

CRITICAL YOUTH WORK?

DOCUMENTATION

**Rethinking and re-imagining conceptual approaches,
(un)learning democracy and human rights in times of
shrinking and contested civic spaces**

**A networking conference for YOU(th) workers, EDC/HRE trainers,
educators, facilitators, youth researchers, and activists**

12.-17. May 2024

Weimar



CRITICAL YOUTH WORK?

Democratic civil society is under pressure. Legal, financial and economic hurdles increasingly hamper the work of civil society actors in many countries. Democratic/human rights and especially vulnerable actors are under attack, and their spaces for participation and shaping society are being hostile and restricted, especially by right-wing nationalist political actors and groups. Election results also show that illiberal and undemocratic attitudes are becoming politically acceptable in the centre of our societies.

The conference "Critical Youth Work," which took place from the 12th to the 17th of May 2024 in Weimar (Germany), invited participants to a multi-perspective mash-up to reflect and develop ideas. We aimed to get to know different concepts and their protagonists, who conceptually and pedagogically engaged with current developments and phenomena. Together, we formulated, (re)discovered, and practically experimented with pedagogical approaches. Further information could be found in the concept note. What happened? A 6-day (non)conference. Together with European and international partners, we addressed questions of democratic education in civil society, challenges to youth work posed by hostility and increasing polarization, as well as the need to include vulnerable and excluded groups, ultimately leading to a re-evaluation of pedagogical concepts in non-formal education.

The (non)conference served as our guiding pedagogical concept.

Methodical & Thematic Strands

It was not about "lecturing" or "collecting rows of best practices" but about pausing conceptually, reflecting, and rethinking existing approaches critically and in new ways—for example, concerning youth, youth work, activism, and global social justice, climate justice, identity, diversity, peace, etc. This took place in the form of inputs, analyses, lectures, practice workshops and experiments, discussion groups, readings, panels, movie screenings, exhibitions, performances, and more. We brought together and represented different levels: theory, research, pedagogical practice, various forms of expertise, and social realities. The aim was to think collectively, map out common horizons of action, and develop an idea of "Critical Youth Work"—to engage and address the diverse and multifaceted communities of youth workers and civic educators in Europe (and beyond). We consistently asked: What does this mean for your, our, and my pedagogical and youth work practices? Participants and contributors were invited to chart their own course through the event, selecting their preferred methodological and thematic strands.

The following "thematic strands" structured the flow of the event:

- **Developing & claiming spaces & rights**
- **Crossing borders, reconciling tensions?**
- **Being transformative competent? Digitalisation, climate and social change**
- **Getting politically active - getting civically active**
- **Human Rights & democracy in conflict**
- **Contested spheres & democratic values**
- **Inclusion beyond lip service**
- (...)

Developing & claiming spaces & rights

This thematic strand mainly issues around the topics of new forms of youth work that go beyond "classical" settings, that are developed by people and initiatives outside the "bubbles"—this might relate to vulnerabilities, related to civil activism, to uncomfortable views questioning status quo in society, changing/questioning the paradigms of participation and representation

Crossing borders, reconciling tensions?

Initial work and thoughts putting at the core the role of CSO work in conflictive situations, as mediators, but also making the steps to overcome barriers. While the reconciling tensions aspect relates to the latter issue, the crossing borders aspect also might give hints how to question, rethink and voice out the inherent barriers

within the foundations of youth work (conceptually, in its norms, power conditions applying etc.). Here also we could cast a cold eye on what youth work actually is, and if that is sufficient.

Being transformative competent? Digitalisation, climate and social change

The big global societal transformations hit youth globally quite differently. How is global social justice connected to the inherent understandings of what Youth Work is and/or could be, and what questions do we need to refer to? Where do we need to be honest? How can we work with existing models, frames and where do we need to question them?

Getting politically active - getting civically active

Is youth work and youth organising indeed a profession of social change, is it indeed contributing to increased equality? What are the traps and what concepts and actions do really tackle political, cultural, economic, ecologic and social power?

Human Rights & democracy in conflict

Quid pro quo? This thematic strand wants to enter the “thin ice”. The aftermath of October 7th Hamas attack on Israel shows that there are quite differing and extreme partial positions. Not only in Europe but worldwide. Specifically worrying is the intermingling of anti-Semitic and anti-racist post-colonial emancipatory argumentation. Similar developments are heated in a variety of current global debates.

Contested spheres & democratic values

Human Rights activism, educating for democracy have become themselves object of hard polarised contestation in our societies, from political sides e.g. in all the “anti-XYZ campaigns”, but also in societal debates. Both are taken advantage of in the antagonistic views. What is the role for CSO – strategically being a broker in balancing, or putting a clear perspective while risking to remain locked in a bubble?

Inclusion beyond lip service

Inclusion is a core promise, “raison d’être” and attitude of youth work. But how does it is highly academic, defined by homogenous groups, and preserves power hierarchies in discourse, factual structures and is organisational not so open accessible as it claims for itself – related to any forms of representing unheard voices, excluded and marginalized groups. Let’s have a closer look ...

Open thematic strand & transversal issues

Further topics came up during the event and therefore we kept a certain space in two “Open Space” sessions. Contributors & participants are invited to bring in their contributions.

Programme of the event

	12.05.24	13.05.24	14.05.24
7.30-8.45	Arrival + World Caffee's	BREAKFAST	BREAKFAST
9.00-11.00		Story Circle: foundational tools for building communities - thoughts, concepts and practices, April Grayson (US) Conceptual Workshop Leveraging Film to Empower Youth and Promote Global Social Justice in the Digital Era, Dora Endre (HU) Workshop Contested Space and HR Freedom of speech and diverging opinions, Nikolaus Fennes (AT) Workshop	Harnessing the power of youth voice, Brayan Lee Rosa Rodriguez (US/Puerto Rico) Conceptual Workshop Integrating the Senses for Social and Emotional Support, Heather McRae-Woolf (US) Workshop Simulation or Activism - how active should political education be Conceptual consideration and practices, Dennis Lange (DE), Ramon Martinez (ES) Workshop Puzzle pieces (Mod 2) active creation of reels, Henryk Balkow (DE) Workshop
11.00-11.30		COFFEE BREAK	COFFEE BREAK
11.30-12.30		PLENARY Radical Education and Youth Work in Europe, Sergio Xavier (PT), 45min Lecture + Opening session	Human Rights Education and Research: Where do we stand?, Barbara Santibanez (FR) Workshop The crisis of liberal democracy - the concept of political imagination, Mouli Bentman (IL) Lecture Continuation of Puzzle pieces (Mod 2) active creation of reels, Henryk Balkow (DE)
12.30-14.00		LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK
14.00-15.30		Me, you, us...and the Wheel of Privilege, Elisa Rapetti (IT) Conceptual Workshop Immersive Audio Unlearning, Sergio Xavier (PT) Workshop Panel: Securitization of Youth Work Conceptual consideration (Hadzibegovic (ME), Weillnböck(DE), Gerber(DE), Jonas Gerber (DE), et al Talk	Group meetings led by supporters team
15.30-16.00		Flexible COFFEE BREAK	Flexible COFFEE BREAK
16.00-18.30		The Power of Humour: An innate ability to transform perspective, perception and possibility, Fergal Barr (IE) Workshop Intersectionality in the Theatre of the Oppressed, Marco Marinelli (IT) Workshop CRITICAL PEDAGOGY conceptual consideration, Yanda Bango (DE) conceptual Workshop Movie Puzzle Pieces (Mod I) - a journey into peace education, Henryk Balkow (DE) Workshop	Uncover, reflect on and discuss professional values and normative beliefs in youth work, Anneli Haase, Mona Wolf (DE) Lecture/Workshop COME2GETHER Dance Workshop, Mangue Cisse (DE) Workshop Standing Strong: Strategies for Surviving Smear Campaigns, Josa Balint (HU) Workshop / Case study Narratology and the approach of Narrative Group Work, Harald Weillnböck (DE) Conceptual Workshop
18.30-19.30	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER
Evening	OPENING by Triple A moderation team	Elephants in the rooms: Contested Spaces and Values April Grayson (US), Agnes Nuwagaba (UG) Martin Kaiser (DE), Laden Yurtagguler (TR), Mouli Bentman (IL), Balint Josa (HU) Mod. Georg Pirker Discussion Group	Total Trust, movie public screening, discussion with Nils Zimmermann (DE) Weillnböck (DE), Barbara Santibanez (FR), Hanna Ahejeva (BY/DE) public screening/discussion/talk

	15.05.24				16.05.24				17.05.24
7.30-8.45	BREAKFAST				BREAKFAST				
9.00-11.00	Open spaces	Open spaces	Open spaces	Open spaces	Questioning the pink coach: How feminist is the feminist urbanism Tender Urbanism collective (DE) conceptual workshop	Enhancing youth voices for climate justice: A Workshop on climate change and empowerment through social media, Michelle Chavez (DE) conceptual workshop	Empowering trans and gender-diverse youth in an academic milieu, Jan Galkowski (PL) lecture/workshop	Youth Work in War times, Oleksii Sliusarenko (UA) case study	Departure
	Open spaces	Discussion group Research items in HRE and youth, Barbara Santibanez (FR) and Andreas Karsten (DE) discussion and data gathering	@home in DE?, Eggert Hardten (DE) talk	Open spaces					
11.00-11.30	COFFEE BREAK				COFFEE BREAK				
11.30-12.30	"Chile woke up" the role of young people i the social uprising, Felipe Moraga Villablanca (CL) case study	Youth work with sexual minörities - criminalised, socially restricted and threatened by death - A case study from Uganda, Agnes Nuwagaba (UG) case study	We have not lived in vain (movie) BELARUSSIAN LGBTQI, Nick Antipov (DE) case study/movie	Your Way - an inclusion path for young criminals, Berka Nilson (SE) case study	Being transformative competent?, What does it mean for EDC/HRE in Youth Work Nils Zimmermann(DE), Elisa Rapetti (IT), and Ajsa Hadzibegovic (ME) Anna Yeghoyan (AM) conceptual exploration	Mainstreaming human rights in youth empowerment. A case study, Diana Kanatbekova (KG) case study/ workshop			
12.30-14.00	LUNCH BREAK				LUNCH BREAK				
14.00-15.30	Young Women's Political Participation in times of Gender Backlash analysis and conceptual consideration, Laden Yurtagguler (TR) lecture	Being Civically Enganged - competence in Practice, Ajsa Hadzibegovic (ME) conceptual workshop	Period Poverty, Salome Adamia (GE) and Jonas Gerber(DE) case study	Game Design-based Learning as a Tool in Civic Education, Sabina Belc (SI) conceptual workshop	Getting politically active - Getting civically active, Dima Mokadem (LB) presentation	How can we involve young people who are not part of our focus group in our political and international work?, Brigitte Christiansen (DE) workshop			
					Leadership work, integrating human rights in organization's programming focused on women and girl's empowerment in Central Asia, Sabina Akhmetzhanova (KG) case study				
15.30-16.00	Flexible COFFEE BREAK				Flexible COFFEE BREAK				
16.00-18.30	Theater of research, Theofanis Katechos (GR) workshop	Trickshots: Youth Work and contested democracy, Ramon Martinez(ESP) and Georg Pirker (DE) experimental workshop	Aktion Tanz- dancing politics!? An Boekman (DE), and Livia Patrizi (IT/DE) workshop	Group meetings and exchanges (60 min) introduction of findings (30 min) The further Story of Critical Youth Work (40 min) final works Triple A moderation team (20 min)					
18.30-19.30	DINNER				DINNER				
Evening	Group meeting				What – so what – what now?				
	Photovoices - "Social Inequalities in Europe - an exhibitions from Young Europeans Rebekka Pfennig (DE) + Talk with Fanis Katechos (GR), Rebecca Pfennig (DE), Livia Patrizi (IT) on physical and cultural approaches on democracy and Human Rights talk								

List of Sessions

Contested Space and HR Freedom of Speech and Diverging Opinions

Contributor(s): Nikolaus Fennes

Description: Methodological approaches on opinion formation and discursive culture.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY Conceptual Consideration

Contributor(s): Yana Bango

Description: The aim of this workshop was to introduce participants to a theoretical lens (critical pedagogy) that could guide, enhance, and/or encourage their critical consciousness in civic engagement.

Story Circle: Foundational Tools for Building Communities - Thoughts, Concepts, and Practices

Contributor(s): April Grayson

Description: A participatory workshop on facilitating a Story Circle and a Group Poem exercise, with discussion and critique about the benefits, risks, and adaptations.

Radical Education and Youth Work in Europe

Contributor(s): Sérgio Xavier

Description: To deepen the understanding of "radical education" and its relevance for European youth work educational practice.

Immersive Audio Unlearning

Contributor(s): Sérgio Xavier

Description: To experience the Immersive Audio Unlearning methodology by critically exploring the state of our democracies.

Me, You, Us...and the Wheel of Privilege

Contributor(s): Elisa Rapetti

Description: The contribution proposed to develop a common reflection regarding the construction of safe spaces in nonformal learning contexts through a facilitator-led activity. Participants were guided in exploring their own positioning and perception of privilege, allowing for expanded thinking about the social construction of privilege in our societies and how marginalized individuals could contribute to social change for a more just society.

Elisa introduced us to her work with young adults of university age: she develops tools for safe spaces in nonformal education. She uses the [wheel of privilege](#) worksheet she provided us with as a getting to know each other method. We started by filling out the wheel of privilege individually ourselves and then discussed our findings in pairs, using Elisa's worksheet and the questions as guidance. Afterwards, we discussed our perceptions of privilege and power in plenary, using a second depiction of the wheel of privilege/[the intersectionality wheel](#). Most participants found the activity valuable as it helps to raise self-awareness and reflect on a certain "arrogance" (a quote) that comes with ignorance or one's privilege. We concluded that it's important to share individual stories to find commonalities, but this requires building trust within a group, and that reflection makes empathy for the vulnerability of others more likely.

Panel: Securitization of Youth Work Conceptual Consideration

Contributor(s): Ajša Hadžibegović, Harald Weilnböck, and Jonas Geber

Intersectionality in the Theatre of the Oppressed

Contributor(s): Marco Marinelli

Description: Participants got in touch with the methodology developed by Augusto Boal and the concept of Intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw to deconstruct power relations and layers of discrimination.

Movie Puzzle of Peace (Mod I and Mod II) - A Journey into Peace Education

Contributor(s): Henryk Balkow

Description: Participants understood and learned how media projects could create a better world.

The Power of Humour: An Innate Ability to Transform Perspective, Perception, and Possibility

Contributor(s): Fergal Barr

Description: This session provided an overview of how humour could be a powerful tool for change, transformation, and creating spaces for possibility. It outlined the value, importance, relevance, and benefits of humour in everyday engagements and interactions. Participants also had the opportunity to complete small exercises to sense how they could use it in their practice. Participants left with a much better understanding of humour, its role, and its capacity to create change.

Fergal first went into detail about the history of comedy. He has a detailed presentation on it, which he said he would share (hence no detailed documentation on individual slides). He went on to name the selling points of humour in general, including the physical benefits of humour and that it nurtures creative thinking and productivity. Those statements, he said, were scientifically proven and widely researched. We received tips for using humour and did an adapted Myers Briggs test in which we received characters from The Simpsons that matched our personality, highlighting the possibility to use humour for self-reflection. Fergal afterwards listed comedians that went on to become influential politicians and in the final group exercise, we looked for titles for memes.

Evening event “Elephants in the rooms: Contested Spaces and Values”

Contributor(s): April Grayson (US), Agnes Nuwagaba (UG), Martin Kaiser (DE), Laden Yurtagguler (TR), Mouli Bentman (IL), Balint Josa (HU)

Harnessing the Power of Youth Voice

Contributor(s): Brayan Rosa-Rodriguez

Description: This workshop centered on a discussion around young people and their contributions to power structures that shaped our civil society. Drawn from a practical example of a campaign in Puerto Rico to influence policy and programs, this workshop took participants through traditional organizing frameworks and invited them to challenge them with the objective to maximize youth engagement. The hope was that participants could articulate ways in which deconstructing traditional advocacy was purposeful and sustainable.

Integrating the Senses for Social and Emotional Support

Contributor(s): Heather McRae-Woolf

Description: This workshop offered experiential and reflective opportunities, where participants explored mindful attention to physical senses. The focus was on how incorporating this awareness could shift approaches to group engagement.

Simulation or Activism - How Active Should Political Education Be? Conceptual Consideration and Practices

Contributor(s): Dennis Lange and Ramon Martinez

Description: Political youth work often used simulation games or role-playing games to sensitize people to topics and issues. However, there was a risk that this simulation remained within a training course that did not result in concrete action. Thus, the discussion revolved around whether there was a need for formats more strongly geared towards real-world problems, or if real issues could be incorporated into simulations to develop ideas for real problems. Practical examples were used to discuss these questions.

After a quick round in which we talked about our individual target groups and our prior knowledge with simulation games and roleplay, the rest of the workshop was very practical: we formed groups of three (Dennis and Ramon handed out puzzle pieces, three pieces each formed a picture and those were the groups) and had to come up with a plan for a youth event (one to three days long) that we would like to implement. The second step was to meet up with a second group of three, in which we did a small role play: One group were representatives of a local government, the other group presented their idea with the aim to receive funding. In a second round, the roles were switched. We closed by discussing how we could work together in our groups once we were back home and by discussing the experience of the role play game.

Human Rights Education and Research: Where Did We Stand?

Contributor(s): Barbara Santibanez

Description: To discuss recent trends in HRE research and identify priorities for future research.

The Crisis of Liberal Democracy - The Concept of Political Imagination

Contributor(s): Mouli Bentman

COME2GETHER Dance Workshop

Contributor(s): Mangué Djibril Cisse

Description: A workshop about art and modern dances as practiced in Berlin with partners and youth. Participants discovered new ways to express themselves through movement, learning fundamental techniques of modern dance styles.

Narratology and the Approach of Narrative Group Work

Contributor(s): Harald Weilnböck

Description: Demonstrated how to facilitate dialogue and foster 'emotional political intelligence' and democratic resilience, especially among hard-to-reach youth susceptible to group hatred.

Standing Strong: Strategies for Surviving Smear Campaigns

Contributor(s): Balint Josa

Description: "Standing Strong: Strategies for Surviving Smear Campaigns" was a dynamic workshop designed to equip individuals with the knowledge and tools necessary to counteract smear campaigns, safeguard online presence, and foster mental resilience. Through engaging sessions, participants learned strategic online engagement, built counter-narratives, and adopted privacy measures. This workshop promised to be an empowering experience, offering practical strategies and fostering solidarity among attendees.

Uncover, Reflect on, and Discuss Professional Values and Normative Beliefs in Youth Work

Contributor(s): Anneli Haase and Mona Wolf

Description: Critical reflection on the own professional understanding of one's role in youth work with a focus on values and normative beliefs. Analyzed the effects of "addressing performances" and strengthened political awareness in the field of youth work through the exchange of ideas with (other) international professionals.

Anneli and Mona first introduced the concept of "addressing performance": It deals with the question how a person is addressed and the implications of the 'addressing', and it concerns the normative horizon to which the addressee is subjectified (Balzer & Ricken, 2010). The process of addressing performance can be analysed in different dimensions and is highly dependent on the situation: among these dimensions are norms and values, which deal with the desirability of the addressees. Afterwards, Mona and Anneli each presented one of their observations and their respective analyses: one setting was a Childrens' Day event, the other was in an open youth work center for girls. Importantly, the analysis of addressing performance concerns itself with minute, small situations, not for a broader discourse, even though the analysis itself is similar to discourse analysis. Afterwards, the plenary discussed the methodology itself and the external factors that might influence the analysis, but also the need to critically rethink the professional role as a youth worker. In the practical part of the session, the participants first individually reflected on their own normative values in their professional settings before discussing them in small groups. The findings were noted down for each group and we wrapped up with a gallery walk, in which we could discuss the results of each group.

Talking About and Screening of Film: "Total Trust, Public Screening"

Contributor(s): Nils-Eyk Zimmermann, Harald Weilnböck, Barbara Santibanez, and Hanna (Ania) Aheyeva

@home in DE?

Contributor(s): Egger Hardten

Description: Provided insights into the thoughts of youth with a migrational background about their struggles to integrate, aiming to fit in while sustaining their sovereignty.

Discussion Group: Research Items in HRE and Youth

Contributor(s): Barbara Santibanez

Description: "Improving quality, innovation, and recognition of youth work" was one of the key areas of action to support the empowerment of young people in the current European Union (EU) Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027. In the last decade, there had been considerable progress in developing quality assurance tools and competence frameworks for youth work; however, if youth work aimed to be truly inclusive and empowering, the tools used should ensure that all voices were represented and that diverse backgrounds and experiences were showcased in the process. This focus group aimed to foster a conversation around experiences with quality assurance and evaluation of projects, programs, and organizations in the youth work sector. The information collected would support the development of a quality assurance model BY youth workers FOR youth workers, as part of the KA2 Erasmus+ project "Quality Assurance for All." Read more about the project:

<https://www.hreyn.net/qa-for-all-project>

"Chile Woke Up" The Role of Young People in the Social Uprising

Contributor(s): Felipe Moraga Villablanca

Description: Analyzed the different actions carried out by youth groups and their consequences in the social movement "Chile Woke Up."

We Have Not Lived in Vain (Movie)

Contributor(s): Nick Antipov

Description: Facilitated a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of human rights struggles, focusing on the Belarusian LGBTQ+ community within broader political movements, and explored constructive ways to support inclusive human rights advocacy.

Youth Work with Sexual Minorities - Criminalized, Socially Restricted, and Threatened by Death

Contributor(s): Agnes Nuwagaba

Description: Addressed the efforts taken to fight for marginalized individuals in society. Shared experiences from the fight for LGBTQ rights in a hostile environment.

Being Civically Engaged - Competence in Practice

Contributor(s): Ajša Hadžibegović

Description: Explored practical applications of the BCE competence area.

Period Poverty

Contributor(s): Salome Adamia and Jonas Gerber

Description: Considered various aspects of menstrual poverty and their impact on the right to education.

Young Women's Political Participation in Times of Gender Backlash: Analysis and Conceptual Consideration

Contributor(s): Laden Yurttagüler Akkuş

Description: Discussed the current situation of young women's political participation while gender backlash was on the rise globally. Young women encountered obstacles on micro (individual), meso (organizational), and macro (policy) levels, which were related to local conditions and global trends.

Workshop: Critical Pedagogy - conceptual consideration (Yanda Bango)

Yanda listed three sources for knowledge about society and people: primary socialisation, formal education and media and popular culture. Through these sources, we legitimise knowledge and learning and it becomes normative. In an activity, we collected what those sources of knowledge had in common and discussed, how media and pop culture institutionalise/normalise ideologies and make them dominant in society (see picture). Results of the discussion: knowledge legitimises institutional culture (traditions, norms, values and shared understandings) and narratives become institutional knowledge through repetition and reproduction through a dominant group. We afterwards discussed the institutional cultures of our respective homes and found that the narratives utilised in our surroundings are not random, but related to a dominant discourse. Finally, we learned about the concept of Critical Pedagogy, discussing the main voices of the concept, the meaning of oppression within the framework, and the concepts of banking education (hierarchical, capital-oriented education that defines what constitutes dominant knowledge) and problem-posing education (non-hierarchical, where everyone listens and everyone learns).

Workshop: Empowering trans- and gender-diverse youth in an academic milieu (Jan Galkowski)

Different ways of addressing young people and the respective consequences were discussed. In the second half of the workshop, we discussed Jan's dilemma in his position: how can the target group - trans- and gender-diverse youth - be supported by a cis-male without patronising and dominant power structures without abandoning the target group and withdrawing from their issues? We discussed the notion of allyship and creating a safer space for the young people, and tried to take into account that speaking up for themselves might be something those young people have to do all the time anyway and it might be a relief for them to have someone else speak on their behalf when they can inform the speaker's position beforehand. It was noted that listening without prejudice can be empowering for young people as well. We furthermore discussed the opportunities to invite the young people to trainings and peer-to-peer sessions, using best practices. Jan introduced us to his aspirations to create a local initiative in his institution that he hopes other universities will eventually adapt.

Workshop: Mainstreaming human rights in youth empowerment/Leadership work, integrating human rights in organization's programming focused on women and girl's empowerment in Central Asia (Diana Kanatabekova, Sabina Akhmetzhanova)

Diana and Sabina talked about their human rights work in Karakol, Kyrgyzstan. First, Diana introduced the participants to the three programmes of [YVO Leadership](#): the School of Democracy and Leadership, the International Volunteer Exchange and Kids Helping Kids. Sabina went on to discuss the broader aims of Leadership and the political Kyrgyz climate: Since 2021, Leadership has been aiming more towards mobilising youth (especially girls) and raise their awareness of human rights, which is especially important in the local setting with traditional, patriarchal structures and early marriages. Furthermore, Sabina reported that Leadership faces shrinking civil spaces in the form of governmental restriction which is similar to the current development in Georgia with increased government control and excessive auditing. Additionally, the NGOs now frequently clash with government-related youth organisations. These developments make it difficult for NGOs to operate and freedom of expression is at immediate risk. However, she ended on the positive note that knowledge of human rights makes women and minorities powerful.

Workshop: Getting politically active - Getting civically active (Dima Mokaddem)

Dima's workshop introduced the participants to youth work in Lebanon within the current political reality of conflict, unemployment and hopelessness for young people. In Lebanon, there are currently 5.5 million citizens, 1.2 million Syrian refugees and 450 000 Palestinian refugees. There are an impressive 11 000 NGOs for human rights, but they are still regulated by Ottoman law. Young people are highly dissatisfied with their life in Lebanon right now, both with working conditions and wages, but also due to the high unemployment rate. Young people are extremely dissatisfied with their government and the generation's mental health is very poor, resulting in a high number of suicides (in 2023, 168 Lebanese committed suicide, which, according to our discussion, matches the total numbers for Poland with seven times more citizens). Dima concluded that youth in Lebanon urgently needs job opportunities, physical and mental health support, fewer school dropouts, enhanced civic and political participation and collaboration, volunteers to deal with multiple crises in the region, and financial and professional support to work in the agricultural sector. We finally discussed ways to improve the situation, like by strengthening vocational training in Lebanon.

A few impressions















Summary of Evaluation Results

Based on the submitted evaluations, the following results can be formulated for the participants of the project (selection):

1. Over 90% of participants rated the measure as very positive or positive, meaning that their expectations were nearly or fully met; for less than 10%, this only applies partially or not at all.
2. Over 70% of participants found the formats of the contributions as very diverse and inspiring; for less than 30%, this only applies partially or not at all.
3. Nearly 80% of participants felt that they could actively engage in the implemented contributions; for 20%, this only applies partially or not at all.
4. Over 90% of participants rated the interaction within and with the group very positively or positively; for less than 10%, this only applies partially or not at all.
5. Over 70% of participants felt that the intention of the measure was consistently very understandable and recognizable; for less than 30%, this only applies partially or not at all.
6. Over 70% of participants indicated that the event gave them the opportunity to critically reflect on their educational practices; for less than 30%, this only applies partially or not at all.
7. Nearly 80% of participants found the organizational execution of the measure (by the organizing team) to be optimal; for less than 20%, this only applies partially or not at all.

Overall, this results in a good to very good picture, which will be explained further below:

Strengths of the event (summary from participants' comments to the question "When you think of the different subjects, content, and parts of the program, which ones were very interesting to you and why?"):

Participants expressed a wide range of opinions and emphasized that they found several topics and program points particularly interesting. A frequently mentioned topic was Radical Thinking and Radical Youth Work, which opened up a new perspective for many.

The engagement with democracy, values, and social ideals prompted some to further explore these approaches, as they were seen as a way to question traditional methods and develop new visions for youth work. Another focus was critical pedagogy, which several participants highlighted as particularly important. Workshops on topics such as political participation of young women, social inclusion, and dealing with right-wing extremist tendencies provided valuable impulses for their work in the youth sector. Particularly well-received were the practical workshops that conveyed methods and approaches that can be directly applied in their own work. Creative and interactive approaches, such as using humour in youth education and artistic or multimedia methods (e.g., dance and visual arts), were also seen as enriching, as they offered a welcome change from theoretical content. Overall, many participants emphasized the relevance and diversity of the topics, ranging from freedom of expression to youth work in crisis situations. The combination of theoretical and practical content was described as balanced and inspiring, with many participants stating that they were able to take away new perspectives and methods they wish to use in their future work.

Weaknesses of the event (summary from participants' comments to the question “Which individual subjects, content, and parts of the program were rather uninteresting and could have been removed, in your opinion?”):

Participants generally expressed positive feedback about the program but had some comments regarding aspects they found less interesting or in need of improvement. Some criticized the density of the program, which left little room for breaks or reflection. Several participants wished for more free time to process what they learned or to engage in informal exchanges, especially towards the end of the day or in the evening hours. Some found that the evening and accompanying programs, such as reflection groups or additional tasks, were overwhelming. Participants suggested simplifying or partially eliminating these activities to relieve the intense daily schedule. A recurring criticism was related to the method of delivery in some workshops. It was noted that some content was too theoretical or did not offer sufficient practical applications. Some presenters also did not adequately explain how they achieved their results, which diminished the learning effect. Despite these criticisms, most participants found the topics themselves interesting and relevant, even if not all content was directly applicable to their professional practice. However, some wished that certain topics, such as the keynote or workshops on Radical Pedagogy, had more time for discussions and reflections. Overall, there was a consensus that there were no completely inappropriate topics, but rather a need for optimization regarding scheduling and methods of delivery.

Feedback on the question “What is the most precious thing that you are taking from this (Non)Conference?” shows that participants particularly valued the diversity and exchange with people from different countries and professional backgrounds. The encounters and the opportunity to freely and openly exchange ideas were perceived as inspiring and motivating. Many respondents emphasized the sense of community and the strengthening of their belief in the importance of their work in the field of youth work. A recurring theme was the diversity of perspectives and methods presented during the (Non)Conference, which offered participants new approaches for their own work and fresh inspiration. In particular, meeting and exchanging ideas with other professionals was described as particularly valuable, as was the feeling of being part of an engaged community addressing similar challenges in youth work. Some participants highlighted the new contacts they made and the potential for future collaborations. Additionally, the format of the (Non)Conference was praised for allowing innovative and bold approaches to topics. It was refreshing that the event provided room for experiments and offered a platform not only for experts but also for less experienced participants. Finally, many stated that they left with a renewed sense of hope and motivation for their future work.

Participants expressed a desire for further opportunities to ask critical questions and create space for reflections on youth education work. Many felt that the provided materials and resources were sufficient, but they wished for additional digital resources or a brief documentation of the ideas and methods presented. Some suggested creating international training programs on radical and critical youth work as well as networks and forums to promote exchange among youth workers. There was a particular interest in methodological materials that can be used in daily work, as well as a publication that combines case studies from different countries with research findings. Additional suggestions included developing qualitative reports summarizing the main themes of the conference, as well as infographics and other visual aids to carry forward the discussions. Some advocated for organizing more events of this kind, while others supported the idea of a network or “challenge group” to continue the exchange after the conference. Finally, it was emphasized that an organized collection of contacts, materials, and images would be a valuable resource for future work.

The following improvement suggestions were expressed by participants:

1. **Balance of Activity and Relaxation:** Many participants felt that a bit more “downtime” would be helpful to process the flow of information and create space for informal conversations.
2. **Freedom and Flexibility:** Some expressed that the sense of freedom in the format of the Non-Conference was not fully achieved. They wished for a more flexible handling, allowing participants to switch more easily between sessions.
3. **Space for Reflection:** Feedback highlighted the desire for more time for group reflections. Some found that contributions often ended too quickly and lacked time for critical thinking. A structured concluding reflection could be helpful here.
4. **Program Structure and Communication:** There were suggestions to improve the program structure and communication. Some found the program too tight and wished for more open time slots, while others suggested clearer communication about sessions in advance.
5. **Increase Interactivity:** Participants wished for sessions to be more interactive to promote active participation. Suggestions included collaborating with presenters to ensure workshops provide practical and tangible content.
6. **Accessibility and Diversity:** The accessibility of the Non-Conference for various groups, including people with disabilities and different socioeconomic backgrounds, was emphasized. Providing materials in multiple languages was also deemed important.
7. **Reflection and Follow-Up:** Some participants desired mechanisms for follow-up to further pursue and implement ideas and plans after the conference.
8. **Fewer Evening Events:** It was suggested to offer fewer evening events to give participants more time for rest and exchange.
9. **Introduction of “Warm Data”:** One participant suggested orienting toward the concept of “Warm Data” to break down barriers between experts and participants and focus more on peer-reflective formats.
10. **Networking:** There were multiple expressions of the desire for stronger networking and exchange among participants to foster collaboration and the development of ideas.
11. **Feedback and Evaluation:** Conducting surveys on relevant topics was suggested to better understand participants' needs and incorporate them into future planning.

A Draft Summary of the event “Critical Youth Work?”

The landscape in which young people grow up is marked by significant and multifaceted societal transformations. These transformations are not only structural but also political, as young people become active participants in the polarized discourses that define their realities. Recent European Parliamentary elections revealed a troubling trend: a notable rise in support for far-right and authoritarian parties among youth. This reflects broader issues such as shrinking democratic spaces, growing support for illiberal democracies, and the normalization of extremist viewpoints. Such developments signal a pressing need for youth work to address these challenges effectively.

Challenges to Democratic Participation

The political climate in Europe is characterized by multiple crises affecting democracy. There are increasing constraints on freedoms such as press and assembly, alongside legal and financial obstacles that hinder the work of civil society organizations. This context poses significant challenges for youth workers, who are tasked with fostering democratic engagement among young people. Furthermore, young individuals often find themselves as mere objects of political decisions, limited by their age and thus often excluded from electoral participation. The demographic reality that youth constitute a minority in many European countries exacerbates this feeling of exclusion.

Young people's experiences with activism—exemplified by climate protests—indicate a yearning for engagement and representation. However, they also experience significant political decisions, such as pandemic-related lockdowns, that disproportionately affect them. This paradox highlights the critical need for youth work to amplify young voices and ensure their concerns are recognized in policy discussions.

The Role of Critical Youth Work (CYW)

The concept of **Critical Youth Work** emerges as a response to the aforementioned challenges, advocating for a transformative approach within youth work practices. CYW emphasizes the necessity of addressing structural,

professional, and methodological dimensions of youth work, re-evaluating its objectives in the context of contemporary societal challenges. This involves acknowledging the importance of human rights and democratic foundations in youth work, creating spaces where young people can express themselves and actively engage in shaping their communities.

Critical Youth Work positions itself as a necessary framework for navigating the complexities of young people's lives. It advocates for youth work as a critical, political, and social practice—one that not only acknowledges the realities of young people's lives but actively seeks to empower them. By fostering an environment that encourages reflection on existing practices, CYW challenges traditional roles and methodologies, promoting inclusivity and equity in youth work.

Empowerment and Structural Change

The text highlights the need for youth work to shift from a passive role to one of empowerment, advocating for the rights of young people. This requires a deep understanding of the social, political, and educational dimensions of youth work. CYW encourages youth workers to engage critically with their practice, recognizing the need for ongoing reflection and adaptation to the evolving landscape in which young people exist. This critical engagement must also address the realities of marginalization faced by many young individuals, particularly those from minority and vulnerable backgrounds. The text emphasizes the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue and reflection, where young people can voice their concerns and aspirations without fear of judgment or retribution. In this way, CYW not only seeks to defend existing rights but also aims to expand the horizons of what youth work can achieve.

Challenges within Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Despite the potential for CYW to effect meaningful change, there are significant barriers within the civil society landscape. Many CSOs and youth fields lack the financial resources and connections necessary to influence European policy discussions effectively. Often, these discussions are dominated by governmental organizations and funders, leaving youth workers and young people in a subordinate position. This creates a disconnect between the needs and voices of youth and the decisions that affect them.

Thus, it is imperative for practitioners in youth work to articulate their perspectives clearly and assertively. By doing so, they can reclaim their agency within the policy-making process, ensuring that the unique experiences and needs of young people are represented.

A Call for Structural Transformation

The text underscores the need for youth work to embrace its role as a critical actor in democratic processes. CYW provides a framework for youth work to adapt and respond to contemporary challenges, emphasizing the importance of structural transformation within the field. This includes fostering an interdisciplinary understanding of youth work, where practitioners draw on diverse fields of knowledge and experience to inform their practices.

In order to strengthen the profession and its structures, the idea of a **Community of Practice** is proposed. This concept acknowledges the diverse expertise within the youth work sector while preventing corporatism, ensuring that youth work remains focused on its core mission of advocating for young people's rights and well-being.

Conclusion

In summary, Critical Youth Work represents a vital approach for addressing the pressing challenges facing young people today. It advocates for a participatory and inclusive youth work practice that empowers young individuals to engage meaningfully in their communities and assert their rights. By fostering critical reflection and dialogue, CYW seeks to reshape the discourse around youth work, ensuring its relevance and impact in a rapidly changing political and social landscape. Ultimately, the goal of CYW is to create a more equitable and democratic society, where the voices and experiences of young people are valued and actively integrated into the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

PARTNERS

The members of the Commission "European and International Educational Work" in the "Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten" (AdB) and their international and European partners (<https://www.adb.de/node/105>)



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CRITICAL YOUTH WORK?

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