

Youth Research Seminar on Equal Opportunities for All

Context and scope

The seminar was organised in the framework of the Partnership in the Youth Field between the Council of Europe and the European Commission in the European Youth Centre in Budapest on 7-9 November 2007.

It was designed to have a holistic approach to the topics relevant to the theme "All Different – All Equal", in line with the slogan of the recently completed youth campaign of the Council of Europe and the "Year of Equal Opportunities for All" of the European Commission.

The seminar theme was very broad and encompassed conceptual as well as empirical work on equality and inequality, anti-discrimination policies, social exclusion, and youth participation. Particular emphasis was placed on work focused on policy development and good practices in the youth field and papers that integrated theoretical, practice and policy orientations. Thematic sessions were not determined in advance but were identified on the basis of the themes that the selected papers emphasized.

The seminar brought together researchers, and a few practitioners and policy makers, from a wide range of perspectives, disciplines, orientations and backgrounds. In terms of discipline, the spread ranged from law to psychology, from comparative literature to pedagogy. The geographical spread was remarkable: from Portugal to Siberia, from Lithuania to Greece and Turkey.

Equal opportunities and educational system

The seminar began with research depicting the barriers and challenges within educational insti-



tutions that undermine equal opportunities for young people, especially in the case of marginal groups, such as the Gitano in Spain. Falling out of the educational system guarantees social exclusion in most settings and youth are often aware of their narrowing horizons resulting from it. Equal opportunities in schooling is still more rhetoric than reality and how school policies discriminate against disadvantaged young people needs to be studied from early on, preferably before children start school.

Equal opportunities and migration

The presentations and the discussions focused also on other dynamics that are critical to understanding discrimination, lack of equal opportunities and pathways that put youth at increased risk of maltreatment and/or victimisation. The papers that focused on migration and experiences of immigrants explained the need for youth workers to be informed of and sensitive to the cultural dynamics (e.g. gender roles, religious codes of conduct, generational barriers to acculturation) in order to better support immigrant



youth. Migration is not a unitary experience and may reduce poverty and increase opportunities for parents and their children, provided that there are mechanisms in place for the “sending” and “receiving” settings. At the opposite end, trafficking (domestic as well as cross-border) is on the rise in countries peripheral to the European Union and puts the vast majority of trafficked youth at great risk of maltreatment and criminal activity.

Need for a “calibrated” approach

The papers also highlighted the need for a more rigorous “calibrated” approach to inclusion and exclusion. First, there is still a need for versatile models that can guide research as well as practice in terms of identifying and utilizing indicators of social inclusion. Secondly, there is a need for continuous monitoring – as suggested in many policy documents – of these indicators. The situation of a certain segment of young people in a given country may change drastically following seemingly minor changes in public policy (as in UK following September 11 and attacks in London). Thirdly, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding disabilities, reflecting an important bias among researchers. The numbers of young people who are hard-of-hearing, visually-impaired, physically-handicapped or have other forms of disabilities are not sufficiently reflected in the numbers of scientific studies. Policy and programmes directed specifically at youth (e.g., EU Youth Programme) are also not necessarily inclusive of disabled youth. Finally, there is a need for research on indigenous youth, who are not immigrants and yet share many experiences with im-

migrant populations. The discussion focused on the concept of power in the practice of youth work and research that utilizes social-psychological models to explicate processes of exclusion.

Youth reactions to discrimination and inequalities

Other papers underlined the need to describe and understand the reactions of young people when they perceive or experience systematic inequalities. The reactions could be violent and very salient (as in the case of riots) or more systematic (as in the case of oppositional subcultures) and organised (as in the form of loosely-organised oppositional groups or in paramilitary organisations). The discussion highlighted the gap in the literature regarding the forms and impact of youth participation in the struggle against discrimination and inequalities.

Further discussions

The seminar provided all participants with an opportunity to share ideas, information on strategies and policy practices that have been developed in diverse national and regional settings. The concluding discussion underlined the difficulties in measuring and applying concepts often used in policy circles, such as multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue, and the need for policy-relevant research. The other important conclusions indicated the need to further examine processes as well as outcomes of discrimination and inequality, the growing role of media in generating stereotypes and prejudice, the role of biased discourse – even in scientific work – in sustaining ill-formed concepts of ethnicity, and the need for developing, applying and promoting critical research methodology.

A comprehensive report of the seminar and the papers presented at the seminar will soon be available on the Partnership website www.youth-partnership.net