

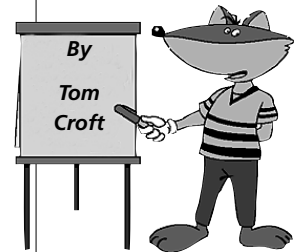


1. Introduction

1.1 The future of Europe : young people, inclusion and participation

"The European Union needs to become more democratic, more transparent and more efficient. It also has to resolve three basic challenges: how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions..."

Extract from the Declaration of Laeken (EU European Council Summit, Belgium, December 2001)



At the dawn of this new millennium, Europe, both the Council of Europe and European Union, and its citizens are travelling rapidly towards a new and critical horizon in their history.

The further enlargement of the European Union, for example, and the enormous political, economic and social changes it will bring in its wake, represent profound challenges for the whole continent.

The citizens of the continent also seem increasingly disillusioned with Europe's political and administrative structures. This sense of disconnectedness has been put forward, for example, as a reason for falling turnout in European elections and "no" votes in national referendums on further European integration. To reverse these feelings and bridge the divide between Europe's institutions and its citizens are also major tasks.

Yet all these challenges represent an immense wealth of opportunities for Europe and its people. We have the opportunity to build together a Europe of peace, based on the respect and defence of human rights and with new forms of democracy that can truly engage Europe's institutions with Europe's citizens.

But what is most striking, as the Laeken Declaration makes clear, is the fact that Europe's young people are central to the success of this vision for a truly united, peaceful and fair Europe. The rise of youth participation up the political agenda reflects significant developments in the thinking and the emphasis given to youth policy and youth work within Europe. The European Union's YOUTH programme, the White Paper on Youth and the training courses run through the Council of Europe's Youth Centres are all examples of this trend.

Young people are then firmly and rightly on the political map of Europe, their role and importance highlighted. But what exactly has all this got to do with social inclusion in youth work? The link becomes clearer when the idea of youth participation is examined more closely.

The notion of participation of young people in society, particularly in the civil and political organisation of society, is developing. Participation in this context means more than mere consultation with young people about changes and initiatives that will affect their lives and shape their futures. We are talking about the participation of young people who are really representing, and representative of, a faithful cross section of European youth. It is this last point that brings us to the crux of the matter.

For society to really benefit from the engagement of young people, all young people must be given the means and the opportunities to take up their right to participate. It is essential that young people with fewer opportunities, indeed with the fewest opportunities, can get involved and make their contribution felt, not least because it is their fundamental right as much as any other young person. But it is not only a matter of the intrinsic ethical value of preventing exclusion or of recognising the richness of diversity. The participation of young people with fewer opportunities is a barometer of the underlying health of our democracies and societies. It is imperative that the voice of the most vulnerable and marginalised young people is heard because their contribution, their perspective and their knowledge is invaluable and unique in the effort to forge a better society for tomorrow, for everyone. Young people who have the most difficult lives and the most uncertain futures can really teach us about the meaning of, and the path towards, a Europe of equality, justice and peace. But these young people must first have the possibility to participate.



Even though the insight and knowledge of people who experience social exclusion directly can help us understand the roots of exclusion, these are complex and difficult experiences to understand. Yet young people in the most difficult situations do tell us that they need opportunities to meet others in an atmosphere of friendship, mutual support and security. They also tell us about the importance of having the possibility to join in with others in the normal pursuits and projects open to young people in society, such as sport, volunteering and cultural activities. It is very much as a result of such an inclusion that young people can go on to discuss and share their views on the issues that concern them. This is true for all young people but especially true for those with the fewest opportunities.

Youth work plays an essential role in reaching and bringing together young people who face exclusion on a daily basis. It is true that there are many other factors in society that can contribute to the social inclusion of young people, not least the abilities and strengths of young people themselves, but for young people with the fewest opportunities youth work and youth organisations can be a principal means of such inclusion.

If youth workers and youth organisations cannot reach out to and include young people with the fewest opportunities in their activities, where else will they benefit from the non-formal learning experiences these activities provide? (See 5 : *Non-formal education as a tool for the inclusion of all.*) How else will the most marginalised young people be able to join other young people and adults in the projects that are open to them in our societies? And outside of the formal structures that do not always serve them the best, where will the most vulnerable young people find the encouragement and support to develop their self-esteem and confidence? (See 6.4 : *Exploring self-esteem.*) Without such broader inclusion where will the most isolated young people develop the necessary skills and self-belief to take up the challenge of representing others? And what possible future will Europe be missing out on without such inclusion?

How then do youth workers and youth organisations go about being inclusive? This T-Kit aims to provide both conceptual and practical tools and resources from which to begin to explore and approach this question.

1.2 The value and challenge of working inclusively

Researchers looking at social exclusion were tracking the changes in the lives of a small sample of young people who were not in education, employment or training – one of the key marginalised groups that government is keen to help. The plan was to interview them twice or three times, over a period of 18 months. Unfortunately, despite regular communication and the researchers' best efforts, many of the young people simply 'disappeared'.

From "Missing ConneXions": Briton (2002)

Excluded young people are hard to reach and the more excluded they are the harder it is. Making contact with young people is not enough; we need to engage and work with them. The problem is confounded by the fact that many marginalised young people express suspicion, even hostility, towards the involvement of professionals in their lives.

This is why youth work is so important. Its often voluntary and community-based nature means that youth workers and youth organisations have a better chance than most to make contact and build trusting relationships with young people on the margins of society (see 6.3 : *Building trust*).

So what are the benefits to be gained when we as youth workers build on this vocational advantage and work as inclusively as we can?



Young single mothers bringing up their children in extremely difficult conditions have a wealth of practical and emotional experience and resourcefulness as well as an acute understanding of some of the injustices at the root of society. This knowledge needs to be shared, not just with other single mothers but also with anyone wanting to understand what it is like to raise children alone on an insufficient income while at the same time coping with society's disapproval and moralising. Such personal insights and experiences are difficult to share with others and bringing young people from very different backgrounds together is not always straightforward and trouble-free but with care and commitment the rewards for everyone are immense.

- The first thing we need to recognise is the tremendous knowledge and insight that young people who face exclusion on a daily and long-term basis can bring to youth work, as pointed out in the previous chapter. Their contribution will enrich any youth initiative or project.
- Young people facing persistent exclusion will benefit from new opportunities that could have been previously out of reach. Through being able to know and encounter other young people they will, together, all be challenged and their prejudices, stereotypes and assumptions questioned. Their horizons will become broader, their contacts more diverse. They will have the opportunity together to see patterns of injustice and explore their concerns and questions. Despite the differences in their backgrounds and experiences they will discover their similarities as young people with hopes and aspirations for the future.
- Youth projects and initiatives will benefit too. If locally based, they will be more relevant to their communities. By listening and learning from disadvantaged young people, youth work and those involved in it will gain a deeper and broader understanding of what is really important. By reaching and engaging excluded young people, future initiatives will have a better chance to include them as well; events or projects can be tailored to meet the young people's actual needs and interests, not what adults imagine them to be.
- In terms of its content, the project, and all the people in it and affected by it, gain too. Racism, sexism, poverty, inequality and other forms of discrimination and injustice can be raised not as abstract "-isms" but as real forces affecting real people. Young people can understand the realities of other people's lives better when there is an emotional connection between them. This principle is well understood as an element of global youth work, but it applies just as keenly when the gap between or within communities is across a city, not a continent.
- In this way, and especially if what we learn through working inclusively can be shared outside the world of youth work, society, as a whole, will benefit too.

However, bringing all this about is far from easy. Working in an inclusive way demands change – organisational and individual. By definition, the status quo has failed some young people. To change that, people and organisations have to do things in different ways. They must identify the barriers they have, perhaps unwittingly, erected. Projects must examine their organisational culture, their values and practices, to see where and how they are reaching and engaging some young people but not others. We examine some of those barriers and ways to tackle them in greater detail in 3: *How to reach all*.

In all this it is vital that youth workers know their limitations. Some of the barriers to young people's inclusion are deep-rooted, long lasting and structural in society. Youth workers cannot counter their effects at a stroke, even with good intentions and hard work. Goals have to be realistic and achievable (see the section on SMART objectives in T-Kit 3 on Project Management). Youth projects obviously cannot single-handedly eradicate poverty, unemployment, drug use, racism and xenophobia, educational underachievement, homelessness, abuse and neglect, youth crime or any of the other problems linked with young people's social exclusion. But they can work with young people in informal settings, broadening their opportunities, providing new experiences and challenges, showing their faith in young people and bringing out of them what is best, as described in 5: *Non-formal education as a tool for the inclusion of all*.



For young people facing daily discrimination and exclusion, and trying to cope with the humiliation and the injustice that it brings, sensitive and inclusive youth work based on respect and dignity can be an immense source of strength and personal encouragement. If this is all new to you, some underlying principles and different approaches of this inclusive youth work are described in *6: Inclusive youth work in practice*, and *7: Some particular approaches*.

We must also encourage professionals – teachers, health workers, police and employers – to take young people seriously; to listen to them, not to preach; to enter into proper dialogue with them about their lives; and to accept that young people have a lot to contribute and to teach us. The importance of partnerships in tackling social exclusion and fostering social inclusion is explored in *4: Young people and their context*.

If, however, you are a trainer wishing to raise awareness about the different issues that surround working with young people with fewer opportunities, this T-Kit will give you a series of methods and exercises in *8: Practical part – Exercises*.

Next we will tackle one of the biggest stumbling blocks, that of trying to grasp what inclusion actually is and who those young people with fewer opportunities are, in *2: Definitions*.