life here. During their stay at the centre in the Church they got over their problems. Today they have families, lead a normal life and in addition they minister to other people who have addiction problems and I heard other similarly powerful stories.

The centre is open to young people who have problems in their families or where their parents cannot take care of them well enough, whether due to addictions or other problems. Children who experience similar problems can go there and start living with others, surrounded by loving and caring people who are dedicated to them. They all work together as one big family.

I think I can take inspiration from this Peeteli Church to my work from the love, commitment and heart with which these people have been willing to help those young people in the community who are in real need.

In the future I would like to see more centres like this one in Estonia, and perhaps, something especially for people with addictions, because I think that this is a serious problem in Slovakia as well.

Reflection on my learning in the programme by David Pobežal

Thanks to the programme, I realised how important it is to know about the background of the young people (in our case often still children) that become part of our groups in 'Royal Rangers'. When we know their background, we are enabled to better understand, motivate and guide them. If we don't know their background, we cannot understand their reactions and behaviour. Consequently, our misunderstanding and reactions could hurt them, instead of us being able to help them and point them to the right direction.

As another such example, I really liked the activity 'Biography' where everyone in the group was given the task of drawing a straight line and marking on it important events in their lives that had somehow influenced or impacted their lives. It made for a really interesting discussion that helped deepen the relationships in our group.

The activities we learned in the Contact Teaching Workshops were interesting and following them led the young people to reflect on their lives so far, things that have had an impact on their development so far (either negative or positive) or how they could help to make a difference in their community.

For me personally, very interesting was the 'Exposure' method that we learned in the first workshop in Helsinki, when Theme Expert, Jouko Porkka sent us out into the city alone and we were asked to soak up the atmosphere of the city and write down the feelings, smells or whatever the city gave off to us.

The method was very free, it could be words, poem, etc. This way of getting to know a new place which I had never visited before was very inspiring and interesting for me. It was a completely original and different way of getting information than what we are used to nowadays, as we tend to use our pocket helpers to get information about our surroundings.

By being on my own, I could really concentrate completely on what was going on around me and find out a lot about my surroundings. I think I can use this method not only to learn about a new place but also in my ministry. Through careful observation I can learn a lot about the youth group I work with and about my surroundings. If I observe it closely enough and don't just swear about how bad everything around me is or how bad the younger generation is, I can notice what the place is lacking and figure out ways to improve it or create some room for change.

I think the point of the methods that we could gain in the programme (such as NAOMI or ABCD) are already being practiced in some ways in our community, through the 'Royal Rangers' organisation and our group.

Recommendations and conclusions

When working with young people, I think it is important to be able to understand them and their background and to adapt the curriculum or the plan of the project or activities we want to do with them and what we

want to achieve based on that. There are a lot of different people in the world from different backgrounds and their needs and problems cannot always be solved according to a specific plan, in other words there is no one-size-fits-all guide on how to help someone, because we are all a little bit different and we may have different needs and we should always keep that in mind.

Similar to the Exposure method, you need to first observe the situation and background of the young people and understand what the problem is or what is missing or why they are not interested in developing or building something in their community for example, and based on that you need to think and plan a way to do it so that they start to be interested and grow or build something (or create a project that addresses a specific problem or situation).

Next, I think it's important to be honest with them and not try to portray yourself as someone perfect but not be afraid to admit that I fail too, I'm only human and I don't always do the right thing, in short I'm not perfect, and therefore through that to build their trust (which is another very key thing, trust) and be a support to them, not just someone who is constantly scolding them and scolding them for everything.

In all this, it is of course important to set a good example and to practice what we are trying to teach them in our own lives, because the best way to teach and guide the younger generation is by who we are and how we live our own lives, or how we behave in key moments, but also in everyday life.

If we violate everything we teach them and do the exact opposite, they will see that and what we are trying to teach them or how we are trying to lead them will not work. (Why should they do something we don't do ourselves)

In closing, I would like to thank all the trainers and people involved in interdiac program for allowing me to know them and to be part of the circle of these amazing and strong people and to learn with them about working with marginalized youth and to know their work and how they are helping in their communities young people who are in need to have fulfilled lives with the right values. These people are a great inspiration to me and I hope that everything I have been able to learn from them I will be able to capitalise on in my service to young people.

I am glad that I was able to get to know them and I hope that after this programme we will continue to keep in touch and be able to support each other, because we have been a really great team. 😊



Anastasiia Terletsk

My Learning Story in the Programme

Introduction

In November 2022 I was invited to be a part of a youth work learning programme called „Make Change Yourselves! Turning challenges to your advantage!“.

That was the beginning of my one-year long story of learning. Not only was it a year full of amazing discoveries, but also a year of important lessons that helped me to become a better professional who understands more deeply the core-principles of working with youth and adults.

The learning programme proved to be an inclusive learning environment and a platform for sharing experiences. An important part of it were the face-to-face Contact Teaching Workshops, where we met with colleagues to exchange experiences, describe various working and life situations, acquired problems and seek solutions. For the professionals and volunteers, work with people, especially youth, is often connected with challenging ethical and moral questions that are demanding for us and that we cannot always answer on our own. Therefore, those workshops were an important part of the programme: they brought our group closer and thus provided much needed psychological and spiritual support.

To sum up my experience of work with young people, I would like to share below some of my key-lessons:

- Every young person is at risk. In their age group, young persons are in the process of forming their identities and this makes them vulnerable to external influences. It is important to help them to develop critical thinking and boost their self-confidence.
- I realised that working with young people requires much more than narrow professionalism. It requires empathy, psychological assistance and attention to their needs.
- Nowadays the dependence of young people on external social locus-control and social networks emphasised the need to develop their healthy self-esteem and the ability to resist negative influences.
- Work with young people should start with involving their ‘close’ environment – parents and relatives. They play a key role in shaping the character and values of young people.
- Motivation for youngsters is important, however, it should not be limited to external motivation. It is important to support and develop young persons’ inner intrinsic interests and values.

While organising the mini-project, which was the final programme task, in parallel with the youth group I worked with a bigger group of adults-refugees from Ukraine. In this work I used all the practical helpful tasks and exercises that we were given during the programme. It turned out that working with adults is of the same importance as working with the youth. Below in my story I will share more about it.

Finally, the knowledge gained through this experience will help me not just to form a group of people who are dependent on our social service, but bring together an active community that can act independently to change their environment and lives of its members. As a continuation of this programme, I would like to see the same approach and work implemented with the 'older' generation of Eastern Europeans, because they carry outdated attitudes that make with the huge impact on young people.

A trip to the theatre
in Český Těšín.
Costume room.
©A. Terletská



Developing work with Youth in the Learning Programme


At the time of the engagement in this learning programme I was working in Slezská Diakonie (Czech Republic) in the department for the integration of Ukrainian refugees. Our group for the project was rooted in a theatre-circle, which was organised with and for children, who are refugees from Ukraine. Initially, this theatre group was created as a way to introduce Ukrainian children to each other and facilitate them back to 'normal' communication and interaction. In this group with the help of theatre-oriented exercises and psychological practices we relieved stress, created a free space for children and removed physical blocks. The group consisted of 4 boys and 5 girls from 7 to 10 years old. All this time the work with the children was done by me and another psychologist from Ukraine.

Since our group consisted of children from different social backgrounds, firstly we focused on building group cohesion. For this purpose together with the children we developed a set of rules that regulated the behaviour of the group members. This helped to provide a safe environment in which children could feel comfortable and confident. We also conducted exercises that included games related to 'getting to know each other' as well as interaction in pairs and group tasks aimed at building trust. This helped to reduce their fears and insecurities and to increase their sense of belonging to the group.

To relieve stress and tension, we used a variety of theatre games and exercises such as improvisation and role-playing, etc. These activities helped the children to show their creative side, improve communication skills and adaptation to social situations. We also organised a few trips with them. These trips were an opportunity to introduce the children to the cultural aspects of the country and to the strengthen the relationships within the group while being out together. Additionally, such experience contributed to the development of their perception and imagination.



Theatre studio class.
©A. Terletská



After the children had got to know each other well, we conducted key exercises - „Autobiography“ and „Future Lab“. The Autobiography exercise allowed the children to review their lives and highlight those moments that were important to them. They visualised their memories through drawings, photographs and verbal descriptions. This helped them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and to realise the influence of social external events and conditions on their personality and relationships. An interesting observation was that children from more advantaged families described only positive moments. While children with troubled childhoods chose only traumatic moments of their life.

The exercise „Future Lab“ helped children to think about their future and ideal life. In this exercise children imagined and described their ideal futures. In this exercise they could imagine how they see themselves in one or five or even ten years from now. This exercise helped them to express their dreams and goals, as well as to understand what steps and decisions could lead them to their desired future. It is important to note that almost all children had difficulties in seeing long-term perspectives due to the current unstable situation in Ukraine.

Our first mini-project was organised as „Christmas Performance“ . Creation and preparation for this performance became a great opportunity for children to show their creativity and ability to cooperate. Children used pantomime to show different comic situations from life. We suggested a trip to Prague as motivation for them to participate in the performance.

After the new year holidays we started working on developing a project for our group. We conducted the second part of the ‘Future Lab’ exercise and asked the children to think what they could change or improve in order to achieve an ‘ideal future’. This exercise was not easy. We had to have several meetings about it, because in the beginning the children suggested only general, memorised well-known ideas: feed the homeless, go to a nursing home, etc. Those were all good ideas, but we wanted the kids to look closer and find the problems that bothered them.

One day one of the group members came and told us about a situation when she was called names on the street just because they heard that she was from Ukraine. The girl told us how unpleasant it was for her to hear such a bad opinion about Ukrainians. It provided us with one concrete situation which we could bring to our children. We invited them to analyse and think how we could influence this situation in a positive way. By common efforts and brainstorming ideas, the project „Gratitude Day“ was born.

The project was carried out by 3 girls from our main group. Since it was first experience of project implementation for the girls, we organised for them a short training on budgeting the project, training on project planning, implementation and advertising. After that the girls wrote a project on their own, made a budget and received a grant for its realisation. This project was a very big achievement for thirteen-year-old girls and it was important to them. In the end we also got the organisational support of Slezská Diakonie and other volunteers. With the help of Slezská Diakonie we agreed to have the project on the national holiday which celebrates Cyril and Methodius.

Theatre studio class.
©A. Terletská



The project included master classes on the traditional Ukrainian style of painting, performance in Ukrainian stylised costumes, performance of a theatre circle, drawing on bags and the distribution of badges with words of gratitude, etc. An important element of the project was a charity exhibition where people could buy handicrafts made by Ukrainian children and their parents. All the raised money was donated to a Czech school for children with disabilities. In this way, the Ukrainian children both thanked the Czech people and supported Czech children.

This project not only helped the children to develop creative and organisational skills. It received a very good feedback from the public, city management and the Silesian Diakonie. Therefore, it gave to the children a possibility to feel their importance and sense of responsibility, as well as strengthened their ability to make positive changes in society. According to their comments they learnt a great deal:

Participants of the „Gratitude Day“ project hand out badges with words of gratitude to V. Hlávková



„I didn't really want to participate, but Rita talked me into it. And now I am glad to be a part of this project. I have learned a lot, and most importantly I am no longer afraid to communicate with people of higher status. This is my main achievement and I am proud of myself“.

Lilia Kharitonova

„I was offered to be the leader of this project and I agreed. I wanted to try how it is to be an organiser. Now I know it is VERY difficult, it takes a lot of time and effort, you must agree with everyone, even when they don't want to, you must plan everything.... I will definitely not decide to do the project again in the near future, but maybe in the future“.

Rita Vodnaya

„I had to perform on stage completely alone and I was very scared. I had to speak in Czech and I stuttered on every word, but I'm glad I did it, because we

proved that Ukrainian culture is very beautiful and diverse“.

Milana Utinova

The names of the participants were changed due to confidentiality.



Gratitude Day Project. Participants and volunteers of the project.
©V. Hlávková

Co-learning Exchange

A part of the learning programme was a learning exchange with one other programme participant - in my case, a colleague working in Latvia. It allowed to learn how other programme participants work, and at the same time to reflect deeper into myself and understand what motivates me personally, what is necessary for me in my work in order not to burn out.

My experience of the co-learning exchange took place in one of the day-care centres for children and seniors in Riga. It was a great opportunity to see how youth organisations work in Latvia. During those days I got to know the work of the social system in Latvia, the work of different centres for children, had the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of local work with youth and community, and took this positive experience with me back to the Czech Republic.

This learning activity taught me that:

- Any work needs a system, otherwise there will be a constant feeling of chaos and constant rush.
- In any work you need a leader, who at the right moment will indicate the direction in which to move. At the same time, each and even the best leader needs a team that will support and help with the realisation of the work goals.
- It is important to use all possible potential of people around. Sometimes in our everyday routine we tend do not notice people around us, their talents and capabilities, or often underestimate them and do not give them a chance to prove themselves.
- Do not be afraid to delegate responsible tasks to others (young people, senior adults).
- At the moment when we feel that we cannot cope with the number of tasks or when we need help, it is necessary to remember that right next to us there is a huge storehouse of energy, which is waiting to be directed in the right direction.
- All people are children at heart, so all the methods of motivation of children and youth, which we study, are absolutely applicable for everyone.
- In order to ignite the ideas with others, you need to believe in what you do and be a resource.
- In order to be a resource, you need to pause periodically and focus only on yourself, on your aspirations, needs and priorities. This is not an egoism, but a vital necessity.

In summary, participating in the experience exchange in Latvia was a special event for me. It was a unique opportunity to look inside the work of other organisations and understand how to adapt my knowledge and approaches. This experience was an inspiration and helped me to better understand my motivation and goals.

Conclusion

With my involvement in this learning programme I have had the chance to broaden my horizons and gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of working with young people and adults. I am deeply grateful for the support I have received from the project team, peers and mentors. Their guidance, insight and expert eye played a huge role in my growth and development. Their attention to detail and personalised approach made this year truly meaningful.

Beyond professional value this experience is of personal value to me as well. I am confident that the knowledge and skills I have gained in the learning programme will serve me well for many years to come, and I look forward to applying them in my work.





List of contributors

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interdiac

Learning community
for Christian social action
and living conviviality