TIME TO SHOW OFF

RESEARCH REPORT
BY PAUL KLOOSTERMAN

LEARNING

FORMAL

NON FORMAL
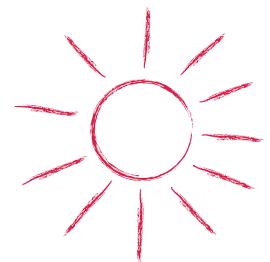
FOREWORD

Dear reader,

Accompanying young people's learning processes and raising awareness of the importance of learning is a crucial competence that youth workers need these days. It is essential when it comes to giving young people access to international mobility schemes – which of course involves informing target groups about them in the first place.

Between October 2015 and June 2017, the Dutch, Hungarian and German National Agencies and Salto Training & Cooperation Resource Centre worked together on a project called Time To Show Off! The main objectives were to collect evidence and knowledge on how youth workers accompany young people's learning processes, to identify the competences they need as practitioners, and explore how these competences can be stimulated by education and training. Based on this foundation, the experts discussed the required competences and proposed ways to achieve a systemic impact on youth worker education and training.

Through their work, the Time To Show Off! partners want to support youth workers in accompanying young people as they learn about life and work, navigate their journey to adulthood, and become fully-fledged members of societies.

We hope you enjoy this research report by Paul Kloosterman (http://trainers. salto-youth.net/PaulKloosterman/), which provides an overview of the outcomes of the project and contains interviews and real-life descriptions of the relevant actors – young people and youth workers.

Rita Bergstein
Project Coordinator
SALTO Training & Cooperation Resource Centre

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ONE THE PROJECT

This research report is part of the Time To Show Off! project, a cooperation between the National Agencies of Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and the SALTO Training & Cooperation Resource Centre.

The aim of this long-term project is to bring about systemic change in the education and training of youth workers. Given the specific knowledge and experience the cooperation partners have gathered in connection with Erasmus+: Youth in Action, their specific focus is on international learning mobility. A second, equally important focus is to better equip youth workers to identify and support participants' personal learning processes and transform and translate these outcomes into life skills, among them employability competences.

THE PROJECT COMPRISED THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES:

An expert meeting of experienced youth workers and young former Erasmus+: Youth in Action participants took place from 1 to 5 April 2016 in De Glind (NL). The aim was to get an understanding and collect examples of quality support for learning processes in an international youth mobility concept and to identify how learning outcomes can be translated into life skills.

This meeting was followed by a training course based on the outcomes of the expert meeting for youth workers entitled Time to show off! MIND-SETS of youth workers in supporting learning through youth mobility, that took place from 30 October to 5 November 2016 in Budapest. The overall aim of this training course was to reflect on the mind-set of youth workers and exchange, discuss and challenge youth workers about competencies they need for supporting young people's development through youth mobility and other schemes.

A seminar for experts and stakeholders took place from 23 to 26 April 2017 in Hilversum (NL) and involved a wider debate with a variety of stakeholders from across Europe about developing youth work education and training. Special emphasis was given to facilitating learning processes and providing learning support for adolescents and young adults. An accompanying qualitative research project took place between August 2016 and March 2017.

TWO THE RESEARCH

RESEARCH SETUP
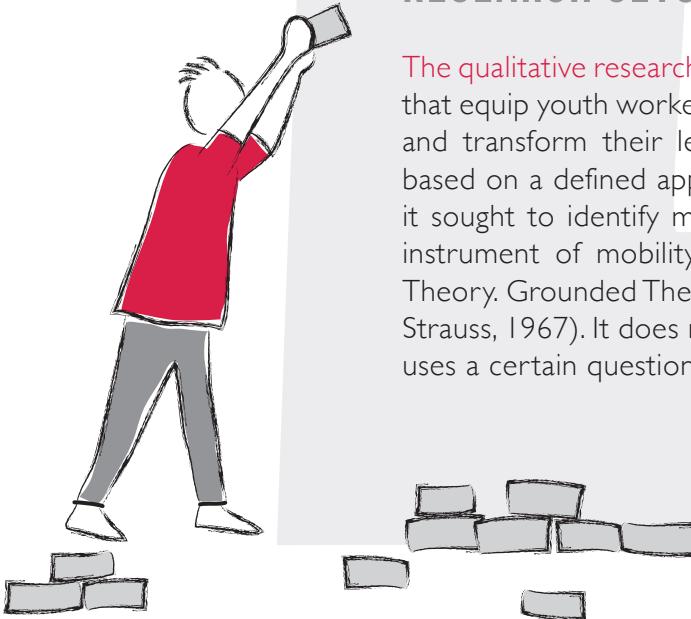
The qualitative research project aimed to identify approaches and methodologies that equip youth workers to identify and support participants' learning processes and transform their learning outcomes into life skills. The research was not based on a defined approach or theory concerning learning facilitation; instead, it sought to identify methods whereby learning can be facilitated through the instrument of mobility. The research methodology was based on Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory seeks to ' generate or discover a theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It does not work with existing theoretical frameworks but rather uses a certain question as a point of departure.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

To capture the perspective and concerns of youth workers and young people, interviews were conducted with both groups. 15 youth workers were interviewed who had been involved in Erasmus+: Youth in Action projects, along with 14 young people who had been involved in a mobility project. The youth workers were interviewed via Skype and the young people were interviewed by the same youth workers who had been interviewed themselves.

The assumption was that young people would feel safer and more at ease if they were interviewed by their youth worker rather than someone they did not know. Also, this approach made it possible for the young people to be interviewed in their native language. Most interviews with the youth workers were done in English; two were conducted in Dutch.

The interviews with the youth workers lasted around one hour, those with the young people between 25 and 45 minutes.
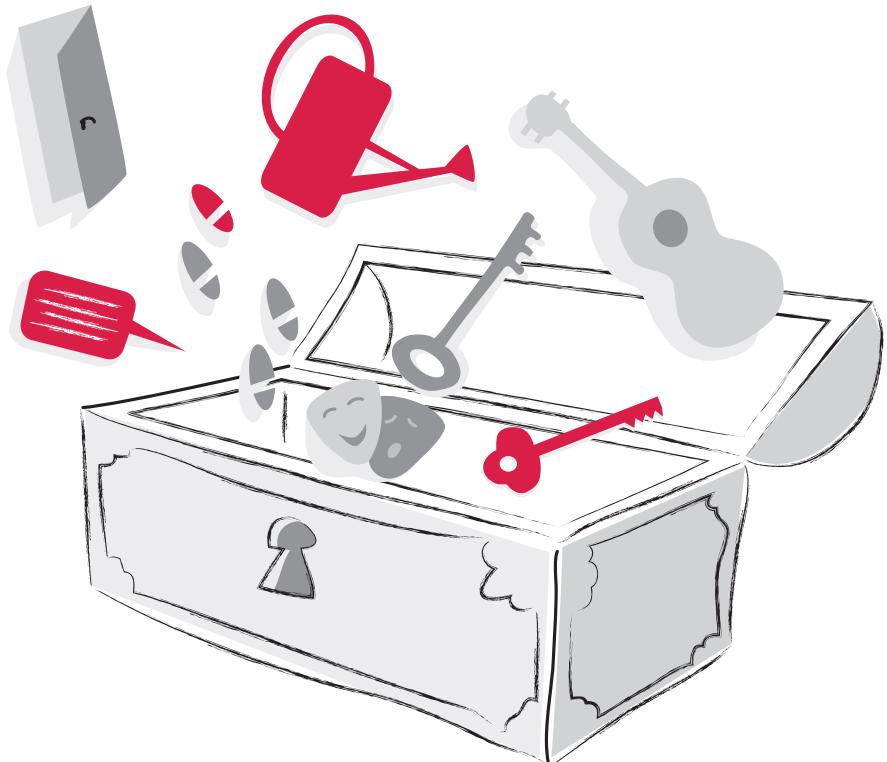
All interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analysed by the researcher.

The focus of the interviews was on 'what makes a project successful in terms of learning for young people?' and explored different aspects of this question. For both the youth workers as the young people the same elements were addressed in the interviews:

- What do young people learn in mobility projects?
- What is the role of the youth worker when it comes to learning?
- What kind of situations, moments, activities and methods allow young people to learn in a mobility project?
- What is the role of peers when it comes to learning in mobility projects?
- What is your approach towards learning in mobility projects? (only for youth workers)

THERE WERE THREE ROUNDS OF INTERVIEWS:
- Ten in September/October 2016,
- Ten in November/December2016 and
- Nine in February 2017.

After every round, the interviews were analysed and where necessary, the next set of interviews refocused.

After the first round the questions relating to the role of the youth worker were reworded to focus more on the relationship between young people and

youth workers and the trust and responsibility given to young people by youth workers. The question about youth workers' approach towards learning was given greater emphasis by adding more prompts to assist the interviewees in answering it.
The youth workers were provided with an interview manual for doing their own interviews.

The desktop research was conducted alongside the interview process and was partly informed by the outcomes of the interviews. Next to research-reports the desk-top research went into project-reports, related articles etcetera.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Interviews were conducted with participants from 13 countries: the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Germany, Belgium, Norway, Finland and Spain.

15 youth workers were interviewed, the youngest aged 31, the oldest aged 64. Their average age was 41. 5. Two of the youth workers had previously been involved in the European Voluntary Service, eight in youth exchanges and five had experience of both. 14 young people were interviewed ranging in age from 16 to 28. Seven were university students, three were secondary school students, two were unemployed and two had a job.
Four of the young people had been involved in European Voluntary Service projects; ten had experience of a youth exchanges.

DIFFERENT REALITIES OF YOUTH WORK

Obviously the realities in youth work in Europe are very different, so it came as no surprise that the realities of the projects here varied widely, too.

- Some youth organisations have full-time paid staff; some projects are staffed by people who voluntarily spend much of their free time keeping the organisation running. The former are often embedded in professional networks; the latter often lack membership of local, regional or national networks but do have their networks through the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme.
- Some youth workers have had special training; others live in countries where no youth work training is available.

The realities faced by young people are also sometimes very different:

- According to one youth worker, the main reason why young people participate in youth exchanges and/or volunteering actvities is to leave their own country and explore life in a country with better living conditions.
- Another youth worker said that for him, one reason to invite young people for projects taking them out of the country is that they can see that there is another reality in Europe where life is not as comfortable as it is at home.
- The group of young interviewees included both the 'successful student' type as well as 'kids from problematic neighbourhoods', amongst others, so it was very diverse.
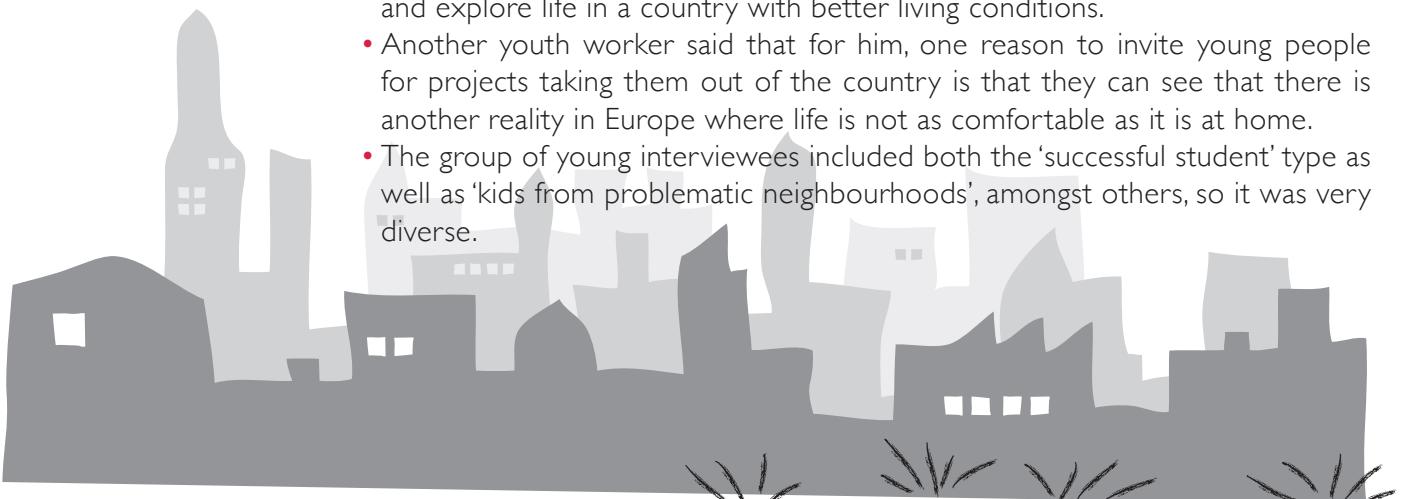
THE RESEARCH OUTCOMES THREE

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN IN MOBILITY PROJECTS?

Personal development, described in many different ways, is surely considered to be the primary outcome of youth exchanges and volunteering actvities. All the interviewed youth workers placed much emphasis on this aspect.

"FINDING THEIR OWN TALENTS"

"TO COME BACK TO YOURSELF"

"A SIGNIFICANT PERSONAL GROWTH"

"TURNING INTO BRAVE YOUNG PEOPLE"

"THEY TURN FROM SOMETHING CLOSER TO KIDS TO BECOMING ADULTS"

"COMING OUT OF THEIR SHELL"

"BEING ABLE TO SHOW THEMSELVES"

"BELIEVING IN THEMSELVES"
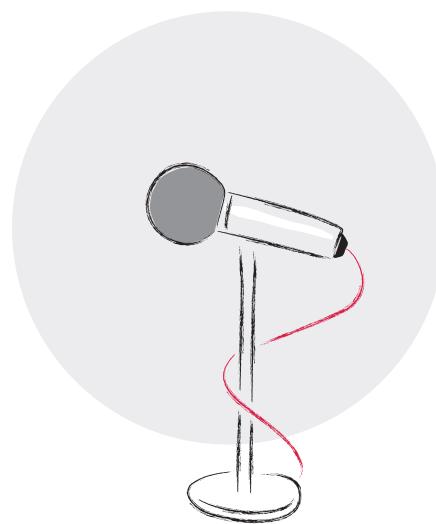
These are a few of the ways youth workers describe this process.

Not all young people, but certainly over half mentioned personal development as an important outcome of their mobility project.

"I HAVE LEARNT TO BE MORE OPEN"

"MY PARENTS ARE HAPPY THAT WE CAN TALK ABOUT THINGS MUCH BETTER NOW"

"THERE ARE MANY THINGS TO LEARN THAT HAVE TO DO MORE WITH YOUR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, SELF-CONFIDENCE"

"I CAN BE MORE VULNERABLE NOW"

"THINGS GOT ME REALLY ON A PERSONAL LEVEL."

"HOW TO DISCOVER MYSELF, I HAVE QUESTIONED MYSELF A LOT"

"IT CHANGED MY WHOLE WAY OF LIFE"
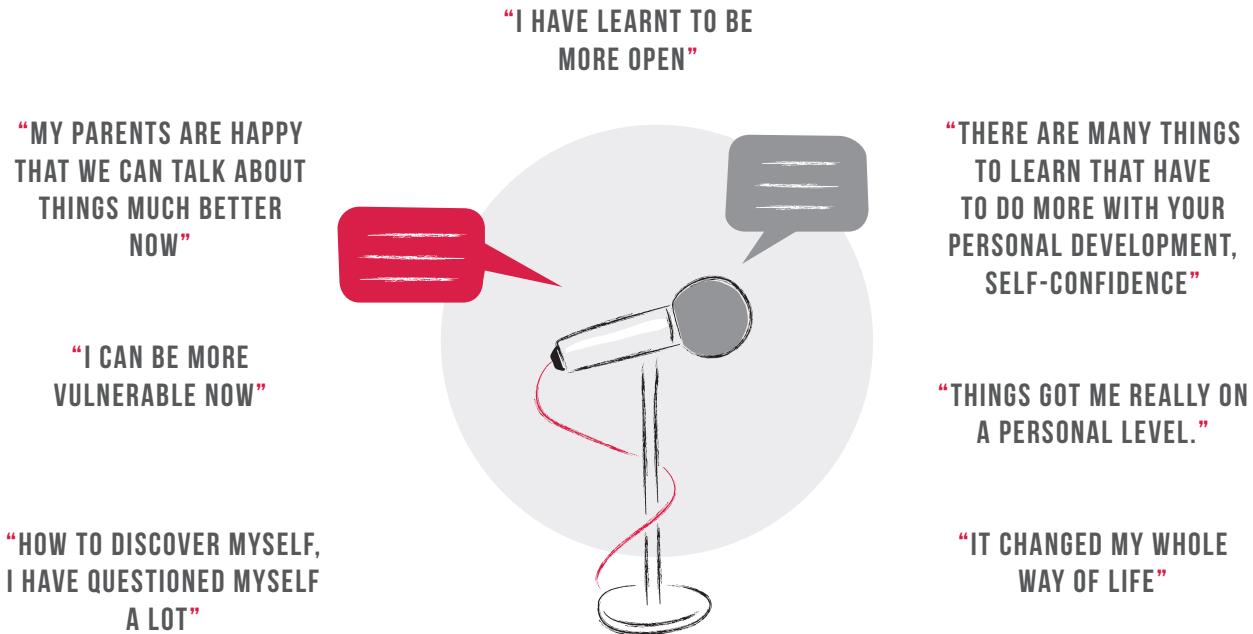
While these statements may not imply very concrete and measurable outcomes, they do express the enormous impact the projects often have on young people. It must be said that both youth workers and young people found it difficult to answer the questions about learning outcomes. It often took some prompting before they were able to express themselves accurately.

> **"THIS IS ALWAYS DIFFICULT TO NARROW DOWN INTO SOME KIND OF SOUND-BYTES, A CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE. EVEN SELLING A YOUTH EXCHANGE TO YOUNG PEOPLE. WHAT DO THEY GET OUT OF IT?"**

The youth workers recognised that 'learning about oneself' is a crucial first step for young people: they recognise their skills and strengths, how they interact within a group, how they relate to others, they recognise their own needs and identify what motivates them. For many young people, the reflection on these aspects is the first time they assess themselves in this way. Partly as a result of this growing self-awareness, the youth workers stated that young people develop more confidence and more empathy, they become more open, they feel empowered to act and to take responsibility, they can present themselves and feel better able to deal with unknown situations.

"I FEEL MORE CONFIDENT WITH MYSELF AND MORE HAPPY ABOUT WHO I AM"

"I'M NOW FEELING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT"

The young interviewees also described this process of 'learning about themselves', yet in slightly different terms.

When asked to describe what skills they thought they had acquired, both the youth workers and the young people mentioned language, organisation/ management, time management, presentation, team, communication, planning, intercultural, and networking skills.

"I LEARN HOW TO TRUST OTHERS"

"I ORGANISE NOW MY OWN YOUTH EXCHANGE AND WILL BE A YOUTH LEADER"

"I LEARNT HOW TO COOPERATE WITH OTHER PEOPLE"

"I SPEAK MUCH MORE ABOUT MY IDEAS AND LISTEN TO OTHER IDEAS"

"I DISCOVERED THAT I'M A GOOD LEADER"

"I GOT BETTER IN COMMUNICATION AND IN TEAM WORK"

"I LEARNT HOW TO 'THINK IN A PROJECT', TO MAKE SOMETHING FROM YOUR HEART INTO REALITY"

"I NEVER MANAGED TO TALK IN FRONT OF OTHER PEOPLE BUT NOW I DID"

Besides these more personal learning outcomes are those that relate specifically to a youth exchange or volunteering activity. Since these touch upon very different subjects (human rights, music, refugees, persons with disabilities, etc.) it is difficult to comment adequately on them. It is remarkable, however, that these specific learning outcomes were not mentioned by most of the youth workers as core outcomes, but rather as side-effects. The young people were more likely to mention subject-specific learning outcomes.

The intercultural dimension of the projects was mentioned in all interviews. For many young people it was the first time they had ever met someone from a different country or even that they had travelled abroad. Most of the young people described feeling uncomfortable at the beginning of the project when meeting other participants in the youth exchange, or when they were confronted with another culture and the new environment of a volunteering activity. All of them, however, were able to translate that into a positive experience. Dealing with language barriers, working together in groups, having fun together, developing friendships, being able to find their way around in a new country were all challenges they overcame and hence mentioned them as something that changed their perception. The young people used expressions such as 'being more open', 'understanding different cultures' and so forth.

"YOU HAVE TO FIND YOUR OWN PLACES IN A NEW CITY. PLACES YOU FEEL AT HOME. TO BUILD A SOCIAL LIFE."

"IT MADE ME DEFINITELY MORE OPEN MINDED. I TRY TO LISTEN MORE AND UNDERSTAND WHY PEOPLE SAY WHAT THEY SAY."

When asked about the relevance of the learning outcomes to employability and further education, most of the youth workers and some of the young people recognised a strong relevance.

"WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT TODAY'S JOBS, GOOD ORGANISATION SKILLS ARE ALWAYS NEEDED, AND YOU NEED TO KNOW YOURSELF AND YOUR OWN COMPETENCES"

The youth workers mentioned a changing labour market where the types of skills acquired in youth work settings are highly appreciated. They considered the strong involvement of young people in the projects and the responsibilities they are given as comparable to the skills that are demanded in many jobs. The relevance is considered to be even greater in connection with volunteering actvities, where the tasks done by the volunteer strongly resemble those that have to be done in a paid job. Some volunteers stated that their voluntary period abroad was a stepping stone towards their future career.

"FOR ME THIS EVS PROJECT IS A GREAT FOLLOW-UP ON MY STUDY"

"I CHANGED MY STUDIES AFTER THE PROJECT"

However, the youth workers underlined that what young people learn in the mobility projects is certainly not limited to employability. Learning in youth projects leads to richer relationships with friends, family, schoolmates and work colleagues, the ability to organise their own lives, more active participation, more tolerance, and a greater capacity for dealing with ambiguity and change.
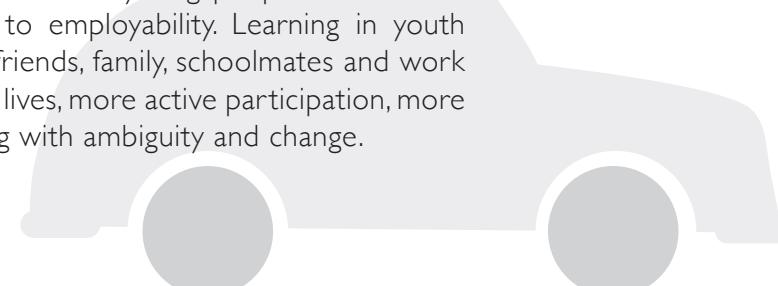
"IT'S MORE HOLISTIC, WHAT THEY LEARN THEY CAN USE IN ALL FACETS OF LIFE"

"WHAT THEY LEARN IS NOT FOR A SPECIFIC CONTEXT, IT'S LIFE SKILLS'."

CONSIDERATIONS

The learning outcomes mentioned in the interviews are not significantly different from the outcomes mentioned in other studies, e.g., the RAY studies.

'The most distinct development is reported for skills related to interpersonal, social and intercultural competence as well as to communication in a foreign language; a significant development is also reported for skills related to sense of entrepreneurship, civic competence, cultural awareness and expression, and learning competence (learning to learn), as well as for skills related to communication in the first language (mother tongue), mathematical competence and sense of initiative.'

RAY - Learning in Youth in Action - Results from the surveys with project participants and project leaders, in May 2012.

However, in the interviews in the Time To Show Off! project there is much more emphasis on 'personal growth' and 'self-awareness'. Youth workers, but also young people underlined the relevance of this many times. This does not contradict the outcomes of, e.g., the RAY study, which refers mainly to the EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, but can be seen as a complementary element of youth work: personal development, self-awareness and a capacity for self-reflection. One could say that this is an important core quality of youth work. The same can be said about the result of this personal development: the ability to deal more successfully with challenges, insecurity and change young people will encounter in life.

Yet these core qualities of youth work seem to be difficult to communicate in explicit terms. The youth workers stated that it is difficult to formulate the learning outcomes. This is understandable, but also worrying. It makes it difficult to communicate the relevance of youth work to young people as well as other stakeholders; neither does it encourage a shared understanding of youth work for youth workers and youth work organisations. A common language and shared understanding is crucial for quality development.

HOW AND WHEN DO YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN?

The young interviewees stated that being in a totally new environment contributes to their learning.

"NOT HAVING EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS YOU LIKE WHEN BEING AT HOME AND NOT HAVING TO BOTHER ABOUT THE THINGS THAT ARE ALWAYS THERE WHEN YOU ARE HOME."

This sentiment was expressed by many of the young interviewees. They experienced the atmosphere/climate in the group as safe, respectful and open. Some of them considered this openness to be unexpected, unusual or even strange, something they had not experienced before. This is mentioned often by young people who participated in youth exchange but also by volunteers; they referred to this specifically in regard to the working climate in the host organisations and/or their interaction with other volunteers.

"IT WAS UNUSUAL FOR ME THAT PEOPLE WERE SO OPEN"

"IT'S CRAZY BUT ALSO BEAUTIFUL THAT WITHIN A DAY YOU MAKE FUN WITH PEOPLE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE"
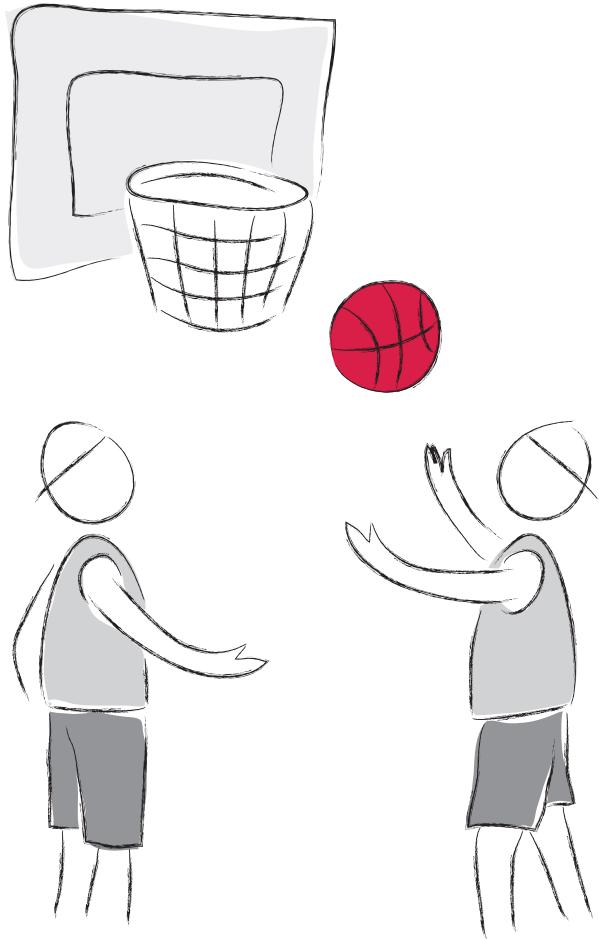
The atmosphere in the group was also influenced by the working methods the interviewees had experienced, such as small group work and reflection moments. Working together on a task, finding solutions together, discussing and deciding how to do things and simply feeling as part of a group were mentioned as positive contributors.

"I LEARN BETTER WHEN I'M IN A CLOSER CIRCLE AND GET MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK TO THEM"

Many young interviewees mentioned reflection as a learning moment. They may not have always used the word 'reflection'; typical phrases included 'looking back', 'sitting together and talking about the day', 'having to think together about how things went'. In most of the youth exchanges, regular group reflection, both in small groups and in the whole group, were part of the programme. Diaries were used as reflection tools in more than half of the projects. Only a few interviewees who had participated in youth exchanges considered the diaries to have been an important learning tool for them. The volunteers all considered the diary to have been an essential tool for their learning and mentioned that the talks with their mentors were helpful as an opportunity to reflect on their learning.

Challenges were quite often mentioned as a learning opportunity for the interviewees. For instance, many of them said that activities during youth exchanges that required them to solve complex problems were good sources of learning. Volunteers mentioned situations that were challenging for them because they had to deal with something new or had to do something they had never done before.

> **"SITUATIONS IN WHICH YOU HAVE TO CREATE SOMETHING WHICH IS VERY DIFFICULT BUT THEN IN THE END YOU MANAGE"**

Most youth workers mentioned reflection as the crucial element for learning. As mentioned above, in the projects that were discussed in the interviews, reflection was always part of the programme. The youth workers considered it essential for learning. They also said that the process of reflection, especially in groups, is a new experience for many young people. Expressing and sharing one's own experiences, feelings, opinions and doubts is not usually something young people do in daily life. Experiencing this together with one's peers was seen as a crucial learning moment. But also to reflect individually, to take the time for that, to look back at what one did and to value it, is an unfamiliar exercise for many young people. Both the young people as well as the youth workers said that in volunteering activities, the mentor talks are an important opportunity for reflection.

"LEARNING IS THERE WHEN THEY START TELLING THEIR STORIES"

"REFLECTION, I DO IT EVERY DAY. THAT'S WHEN THEY LEARN FOR SURE"

"THE MOST FRUITFUL VOLUNTEERING PERIOD ARE USUALLY THOSE ONES THAT ARE SOMEHOW HARD"

"AT A CERTAIN MOMENT WHEN THINGS GO TOO SMOOTH YOU HAVE TO GIVE THEM BIGGER CHALLENGES"

"WHEN THE JOB IS TOO EASY FOR THE VOLUNTEER WE GIVE THEM A MORE CHALLENGING JOB"
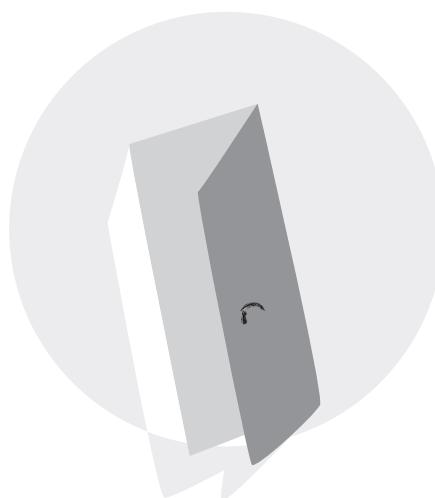
Both groups of interviewees pointed out that challenges are what make young people learn. Putting them in situations that are unusual, outside of their comfort zone, was often mentioned as a way to help young people learn. Some of the youth workers said they had 'raised the level of challenge during the project.' Successfully overcoming a challenge and finding a solution is an empowering learning moment. Equally, not succeeding and making mistakes were considered to be opportunities for learning and reflection.

Safety was also mentioned as a crucial element for learning. Before taking on a challenge, young people have to feel safe in the group. The atmosphere should be one where young people feel free to participate, express their feelings and show vulnerability.

> **"OVERALL IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A GOOD AND SAFE GROUP ATMOSPHERE BEFORE YOUNG PEOPLE CAN LEARN"**

Some of the youth workers mentioned the degree of involvement as a factor determining how much young people learn. The more young people take part, the more responsibilities they are given and the more they are able to take the initiative, the more they learn, they said.

> **"IT'S IMPORTANT THAT THEY TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY. WHEN THEY HAVE THAT YOU CAN CHALLENGE THEM WITHIN THEIR OWN REFERENCE."**

Peer learning was recognised by most of the youth workers as contributing to learning. Two interviewees doubted the value of peer learning in their projects, stating that they didn't see enough trust and safety in the group for them to be able to support each other. They explained that with the 'national culture' in which one was not expected to show one's vulnerability.

> **"PEOPLE IN MY COUNTRY ONLY WANT TO SHARE THEIR BEST, SO THEY DON'T SHARE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES WITH EACH OTHER"**

However, the other youth workers assigned a high value to peer learning, since it involves using one another as an example or role model, correcting each other but also sharing experiences and emotions. Cooperation in (small) groups was seen as an important source for learning.

Yet only few youth workers said they planned and encouraged deliberate peer learning. Most of them just saw it happening automatically; it was not part of their approach or methodology.

> **"WHEN IT COMES TO COOPERATION, SOLVING PROBLEMS OR ANYTHING RELATED TO CULTURE AND DIVERSITY I THINK THE LEARNING COMES FROM THEIR INTERACTION WITH EACH OTHER."**

CONSIDERATIONS

The new situations that young people find themselves in when they take part in a youth exchange or volunteering activity appear to make them learn automatically. They have to start communicating in another language, build relationships with new people, deal with intercultural differences, being away from home, taking part in activities they have never done before, not having the, on the one hand safe and the other hand limiting, normal living environment… It is all about new situations where you have to find ways to deal with. Especially the youth workers pointed at all these experiences as important learning moments. But also many young people refer to being in new situations when asked how and when they learned.
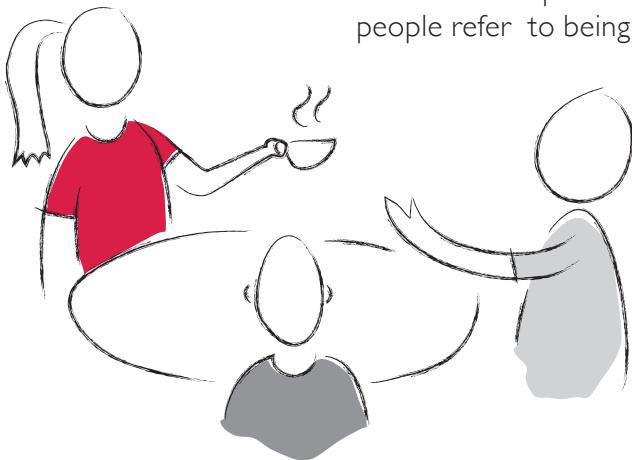
This shows that volunteering projects and youth exchanges offer many opportunities for informal learning. Informal learning being a fairly unintended, unplanned or unstructured experience that is not immediately visible for learners themselves. By going through all these experiences and having to deal with unfamiliar situations, they learn a lot. They may not recognise or refer to it as 'learning', yet it does have an impact on their behaviour and attitudes. In other words, a process whereby young people grow and develop.

The step to non-formal learning or education happens when the learning is conscious, is planned and structured, supported, reflected on and recognised by the learner. In the projects interviewed there is a difference in terms of to what extent this step is made (setting learning objectives, focus on learning, support for reflection, setting different levels of challenge). The assumption is that when youth workers are more conscious about the learning dimension of their projects and implement that it in their planning of the project, the learning outcomes increase. But it would go too far to state here that there was a clear confirmation of that assumption in the interviews with the young people.

The importance of the atmosphere in the group was mentioned by both the youth workers and the young people. In the expert seminar at the beginning of the Time to Show Off! project, participants felt that the challenge of creating a supportive learning atmosphere was seen as crucial and as something that requires more investment in exploring how to build climates and environments that invite participants to learn. In this context, the balance between safety and challenge probably plays a major role, too.
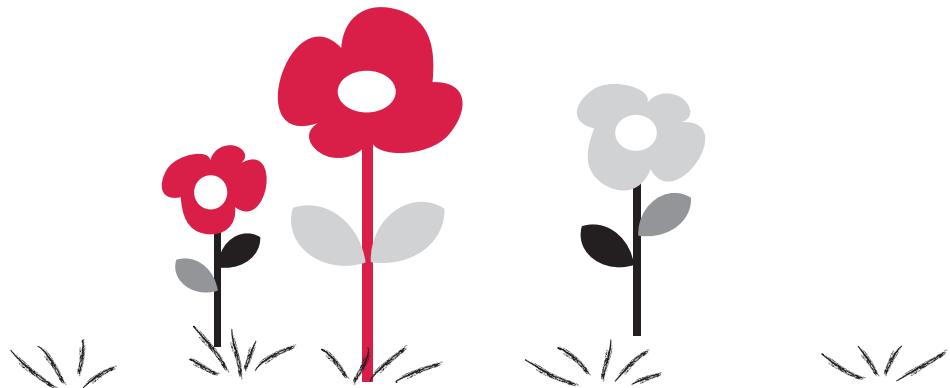
APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

When asked about the approaches they followed in their work, only three youth workers mentioned an approach that was customarily applied in their youth work organisation. Most respondents found it hard to come up with an answer. However, that doesn't mean that they do not know why they do what they do. In the interviews many of them expressed strong ideas and principles on which they base their work with young people. After all, youth workers seem to be driven by a strong passion to contribute to a 'better world'. But it is generally not something that is codified or based on an organisation's mission or a formalised personal approach or methodology.

> **"WE DON'T HAVE SOMETHING WRITTEN DOWN AS OUR APPROACH, WE FOLLOW OUR GUT-FEELING"**

The youth workers used statements such as,

- I want to give them hope for a better future
- Our work is based on a strong community feeling where compassion is very important
- Respect and humour are important
- I'm inspired by solution-oriented therapy
- I want to empower young people to create a future community
- Respect and acceptance are part of the culture of our organisation

> **"WE WORK A LOT ON OUR INTUITION"**

Most youth workers expressed a strong belief in the capacity of young people to take responsibility, to find their own solutions and to direct their own learning. This was mainly expressed when they talked about their own role as someone who does not want to give answers or be at the centre of the activities – to be there to 'teach' – but instead wants to step back as much as possible to create space for young people to 'do their own thing' (see also 'The role of the youth worker').

CONSIDERATIONS

Although youth workers have strong ideas about why they do what they do, they often lack a 'solid story'. In most cases, there is no conceptual framework or coherent policy/strategy in NGOs concerning objectives, principles and approaches. Having such a conceptual framework, including visions, objectives and methodologies, that describes why and how they should work with young people would help youth workers and youth organisations alike to communicate the relevance of their work more effectively to others. It would probably also help to evaluate and develop the quality of their work.

This is not (only) a responsibility for the individual youth worker, but also something that needs to be tackled at the organisational level or even youth work community level. Here the question comes up to which extent youth worker training should include conceptual frameworks, approaches and methodologies.

THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH WORKER

STEPPING BACK

There seems to be a consensus amongst the youth workers about the importance of giving as much responsibility as possible to the young people and letting them find their own answers and solutions. That said, the amount of responsibility given to young people varied. Some youth workers said they gave more or less clear guidance (programme, rules) on how much responsibility the young people should take. Others said they left almost everything to the young people and were only there to provide support when asked or when things 'got out of hand'. But for all interviewed youth workers, the motives were mostly the same: handing over as much responsibility for the project as possible to the young people and as a youth worker, not remaining at the centre of attention or being the source of all the answers and solutions. In many cases, the interviewed youth workers referred to other youth exchanges where youth workers are the centre of the process, acting as animators or 'clowns'.

"WE DON'T HOLD THEIR HANDS"

"WHAT I REMEMBER MOST IS THE SPACE AND AUTONOMY WE HAD."

"I'M ONLY REALLY INVOLVED IN CRITICAL SITUATIONS'"

"STEPPING BACK, TO CREATE SPACE, TO LEAVE SPACE "

"WE LET THEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE DO THE THINGS IN THEIR WAY AND THEIR RHYTHM"
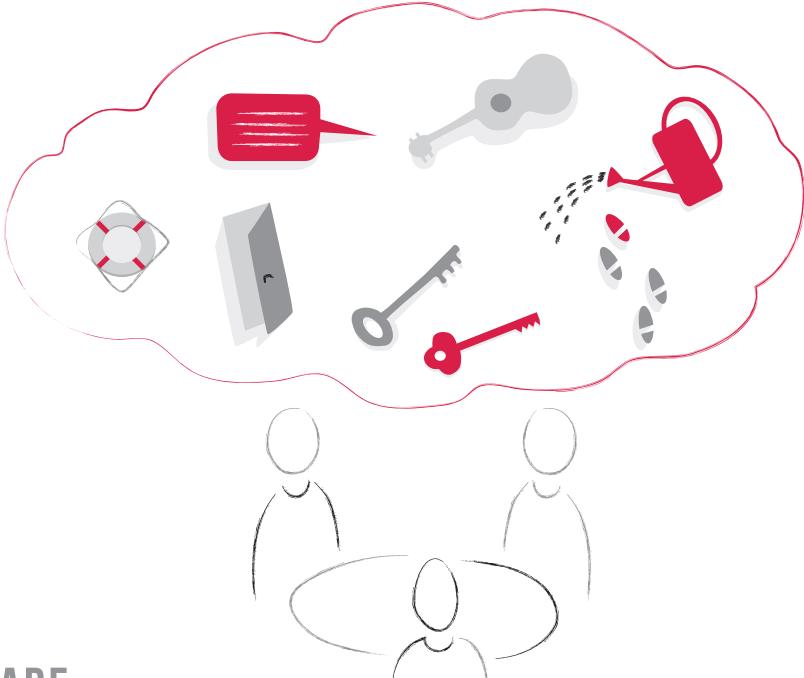
BUT STILL TAKING CARE

More in volunteering activities than in youth exchanges the youth workers express the importance of taking care. This has much to do with the target group the youth workers have in their projects. Those who work with more vulnerable groups mentioned this aspect more often. Partly, the taking care goes into the preparation of the young people before they join their projects. Some youth workers underlined that it is crucial to prepare young people for the challenges they will come across.

During the project the challenge lies rather in finding a balance between stepping back, handing over responsibility and the need of some young participants to have an adult listen to them. In some projects, predominantly volunteering actvities, the support in question is provided in 'formalised' settings such as mentor talks and one-on-one coaching sessions. Some of the youth workers saw it as their role to constantly keep an eye on how the young people are doing and feeling.

"THE YOUTH WORKER BASICALLY BEING THE ONE WHO PREPARES THE PLAYING FIELD"

"TO TAKE CARE, SOMETIMES YOUNG PEOPLE NEED THAT "

"I CHECK ALL THE TIME HOW THEY ARE FEELING"

"IT'S IMPORTANT FOR THEM TO KNOW THERE'S SOMEONE WHO CARES FOR YOU, AN ADULT WHO CONNECTS TO YOU "

"I FEEL IT AS AN OBLIGATION TO EXPLAIN EVERYTHING THAT THEY CAN FACE TO MAKE THEM MORE READY "

"WE ARE NOT THERAPISTS BUT SOMETIMES WE GET CLOSE TO THAT"

"WE MAKE CLEAR FROM THE BEGINNING THAT IT'S NOT A THERAPY"
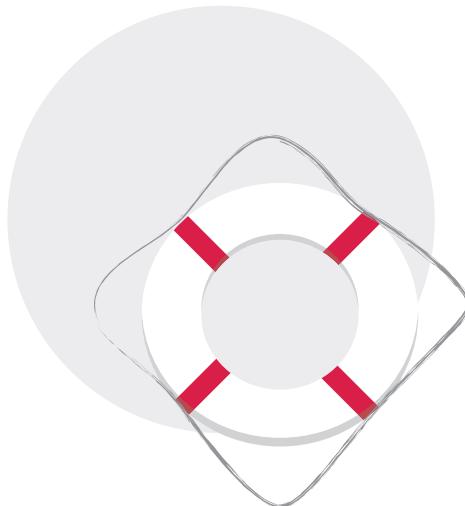
Providing support has also its limits. Some of the youth workers described how hard it is not to cross the line into therapy. They were aware that they are not therapists and should not cross that line, but said it was difficult to define the moment where support ends and therapy starts. Sometimes young people tell very personal stories because of the trust they have in their youth worker. Some of these stories are due to a problematic personal history, the resolution of which goes beyond the competences of a youth worker. In such cases it is important to recognise when professional help should be brought in.

UNDERSTANDING LEARNING

When it comes to learning, the youth workers explained that they have to discuss the understanding/definition of the term 'learning' with the young people. Some of them said they avoided using the term altogether, especially before and at the beginning of a project. They explained that it reminds young people of school and the way they experience learning there, which for many of them has negative connotations. Others deliberately use the term 'learning' from the beginning to make it clear that the project is about learning. For many young people, the combination of 'having fun' and 'learning' is confusing. They have to experience non-formal learning before they can really understand the connection.

> "PARTICIPANTS FIND IT CONFUSING THAT THEY CAN LEARN WHILE HAVING FUN. IT DOESN'T REALLY GO TOGETHER FOR THEM."

QUESTIONS

Giving young people meaningful and relevant questions to reflect on is seen as crucial to helping them learn. Many of the youth workers pointed out that formulating good questions is an important skill and not that easy.
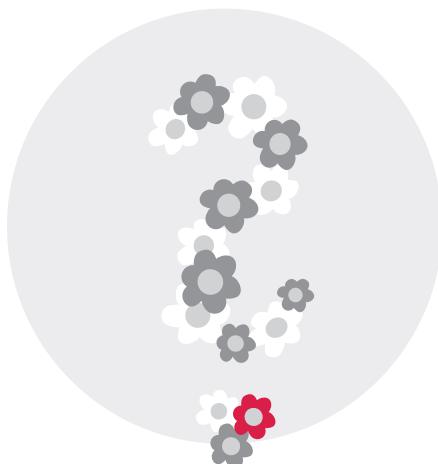
"IF YOU DON'T STOP FOR A WHILE TO GIVE GOOD QUESTIONS ACROSS AND TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO ASK THEIR OWN QUESTIONS THE LEARNING MIGHT GET LOST IN FUN AND PLAY"

"WE NEED TO PUT QUESTIONS AND ASK THEM WITH SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO UNCOVER THEIR ABILITIES "

"IF YOU ASK: ''HOW WAS YOUR DAY?'', THE ANSWER MIGHT BE ''IT WAS NICE''. IT'S ABOUT WHAT QUESTIONS YOU ASK AND THE METHODS YOU USE TO GET ACTUALLY SOME MORE OUT OF IT. IT'S THE HARDEST PART OF YOUTH WORK"

PREPARATION AND FOLLOW-UP

There is a significant difference between the projects when it comes to preparation and follow-up. Some of the youth workers stated they focused mainly on the project as such, with preparation limited to recruiting and giving basic information. For them, follow-up was not a major part of their work. Others considered the preparation and follow-up phase as essential parts of the project. This is partly due to the target group they work with and partly to being a professional youth worker in an organisation that works with young people on a daily basis.

YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT YOUTH WORKERS

Young people especially appreciated the closeness between them and the youth workers. They generally found it easy to approach them and ask them for support. Typical statements were 'we are equals', 'they are like family members', 'they are not a lot older than us'. Many stated that they saw the youth workers as being available when they had questions or they were in trouble. Quite a few young interviewees mentioned that they appreciated the freedom that their youth workers gave them. A few saw the youth workers as people who helped them think, who showed them other realities and helped them learn.

CONSIDERATIONS

At the expert seminar in April 2016 in the Netherlands, the matter of finding the right balance between 'stepping back' and 'providing support' was seen as a challenge. There is no single answer to that, but it is clear that the youth workers' attitudes to this vary widely, although they apparently have the same intention, namely to give as much responsibility as possible to young people. In the 'Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally', the section headed 'Facilitating individual and group learning' reads: 'Readiness to trust young peoples' capacity to direct their own learning'. To apply this trust in practice is challenging but at the same time crucial when it comes to giving young people responsibility.

In the same competence model, the section called 'Facilitating individual and group learning in an enriching environment' refers to one of the skills as 'Skill of initiating & supporting self-reflection on learning'. Although it is one of eight skills in total, from the interviews it seems that this particular skill should be written in capital letters. Almost all of the youth workers but also many of the young people mentioned 'reflection' as the moment where learning takes place. At the same time, it is a big challenge to find ways to effectively facilitate good reflection. Coming up with questions that support the reflection process seems to be one of the central topics here: questions that help young people to express what they feel they have learned, that support young people in following up on what they have learned and that enable them to transfer the learning outcomes into competences.

It is not difficult to argue that the quality of a project benefits from a preparation and follow-up phase. Making this clear to youth organisations makes sense, although at the same time the realities that govern certain projects should be taken into account.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF YOUTH WORKERS

Five of the 15 youth workers followed education to be a youth worker, five were qualified in an education-related field (psychology, teacher, sociology) and five had a completely different professional background. Thirteen had completed at least one training course within the framework of (Erasmus+) Youth in Action. It is remarkable that all of them mentioned their own experiences in taking part in youth work as well as their personal life experience when talking about what led them to become the youth workers they are now. Many of them mention 'learning in practice' as an effective way to develop relevant youth worker competences. Contact with young people, identifying their role as youth workers and working together with others are seen as the elements that make them the youth workers they are.

"I HAVE LEARNT MOST BY DOING EXCHANGES AND BY THE HELP OF GOOD COLLEAGUES"

"THE MOMENTS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT, WHEN YOU GET FEEDBACK FROM THEM THEN YOU GET A KIND OF CONFIRMATION"

"I THINK THAT YOUTH WORKERS HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE SAME PROCESS AS YOUNGSTERS; THEY HAVE TO EXPERIENCE FIRST THEMSELVES"

Formal studies contribute. The interviewees mentioned that through their formal training they obtained a better insight in how young people develop, and that it made them aware of the 'bigger picture' of what happens in their daily youth work.

Their own experience of being a participant in a European activity, as well as taking part in projects and in training courses themselves, was seen as inspirational and helpful. Going through this kind of process personally makes one much more aware of the potential of these mobility projects. Training courses give participants tools that they can use in their own work and an understanding of what non-formal education is really about.

> **"I GOT A BIG PORTION OF INSPIRATION FROM A COUPLE OF TRAINING COURSES I ATTENDED WHERE I STARTED TO LEARN ABOUT NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND FEELING THE EFFECT ON MY OWN SKIN"**

CONSIDERATIONS

The RAY study also recognises the value of the experience that project leaders have within the Erasmus+: Youth in Action: 'Project leaders also report that through their involvement in Erasmus+: Youth in Action projects they developed youth work competences, in particular with respect to non-formal education and international projects'. It certainly should be recognised as an important source of learning. At the same time, the lack of coherent approaches or methodologies mentioned above is linked to this kind of learning in projects, meaning that often the experience is relatively short. A five-day training course can offer a lot of inspiration and ideas, but it does not necessarily lead to a conceptual framework and coherent approach.
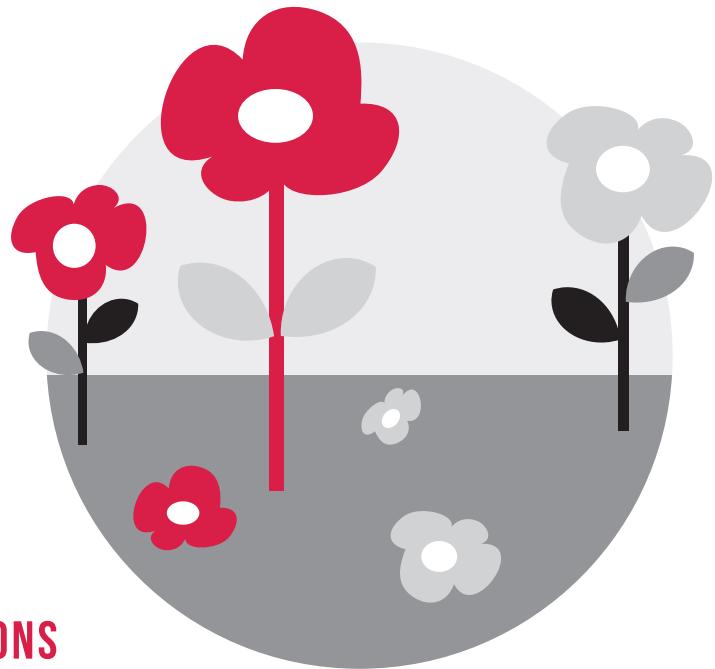
RECOMMENDATIONS

Where possible, these recommendations are linked to the 'Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally' so as to embed them into an existing model.

A Youth workers and youth organisations should be supported (awareness raising/training) in formulating a conceptual framework and coherent policy/strategy including visions, objectives and methodologies that describe why and how they work with young people and how they can recognise that learning takes place. This would help them to communicate the relevance of their work more clearly to others (including young people), to manage their daily work and to evaluate the outcomes of their work. In the Competence Model this is partly referred to in connection with the competence Designing Programmes, where we find the following passage: 'Knowledge of different educational methods & concepts; knowing how to tailor and apply these to respective needs' and 'Skill of taking the socio-political & economic context of the young people into account & from this deriving an appropriate educational approach.'

B

Related to the first recommendation, youth workers need to be assisted in communicating the potential (learning) outcomes more clearly both to young people and to other stakeholders (policymakers, employers, formal education providers, parents etc.). In the Competence Model, in the section called Networking and advocating we read 'Ability to transform/communicate & share the learning potential of international mobility experiences' and 'Promote and explain the learning potential of international mobility experiences.' Besides training courses that support youth workers to communicate the outcomes better, a European-level publication on the same theme could be considered.

C

Youth workers would benefit from support to further develop their practice when it comes to the facilitation of learning, especially in regard to facilitating young people's reflection on their learning experiences. Special training on drawing up reflective questions and various reflection methods would contribute to the quality of learning in mobility projects. In the Competence Model under Facilitating individual and group learning, on this we read 'Skill of initiating & supporting self-reflection on learning.'
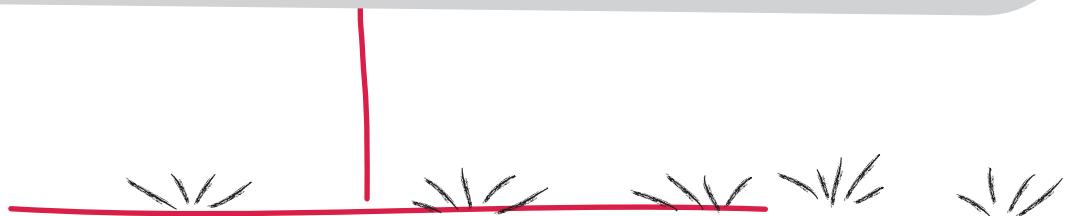
D

In order to further develop learning to learn/self-directed learning in the programme, emphasis should be given to training or exchange about the role of the youth worker when it comes to handing over and/or sharing responsibilities with young people. In the Competence Model under Facilitating individual and group learning, this is referred to as 'Readiness to trust young peoples' capacity to direct their own learning.'

E

More attention to the benefits of a proper preparation and follow-up phase of projects and methods, and tools to facilitae this would improve the quality of mobility projects.

F Attention and support for creating supportive learning environments (this recommendation is not an outcome of the interviews but of the expert seminar in the Netherlands in April 2016).

G Taking into account the value that is attached to youth workers''personal experience' of international projects and the list of recommendations above, a long-term training course for youth workers (as the Training of Trainers) could be an opportunity to raise the quality of youth mobility projects.

H This final recommendation is maybe more a reflection. The concept of learning in youth work is definitely not one that is shared across the youth work community in Europe, although one could say it is shared widely across the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme. The interviewed youth workers mention Erasmus+: Youth in Action publications and training courses as their main inspiration for including the topic of learning in their approach to youth work. It would be interesting to find out to what extent the topic of 'learning in youth work' is part of the national training curricula for youth workers. Cooperation between different providers of youth work studies and youth worker training could help to further develop the concept of learning in youth work.

Paul Kloosterman
May 2017
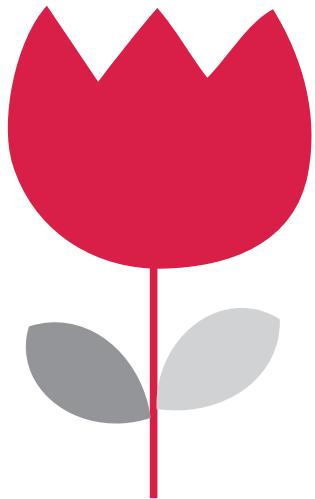
A BIG THANK YOU GOES TO:

- All young people and youth workers who participated in the interviews
- Tomi Kiilakoski for providing helpful feedback on the draft research report
- The Time To Show Off! project team: Éva Járosi, Marrie Kortenbosch, Rita Bergstein, Gabi Steinprinz and Antti Korhonen

Quotes you find throughout the report are from young people and youth workers interviewed during the research.