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International Perspectives on Youth Participation

AUTHORS ANTTI RANTANIVA & BARNABÁS GULYÁS PHOTO MISSION TO ACCOMPLISH PARTICIPATION (MAP) -HANKE

Youth participation is one of the key topics in the youth field and regularly mentioned, for example, in youth policies and strategy papers. Being in the forefront implies that youth participation is rather well-known, but it is not always clear what exactly we mean when we talk about it. Together with different stakeholders from Finland and Hungary we became curious about what participation means for young people themselves. How would they define it and what would they recognize as a form of meaningful participation for themselves? Also, most importantly, how could we as youth workers support the youth more efficiently to reach this meaningful experience of participation?

These questions were the basis for building an Erasmus+ KA2 project called *Mission to Accomplish Participation* (MAP), which has brought together a group of Finnish youth aged 14–17 and youth workers from the city of Mikkelä as well as Community Educator students from Xamk. We sought a similar group composition from Hungary too with the two differences, from the City of Gödöllő we had a decision-maker involved who is responsible for youth affairs and students from ELTE University's Community Coordination program.

Understanding how to contribute to quality development of youth work in a local context

The project is a kind of a pilot in which we try to explore the possible connections between higher education institutions, local municipalities, and youth work organizations. Bringing together the different partners helped us to understand how to contribute to quality development of youth work in a local context.

The first project activities were international workshops for all the participants. They all met each other for one week in the small town of Gödöllő in Hungary in February 2023, and then again in Vierumäki, Finland in August 2023.

In these international meetings we attempted to deepen our mutual understanding regarding the topic of youth participation, not just from the different perspectives of young people themselves, youth work students and professional youth workers, but also from the perspectives of two different countries, Finland and Hungary.

In both international meetings all participants spent a lot of time sharing their views about what they considered as important elements in participation. They recognized, for example, how it's important that it's genuinely possible to create an impact and make a change if you join some participation activities, such as a student council at school. They also concluded that a meaningful participation experience doesn't only happen in "official" participation activities like a youth council or a political hearing, but instead, participation can happen in any activity where you aim to make some kind of positive impact to something that feels meaningful for you. The genuine chances to express your opinions and make them heard by the adults were considered highly important for successful youth participation. Also, it should be mentioned that youth participation as such is a less interesting topic for young people, as we experienced. In other words, during the project we had to find an angle which is closer for young people when talking about youth participation, such as seeking for change in society or taking responsibility.

Sharing experiences between Finnish and Hungarian participants

The meetings also allowed the Finnish and Hungarian participants to discuss their ideas and experiences of potential obstacles to participation. Young people from both countries listed multiple personal obstacles they recognized, such as a lack of motivation, energy, or know-how to join the different participation activities, even if they consider them important. They also shared many experiences in which the opportu-



nity to participate and make an impact wasn't genuine: for example, the school board asked for the opinion of the student council, but this had no impact in the actual decision-making process. According to participants, bad experiences such as these were highly unmotivating and could easily be an obstacle for joining any further participation activities.

There were a lot of similarities in the issues regarding participation between Finland and Hungary, but of course the participants recognized many differences as well. This gave an interesting perspective to the topic itself and more generally to the everyday lives of young people in the two countries. MAP is a small-scale partnership Erasmus+ project, which allows us to have a longer process with the participants rat-

her than just one international meeting. This proved to be very good for the learning results of the participants as well as for the group dynamic.

Bringing together the youth, the students and the professionals

It was an interesting experiment for us to organize the international meetings by bringing together all three target groups: the youth, the students, and the professionals. This of course brought a lot of perspective to the topic, and in many cases we were able to reach good dialogue between these groups. However, obviously this approach created some rather big challenges as well. It was a demanding task for the facilitators to make sure that the different participants understood what we were discussing, since participation is a very large theme that can be a challenge for anyone. We also had to balance how each partici-

pant understood their specific role in the process. Sometimes this was successful and other times it created some confusion. This was a very good learning opportunity both for the participants and for the organizers.

The longer project also allowed for our partnering Finnish and Hungarian organizations to really deepen our relationship during the project and create plans also for the future. We will continue to work together with other topics as well, and we are already looking forward to it. Thank you for this journey, Erasmus+! ■

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▲ The participants of the MAP Project gathering in Gödöllő, Hungary, in February 2023.