



CATCHING-UP WITH EAYW CONTRIBUTORS: "INNOVATION IS STRONGLY LINKED TO THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE!"



In 2019, the first edition of the European Academy on Youth Work was implemented in Kranjska Gora. There, we had the opportunity to learn from 36 different contributions dealing with various topics of importance for the European youth work community of practice. Two years have passed since the first Academy event, so we wanted to catch up with our contributors and find out if they were able to develop their project further or if it led to or stimulated any further initiatives. In this EAYW series called "Catching-up with EAYW contributors", we are presenting some of the developments experienced by contributors of the first #EAYW.

In our second article, we are talking with **Marzena Ples** and **Paulina Opielka**, who are both youth workers and mediators. On the first EAYW, Marzena presented the **First ADR Kit**, and we were interested to find out if the project was up scaled further and how the topic of mediation is dealt with in the youth work sector.

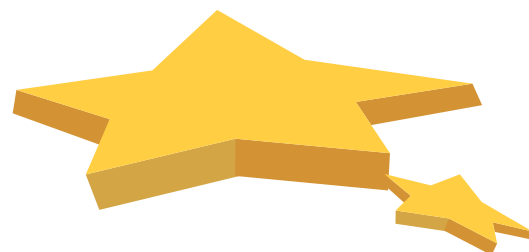
First things first: can you tell us a bit more about your organisation?

Youth Integration and Development Association STRIM aims at empowering young people and providing them with a space to explore their interests, develop competencies, participate in various initiatives and implement their own ideas. At the same time, the goal of the organisation is to build an open-minded society and support local communities. A major part of STRIM's activities are volunteering projects and international educational activities.



Marzena Ples and Paulina Opielka

STRIM runs research in the field of youth and develops various educational tools. The organisation works based on principles of non-formal learning.



We are interested to hear what has happened since the last EAYW. Can you share with us new developments with your project?

At the first EAYW, we presented the outcomes of the First ADR Kit project (the acronym ADR stands for Alternative Dispute Resolution), which was a Strategic Partnership aimed at introducing ADR and mediation in the youth work field. We have been continuing our work towards that direction and since the EAYW, we have involved more partners from various countries in initiatives related to ADR in the youth field. One of the training courses was implemented in Georgia (the representative of the host organisation, Youth Association DRONI, was present at the EAYW) and we managed to raise interest in mediation among youth organisations from the Eastern Europe and Caucasus regions. One of the outcomes of this project was a new Toolkit, **“Ready to mediate? Direction: Youth!”**, which contains workshop scenarios and educational tools on conflict management for youth workers. Currently, we are working on the Capacity Building project “REMEDY” and creating a network of organisations, which can support young people in the mediation process.

Many young people do not have tools to deal with their conflicts and often their reaction is either aggression or avoidance which, in any case, does not get to the root of the problem. There is still a clear need to show young people how they can manage their own conflicts in the most efficient way, and this we are trying to do through our projects and initiatives.



*“Ready to mediate? Direction: Youth!” training course for youth workers
(source: Facebook - First ADR Kit)*

This sounds really interesting! Can you give us some more information about your new project?

Our project “Conflict Transformation and Mediation in Youth Work, ReMeDy” is a continuation of the strategic partnership “First ADR Kit”. The aim of both projects is to introduce and explore mediation, an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) method to youth work. During the “First ADR Kit” we focused on creating new educational methods for teaching mediation and negotiation by using non-formal learning approaches, and then tested and implemented them with youth groups in Estonia, Italy, Norway, Poland and the UK. The tools of mediation were used with various young people with different backgrounds. The project was met with positive feedback by young people, youth workers and professionals in the field of mediation, therefore we decided to develop it further, expand target groups, involve different stakeholders and introduce it on an intercontinental level.

“ReMeDy” focuses on providing young people with tools to manage conflicts in their lives. This project aims to raise awareness on the potential of mediation as a tool for conflict transformation and create a sustainable network of organisations willing to share and gain expertise in the field of mediation applied to youth work. Throughout the project, we plan to conduct research among young people and youth workers regarding their approach to conflict and dispute resolution and then, based on the findings of that research, to conduct a series of training courses on the topics of communication, negotiation and mediation, which will be developed and implemented with the help of professional mediators. The project involves organisations from Italy, Poland, Greece, Spain, Vietnam and Colombia, each of them contributing to the project with unique skills and a specific approach.

More information about both projects can be found here:

<http://firstadrkit.org/> and

<https://www.facebook.com/firstadrkit>

Ready to Mediate? Direction: Youth!

Workshop scenarios and
educational tools on conflict
management for youth workers



Source: Facebook – First ADR Kit

As we are dealing with innovation, can you tell us what makes your project innovative?

The main innovative aspect of the project lies in its unique and unprecedented way of approaching the topic and addressing it in youth work. To our knowledge, we were the first partnership of organisations working with youth and conflict professionals who decided to join forces and introduce mediation – a topic so far mostly reserved to legal disputes – to youth work. When we started the “First ADR Kit” in 2016, the concept of mediation was completely unknown to youth workers. At the same time, many of them were using skills and tools related to mediation (such as active listening, focusing on interests, managing emotions, creativity) in their everyday work! By connecting them with professional mediators we were able to give structure and concrete tools to youth workers who are faced with conflict in their everyday jobs.

Another unique aspect of the project are educational tools that we gather, retransform and create in the field of mediation and conflict transformation in youth work. The majority of exercises and tools used in mediation are very practical, based on games and simulation exercises. Many of them are well known to youth workers working with a non-formal learning approach, and adding some elements to the tool or to the debriefing part makes them very useful in learning skills that are essential in conflict transformation

and mediation. By engaging creative and open-minded youth educators we are able to create a learning curriculum for young people that is both interesting and educational and allows young people to learn from experience.

Our approach, content and the whole methodology are based on findings from research conducted with young people and youth workers. We analyse their needs, experiences, and attitude and use them in creating tools that they can easily use not only in the educational process but also in their everyday lives.

Last but not least, the innovative aspect of the project lies in its multiculturality. Partners of “ReMeDy” come from extremely different backgrounds. The University of Sevilla employs a scientific approach on mediation and conflict transformation. Our partners from Italy and Greece have a wealth of experience in international educational projects for and with young people. Our Vietnamese partner focuses on community work whereas our Colombian partner works with young people with fewer opportunities. This mix allows us to address needs of young people from different backgrounds and make the educational tools that we create engaging for all of them.



Thanks for sharing this with us! As you identified innovative elements in your project quite easily, can you tell us what innovation in youth work means for you?

It is a process of improvements, constant thinking, brainstorming, checking ideas, developing and evaluating, which leads to the practical implementation of ideas with additional, new elements. While doing this, the social context and needs of young people are taken into consideration. We understand it as a dynamic procedure, where we have an opportunity to check and test various solutions and include in our practices those that work the best. There is also space for mistakes and learning from them. Innovation is curiosity and courage to follow it.

At the next EAYW, we will deal with factors that foster or hinder innovation. From your perspective, which factors or conditions were especially important to make this project possible? Did you face any challenges along the way?

Cross-sectoral cooperation is an important factor. We are introducing a mediation concept which comes from the law into the youth field. The involvement of professional mediators was a key element. At the same time, the non-formal learning approach was something new for them and they have discovered new ways of working with young people. Of course, there were challenging moments between lawyers, mediators and youth workers and they had to put additional effort to understand each other and to meet the needs of young people. Researchers are also involved in the process, and currently we are conducting qualitative research on strategies that young people use in conflict transformation in different countries. The results of this research will be the base for further developments of educational tools.

If you want to find out more or have some thoughts which you want to share, you are more than welcome to write to Marzena Ples at marzena.ples@gmail.com.

The major challenge at the moment is COVID-19 and restrictions related to it. The face-to-face meetings and long discussions among partners are missing. As the initiative is intercontinental, it is very difficult even to arrange online meetings with partners due to time differences. When in Europe we are finishing our working day, the Colombian colleagues are having breakfast while the Vietnamese are preparing themselves for sleep.

From your perspective, what should we be doing more and what should we avoid when developing innovative practices?

I think it is important to not get stuck in a fixed mindset. Some practices in youth work that we know and use every day have not been questioned or changed in a long time (i.e. some educational activities like team building, methods of teaching, the structure of training courses etc.). It is possible to take working tools and methods from different fields (such as mediation, which used to be a method reserved only for legal disputes) and adjust them to youth education.

At the policy level it is also very important to monitor what are the current needs and issues that young people have – being innovative also means being up to date with the needs of youth. In current realities, where topics such as discrimination or climate crisis raise a lot of emotions among young people, true innovators should not be afraid to tackle these topics and address them in their work.

Finally, can you share with us your thoughts on how we can innovate more and create better youth work opportunities?

All innovation in youth work should be based on the real needs of real young people. While working on our projects, we always start by conducting research activities and asking young people what their needs are and issues that they face. Another suggestion would be to draw inspiration from other fields, even if they seem very far away from your field of expertise. True innovation is multidimensional and can be adapted differently in different areas. And never be afraid to ask others to join you! You may be surprised how eager and creative people get when given the opportunity to engage in a new activity.

