EUROPEAN ACADEMY ON YOUTH WORK - WORKSHOP REPORT

STEPS - Strategies for Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) in post-factual Societies

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TOPIC / PROJECT DISCUSSED

STEPS is an Erasmus+ KA 1 project involving 13 countries (DE, AT, CZ, ESP, GR, BUL, ROM, IT, NOR, UK, BE, EE) and focusing on the question, in how far rising right-wing populism, post-factualism and the prevention of radicalisation influence EDC with young people on the levels of youth policy and of concrete educational activities.

METHODOLOGY

The workshop lasted for 90 minutes and consisted in the following steps:
- Short introduction of the STEPS project and its key conceptual aspects
- Barometer exercise:
    - Does the current appeal of right-wing populist political movements influence your field of work on the political level?
    - In your educational work, do you come across anti-democratic / illiberal convictions of participants?
- Introduction of key findings of STEPS, group discussion, clarification and new ideas by the participants
- Introduction of concept of an intervention plan, discussed in small groups
- Raising and discussing the topic of "bridging narratives"

KEY ISSUES RAISED/ CHALLENGES

Conducting a barometer exercise in the group, we found out that it remains difficult to notice a change in the political sphere of youth policies, while there is ample experience of the participants with anti-democratic attitudes in their concrete educational work, a loss of trust of the mainstream while radicalised anti-democratic views are gaining momentum.

This exercise confirmed the analysis of the STEPS project, which investigated the consequences for EDC with young people on two levels. First: the impact on national youth policies and European policy developments given the shift of debates caused by the entrance of nationalist parties into governments. Second: which concepts exist in non-formal EDC/HRE with young people to counter radicalisation and polarisation, and are these concepts scalable and ready for transfer?

SOME FINDINGS OF STEPS INTRODUCED TO THE WORKSHOP

First, at the level of the EU and among EU member states, there is a political shift to focus youth work on the topic of prevention of radicalisation. There is a clear distinction to be made between conceptual approaches of Education for Democracy and Human Rights and the aim to prevent radicalisation from the perspective of security only. To respond to both, the development of infrastructures, systems and competences at the level of national youth policies is highly needed.

Second, there are many good and innovative approaches, which are being developed surprisingly fast. Therefore, a strict focus on project investment and innovation only is counter-productive, as there is a lack of means for mainstreaming and educating for democracy with youth as a permanent task (see here the references to websites used in the workshop).

Third, there is a worrying development of more and more political actors taking measures against youth organisations and NGOs which work for plurality, democracy, and human rights. Sometimes, working on European topics is already a reason for questioning their work. The appearance of right-wing oriented and ideologised parties in more and more governments deeply damages the youth educational sectors as core providers of EDC/HRE.

The workshop discussion confirmed the thesis of STEPS that these developments will not pass by quickly and easily. Therefore, youth work needs to develop an active stand and build capacities that defend democratic and democracy learning and democratic learning spaces in our societies. Organisations doing youth work need to develop awareness and sensitivity of the related political frameworks and STEPS to take.

In small groups, we developed ideas for small intervention plans to understand and tackle the challenges from an organisational perspective.

YOUTH WORK NEEDS TO DEVELOP AN ACTIVE STAND AND BUILD CAPACITIES THAT DEFEND DEMOCRATIC AND DEMOCRACY LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC LEARNING SPACES IN OUR SOCIETIES.

INNOVATIVE RESPONSES TO THESE CHALLENGES

To go deeper into the discussion on findings during the second half of the workshop, we focused on four cards indicating (non-exhaustive) topics, around which right-wing populist movements often enter societal debates:
- Gender and diversity
- Migration and Islam
- Climate change
- Traditional norms / family values etc.

It was discussed, whether in a contested climate, it makes sense for youth work to concentrate on these points of conflict, or rather to look into the more hidden aspects.

Could it be relevant to develop educational concepts that take into consideration the specific experiences that have contributed to the erosion of trust towards democratic governance of our societies, with the aim to come into a serious discussion with the conflicting positions and to allow creating a "bridging narrative" (as identified and suggested by the STEPS project)? I.e.:

- Digitalisation and ethics: the ethical dimension of digitalisation, the re-distribution of wealth, the dimensions of access, control and power in a digitalised society?

- Media and social media in a market dimension: how to develop a standing as critical media user, given the fact that we have dysfunctional media markets and strategic trolling not only in Europe? Developing media competences is only a small part of the bigger picture.

- Economy and the experience of neo-liberal paradigms; the ability of youth work to develop and think in alternatives;

- A highly competitive educational system, while more cohesion and solidarity is needed in society;

- A shift in the perception of radicalisation in societies where the mainstream discourse is shifting to extreme positions;

- Climate change as a present and lasting experience determining the future of the young generation, while threatening privileges of those established.

It is clear that in the frame of a 90 minutes' workshop, we were only able to scratch some of these questions on the surface. We did not come to conclusions or agreements on all the issues raised. However, the common answer from the participants led to a new question: should youth work be the field to create a bridging narrative with those that stir up the debate or is it the genuine task of youth work to clearly take a stand in line with those threatened: minorities, groups in society which are not heard and do not have a lobby.

Focusing the debate on these alternatives, the answer was clear: **the latter is the choice!**

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS
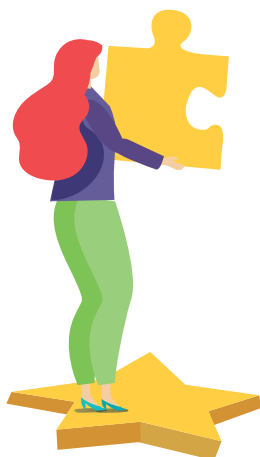
- *"The moderator's low voice and declining modulation made impossible to follow."*

- *"Super interesting topic"*

- *"If we leave scientific evidence aside and accept that the debate is only about opinions and feelings, then we can forget the basic premises of our democratic system."*

- *"We cannot provide long term answers as the societal disturbance created e. g. within the field of economy, digitalisation, climate change, education, radicalisation will accompany us for a long time. So we need to trust our capacity to work with youth on these issues."*

- *"The neo-liberal paradigm shifts us from service users / producers / owners to consumers, and from communities of owners to objected passive individuals: it is necessary to develop a standing as youth workers and educators on this aspect of economy."*

- *"The fact that we sail in rough seas and face headwind also confirms that we are on the right track with education for human rights and democracy: challenges get bigger, thus also the reactions in societies get stronger as more and more people come out of their comfort zone and start learning."*

WEBSITES USED IN THE WORKSHOP

- Reuters digital news report: http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/interactive/

- CIVICUS Tracking Civic Space: https://monitor.civicus.org/

- Reporters without borders: Freedom of press index: https://rsf.org/en/ranking

- Fakeittomakeit: a game on understanding how to create fake news: https://www.fakeittomakeitgame.com/play/sites

Further information available online

- www.dare-network.eu

- http://dare-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DARE-BLUE-LINES_STEPS.pdf