

## 6. Inclusive youth work in practice



T-Kit  
on  
Social Inclusion

### 6.1 Ethos

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

We consider ethos in two areas: ethos linked to philosophy and ethos linked to the work with the target group.

#### *Ethos linked to philosophy*

According to Begnino Caceres, two tendencies appear in community and youth work (community work endeavours to enable people to participate in society).

The first approach sees community and youth workers as actors who should include their target audiences as much as possible in society. They do not intend to change society, but instead promote that people adapt to it. Community and youth workers have a role in social regulation.

The second concept of community and youth work sees itself as a tool for transforming society. It lies in people's ability to interact with their environment and transform it. Community workers' actions are aimed at a long-term transformation of the people's minds and hence their capacity to participate in society and also to improve it. In this approach community and youth workers do not aim to integrate people into society they contribute to social transformation of society.

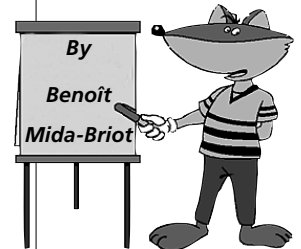
The moral approach, of course, has consequences for the way you work with young people.

#### *Ethos linked to the work with young people with fewer opportunities*

Youth workers should be conscious of the ethos on which their educational actions are based. They may have important roles like providing support and mentoring to the young persons they work with. This support should remain punctual and avoid creating dependency-based relationships, as these create obstacles to young people's empowerment and personal autonomy instead of enhancing them. Youth workers should aim to become superfluous once they have coached the young persons to achieve independence. Youth workers can provide young people different opportunities that hopefully inspire and boost the young people's empowerment and active participation in society.

#### **Some questions to ask yourself**

- **My values:** what are my conceptions of society? Is youth work the right place to be coherent with my values?
- **My motivations for working with the target group:** do I want to integrate youth into society or do I want to create spaces for enabling them to participate in public discussion?
- **My role as a youth worker:** do my motivations and actions match my employer's policy and the young persons' needs? Do I have influence on young people that goes beyond my task? How can I manage this?
- **How to avoid creating dependency-based relationships with the target group:** am I able to limit my involvement with the young persons? Am I too emotionally committed? Do I network sufficiently?





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One important aim of youth work with young people having fewer opportunities can be to become unnecessary, when young persons become autonomous and socially included enough not to need youth workers anymore.

## 6.2 Step-by-step approach

As mentioned in 4.3 : *Different working contexts*, there are different ways to work with young people with fewer opportunities. One can aim to give a little push to these young persons' lives by using brief challenges, or you could aim to coach the young person towards more permanent change. In the latter case it is important to become familiar with the young people's stories. Youth workers should get to know the mechanisms that have led the young people to become socially excluded; they should understand their present and hopefully construct a better future with them. Youth workers may realise at this stage that short-term youth work has its limits regarding the needs of young people with fewer opportunities. Change needs longer-term guidance.

You cannot push young people to suddenly change their lives. They also need to be ready and open for change, which demands a step-by-step approach. At different moments in their lives, you can do different things to get them moving toward integration into society. Getting to know their stories, working on a trust-based relationship, involving them in the choice of their future are essential before you can start steering them towards better horizons. It is paramount to adapt your approach and activities to their pathways, providing tailor-made programmes that take into account their expectations and possibilities. You can start with little challenges and build on that, reaching, step-by-step, where you want to go.

### ***How to build a step-by-step approach ?***

Different essential ingredients are needed to work efficiently with the target group in the context of youth work. These will be mentioned in this section and explored in the next sections of 6 : *Inclusive youth work in practice*.

As a principle, any work with young people with fewer opportunities should be built on trust and not be forced upon them. As outlined in 6.3 : *Building trust*, this can take weeks or months. However it is a key to many doors in the work with them and well worth working on and waiting for.

Youth work should be based on the young people's expectations and needs. If they do not have any specific wishes or do not know what they want, the youth worker can help them find out where they want to go in life. The youth worker can do this by proposing a variety of activities that the young people may feel attracted to and thus help them detect their centres of interest.

Once specific aims have emerged, the youth worker and the young people may be able to reflect together on possible ways to reach these aims. The contractual approach (see 7.2) could be one of the ways to go about this.

Furthermore, it may be necessary to restart a socialising process: the young persons may need to learn to communicate and co-operate again with others. It may be useful to take them through experiences out of their daily environment, to make them function again outside their old habits. International projects could be an opportunity for certain young people to change their lives. It goes without saying that people who are not used to such international experiences need a fair amount of preparation, continued support throughout the entire project and, of course, active involvement (see more on this in the T-Kit on International Voluntary Service).



### Good practices – A concrete example

*S, 19 years old, was involved in petty crime and this brought him in repeated contact with the juvenile delinquency department of justice. They asked an organisation that works with young people with fewer opportunities, using mainly circus arts and sailing activities, to work with S, and so they did. After a while, this organisation offered S an opportunity to go on a short-term European Voluntary Service (EVS) project abroad. S was tempted by the idea to go abroad, but to do so required a trial period of one month, in which S would need to prepare for the project abroad. One month later, after some difficult periods, S was ready to go and a meeting was held to establish a “contract of objectives” before going abroad on a sailing project. The first four months abroad were not easy due to language problems but because of strong on-going support of his mentors, he stuck it out. What is more, S applied for a two-month extension. He was very much appreciated by the project and later presented a photography exhibition of his work aboard during a festival. After he finished his EVS he went back home for holidays but soon he moved permanently to the country where he did his EVS to start a new life.*

#### **A brief analysis of S’s case**

*S successfully used, with the support of his mentors, a non-formal educational opportunity (see 5: Non-formal education as a tool for the inclusion of all). We see that a step-by-step methodology had been implemented, tailored to S’s expectations, and most at all, depended on his strong adherence and active involvement. The youth worker (short-term EVS) had proposed the first step in this project but the choice was made freely by S. He had been considered from the beginning someone responsible, that is, someone able to make a choice.*

*The second step set up a trial period, meaning that before entering the “nice” part of the project (going abroad), S had to confirm his choice. After a satisfactory evaluation of his preparation period, the next, “exciting” step was discussed and led to a contract of objectives stating the parties’ rights and duties, describing further steps to take and foreseeing regular evaluation meetings.*

*During the stay abroad, strong support was provided by the EVS mentors enabling S to have a successful experience, which also allowed for moments to stand back and reflect about what steps to implement after the EVS project. As a final step his work was acknowledged through his exhibition during the festival, increasing his self-confidence and self-esteem (see 6.4: Exploring self-esteem) and developed his project management skills.*

*The EVS offer came at the right moment in S’s life, where he was willing to take up a challenge and get actively involved in this project. Prior to this project, he was looking for situations in which he could improve himself and get a second chance. Because of the partnership between the juvenile delinquency department and the organisations, S was able to benefit from a European mobility project. This tool had been tailored to his needs and expectations into a relevant personal development tool. S significantly improved his self-confidence and self-esteem and gradually took on, in a step-by-step approach, more and more responsibilities.*



## 6.3 Building trust

Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly, and they will show themselves great.  
*Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882)*

Love all, trust a few. Do wrong to none. *William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)*

The significance we attach to the concept of trust is exemplified by the adjective so often attached to it – sacred. Trust, and our need for the security and reassurance it offers, is central to our sense of self and our relationships. We expect – and want – to trust our family, our friends, our teachers and our leaders. With that trust comes certainty, predictability and safety. Without it, life is at best uncertain, at worst a dangerous place where the safest survival technique is to trust no one, relying instead on self-interest.

“Don’t trust a word he says”, “She’s not to be trusted”: there are few more damning remarks to make of another person. From the pages of literature, through to the divorce courts, from the tearful teenager whose supposed best friend has just blurted out something she promised to keep secret, to the pensioner cheated out of his life savings by an unscrupulous advisor, betrayal and its consequence – the destruction of trust – is recognised as one of the most damaging of all the cruelties one human being can visit upon another.

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

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

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

- **Mean what you say:** “Hear the words, but watch the actions.” If you say you are available according to an agreed timetable, be available. If you promise not to pass on a confidence entrusted to you by a young person, respect that promise.



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- **Take responsibility:** People who can be trusted take responsibility for their actions. Show that you recognise that everyone makes mistakes: admit to your own shortcomings, and avoid offloading the blame on to someone else. It is all too easy to attribute failures and difficulties to someone else, often a nameless “they” who may so easily engender a feeling of powerlessness and apathy. Demonstrate how, even in the smallest way, you can take responsibility for your own destiny. Part of taking responsibility, just as with self-esteem, involves learning to take account of other people’s interests. Working on trust will often involve presenting young people with the experience of both trusting someone else and having someone trust them, then exploring the different emotions – vulnerability, fear, discomfort, empowerment, confidence, for example – they may have felt. See section 2 for practical ways to explore this.
  - **Show understanding:** When you believe that another person to a greater or lesser extent understands your situation and why you feel as you do, it is easier to trust them. Empathy and compassion, shown sincerely, unpatronisingly and consistently, can help to persuade a young person that you are trying to see the world through their eyes. However, as mentioned in the section on self-esteem, the reality of their lives must be acknowledged: you cannot fully understand their precise feelings – what is important is that you try.
  - **Create a safe space:** We tend to trust those with whom we feel safe. For some young people, particularly for those with fewer opportunities, the lack of security is a crucial factor in their unwillingness to trust. When life constantly lets you down and time and again your hopes are betrayed, it is not surprising if every encounter is greeted with suspicion. Through empathy and non-judgemental exchanges, the youth worker can help create an environment that feels safe, and where the young person can start to relax and let down their guard to some extent. No-one would pretend this will happen overnight – that would be naïve – but the experience, however brief, can at least provide a taste of what it feels like not to constantly assume the world and people in it are not to be trusted. This is why so many of the exercises aimed at building trust concentrate on the safe surrender, to some extent, of one’s own control, entrusting one’s personal and emotional security to another in a carefully managed situation (see activities in 8: *Practical part – Exercises*).

It would be a foolish person indeed who would pretend that the interventions of youth workers, however skilled and for however long, could transform lives for so long blighted by mistrust and insecurity. At the very least, however, the youth worker working with young people with fewer opportunities can try to provide an accepting setting where even for a few hours a feeling of safety and security can be experienced. In an uncertain world, they can also try to ensure that they themselves behave as someone worthy of another’s trust.

## 6.4 Exploring self-esteem

- If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
- If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
- If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.
- If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
- If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.
- If children live with encouragement, they learn to be confident.
- If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.
- If children live with approval, they learn to love themselves.
- If children live with acceptance, they learn to find love in the world.

Dorothy L. Nolte



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

In the first instance, what exactly does this term, which we all believe we understand, mean? A simplistic definition might be: “Self-esteem is feeling good about one’s self.” Using this definition might also describe such characteristics as conceit, egotism, arrogance, narcissism, or a sense of superiority (Baumeister, 1996), characteristics one might wish positively to discourage.

A better definition is one that recognises a more stable sense of self-esteem where feelings of self-worth, power, and capabilities are positive and relatively constant in the face of fluctuating life events. Branden (1994) describes self-esteem as “the disposition to experience one’s self as competent to cope with the challenges of life and as deserving of happiness.” Other definitions refer to having the ability to be accountable for one’s own actions and behave responsibly towards others. Achieving this richer level of self-esteem rests upon a sense of personal efficacy (self-efficacy) and a sense of personal worth (self-respect). This better explains why a young person largely excluded from society might struggle to have a sense of worth and efficacy in a world that so consistently undermines confidence, creates obstacles to achievement and is largely hostile. We referred earlier to the multiple insecurities a young person with fewer opportunities might experience, arising from a combination of disadvantageous factors anyone outside that setting might struggle to fully appreciate (see 2.2: *Who are the young people with fewer opportunities?*).

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

Youth workers often refer to the satisfaction they feel when watching a young person grow in self-confidence and in so doing increasing their self-esteem. However, we should be cautious about leaping to conclusions. The transformation that they witness will be the result of a wide range of experiences for the young person and, not least, the qualities of the individual young person. This is not to devalue the worth of a session or project in a safe and non-threatening environment that enables a young person – perhaps for the first time – to experience a real sense of achievement and justifiable pride in what they have done. It is rather to acknowledge the reality of a life that within seconds – perhaps just by stepping outside – can revert to the familiar daily struggles and frustrations. What is important is that the youth worker recognises their contribution to the complex jigsaw puzzle that makes up an individual’s self-esteem. We must also trust the evidence of our own eyes.<sup>2</sup>

Baumeister (1993) refers to a critical element of healthy self-esteem as having realistic, clear self-concepts. Here clearly the youth worker has a role to play in helping the young person frame their view of themselves and the world they inhabit within meaningful and challenging but realistic limits.

Branden describes self-esteem in terms of the “confidence in the efficacy of our mind, in our ability to think. By extension, it is confidence in our ability to learn, make appropriate choices and decisions, and respond effectively to change. It is also the experience that success, achievement, fulfilment – happiness – are right and natural for us. The survival-value of such confidence is obvious; so is the danger when it is missing.” The ways in which youth work, particularly with young people with fewer opportunities, can encourage that confidence to develop is integrally bound up with the creation and building of trust, which the next section explores.

2. There are different views in research about how exactly self-esteem and the effects thereof should be interpreted in youth work. For a recent, critical look at this issue see an article by PJ White in the *Young People Now* magazine (issue 162, October 2002), published by the National Youth Agency in the UK.  
Web: <http://www.nya.org.uk>



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- Unconditional self-acceptance
  - Sense of capability
  - Sense of purpose
  - Appropriate assertiveness
  - Experience of fulfilment
  - Sense of responsibility and accountability
  - Sense of safety and security
  - Sense of belonging
  - Sense of integrity