

YOUTH IN EUROPE
OFFENBURG
TALKS “ ”



#3

SHRINKING SPACES FOR
YOUTH WORK!?
– CHALLENGES FOR
POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

REPORT

on virtual meeting
11th – 12th November, 2020

The contents of this report are based on the inputs and discussions in the workshop and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth organising it.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The discussions of the 3rd edition of the **YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS on 'SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!?' – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES'** can be summarized as follows:

Spaces for youth work need to be seen as a tri-dimensional concept: physical, mental/psychological and political. Whether or not this space for youth work is shrinking, growing or simply changing depends on various factors: besides methodological and analytical questions, the diversity of democratic trajectories are influencing framework conditions for civil society. From a European perspective, spaces at national levels seem to shrink while at global level in many ways they seem to expand.

A controversial issue is whether shrinking spaces for civil society are a result of intentional strategies in 'post-democratic' states or rather one of political disinterest, indifference and ignorance in individual countries. Both might be true, depending on the social and political realities in a given country or region. From this perspective, shrinking, growing or changing spaces are also a result of social and political recognition of youth work as a social and educational practice.

In this respect, the 'professionalisation' of youth work is undoubtedly something positive, in particular in terms of quality development. However, it may also contribute to the neutralisation of its capacity to work alongside young people in the provision and defence of civic space.

There is also the issue of digitalisation of all spheres of life. Digitalisation provides many extra opportunities, but it is also another element in an already long list of risk factors in the lives and prospects of young people. Here, youth work can play an important role by helping young people to take a critical look at digital technologies designed for young people as well as the content they deliver.

Collecting the narratives of young people, giving them space to tell stories of their daily lives, providing opportunities to express themselves in their own languages and styles is a key dimension of youth research in this area, in conjunction with more classical quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

This leads to the issue of politics, political education, political literacy and youth work. Youth work spaces are often considered to be 'laboratories for democracy', since they create opportunities, enable emancipation and offer coaching to young people to construct own standpoints and choices. In this regard, youth work(ers) can help with a theoretical understanding of the challenges and a practical capability to interpret these challenges for action on the ground. Conversely, however, it was also argued that the prevailing liberal-democratic affiliation of youth workers serves to limit reflection on alternatives to the status quo?



Who are we talking about? Youth is clearly no homogeneous group. Young people can be differentiated in many, many ways, including classifying them as privileged or 'ordinary' kids, middle- or working-class, and 'at risk' or marginalised young people. Who actually participates in youth work activities and which kind of youth work activities are offered to different groups of young people? A variety of youth work practices must be offered and open to ALL young people.

This leads to a consideration of those providing and doing youth work: the necessity of a pluralistic and comprehensive model for youth work sits in contrast to a corporatist approach that obstructs new initiatives, organisations and movements from entering the youth work sector.

And finally: Europe. A European impetus towards youth work (policy) can help to frame and support national, regional and local youth work development. And – vice versa - the national, regional and local traditions of practice with young people need to be woven into the European youth work space. Youth work at all levels must maintain its efforts to reach more widely and deeply into the youth population but it must also strengthen its reach into the corners and corridors of decision-making, without losing a critical distance from policy structures and maintaining an independence of thought and method.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The series YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS are expert workshops on themes and phenomena relevant to the youth sector with an impact on youth policy, youth work practice and young people's lives in general. They aim at achieving more mutual knowledge and understanding of youth work and youth policy in Europe and are organized by a steering group representing five National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth¹. The aim of the 3rd edition on 'SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!? – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES' was to reflect on new and changing political developments in our societies, in particular with regard to youth work as a part of civil society and the third sector and to take a look at the state of art of youth work in providing spaces for young people and building bridges to support youth transitions in times of 'post-democracy' and 'neoliberalism', thus considering how youth work can respond to related challenges.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the 3rd edition of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS took place digitally on 11th and 12th November 2020. Thirty-five participants had been invited and were selected in relation to their expertise in the field and interest in the subject. On each day, there were four 20-minute presentations, followed by questions to the speakers and then breakout groups that allowed up to five participants to reflect on and debate the issues at hand. Each one of the two days culminated and concluded with brief summary reflections by three rapporteurs and some 'plenary' discussion. Between 25 and 30 participants were continuously involved in the online sessions, though proceedings were live-streamed, and considerably larger numbers followed the plenary presentations and discussions on social media.

The inputs as well as key points and results of discussions are summarized in this report. It is largely based on the reports and further comments of three rapporteurs: Lana Pasic, Guy Redig and Howard Williamson; it was compiled by Hanjo Schild with support of Claudius Siebel and Andreas Hirsch².

For further reading and watching please also have a look at the videos of all contributions (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXqdbbR1bA46ww1De52D0Jg?view_as=subscriber) as well as a 'reader' document on the project website (<https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-ijfel/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/>)

RATIONALE FOR THE TOPIC 'SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!? – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES'?

Forty years ago, neoliberalism started dominating the political agenda in Western democracies and 20 years ago the term 'post-democracy'³ was coined by British political scientist

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² Lana Pasic is research and policy officer at EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership; Dr. Guy Redig works as a consultant for Culture, Youth(work) & Public Policy in Belgium; Prof. Dr. Howard Williamson is Professor of European Youth Policy at South Wales Business School in the University of South Wales; Hanjo Schild is a retired youth work and youth policy expert; Claudius Siebel, Policy Issues Coordinator and Andreas Hirsch, Advisor on European Youth Policy, both JUGEND für Europa.



Colin Crouch. Since many years experts claim that our democracies including civil society are under threat and we are moving towards a post-democratic society which provokes a ‘democratic fatigue syndrome’, as Belgian historian David van Reybrouck⁴ puts it. Noam Chomsky, American linguist, philosopher and political activist sees an ‘age of resentment’ against socio-economic policies which have harmed the majority of the population and have consciously and in principle undermined democratic participation⁵.

Since the 1960s, with the emergence of social, civil and human rights movements, later with the collapse of the communist bloc, many parts of the population had been attracted and motivated to enter the political arena in one or another way and to stand up for their rights: women, minorities, people of colour, LGBTQI+, young and old people, pupils and students, farmers, workers, environmental activists Democracy seemed to be an ever-granted political system in which citizens and civil society play a substantial and emancipated role and perform relevant functions in democratic life. Also in economic terms, the third sector (social economy, community, voluntary and not-for-profit activities) had developed as a relevant actor acting next to the first (business, private) and the second (public) sector.

However, recent years have witnessed sections of society that wished to put the wheel of history into reverse. Some political leaders were concerned about the activism of larger parts of the population. Others were alienated and questioned political and socio-cultural changes (and achievements) that had been made since. Loss of common goals and traditional communities, the impact of globalisation, dominance and entanglement of public and private sectors, privatisation and the neoliberal agenda led to frustration and resentment on the part of many citizens. As of 2010, with the economic crisis and related austerity measures in most European countries, civil society and the third sector has come increasingly under threat. In many ways, civil, political and social engagement has, increasingly, faced hostile conditions that have led in many countries to ‘shrinking civic spaces’⁶, fostered often by an authoritarian pushback against democracy and human rights in general and the increasing appeal of nationalistic, xenophobic and populist parties (*see results of YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS #2 https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/download/doctrine/WebforumJFEWebsiteBundle:Download-file-4164/YiE_OT_2019_Report.pdf*).

³ According to Wikipedia the term “post-democracy” defines a society as one “that continues to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but in which they increasingly become a formal shell”. Crouch stated that we are not “living in a post-democratic society, but we were moving towards such a condition”.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Van_Reybrouck

⁵ Noam Chomsky: *Neoliberalism Is Destroying Our Democracy*; <https://chomsky.info/06022017/>

⁶ To understand the phenomenon of ‘shrinking civic spaces’ the Council of Europe organised under thematic priority ‘Revitalising Democracy’ a consultative meeting <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space>; at the same time (2018/19) the European Youth Forum commissioned a study titled *The Shrinking Space for Civil Society and its impacts on Young People and Their Organisations* (<https://rm.coe.int/2018-shrinkingcivicspacesforyouth-executivesummary/16808eb41b>). Today, the topic is at the core of political priorities of the European Union trio presidencies (Germany – Portugal - Slovenia) and will be subject of discussion at German Children & Youth Work & Welfare Service Fair 2021 in Germany.



Against this background, the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALK #3 on ‘SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!?’ – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES’ aimed at positioning youth work itself as a political and social practice which is concerned with the regulation and contestation of unequal power relationships, while at the same time maintaining some kind of party political neutrality. The relevant underlying questions had focused on where does youth work stand today, and on which side does it stand, where does it want to go and how can it support young people in being agents of social change? In this respect it had also to be asked which spaces for youth work and activities of civil society are shrinking and under threat, and which perhaps may not be, which arenas might provide even more space, also connecting to different social realities in various countries and regions in Europe and to the role of social media and digitalisation as additional ‘spaces’ for youth work.

WHICH TOPICS WERE DISCUSSED & BY WHOM?

In concrete terms, the eight short presentations looked at the subject of ‘shrinking spaces’ from diverse perspectives and touched upon a variety of thematic aspects:

Dr. Siri Hummel, Deputy Director at Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society in Berlin, Germany focused in her presentation on The Space for Civil Society: Shrinking? Growing? Changing?. She gave an introduction to the general topic, defined terminology and explored the relationship between civil society, the state and the market? She then addressed the question, which influential factors on civil society exist and what demographic change and an increasing social inequality mean with regard to consequences for and expectations of civil society. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/YSkTibJKMiA>

Prof. Dr. Tomaž Deželan, Centre for Political Science Research at University of Ljubljana, Slovenia presented results of the study Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe⁷ whose key message can be summarized as follows: despite the centrality of youth organisations in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy for young people, the last few years have witnessed a narrowing of the civic space available to youth. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/EYZBRg9zsI>

Daisy Kidd, Project Coordinator at Tactical Tech in Berlin, Germany analysed What the Future Wants – a critical look at digital technologies designed for young people and looked at shrinking civil space from a digital perspective, in particular at the role of digital technologies which are often addictive, unhealthy or unsafe. She also asked what we should be doing about it. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/7jAF3bikRMM>

Rares-Augustin Craiut, Secretary General of European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC) from Brussels, Belgium, presented results and normative recommendations of the project Shifting spaces - using narratives as data to investigate shrinking youth work practices and spaces, which collects stories (narratives) on how shrinking space for civil society is affecting youth work and young people. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/apKfEP6LIMg>

⁷ <https://www.youthforum.org/civic-space-for-young-people-europe>



Sérgio Xavier, trainer, facilitator, advisor at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, Portugal focused in his contribution on Unlearning European Youth Work and disengaging the XXI century liberal democracy dystopia. He looked at possibilities for youth work to challenge and disengage the paradoxical and reproductive nature of liberal democracies. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/ziqTCFhNTxM>

Niccolò Milanese, Director of European Alternatives from Italy presented results and normative recommendations of the transnational Horizon 2020 research project EURYKA: Reinventing democracy in Europe: Youth doing politics in times of increasing inequalities and asked concretely what does ‘politics’ mean for youth and youth work? Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/Bgewg8tK111>

Maurizio Merico, Associate Professor of Sociology at Department of Political and Social Studies of the University of Salerno and **Daniele Morciano** from Department of Education Sciences, Psychology, Communication at the University of Bari, Italy, discussed the subject at the example of Italy when asking: An empty bottle? Youth work in Italy, between old challenges and new spaces. Here, the re-emergence of youth work at institutional level and of the ‘crisis’ are (silently) converging, while producing a process that seems producing a (maybe nice, but) empty bottle. Link to speech: <https://youtu.be/TCEzlyG8glU>

M. Laurent Besse, senior lecturer for history and **Jérôme Camus**, senior lecturer for sociology, both at Département Carrières Sociales of Université de Tours in France asked in their contribution Which space for political commitment [does exist] within youth work in France?. Their thesis was that youth work (animation) in France has and has always had an ambiguous and difficult relationship to politics, which is why, today, youth work may not be shrinking but some of its principles and values might be at stake. Link to speech: https://youtu.be/_Ct-J9mhdM8

SPOTLIGHTS ON RELEVANT PHENOMENA AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES ...

1. Space: a tri-dimensional concept

The Final Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (2015), when identifying the ‘common ground’ of all youth work, suggests the winning and defending of spaces for youth association, for autonomy and for action as key. Three different directions can be defined regarding spaces in which youth work takes place:

- Space as a physical notion, as ‘room to move’. Youth work is about places to act, to play, to meet (in the neighbourhood, in public or in specific youth ‘spaces’), to create and enjoy, to find a place to be young together. There seems to be an increasing pressure on the available physical space for young people and youth work.
- Space as a mental, psychological notion, meaning the view on young people, the ‘tolerance’ for their specific views and ways of being young. Giving space for experiments, giving opportunities and chances, mental space means respect for the way children and young people are: growing, experimenting, and sometimes testing their limits and living dangerously.



- Space in policy. Do governments and public bodies invest sufficiently in youth policy and in youth work, in terms of budget, laws and instruments? Is enough consideration being given to the impact that policies (in general, not just on youth and youth work issues) have on young people? Is there a participatory approach, giving young people and their structures a real chance of co-ownership and co-management? Do politicians and civil servants have sufficient 'youth competences'?

2. Civic space - Shrinking? Growing? Changing?

There is a diversity of methodological and analytical ways in which the concept of 'shrinking' civil and civic space may be explored; this diversity can produce different conclusions and suggestions. And certainly the democratic trajectories in different parts of Europe are taking many different forms, which influences the framework conditions for civil society, including youth work, substantially.

Obviously, we are experiencing the transformation of civic space and are facing, in general terms, two contradictory phenomena: shrinking spaces nationally, expanding spaces globally. At national level, in many countries, though not in all, the space is shrinking, in terms of regulations imposed on the civil society and their legal status, in terms of bureaucratic requirements, availability of funding, freedoms of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom to participate (and being invited to participate), control and surveillance of civil society organisations. On the other hand, at the global level, the space is expanding, in terms of the topics covered, with more attention given to topics such as women's rights and the rights of minorities, such as the LGBTQI+ population.

Moreover, not all civil or civic space is necessarily being closed down equally or fully, though some elements or some approaches might shrink due to social, political or cultural changes, as one can see here and there in examples from youth work. The classic illustration of this is that 'open access' youth work may be shrinking, but at the same time, digital youth work seems to play an ever-increasing role. And young people may be expanding their actions in civic and public space in innovative and perhaps radical ways as well.

3. Intentional strategy or disinterest and ignorance?

It is a controversial issue whether shrinking spaces for civil society are a result of intentional strategies in 'post-democratic' states or rather the outcome of political disinterest, indifference and ignorance. This obviously also depends on the social and political reality in a given country or region.

The closing down of civic space and a corresponding shrinking of youth work space can be described as a strategic option based on a government's 'shrinkage toolkit': undermining status, limiting and reducing funding, strengthening reporting requirements, imposing disproportionate and unmanageable bureaucratic obstacles, engaging in smearing campaigns. It is not a surprise that when the civil society or, in this case, the youth work voice has been louder, it has often been muted by public and political authorities since most governments are, unsurprisingly, not prepared to fund voices that maintain



constant, publicly-expressed opposition to them! Youth work has sometimes become harnessed too tightly to wider public policy priorities for young people

Civil society, and youth work within it, has always had to fight for space and for its place within the social system. After all, it has neither the power that derives from the resources of the market nor the authority that derives from the formal democratic mandate that accrues to the government and the state. From this perspective, shrinking, growing or changing spaces are clearly a result of power relations, as well of social and political recognition in terms of respect and support from governments that properly understand the tensions inherent in youth work activity – that are enshrined within the principles of youth work, the demands of public policy and the voice and aspirations of young people.

4. The struggle for recognition

To find a structural place in a governmental policy frame youth work must have a recognizable ‘footprint’: who are we, what are we doing, why, where, how many...? This is surely about good, plausible and persuasive narratives.

On the other hand, there must be reflection on how far youth work should bow its head, in a humble gesture demanding recognition. Youth work must prove its usefulness in a field where economic thinking rules. There is a growing demand on public services, paid for by public taxation, to demonstrate its social value, its social return on investment, its outcomes and impact... However, the many contributions of youth work to social benefits are often difficult to quantify and evaluate, especially over the short term, even though increasing efforts are being made to do so. If youth work is obliged to give proof on criteria that reflect classical economic formulae, however, it will not succeed. Youth work must resist the temptation to try to prove its ‘worth’ by only telling stories of increasing employability, anti-radicalization, banning drugs, integrating difficult young people, or creating good Europeans. This may all be true, but youth work also needs to assert and make more visible its contribution to better well-being, offering young people space to be young together, to critically engage with social and political questions, to create their own ideologies, to enjoy, play and live. It can also lay claim to supporting young people to move positively and with confidence and competence to the next stages of their lives by building bridges for effective economic, domestic and civic youth transitions. This is a ‘both/and’ scenario, not an ‘either/or’; if it was only the latter, it would not be youth work.

5. Youth work between collaboration and control

Youth work has always been struggling to maintain an independence of thought and method while simultaneously seeking public resources and recognition. It has sought influence and collaboration while rejecting co-option and control. Paradoxically, perhaps, it has aspired to engage in political debate and political education, yet has not wanted to be shaped by prevailing political conditions. It is imperative that youth work does not get sucked into and subsumed within the wider, arguably oppressive instruments of the state that produce inequality and exclusion.



Youth work must maintain and preserve its critical distance and hold on to a menu of options within its own 'toolkit'. Youth work cannot, however, assert its complete 'independence' from the agents of the state and from state control; if it does so, it will be dismissed as irrelevant and starved of recognition and resources. It is important for youth work to engage with the middle ground and fight for recognition in 'partnership' with others.

Finding a path that does not produce subordination, but which brings acknowledgement of the distinctive value and contribution of youth work, within political contexts that do marginalise many young people, is never easy. Youth work is too small to stand, stubbornly, alone. It needs to make alliances with the progressive arms of other, related professional activity (children's work; social work; formal education; sports). Otherwise, 'divide and rule' strategies adopted by those with different political and policy agendas will certainly be effective.

6. Professionalisation of youth work: chances and risks

The 'professionalisation' of youth work may contribute to the neutralisation, even castration, of its capacity to work alongside young people in the provision and defence of civic space. Too often, youth work has been too fast in accepting new agendas, for example uncritically embracing concepts and expectations around ideas such as 'employability'. Perhaps, accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis, there has been a 'rush to digital', celebrating the wonderful opportunities and potential that virtual space has offered in lockdown times but paying insufficient attention, or even ignoring, the frightening risks and costs (both human and financial) that – we are increasingly aware - are bubbling just beneath the surface.

This begs the classical question that has always dogged youth work, social work and related professions – which (and whose) side are you on? It is never a case of whether or not youth work cannot or should not undertake such work. It is a case of how youth work can undertake it – fighting for the conditions for it to do so, within the broader framework of values, principles and practices that have always informed youth work. This demands reflection by youth work about its place and position in societies and for youth work to have the courage of its convictions.

Most youth work continues to be done, in most places, at the local level by volunteers. With some momentum towards the professionalisation of youth work in Europe, is there a risk that this becomes a 'cage' – trapping professional youth workers in forms of practice (who should be reached, what should be addressed?) that are decided (dictated and prescribed) by political authorities and leaving an 'unprofessional' youth work practice – well-intentioned, perhaps, but uninformed and unguided – 'out there' for a majority of young people. There may be a youth work space, or indeed youth work spaces, but they may not be of our liking or our making.

7. Digitalisation and youth work

Digitalisation in the widest interpretation is now notoriously present and deeply rooted in the daily life of everyone. Children and young people, in particular, are spending a large part of their lives online. As always, such a phenomenon causes paradoxical reactions. On



the one hand, there are plenty of stories about online addiction and dependency, abuse and depression, and another arena of social inequality. On the other hand, digitalisation provides many extra opportunities, new ways of communication, different possibilities for engagement, and the chance for innovation and creativity.

Digitalisation is one more element in what is a long list of ‘risks’ and ‘vulnerabilities’ in young people’s lives, as have classically prevailed in relation to alcohol and other substance use, all kinds of other dependencies, trafficking, bullying and other forms of ‘violence’. It is, however, rather less concrete, like other uncertainties in daily life, precariousness and options in decision-making. In the ‘rush to digital’, we have yet to properly consider the balance of opportunities and threats entailed.

It is a key aspect in every educational relationship, including within youth work and in youth policy, to make young people strong and self-confident in order to cope with an endless menu of risks and uncertainty. Out of many experiences, we know that a lot of so-called prevention often is hard to measure and to prove its effectiveness, sometimes it may not even work at all.

In the context of digitalisation, youth work can play an important role by helping young people to take a critical look at digital technologies designed for young people as well as the contents they deliver. Youth work needs to support young people in developing digital literacy and a critical awareness of above-mentioned risks. However, the capacity of youth work itself – especially when more open youth work spaces are closing down, or being closed down – to engage in such practice may be diminishing.

8. The importance of narratives

Much more attention needs to be given to broadening and deepening the ‘evidence base’ for youth work. This is not to rule out traditional quantitative or qualitative research methods, but it also needs to include collecting the narratives of young people, giving them space to tell stories of their daily lives, and providing opportunities to express themselves in their own languages and styles. Such narratives do, of course, need an interpretation and must be embedded in an educational process of analysis, synthesis with other data, and dissemination. But there is a pressing need to think about new ways of gathering youth narratives, and how young people are represented and voice their own concerns or ideas in both real and digital spaces.

9. Politics, political education, political literacy and youth work

However oppressive the state, young people may have no choice but to grow up within it. They will thus require ‘navigational capacities’ to make the best of their situation. Youth work(ers) can help, particularly if they are ‘associative intellectuals’, with both a theoretical understanding of the challenges and a practical capability to interpret them for action on the ground. For that, youth workers need a good understanding of multiple ‘repertoires for action’. Many young people are victims of the individualisation thesis, believing their own deficiencies and failings are their own fault, rather than them being significantly



shaped by structural forces. Youth workers must confront and correct such false assumptions, while also giving young people a sense of their own capacity for ‘agency’.

Often, youth workers are accused of condemning the neo-liberal state and waiting for the revolution; or, they are accused of falling too much in line and in tune with contemporary political arrangements. For sure, youth workers might have their own politics but they should not use young people as pawns in their own political game and rather help young people to find and follow their own desired path, with their eyes open to the plus and minus side of that particular journey.

Youth work has a ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ position and role – and its backstage role is most certainly to debate ‘politics’ with young people, to engage in their political socialisation, to enable them to assert and achieve their rights, and to support their self-advocacy for a democratic platform (including their youth work space) and the opportunity to shape their own lives (with the support of the bridges provided through youth work).

Youth work spaces are often considered to be ‘laboratories for democracy’, clustered in a package of common democratic values. Youth work gives plenty of ‘space’, so young people can create their own ideological frame. In fact, the ideology of youth work is concerned with creating opportunities and offering coaching to young people for them to construct own ideological choices. Therefore, faith in the power and responsibility of young people is crucial. Youth work invests in capacities, enables emancipation, and in that way contributes to a more active democracy.

10. Young people: which youth work & for whom?

Often, we speak too freely and loosely and presumptively about ‘young people’ as some kind of homogenous group. Clearly, they are not, differentiated as they are in many, many ways.

Within youth work, history tells us of the emancipatory (open) youth work practices for better-educated (middle-class) young people, and the more regulatory and compensatory youth work practices for more challenging working-class young people and those in vulnerable situations – and relatively little consideration and provision for those perceived as ‘ordinary kids’. This begs the question: if there is a youth work space to be filled, who should be in it, and how should it be done? And why?

Without specifying proportions to any particular sub-section of the youth demographic, there is considerable evidence that, on the one hand, youth work does often engage with more educated and integrated young people through more open and participatory youth work while, on the other hand, youth work engages with those considered at risk, marginalised or in vulnerable situations through more targeted and planned ‘healing’ and ‘repairing’ (re-)integration and prevention programmes.

What about the remaining young people, arguably a significant majority in the ‘middle’ – those who neither make a civic or community contribution, nor cause or experience problems? Is there indeed a generic youth work for ALL young people, including this ‘silent’ and often rather invisible majority?



Should there be more specifically tailored forms of youth work for different groups of young people? In other words, are we getting ‘youth work’ right? Is emancipatory youth work only for those already emancipated? Where is the fun in more compensatory youth work? And, what are the (different) elements of youth work that appeal and ‘act’ for (different) kinds and interests of young people?

In view of the fact that poverty, exclusion and other inequalities are expanding, even in traditional ‘rich’ countries, that the gap between excluded and included citizens is widening, and that increasing numbers of children and young people are living in vulnerable situations, it may be tempting for a youth (work) policy response to focus all effort on youth at risk. Historically, youth policy and youth work has often been reduced to prevention and problem solving, to heal and repair. But giving priority to any one group of young people cannot be the solution. Youth (work) policy must invest in the good shape and durable existence of a variety of youth work practices, based on a carefully calibrated balance of both an opportunity-focused approach and a range of integration and prevention strategies – within an approach that is offered, open and reaching out to ALL young people.

Another aspect of the discussion on ‘youth work for whom?’ is the age range: in the international framework of the EU and the Council of Europe, youth is described as young people between 14-15 and 30 years. This seems to be the overall definitional range in many countries, although in some countries youth covers an even wider age group, sometimes drawing no strict distinction between children (0-18) and young adults (up to the age of 35). This conflates issues of safety and development of children within the confines of families or their substitutes, keeping young people in good shape during their adolescence, and ensuring diverse opportunities and experiences to support various transitions (particularly in housing and the labour market) in young adulthood. In European debates about youth work and target groups we need to keep this point in mind, especially in youth work contexts where children are an important aspect of practice.

However, how much all this debate on target groups speaks to a reflection on shrinking civic space is perhaps quite another matter; it is a much broader set of policy questions about the balance between universal and targeted intervention and opportunity: who are we seeking to serve and support, with which intention, and how?

11. Youth work community of practice and a self-critical reflexivity

Within the youth work community of practice it is often difficult for newcomers to find a welcoming seat at the youth work table; there seems to be little free space anymore. One reason is that the ‘cake’ of subsidies and support from governments is always limited, and established players invariably defend their own (perceived) rights to access and resources. Public authorities always have to make choices and they are often fearful of the reactions of well established organizations if support is reduced or withdrawn, as well as being cautious about the unpredictable reliability of new players. That is, of course, why corporative systems function so well.



But this mechanism inevitably has perfidious effects: ongoing conservatism, a brake on renewal, lack of innovation, disillusion for new initiatives. Hence, the youth work community of practice needs to ensure that it creates and maintains space for a variety of players and practices, including new initiatives, and thus promotes a pluralistic and comprehensive model for youth work in the future.

12. Youth work and Europe...?

A coordinated European approach towards youth work (policy) and indeed wider European youth work policies do not need to be unlearned and disengaged from, but they do need to be critically appraised. Such a European approach can help to frame and support national, regional and local youth work development, with ideas, funding and political advocacy. But there are also the national, regional and local traditions of practice with young people – not always explicitly recognised or named as ‘youth work’ – that need to be woven into the youth work space, if that space is to be enlarged.

So, does ‘Europe’ constrain or enable a larger youth work space? There are different ‘Europes’, and different European institutions have different priorities and agendas, including in relation to youth work. Currently it seems, that Europe, at least the two key institutions with an established interest in youth work, European Union and Council of Europe are putting the ‘wind in our back’⁸ in support of a European Youth Work Agenda.

We can be believers in Europe, and comfortable (though not complacent) in learning and engaging with European level debates about youth work. It is important to emphasise, however, that apparently public collaboration (in the very worst sense of the word) with policy structures does not mean that there is no, more private, internal criticism – that may vitiate more negative intentions of such policy or strengthen more positive ones.

And, there is an important issue of reach. Europe has committed significant resources to the youth sector in recent years and even signaled a strong increase for the coming years. Youth work must maintain its efforts to reach more widely and deeply into the youth population but it must also strengthen its reach into the corners and corridors of decision-making (at European and also other levels of governance) and into the coffers where the resources lie. In this sense, youth work needs to influence the direction and distribution of resources available to European youth, to ensure equality and equity – politics into practice!

POSTSCRIPT

As seen in this report the (controversial) issue of shrinking, growing or changing spaces for civil society can be discussed from different perspectives, within which there is a variety of related themes, such as recognition, professionalisation, digitalisation, education, young people themselves, the community of practice, and Europe. Irrespective of the answer to the question of whether spaces are shrinking, growing or changing, it seems that youth work at all levels can profit from a tailwind coming from the European level.

⁸ *The title of Howard Williamson’s opening speech at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention.*



Four weeks after the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS on ‘SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!? – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES’ the 3rd European Youth Work Convention held from 7 to 10 December 2020 as a digital platform presented the final declaration, entitled ‘Signposts for the Future’. It sets out guidelines and suggestions for the implementation of a strong ‘European Youth Work Agenda’ and related ‘Bonn Process’, promoting the strengthening and development of youth work across Europe and calling for joint measures. Thus, the Convention provided an indispensable and highly visible contribution to growing spaces for youth work policy and youth work itself, its capacities, awareness and recognition.

