

Conclusions

Youth work and young refugees – Critical reflections on the evolving social order and bridges to inclusion

Maria Pisani and Tanya Basarab

Introduction

The current human rights crisis affecting refugees in Europe served as the impetus for a number of EU–Council of Europe youth partnership actions geared towards exploring the situation of young refugees in Europe, and in particular the role of youth work and youth policy in their integration and inclusion. This issue of Youth Knowledge Books responded to a recognised need for more critical engagement, an opportunity to explore what is being done in the youth field, the challenges, the strengths, and ways of moving forward, while advancing a dialogue between policy, research and practice, both in the youth field and in co-operation with other fields.

Our call was ambitious, setting out a broad array of areas for development, and the contributors did not disappoint. The pages in this book highlight the diversity of practices across a range of settings, with different youth actors developing a contextualised knowledge base, and drawing on a range of methodologies, skills and tools to respond to the needs and aspirations of young refugees. The reader will also recognise key youth work characteristics (see Council of Europe 2015) informing analysis and practice throughout the book: the emphasis on value-driven youth work that is self-reflective and critical, the focus on young people's expressed needs and aspirations, voluntary participation, a focus on the personal, social and ethical development of young people, and the focus on relational practice, emphasising dialogue with young people and the broader communities.

But how do such characteristics play out within what is clearly a very particular, and yet evolving and uncertain context? What is particular about youth work with young refugees and migrants? What knowledge base, sources and skills are youth workers drawing on and developing in order to address new learning needs? This concluding chapter reflects on the common threads, presents some of the emerging themes and locates youth work within, and the possibilities it may offer to, the lives of young refugees and migrants. It also presents some avenues and perspectives to consider in youth policy making.

We hope that the examples that contributors brought, together with these concluding remarks, will also support those involved in the European youth field to continue working on the issues young refugees and migrants face. In an increasingly hostile context across Europe, maintaining the inclusion and human rights of young refugees and migrants on the European youth agenda and communicating the needs of these groups to other policy fields is an important responsibility.

Between violence and hope – Youth work navigating insecurity and uncertainty

The ethnographic data presented by Briggs and Cordero Verdugo sets the terrain; the disturbing contexts they describe as they trace a trail across Europe are repeated throughout these pages. Smugglers, deportation, refugee camps, legal status – these are not familiar terms to youth workers, or indeed the majority of us who can make a claim to citizenship and the rights we take for granted. Such terms belong to the subjective life-world of the refugee, the “illegalised” migrant, the lived environment that surrounds them, which provides the backdrop against which they try to make sense of their world, their journeys and their future. A number of contributors emphasised the need for youth workers to understand the legal terrain and the administrative barriers many young asylum seekers, refugees and migrants confront on a daily basis.

Young refugees and migrants are exposed to violence and multiple insecurities, fleeing war, persecution, experiencing the loss of family and home, sexual and gender-based violence, and institutional violence, racism and hate crime. While recognising the role and limitations of youth work, Lyamouri-Bajja reminds us that youth workers working with young refugees will invariably be working with young people who have endured or continue to endure a traumatic event. This reality also highlights the need for more research into trauma-informed youth work practice. The author emphasises that in such situations youth work can explore the resources and resilience of the person and focus on supporting their own life projects as a way forward.

“Waitinghood”, a drawn-out process marked by insecurity and precarity, surfaced time and time again, often as a source of ongoing trauma. Citing unaccompanied minors, Honkasalo described it as the most “unbearable” aspect of life in a new country – not knowing if they will be able to remain, or the conditions framing their right to remain. For the young asylum seeker and undocumented migrants, the transition to adulthood then is not associated with gaining new rights, but potentially losing rights, and new risks, such as deportation, are added to the mix. For youth workers and policy makers, knowledge development is critical in developing the services, tools and good practices necessary to accompany young asylum seekers and refugees as they navigate the complex legal terrain, but also in understanding how such transitions affect the lives of young asylum seekers and migrants. The period of waitinghood (that is particular to young asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) also provides some important insights into how we theorise adolescence and emerging adulthood, vulnerability, agency and resilience. Certainly, in making the transition to adulthood, the possibilities for exploration and opportunities are not equally accessible nor obtainable to all young people, and choices will of course vary according to different individuals and cultural influences (see Arnett 2000: 477).

However, for those young people facing the possibility of deportation, in particular those who will remain with an irregular legal status, postponing the transition to “adulthood” is not an option. Adulthood does not “emerge”, but rather, is delivered through legal notice at the age of 18 – with a significant reduction in rights and in fulfilling their potential through further education, professional development, and indeed political development.

Youth work, cross-sectoral partnerships and relationships

Young asylum seekers and refugees do not live in a vacuum. Given the complex and multifaceted realities mentioned above and many others documented throughout this publication, a number of contributors highlight the need for cross-sectoral collaboration across the services young refugees and migrants come in contact with. Henn and Gregull argue that youth work with young asylum seekers, refugees and migrants requires new alliances, cross-sectoral co-operation and working relationships with other service providers and professionals, in order to tap into diverse perspectives, resources and expertise, and also to develop service provision, practice and youth policies. Özerim and Kalem, for example, provide a number of examples of how youth organisations have responded to the refugee crisis in Turkey, and engaged in different partnerships, including collaboration with humanitarian organisations, to address the needs of young refugees. The authors also look at how youth work has moved from emergency support to more structured, continual engagement with young refugees in Turkey. Youth work in humanitarian and emergency contexts has emerged as an important arena for action in several contributions in this book. This topic requires further knowledge gathering, analysis and understanding to facilitate adequate support to those paid or volunteer youth workers acting in such contexts.

Social capital is an established theoretical lens for looking at how youth workers, as resource-bearers, can further the development of capital. When it comes to youth work, relationships matter, going to the very heart of practice. Whether it be youth workers developing their capital by reaching out to other service providers and facilitating cross-sectoral practice, or youth workers sharing their capital with young people in the form of information, support, and bridging communities, it is clear that, in the case of young refugees and migrants, the importance of this resource takes on a new meaning and significance. By its very nature, forced migration entails disruption, separation, and life in a new and strange context.

While highlighting the administrative and legal obstacles upon which so much hinges, Le Guern describes the educational role in providing transcultural and transitional support to young refugees. Described as learning the “cultural keys” to their new environment, young people are guided through this process as they take ownership of their own journey towards belonging and inclusion. In this case, youth workers co-operate closely with other professionals (psychologists, social workers, lawyers, administrators), in order to offer the young people a coherent service. Such multi-disciplinary teams provide the opportunity for each specialised role to develop in a focused way, while avoiding role confusion, burnout and, indeed, unethical practice.

Formal and informal social networks are critical in affecting how the migratory journey will pan out. This is particularly the case where young asylum seekers and refugees

have little say on where they will be moved to. As Williams so aptly captures it, social capital is “shattered” by the policy of dispersal, moving young asylum seekers from one place to the next through the course of the asylum process. Eicken describes her own sense of helplessness and the effect it has on the young refugees she works with, in particular how ongoing displacement disrupts relationships of trust and forces young refugees to face such challenges over and over again. In the words of Abbas, a 17-year-old Afghan, on learning that he will be moved to a new home in a different part of the country:

My home will close. They will transfer me and my friends to different homes. I will lose my friends, my home and since I will be moved very far, also my job. (see Chapter 3)

Gately and Refugee Youth also describe how friendships and relationships suffer as a result of ongoing displacement and relocation, contributing to a sense of isolation and loneliness that is common among young asylum seekers. At greater risk of social exclusion, young refugees and migrants experience higher rates of material poverty and face obstacles (social and legal) to social welfare and health services. Networks and relationships, then, become crucial in providing support, finding a place to live, a place to study, a place to work, a place to worship, and a place to hang out and feel safe. The absence of such relationships forms one of the biggest barriers to young refugees and migrants engaging within and across communities. Several contributions have highlighted the importance of relationship-building and ensuring some level of stability by building a trustful relationship with the youth worker, investing in new friendships and support networks with peers and with the host community. Reflections from youth work practice in such contexts also refer to the need for support and guidance for the youth workers themselves.

Different facets of social capital were discussed by many of the contributors. In her chapter on the work being done in Italy, Scardigno discusses the importance of recognising the cultural capital and resources young refugees and migrants already possess, and also how specially designed programmes within the formal education system can provide opportunities for young refugees and migrants to further develop and accumulate different forms of capital, including cultural knowledge, and social capital in accessing new and different communities, spaces and places. Scardigno reflects on the need young refugees might have to reconstruct their story and, in the process, identify bridging elements to the context, in this case building an academic achievements portfolio that the university can use as a basis to open its doors for furthering education. Pisani discusses the importance of providing a space to bond; she describes a liminal space that transcends arbitrary borders, providing a space for young people, including young asylum seekers and refugees, to no longer feel lonely, nor alone. This is a recurrent theme throughout the book. The opportunity to feel safe and make friends, leisure activities and having fun is emphasised as fundamental to the well-being of young refugees and migrants – and as one might expect, youth workers have responded across diverse contexts in familiar and innovative ways. For example, young refugees and migrants recognise language barriers as one of the biggest obstacles to making new friends, to understanding the legal context, their rights and how to access them, to reaching out to service providers, policy makers and new communities. Youth workers are tapping into their strengths and responding in

innovative ways through informal education – learning languages through play, and engaging in activities that are less dependent on spoken language, such as sports or the arts, and which support young refugees not only in keeping them active but also providing the much needed emotional support and space to express.

Nothing new here, it's what youth workers "do". And yet not. Such practices must be couched within the broader context. Racism, xenophobia, far-right, invasion, besieged, nationalism, fear, hate and violence: these terms are repeated and echoed throughout this publication, as different authors have commented and reflected on the discourse and environment that receives young asylum seekers and refugees to Europe. Polishchuk argues that the "other" guised as the Muslim/illegal immigrant/refugee generates a "shared public and private feeling of being besieged". She argues that such a reality influences why young refugees and migrants experience difficulties in making new friends: the "local" actively avoids contact with the "other" (see Chapter 12). Honkasalo describes how negative and stereotypical media coverage has influenced the ideas of young people in youth clubs; she provided examples of critical media analysis and research, and calls for more training for youth workers in this regard. Galea and Kanteh provide an example of how such exclusion can be addressed. They describe how empowerment came through the social capital that was gained through forming part of a refugee-led group. Bonding social capital came through the effects of a greater circle of friends, which translated into empathy of issues shared with others who faced similar challenges. As a group, the members "acquired a far better tool to face aspects of the double liminality that existed within their age groups: the fact that not only were they grappling with typical teenage growing-up issues but they were also Muslim, often black, and refugees in a country that had a tendency towards racism" (see Chapter 15).

Framed within different paradigms, from horizontal methodologies to participatory and bottom-up approaches, and with an emphasis on dialogue, the transformative and political element of youth work is not only embraced, but theorised as central to youth work practice. Briggs and Cordero Verdugo call out for a renewed political energy in youth work. Critical political engagement requires youth workers and young refugees to be attentive to power relations and social inequalities (see Gately and Refugee Youth and their work on Participatory Action Research and critical youth work), to understand the local within the global, and to develop a deeper understanding of refugee and migrant movements within a globalised and interdependent world. Together, youth workers and refugees interrogate and ask questions as to how and why policy is developed and, ultimately, how it is experienced in real life.

Williams positions youth work as a place of hope, arguing that in order to keep hope alive, youth workers must work with young refugees and migrants to politically engage, and to embrace a transformative youth work agenda. A number of contributors provide examples of how youth work with young refugees has embraced these possibilities. Located in the borderlands, Pisani describes youth work as a site for radical openness, where young people can feel safe, and engage in the uncomfortable conversations that must be had, to learn, to challenge, to transgress borders and create opportunities to embrace and enable political agency and voice. Borderlands is a space of action allowing young refugees and youth workers to speak

out about their doubts and vulnerabilities while at the same time engaging with the social order and its challenges.

Polishchuk introduces “horizontality”, embracing democratic processes “with” young refugees, paradoxically within a national context that is embracing undemocratic processes justified within a constructed national “crisis”. Bringing a policy-making perspective, Ziemann makes the point that youth work has a particular role and responsibility to bear in ensuring young refugees have real opportunities to engage. Situating participation as a human right, he argues that young refugees should be supported to participate, not only to speak, but also to be heard (Spivak 1988). Ziemann provides examples of how youth workers in Germany have engaged young refugees and local youth in a series of structured workshops with local authorities. The workshops identified youth needs, while the process as a whole strengthened democratic skills and social cohesion.

Social capital in the form of bridging, providing links to other spaces, including institutions and structures of power and influence such as the media and policy makers, also comes to the fore. Ryckebusch and Steegmans explain how a project in Belgium works with young asylum seekers to identify problems in the asylum procedure, the reception policy and integration. The project also embraces a pedagogy that seeks to work with young people to communicate these problems to policy makers, and to raise public awareness. Social media has provided a space for young refugees to challenge such negative, homogenising and often violent casting, and an opportunity to speak out on their own terms.

Confirmed and emerging themes – Considerations for youth policy

Migration is a transversal phenomenon not limited to procedures or to specific authorities. The contributions in this book have highlighted the strength and potential of youth work in supporting young refugees once they arrive in Europe and in their host communities. Some of the contributions in this book have highlighted how youth work has responded through its flexible and adaptable nature, while others have also touched upon how services for young refugees and migrants are organised and implemented on the basis of co-operation. There are certain considerations for policy makers in the youth field to reflect on or to advocate towards other policy areas, based on the analysis in this Youth Knowledge book.

First, some topics well known to youth policy have come up in the publication related to the importance of supporting access to rights, participation, relationship- and trust-building, and cross-sectoral co-operation. These have been generally seen in youth policy as fundamental aspects of young people’s transition to autonomy and socialisation. What is important is to assess whether all youth work with young migrants and refugees, wherever it happens, is well supported by the general youth policy set-up.

Second, a range of themes that were considered no longer relevant have emerged to the foreground again, not exclusively due to the political and media discourse around large recent arrivals of migrants and refugees to Europe. These themes

include discrimination, xenophobia, hate speech and lack of access to rights. Policy makers need to ensure the states fully respect their commitments to guaranteeing the rights young refugees have and actively combat these negative phenomena. Young people growing up in a country that tolerates public discrimination will assume that it is acceptable to perpetrate such acts. Equipping youth workers with information on the human rights system, on the rights of young refugees and the various categories therein is the right approach in such contexts. Support to active young people engaged in awareness raising, open debates and mobilisation against these actions ensure an investment in a peaceful, cohesive society.

Third, new themes have also emerged that may require new policy frameworks. One such point has been the need to support further knowledge development and put in place support systems for youth work in humanitarian or emergency contexts. Youth work in such contexts bring an important contribution rooted in informal and non-formal pedagogies in providing information, offering a break to young people caught in such contexts, safe and recreational spaces to breathe, connect and learn. Co-operation with the development and emergency aid sectors is required to understand the strengths and the limitations of youth work in these new contexts. Youth workers feel the need to understand well the asylum legislation, the migration laws, the rights and responsibilities of the young refugees, the rights of migrants in the labour market or to education or healthcare. These are not questions that can be learned through practice, they imply understanding of facts and legislation. In this sense, authorities can develop user-friendly referral systems for youth work practitioners to help them navigate migration and integration procedures, while at the same time bringing their added value of safe learning and recreational spaces.

Supervision and guidance systems are needed for youth workers in these and other contexts through targeted policy measures. For example, trauma-informed youth work may be equally straining for the youth workers and for the young refugees. Disruptions have a stronger impact in the transitions of young refugees that might travel alone. Long waitinghood and procedures take a strain on the young people and affect them in multiple ways. Youth work that reaches out to these young people needs resources and an enabling environment. It needs to be made visible and recognised by youth policy makers through a combination of broad and targeted measures.

While the contributions in this publication have reflected on youth workers' perspectives, youth policy should consider also what specific measures might be needed to address the youth population in the host communities at large with the objective of strengthening community-building and preventing divisions. For example, at the local level, policies on community cohesion and intercultural dialogue are needed, so as to foster a rich intercultural exchange between the young migrants and refugees and the young people from the hosting communities which might become the new homes for some of them. Youth policy can initiate cross-sectoral partnerships for this purpose.

Several authors have reflected on the hostile environment, negative imagery and media portrayal of the refugees which lead to a rise in xenophobia and even violence. The concept of borderlands as a space where young refugees have a chance to define their own agency, to build their own social and cultural capital and engage with the host communities could be a useful basis to reflect on policy barriers or limitations.

There are countries that have extended certain rights and protection beyond 18 years as a way to reduce the sudden interruption of life projects.

Youth policy should support further understanding of how transition, participation, autonomy and resilience are seen by young refugees and migrants and by young people in host communities and how youth work could facilitate a constructive dialogue between these perspectives.

Policy improvement also requires active contribution from practice, therefore ongoing dialogue and spaces for advocacy need to be supported. Targeted funding to refugee-led initiatives can inform not only youth policy, it can also enrich youth work traditions and approaches that have developed in Europe. Support to experiential youth work practice, to inclusion initiatives but also to basic language courses led by thousands of volunteer youth workers means support for inclusion as a whole.

Creating space and support for refugee-led initiatives can also lead to a stronger advocacy movement and ensure that any discussion on refugee issues involves those concerned. Across Europe, young migrants and refugees are not yet fully part of the discussions that concern them; political bias often gets in the mainstream of public discourse and human rights questions are side-lined. Through supporting the agency and space for refugee initiatives, these harmful tendencies can be reversed and a more balanced and fairer democratic space could emerge on migration topics to be discussed.

Finally, support to research is important in identifying the most effective policy responses to the various contexts and moments young refugees and migrants may experience, from arrival to full integration or return to their homeland.

Conclusion – Political contributions of youth work and policy: embracing and shaping a more dynamic and diffuse new world order

The challenges that young asylum seekers, refugees and migrants face are well documented throughout this book. Positioning these young people as passive victims of their circumstances, to focus on obstacles alone, would fail to capture the complexity and multifaceted aspects of their lives, and how they deal with them at an individual level. Likewise, examples of their resilience, strength, determination and agency, while inspiring, must not be fixed in binary terms: vulnerability and resilience are dynamic in nature. To do so would simply be to flip the hierarchy in an attempt to maintain a neat but dysfunctional order, and negates how social categories (such as age, race, gender and legal status among others) are dynamic and intersect.

In many ways the arrival of the “other” is forcing us all to reflect on the complexities, risks, disruptions and possibilities of the “post” world we call home. The nation state, borders and the comfort of certainty and stability are being challenged by growing global, regional and local economic inequality, climate change, political unrest and transnational conflicts and disasters. With these changes come new opportunities and the excitement of unknown and yet unimagined possibilities. The chapters in this book testify to the way youth work has embraced the unknown, and this in itself points to one of the strengths of the field. Youth workers are reaching out, working where young refugees and migrants are at, wherever they may be, developing a myriad of relationships and working relationally to connect “us” to the “other” (Fusco 2012) – whoever the “us” and the “other” may be.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the arrival of young refugees and migrants has also held up a mirror to youth work, inviting us to ask ourselves who we are, how we define ourselves and our actions, and responding to the question: What do we stand for? The response from our contributors was explicit and unambiguous. Respect for each and every individual goes to the heart of youth work practice. Young refugees are young people first and foremost, and must not be defined by their legal status. Within a context that increasingly seeks to shackle the lives of young refugees, youth workers have an opportunity to embrace and encourage their political agency. Taking this notion further, a transformative practice moves beyond youth workers as providers of recreation and leisure – that may at times merely serve as a distraction – to engaging with the structural inequalities that shape young people’s lives, and collectively addressing these obstacles. Recognising the inalienable human rights of every young person, not only as an ethical stance, but also as a legal obligation of the state, and supporting inclusion and participation, requires critical engagement, dialogue and participation, knowledge and action. We are reminded of the political role of youth work, in advocating with, and sometimes, where they are excluded from such spaces and processes, on behalf of young refugees and migrants.

References

Arnett J. J. (2000), “Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties”, *American Psychologist*, Vol 55, No. 5, 468-480.

Council of Europe (2015), *Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio*, European Youth Centre, Strasbourg.

Fusco D. (2012), “Use of Self in the Context of Youth Work”, *Child & Youth Services*, 33-45.

Spivak G. C. (1988), “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Nelson C. and Grossberg L., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana.