

Preventing the Social Exclusion of Young People in Europe: Experiences from the YARi (Youth at Risk) Project

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Introduction

Modern developments in European societies in social, political, and economic spheres are increasingly contributing to inequalities and a growing polarisation between rich and poor. Sweeping changes in national and supranational contexts rooted in altered economic realities and shifts in ideology brought about by globalization and changing migration patterns have forced a re-evaluation of our conception of the nature of social relations, the role of the welfare state, and social work in reducing these growing inequalities. The gradual entrenchment of neo-liberal ideologies and their "new managerialism", emphasizing efficiency and observable results in social care, has further contributed to the growing social exclusion of vulnerable groups such as young people (Pöttsch 2004). Youth work has been accused of being preoccupied with the "surface" managerial agenda of outcomes and accountability at the expense of building relationships based on a depth of mutual feeling and thinking between workers and clients. This stands in direct contrast to the wishes

of young people themselves, who stress the importance of the relationship with their social worker or counsellor (Morris 2000). For young people, finding a working or study place has become more demanding. Nowadays, new and different types of knowledge and skills are required in order for individuals to gain a foothold in working life. This presupposes that social work must be able to offer creative solutions to facilitate the empowerment and enhancement of future life opportunities of young people. It must, however, also seek to address structural inequalities which contribute to their continued social exclusion. The YARi (Youth at Risk of Social Exclusion) project hopes to offer one such creative solution by collaboratively developing methods with European partners from both educational and working life aimed at reconnecting youths with their social environments.

Background & Aims

YARi is a project which is funded by European Union under the umbrella of its Leonardo Program. It has a duration of three years (2003–2006) and comprises eight partners from four European countries: Finland, Italy, Holland, and the U.K., each of whom work in different capacities with young people towards social inclusion¹. The con-

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Bradford College, Department of Applied Social Science and Humanities, Youth and community work education, UK and Reemap, Leeds, UK as a working life partner.
A.S.L.NA5, (Neapolitan public company for the promotion and protection of young people's physical and psychological welfare)
Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen, Department of Social Educational Care and "R.O.C. de Leijgraaf" te Oss as a working life partner.
Laurea Polytechnic, Otaniemi, Espoo, Finland and ASTU-project as part of the Vihti Mental Health Association as a working life partner.

tracting institution for the project is Laurea Polytechnic's Department of Social Services and Health, located in Otaniemi, Espoo, Finland.

All partners, except A.S.L.NA5 from Naples, have been familiar with one another through previous professional cooperation, which included the arrangement of International Social Work Symposiums, and the participation in other national and EU funded projects. Laurea Polytechnic and Bradford College, for example, have previously worked together in the SPACE (Providing Opportunities for Youth at Risk) project. The goal of the latter project was to share and compare working methods in youth work and implement some of these with young people from participating countries. The central question, which guided this process was; were young people really helped by these working methods? Most recently, the partners cooperated on an EU Leonardo project called CREATE (Creating Routes in Education and Training in Europe) whose aim it was to target employment of youths in partner countries. This intense and fruitful cooperation gradually yielded important insights among participants as they ascertained that existing shortcomings in interventions targeting young people at risk of social exclusion were both a national and European phenomenon. It was further discovered that both working life partners and educators often felt powerless and lacked the necessary methods in working with young people in need of intensive and continuing support.

The previous cooperation and the corresponding realization of the need for creating models of youth work based on intercultural "best practices" was the actual starting point for YARi. The creation of unique theoretical and practical model of youth work combining some existing approaches into an innovative whole became the project's focal point. In addition, by looking at earlier EU-projects targeting socially excluded young people, we found that they focused either on ways to allow youths to complete vocational training or targeted specific groups (i.e. physically or mentally challenged youths) or working environments

(i.e. work in children's homes). Therefore, YARi would occupy a hitherto unexplored niche in international cooperation concerning youth work. The basic aim of the project is to enable and empower young people to become more responsible for their own lives and support their social integration by facilitating their efforts to find a job or a study place. Empowerment efforts would also allow young people to begin to identify more structurally-based causes for their "personal" situation and start to address these. We therefore focused our efforts on some key areas: career planning, addressing substance misuse issues, dealing with emotional and psychological difficulties, as well as developing social skills and future perspectives of young people at risk of social exclusion.

As such, YARi set out to deliver two concrete products during the life of the project. The first is the creation of a new working model to be implemented and developed with groups of young people from partner countries as well as a printed "guide book" to be used as a resource manual for both students of youth work and social care and youth workers. The working model includes both theoretical and practical components. Its theoretical foundation is based on three distinct approaches or methods of work: the solution orientated approach, experiential learning, and anticipation dialogues. These methods are then implemented with groups of young people ranging in ages from 14–24 years of age. The model can be used as an "intensive period" as part of a longer intervention and consists primarily of group exercises.

The second product will be an on-line study module based on the working model. This will also be implemented in all partner countries and is designed to be suitable for youth work and social work training in Higher education and/or Further education in Europe. At present it uses the OPTIMA learning platform as its foundation. The project plan entails that the creation and implementation of the working model as well as work on the guidebook would take place in the first 1.5 years of the project while the remaining time would be dedicated to the devel-

opment and implementation of the study module. Prior to looking at the evaluation of the results obtained until now, it is essential to briefly outline the core ideas of the three theoretical and practical approaches which comprise YARi. (http://opko.laurea.fi/youth_at_risk).

Approaches to Work

In deciding upon which approaches in working with socially excluded youths would be appropriate, the partners drew upon their collective experiences gained by working together in previous projects, as well as their own interests and unique expertise. It was hoped that each partner would be able to contribute some "best practices" which had proven successful within their own national contexts and which could be modified and amended to fit the framework and *raison d'être* of the project. Experiential learning represented the first of these approaches. It emphasizes a more active way of working with clients which sees them as "subjects", involving them in their own welfare, rather than passive "objects" of intervention efforts by so-called experts. In this way, people are intrinsically involved in choosing and practicing the very skills they are learning. They are therefore also more likely to maintain their personal changes in their social or professional lives. The theory on experiential learning is not meant as an alternative but as a holistic, integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition and behaviour (Kolb 1984). One could argue that all learning is experience-based, however, Kolb maintains that learning only becomes "experiential" when elements of reflection, transfer and support are added to the base experience.

Reflection, or the process of purposefully examining an experience by questioning and contemplating it, is essential for it enhances the awareness of learning and can lead to changes in feeling, thinking or

behaving that derive from that experience. Another element of experiential learning is that *transfer* is aimed for. This means that changes in feeling thinking or behaving obtained in an experiential program begin to show up in, or are transferred to the real life of the client. In a sense, this is evidence that learning having taken place in the client-worker interaction begins to take practical root in transforming the client's life. A third element of experiential learning involves the need for *support*, meaning that time, resources, or other cooperation or project work possibilities are provided which permit participants, or the young people in YARi's case, to continue changing or maintaining new learning.

What, then, are some of the most important things to keep in mind when seeking to apply this approach in practice? One pivotal point which should underpin all experiential learning activities is that learning must have a present as well as a future relevance for participants and the society in which they will participate. If learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially and/or physically, as well as actively involved in posing questions, experimenting, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning then there is a much better chance that they will perceive the "experience" to be authentic and valuable. It is also essential that they are given opportunities to experience success, adventure, risk-taking, and even failure, within a supportive environment. This where the role of the facilitator or adult worker becomes crucially important. S/he must seek to structure appropriate experiences, pose relevant problems, set boundaries, support participants, and insure physical and emotional safety in promoting the learning process. Even in contexts where experiential learning activities were implemented with groups, as was the case with YARi, one must seek to ensure that learning is tailored to meet individual needs. Involving participants in the creation of their own activity program as well as allowing adequate time and opportunities for personal reflection are some ways to achieve this. For if one aims to nurture relationships;

learner to self, learner to others, and learner to the world at large, one needs to increase participants' awareness of how personal values and meanings influence their perceptions and choices of action. Lastly, experiential learning activities should also enable individuals to recognize how institutional, social and cultural factors impact their present situations. The danger exists that an overly behaviourist or psychological approach focusing strictly on interpersonal dynamics and personal change inadvertently reverts to a "victim-blaming" mindset, making clients solely responsible for problems which often have social origins. (Sakofs & Armstrong 1996; Weil & McGill 1996.)

The effectiveness of experiential learning is derived from the maxim that; "nothing is more relevant to us than ourselves". What experiential learning does best is to install a sense of ownership over what is learned. It adds to the interest and involvement of the participants, but most importantly it contributes significantly to the transfer of learning. In YARi, much of the expertise in implementing practical activities based on this approach using creative methods, came from the partners in Holland.

The second main component in the YARi model was the use of dialogic methods with youngsters. Specifically, the approach of Anticipation Dialogues (AD) consisting of methods developed in Finland through successive research and development projects throughout the 1990s was employed. These projects were organized by Stakes (National Research and Development Center for Welfare and Health, Finland) in collaboration with several Finnish cities under the guidance of Tom Erik & Robert Arnkil, and Esa Eriksson who developed AD approaches for as a tool of improving municipal service delivery and a way of better connecting clients and social service providers (Arnkil, 1991a, b 1992; Arnkil & Eriksson 1994; 1995; 1996; Arnkil T.E., Eriksson, & Arnkil R. 2000; 2001). The two main goals of this dialogic method are to develop resource-centered methods and create a network-oriented

work approach in service delivery that breaks the narrow confines of professional boundaries and advocates a truly multi-professional way of working. Anticipation Dialogues are predicated upon the idea that various clusters of people are important factors in a client's life and that network interventions involving representatives from both, the relevant social service agencies as well as from the client's own life world are therefore necessary for effective work in crisis situations. This ensures a more collaborative approach right from the outset and means that multiple resources can be pooled and mobilized efficiently.

AD's starting point is a valuation client networks as indispensable resources rather than as obstacles to be managed or overcome. Inviting people from the client's personal network to participate in problem solving illustrates a recognition that the helping relationship must be a partnership between client and expert in which the former is an active participant rather than a passive recipient of "expert" interventions. Anticipation Dialogues are usually in the form of one-time consultations, whose aim it is to explore and understand complex situations and promote change by facilitating inner dialogues among those present. These dialogues are founded upon several key principles which underpin the approach. The first of these is *subjectivity*. With each participant being encouraged to speak about how they see and understand a situation, a fractured picture of different perspectives begins to emerge. Reality becomes a kaleidoscope of subjective pictures and imparts to participants just how complex or impossible it may be to agree on an "objective" view of the problem situation. It is hoped that gaining more understanding of participants' views can lead to a better understanding of the interactive and interpreting network in which oneself is embedded. Therefore, facilitating a shift in position from objective problems to subjective concerns is central in anticipation dialogues. Closely connected to this is the recognition that AD presupposes a *high tolerance of uncertainty*. With these many voices (polyphony) emanating from participants em-

bedded in varying and changing social and professional networks but which are, at the same time, seeking common, collaborative solutions, it may be easier to deal with the fact that simple understandings and interventions may not be possible.

A third principle asserts that such dialogues are truly *experiments in thought and action*. Bringing together client and professional networks in dialogue and emphasizing the inherent worth of "all" viewpoints to aid mutual understanding is experimental. Such experiments may have both intended and unintended consequences and they require courage and a kind of postmodern expertise in bringing them to their fruition. Anticipation dialogues are also distinguished by their *future focus*. Little emphasis is put on the past with the "future life-world" created during concrete discussions with clients and helping professionals serving as the platform for coordinating activity. These imaginings of a better future require targeted *facilitation* by experts which comprises the fifth central principle behind AD. Facilitators must be able to operate across professional or sector boundaries and between managers, workers and clients. Ideally, they encourage and enable constructive discussions by creating an atmosphere which allows, if even for a time, the possibilities of a better collective future to become "real" and tangible for all participants. Lastly, AD espouses the *reciprocal character of professional work* which sees the helping relationship as a partnership between client and professional, the nature of which is constantly shifting and being uniquely reconstructed and which utilizes the talents and resources of all parties.

In the YARi project the "Recalling the Future" method in anticipation dialogue was implemented with groups of young people by all partners. This represents a dialogic method which aims to refocus the dialogue on a better, commonly imagined future instead of reverting to a discussion of present concerns and "problems". Participants are asked to imagine a positive future and then to reflect upon what helped bring this about, to "recall the future." The role of the facilitator is to encour-

age participants to truly invest themselves in these imaginings and to guide this process with concrete questions. (Arnkil T.E., Eriksson, & Arnkil R. 2000; 2001.)

The third working method that completes the YARi model is the solution oriented approach. Expertise in this case was largely contributed by the partners from Naples who utilize this method in their psychotherapeutic work with young people at risk of social exclusion. The solution orientated way of working can simply be characterized as a constructive way of talking supported by an atmosphere of openness. The focus is on thinking positively and on addressing subjects that foster hope, such as the client's existing resources, their progress and their dreams of a better future. It thus, neatly complements anticipation dialogue as both dialogic methods share many foundational principles. Solution orientated approach has its roots in psychotherapy and is predicated upon the understanding that clients and workers jointly construct the nature and boundaries of the helping relationship. The premise behind this, which might be called "verbal realism" (Wilder-Mott 1981), is that to a greater or lesser extent, social reality is constructed through communication. The rationale for using solution oriented approaches is "change"; helping clients to "reframe", or change their perception of how they view their (problematic) experiences. This is achieved by working with a client and eventually his/her family, friends, other helpers and trainees in co-operation discussing together about solutions in an encouraging and predominantly forward-looking atmosphere. The past is not seen as a source of peoples' problems, but a resource which can be of help in addressing them. In the same vein problems are reframed in a more positive light, as opportunities for growth with "problem talk" giving way to more solution focused dialogues. In addition, work is done to aid the client in being more affirmative and optimistic in relation to their own future through such techniques as the "miracle question" which in emphasis is much akin to AD's recalling

the future method. Building on progress that has been made, even if the steps are small, is another confidence inducing measure to reinforce the client's capacity for change. Finally, it is important to share credit for progress with all of those involved in the helping relationship as it re-emphasizes the nature of interdependency between relevant social actors. (Metcalf 1998.)

Implementation

Combining the aforementioned approaches of experiential learning, anticipation dialogue and solution-oriented methods, then, formed the foundation of the YARi model. Practically it meant creating a working model to be implemented with groups of young people accompanied by a printed guidebook as well as the creation of a web-based study module teaching YARi to students and practitioners of youth and social work in Higher education and/or Further education in Europe. Between November 2004 and April 2005 the YARi working model was put into action in all partner countries with results having been evaluated by September 2005. The following represents a short summary of the experiences gained by both facilitators and groups of young people.

In combining the three approaches individual partners had a great deal of freedom in selecting activities appropriate for their target groups of young people whose composition, size, and level of social exclusion varied. It was felt that by emphasizing autonomy and creativity one allowed the partners to tailor their own YARi program to their unique circumstances thereby also contributing to the flexible application of the model. However, a commonly agreed framework in relation to the order, duration and evaluation of activities did exist. It was decided that the model would be implemented in 8 sessions of approximately two to six hours in duration, and that a needs analysis with individual youths

should precede the selection of exercises. It was further agreed that anticipation dialogue with individual participants or groups would kick-start the working model to initiate the process of empowerment. Enrolment in the program was largely voluntary and motivation high with reasons for involvement ranging from finding suitable employment or schooling, to improving personal social skills and affecting personal growth. The choice of activities as developed with input from youngsters had varying emphasis on creativity (painting and drama), real-life skills (job search, cooking), and individual and group skills (games supporting personal development, horseback-riding) and sought to reflect YARi's underlying aims of empowerment. As the evaluation of activities by young people showed, this variety was greatly appreciated.

Ultimately, 40 young people in four European countries took part in the working model and their reflections on their experiences derived from a common evaluation form employed by all partners, illustrates some common conclusions. The first was that participants overwhelmingly "enjoyed" the activities offered to them and the manner in which these were run. They were further, amazed at the fact that they had learnt something concrete and cultural by playing. Other common reflections revolved around being part of a group in completing the YARi program. Group parameters including discussions on confidentiality, privacy and trust-building had preceded the actual commencement of activities in most partner countries. One frequently mentioned benefit of belonging to a group, according to the young people was that it taught them to cope with and appreciate difference and that they, in turn, learned valuable social skills such as patience, listening, negotiating and compromising. As one participant from the U.K. put it, "the best thing about the program was meeting other people and seeing how well I could communicate with them. I learned that people's personalities are more varied than I used to think." A majority of the participants also thought they would in some way be able to take the experience

home with them. Some likened what they gained to a "tool kit" filled with knowledge and skills which they could use when appropriate. This kit contained both real life skills and personal and emotional changes. *Real life skills* included; a greater competence in seeking work, a renewed confidence in returning to, or remaining in school, an enhanced social competence of managing better in diverse groups, communication skills, and more "technical expertise". *Personal & Emotional Changes* were understood to include feelings of greater personal ease and comfort in participating in groups and interacting with adults (facilitators), as well as trust-building. Other benefits on a personal level, according to the young people, were positive opportunities for personal expression and increased abilities of self-reflection leading to changes in perspective in relation to their own lives and their interaction with others. Enhanced self-confidence, tolerance, and intellectual growth were also mentioned. The youngsters also felt that the facilitators were instrumental in helping them make these changes. Facilitators were commended for supporting the participants in increasing their self-confidence and for actively working for group inclusion and the creation of an open and safe group atmosphere. Establishing a positive bond with an adult role model was important to many youngsters. For the future development of the YARi working model, the young people suggested more activities with real life applications such as employment training, and more excursions and experiential learning exercises. When evaluating the three main approaches, most youngsters felt that participating in anticipation dialogues was difficult and a source of anxiety, but also added that with supportive facilitators, they ultimately gained much from the approach.

In addition to the forty young people, there were also 12 facilitators from the four partner countries who helped create, participate in, and evaluate the working model. Their reflections yielded some interesting conclusions. All facilitators agreed that eight sessions were too

short and perhaps too intensive with two sessions per week. However, they also agreed that the program is a valuable starting point, and a positive foundation if supported with continued interventions or programs. Some even committed themselves to using the YARI model in the future. Most also echoed the feelings of the young people themselves that the chosen activities fostered self-actualization, self-confidence and greater social competence. Involvement in group activities and games was further seen to increase the social competence of participants and facilitated personal reflection. Many remarked that using AD should require more training or prior experience than they received before implementing the approach and this must be seriously considered when contemplating future application of the model. In addition, facilitators recommended that as a complement to empowerment successes on the personal level more needs to be done to include activities with direct application to working or educational life as well as in connecting youngsters to other peers and supportive adults.

Conclusion

Above all, however, the YARi-project has given hope and the expectation of a better future to many of those involved in it. Concrete results from the implementation of the working model are that some participants have decided to re-enrol in school or become more involved in future activities offered by the working life partners and facilitators have gained valuable new skills. Furthermore, the intercultural cooperation in creating the model has yielded new and innovative ways in working with young people at risk of social exclusion. The same can be said for efforts to combine practical youth work methods with online learning as a resource for practitioners and students. A future challenge will be to find ways of transcending the hitherto preoccupation with

bringing about personal change to include ways and activities which allow participants to challenge the structural factors of social exclusion. Then the social change component in the project goals will take on an even greater relevance. With the publication of the "YARi Guidebook" in the Spring of 2006 and the launch of the study module on Nov.1, 2005 it is our expectation that further benefits, surprises and developments will follow.

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