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LEARNING FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

Insights for Practice
and Learning
from the Programme,
'Make Change Yourselves'





**LEARNING FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH WORK PRACTICE
INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE AND LEARNING FROM THE PROGRAMME, 'MAKE CHANGE YOURSELVES'**

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Introduction

This paper is an invitation to explore recommendations based on the interdiac Learning Programme, ‘Make Change Yourselves: turning challenges to your advantage!’ The programme aimed to provide innovative learning and networking opportunities for youth work practitioners. ‘Make Change Yourselves’ was co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of European Union and involved interdiac partners, who were engaged in grass-root youth social work. Through this process, a number of resources for organising and running informal learning processes with youth workers and young people have been developed and these are listed in the Appendix to this paper.

For over a year, during their learning with interdiac programme, the participants were invited to engage with a group of marginalised young people in their local setting to work together to conduct an analysis of their context and come up with a micro-project and implement it. The young people themselves would choose their own micro-project to change something that they chose to recognise as a significant change for themselves and for their environment. At the same time, this complex guided process focused the reflection of youth workers on how they can change their professional ‘working service model’ to support young people to engage with their environment, find their ‘voice’ and develop power to change their lives. Therefore, they were learners just as the young people were but with a focus on a better understand of the young people and to modify their own working practices. *The double-learning approach is a motto of this learning programme.*

Ultimately, this paper is an outcome of the joint effort of the participants in the programme with programme resource people and leaders. The young people who were in the different groups are also contributors to the findings and their contribution is further reflected in the stories included in the publication, ‘Make Change Yourselves! Participants Stories and Reflections’. Together, all the participants bring to you their ideas about learning and for the development of inclusive and just social youth work.

Programme Vision and Recommendations for the Development of Youth Work

Disadvantageous situations hit hard on young people, who are growing up and learning to be independent. Therefore, the core programme vision challenged those approaches to social work with young people, where response to their needs aims to provide a 'quick fix' for their problems, and thus turn them into 'passive beneficiaries'. Too often young people internalise such attitude and mirror it back with outrageous behaviour.

Too often they develop a vision and experience of the social services as bearers of a social coercive control that undermines their reality and enhances their risk-behaviour. Instead, the interdiac vision suggests a 'relational approach' and the creation of a safe environment, supporting marginalised young people with unconditional acceptance, participation and relation-building. Through the richness of community ties with workers and other users of the services the aim is to co-create with them a sense of belonging, empowerment and personal growth through working for change together.

To develop this approach to youth work, one needs a different understanding of the role of the youth worker. One may mistakenly think that building relations with young people implies knowing their latest hobbies and following the fashion trends. However, relations with the young person go deeper than that, they seek to strengthen trust and develop understanding and to feed the sense of safety and belonging through open and engaged day-to-day communication. To do so, a youth worker must accept that in the situation of the relation-building they are a learner as well, that they are transformed by the relations with the young people in reciprocal ways. Below you may read the voices of programme participants, who were asked to reflect on their learning:

'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'. (David Balakay, Belarus)

'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 (young people) can do the same'. (Evelyn Diana Plitman, Latvia)



Summer camp.
Coming together
©Rita Eglite

The double-learning process, which involves workers and young people as subjects of learning, requires the following principles:

- Recognising one's own limitations, the need for critical reflection on practice and continuous learning from experience;
- Securing mutual trust and keeping communication with young people 'horizontal' (eye to eye) as far as possible;
- Acting ethically, both according to the code of conduct and on the broader value-based scale;
- Ensuring and promoting a sense of equality and seeking justice through anti-oppressive practice.

'...the biggest challenge for me was to find the leader in myself, to believe that I can lead and manage this kind of work. 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'. (Agnese Blaua, Latvia)

'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'. (Kadri Kesküla, Estonia)

Growing up for young people implies the pursuit of their dreams and aspirations, maybe also their hopes to be 'better off' than where they were in their childhood. Being included in a safe environment where they can experience appreciative acceptance, engage in participation with other people, explore their own interests, and, eventually, benefit from common action and learn how their community benefits from it is another step on the way to fulfilling life. Exploring the ways of meeting these needs of young people correlates with the value of social work to promote justice and seek equality. It also correlates with the goals of the EU policy for overcoming poverty and social exclusion. The European Commission's interpretation of social inclusion points to the multi-dimensional aspects of this phenomena, and defines social inclusion as enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society (European Commission. Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion). Through this and other programmes, interdiac argues that social inclusion is not about individual assets and the human capital that persons possess, but it is about the overall social and economic context. It relates to the ways in which education and community and social services develop their work to support vulnerable persons to recognise own assets, distinguish what the barriers are on the way to social inclusion and to enable young people to act for change of own situation and of community.

'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.' (Anastasiia Terletska, Czech Rep)

Therefore, it is an integral part of the social commitment of youth workers to seek ways of empowering young people so that they develop a sense of their own 'agency' and find their own 'voice'. Among many things, empowerment may redefine who you are, help to build self-confidence and develop a sense of hope for a better future.

'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'. (Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi, Finland)

Empowerment is produced through meaningful participation in the community. To achieve it and thus to enhance social inclusion, means that youth workers should not be left to carry out this vision as individuals. Structures, such as education and social services, should seek to create supportive environments and conditions for the young people to flourish.

'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'. (Hasmik Mkhitarian, Armenia)

Social and diaconal centres with partners, and, eventually, the social state system need to stop implementing oppressive politics and employing stigmatising language and practices towards young people who are marginalised or at risk. Instead, they should promote their social and human rights. There is also a need to reassess and change the working policies and conditions for social and youth workers, because the growth of demanding tasks fuels risks of professional and emotional burn-out.

'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'. (Evelyn Diana Plitman, Latvia)

Support and implementation of learning programmes that provide opportunities and conditions for the long-term unconditional engagement of youth workers with marginalised young people should become one of the integral elements for building an inclusive future for the society, where marginalised people would be empowered to making changes themselves and would therefore turn the challenges they face to their and common advantage!

'...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 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'. (Rita Eglīte, Latvia).



Programme Learning and Recommendations for Education in Youth Work

In this section of the paper, we will list and explain the content and aims of those learning tasks that the programme participants found helpful to themselves and with their voices they will explain the gains for their professional and personal development. The tasks are grouped around the thematic programme units, which youth practitioners identified as required expertise for youth workers. The participants had to accomplish some of these tasks themselves and then also carry them out with their group of young people. It helped to solidify their confidence and comprehend the aims of each task.

» Reflection and Critical Thinking

These tasks aimed to help the participants to articulate their 'working service model' by reflecting on their biography and socialisation. It invited them to explore relational nature of developing of personal identity. Other tasks facilitated their thinking about the conditions and setting for their learning and positioned the questions for analysis about the possible future challenges for the societies and personal lives.

Reflection

Reflection is seen as a corner stone for lifelong learning because it invites the learner to revisit their actions and decisions in a critical manner. It was introduced as ongoing programme task in a form of individual journaling work for each participant.

'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'. (Evelyn Plitman, Latvia)

PILGRIMAGE
Visit to haghartsin
monastery
©Mkrtych Krtikashyan



Renovating village
©Denis Válek

'Going out' task

This task has been developed by Finnish colleagues to invite second reflection on one's emotions and feelings, when we open ourselves to receive from the phenomena of a specific social reality and initially interpreted this for ourselves. The task guides a learner to open up the space between reality and their own interpretation again and to recognise how their socialisation underlays their perceptions and ideas.

'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.' (David Pobežal, Slovakia)

Future LAB

This task invited young people to envision their futures and futures of the planet in terms of 'Utopia' and 'Dystopia'. Such imaginative and provocative tasks for young people aimed to facilitate and develop a comprehensive analysis of their context as it affects them.

'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.' (Agnese Mikne, Latvia)

» Developing Relations with marginalised young people

Through the programme the youth workers were asked to engage and develop reciprocal relations with the young people. It may seem that open engagement with the young people is easy to reach and sustain. However, youth work follows standards and practices which allow youth workers to purposely intervene

in young people's lives, whilst this programme focused on creating opportunities that enable young people to think and act differently towards their social world. Through this process, the workers would learn what they could do differently to support young people.

'Biography' task

This task helped participants to build up an understanding of the motivation and expectation through a process of reflection on biography. It revealed to them how their identity frames their interactions with the young people. For the young people it gave an opportunity to reflect on their life histories and the histories of their families and the context in which they are living and understand its influence on their current life and the future.

'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.' (David Balakay, Belarus)

Co-presence with young people in their everyday life, active listening and motivation

Through constant presence with the young people the participants were able to support them in developing their hidden competences through an understanding of identity and diversity, by being non-judgemental, showing respect and accepting individuality.

'I realised that working with young people requires much more than narrow professionalism. It requires empathy, psychological assistance and attention to their needs... 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.' (Anastasiia Terletska, Czech Rep)

Ethics in youth work

Ethical standards in youth work help communicate with young people in a non-violent, non-manipulative way and create a safeguarding framework.

'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 have felt protected and trusted the professionalism of the worker.' (Terhi-Liisa Autioniemi, Finland)

» Empowerment

This wide subsection embraces learning tasks about approaches to participatory community development with marginalised young people, including participatory planning and implementation and evaluation. Working with marginalised young people to create an organised response, in order to improve their social, economic and/or cultural life.

Start from strength and not from deficits

This approach was introduced through an adaptation of so-called 'Asset-Based Community Development'. This may generally be understood as an orientation to start from the work with people and communities from their present strengths and assets, and to see people not as simply bearing some deficits.

'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.' (Evelyn Diana Plitman, Latvia)

Ensuring participation through project development and implementation

Working together in their group, the young people were encouraged to develop and carry out a micro-project all by themselves. It was the final task of the learning programme, and it harvested the achievements of one year of work with the group of young people.

'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.' (Agnese Mikne, Latvia)

'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.' (Anastasiya Terletska, Czech Rep)

» Peer Learning

This sub-section describes the forms of learning that brought programme participants together or in pairs for learning from each other. Learning from practice initially meant learning from presence with young people and then reflecting on it and discussing with colleagues in the workshops but a key feature of the programme was the co-learning peer to peer exchanges which also included a reflective task.

Peer learning

The Programme had four face-to face Contact Teaching Workshops in different locations, which were organised with support of the local partners. The five-day learning sessions were always full of laughter, sharing and common learning.

'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.' (Dávid Pobežal, Slovakia)

Learning from practice

This orientation implies the motto: 'learning by doing and then reflecting on it'. The programme had four practice periods between the Workshops, when the participants went back to their working settings to apply the gained knowledge to their practice.

'...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.' (Anastasiia Terletska, Czech Rep)



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

Co-learning exchange

This is a learning activity which was carried out independently from the programme tasks. All programme participants found this very helpful and inspirational. In a nutshell, this activity provided programme participants with the opportunity to visit each other reciprocally in their countries. In the work setting of their 'pair' they could learn from each other and reflect by comparison with their own different contexts and working practices.

'This kind of exchange of experience provides an opportunity for deeper understanding of being and for creativity... I propose to focus the development of the programme on making the experience of participants visible. Sharing life experience as wealth'. (Kadri Kesküla, Estonia)



Conclusion

The wealth of reflection from the programme participants informs and enriches our understanding of the professional inclusive work with marginalised young people. According to their testimonies, youth work needs sensitive, empathic, creative and open processes of co-presence with the young people in their own living situations, in terms of 'horizontal' communication and equal treatment. This is only possible by ensuring everyday presence of the youth worker with marginalised young people, active listening to their voices and the refusal of any pre-defined expectations and procedures for them. It requires working inductively with the young people to empower them to discover their own 'voice' and initiative. Such inductive working process poses a number of challenging issues that require common joint work of the youth organisations, policy makers and educational establishments. Below we itemise the key points, through the lens of the main findings from the programme participants:

- Firstly, in the light of programme reflections, the role and professional profile of youth workers should be reassessed. Their work cannot be narrowed down to service-delivery, it is a quality of engagement from the youth workers that is needed. Young people may be going through difficulties in their lives, but they should be seen holistically, supported to limit the impact of the challenges to their lives and simultaneously to avoid being labelled by main-stream society. To do that, youth workers need to develop a sense of own 'self'. They should be able to recognise how their sense of their identity impacts on their understanding of work with others. This is especially important in work with vulnerable persons, who may be highly sensitive to relational aspect of encounters with 'others'. Therefore, youth workers should work on their self-understanding and become accountable to themselves their colleagues and most importantly, to the young people they work with for their contribution to young peoples' lives.

- Secondly, the organisations that provide youth work, should be continuously assessing their goals to develop appropriate process-driven forms of engaging in collaborative work and the creation of an internal supportive environment for their workers and the young people, who use their services. It worth organising reflective working groups around questions such as:
 - o What evidence is there that participatory practice is part of the everyday work of the organisation?
 - o What opportunities are there for young people to shape and influence the organisation's work?
 - o How are young people enabled have a say on the issues that affect their lives and the life of the community and society, beyond the organisation?

Assessment should touch on how the organisational values find their expression in the internal working process and practices, that shape the youth work organisational 'profile'. It may also involve reflection on and renewal of youth work values. At the same time, broader networks of youth work organisations should seek to promote the need for participatory practice which focusses on learning from the context of the young people and supporting long-term engagement in processes of analysis and working for change with them.

- Thirdly, professional training and learning programmes for youth workers should be adjusted to creatively embrace the indicated points and perspectives. Learning in these conditions needs to be seen as a continuous double-learning process of workers and young people. Practice-rooted knowledge and skills built up through 'learning in action' should inform the content and approaches of learning for youth work. This approach reflects the importance of seeing practice as form of continues action learning and research
- Fourthly, professionals should be encouraged to learn from each other by the organisation of co-learning exchanges which can be structured to enable peer to peer learning and co-reflection on context, organisation and practice. Such exchanges can be within a region or nation or international. This process can support the development of networks which can provide inspiration and support for youth workers who often face quite complex and emotionally demanding situations. The basic details for the organisation of a co-learning exchange are in the Handbook for Programme Participants.

Developing and supporting learning programmes that engage workers and young people in unconditional reciprocal learning are essential for youth work agencies that seek to establish and support bottom-up transformational change with marginalised young people. It is also important to establish 'hubs' or other forms of organisation with support workers in this field and which also can harvest the new knowledge gained from such important work.

Appendix

Programme Resources

Make Change Yourselves: Turning Challenges To Your Advantage!

- Curriculum and Operational Plan
- Handbook for the Programme Participants
- Handbook for the Programme Leaders
- 'Make Change Yourselves! Participants Stories and Reflections'
- Learning for Empowering Youth Work Practice



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Learning community
for Christian social action
and living conviviality