
IMPACT DU VOLONTARIAT DANS LE PARCOURS D'UN JEUNE EXCLU

Les villages des jeunes

Research Organisation « Villages des Jeunes » travaille depuis son origine (1963) avec des jeunes en difficultés et avec un aspect international par son appartenance à un mouvement international « Action Jeunesses pour la Paix ». Nous constatons régulièrement que les Programmes Européens étaient peu fréquentés par les jeunes exclus.

Research Director / Co-ordinator

Research Partner

Key Words

- Adaptability
- Integration
- Small works
- European Volunteers
- Youth
- Exclusion

Research subject

The study, *European Voluntary Work for Excluded Young People*, sets out to determine why the participation rate of excluded young people in European programmes is low, and in particular, why it is low in the European Volunteer Service programmes.

This study raises two main issues: is the low participation rate due to the approach adopted by the organisations, or alternatively, is it the result of self-exclusion by the young people themselves?

The authors of the study present a summary of factors, drawn from studies of these young people, which offer a preliminary explanation for this low level of participation. Among the reasons are the following: the young people do not see the value of participating in this programme; they are afraid of going abroad; they do not identify with the programmes; they cannot be absent for long periods of time, etc. These hypothetical reasons are corroborated by the results of numerous studies.

However, the authors state that a multidisciplinary approach is necessary if we are to understand the reason why participation is so low.

Abstract

This study sets out to determine why participation levels of excluded young people are so low in European volunteer programmes, this low participation level having been confirmed by direct observation by the authors. The study involves three European countries: France, Portugal and Denmark, which were chosen for their complementary nature in regard to social setting.

It is a comparative study of the three participating countries. In addition, within the qualitative methodology, interviews have been conducted (with nine young people) using a life-story format, which enabled the researchers to discover the reasons cited by the young subjects themselves.

The study concludes that it is necessary to adapt the European programmes to each individual group of young people, but that this must not be seen as further stigmatisation, in other words, a basic, identical format should also be maintained for all groups.

Methodology and Methods

This study attempts to delimit the lives of excluded young people in three European Community countries. France, Portugal and Denmark. These countries were selected for their complementary characteristics. In the case of Denmark the state plays an important role in managing social programmes. In contrast, in France it is the associations that play the dominant role, and, finally, in Portugal, responsibility for social programmes is taken by civil society and families. Also, in these countries there are organisations that can send or host European voluntary workers and which carry out a variety of activities.

A comparative study of the three countries was undertaken. The process was as follows in each country: first, documents were compiled to enable comparison between the countries. This permitted the establishment of preliminary hypotheses which served as guidelines for interviews with a pre-determined number of young people in each country; second, interviews were held using a life history format, that is, the young people were asked to tell the story of their lives and the interviewer's role was that of facilitator; third, the interviews were analysed and compared from an international perspective to arrive at conclusions and elaborate proposals for the future orientation of the EVS.

This study then, takes an international perspective; it focuses on the similarities and differences found in the operation of the EVS in these three countries, with the aim of making proposals for its future operation.

Procedure

For the study, contact was established with people from the organisations involved in the integration programmes for excluded young people. The young people concerned were aged between 16 and 25 and the local partners chose three young people from each country, making a total of nine.

These young people were interviewed and their responses recorded and transcribed (in the case of the Danish and Portuguese subjects they were translated). The interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to two hours 30 minutes.

This method was chosen due to the heterogeneity of the young people. Again, the purpose of comparison of these life stories was to find similarities and differences in the various personal accounts.

Priority was attached to the subjective view of those interviewed, that is, what they said was taken to be real. A thematic analysis was carried out in which the main subjects of each interviewee were identified and grouped thematically. A thematic table is included which was not defined a priori, rather it was a group of meanings compiled over the course of the research. Once the themes had been established, they served as a stable framework for analysis of the interviews. This permitted preparation of a hierarchical table of main and secondary themes, and allowed optimum break-down of information, i.e., separation of factual and "meaning" elements.

Initial Research Objectives

The first objective proposed by the authors was overly optimistic, namely: to open up the European Voluntary Service to excluded young people from whatever country.

The authors themselves recognise that it is difficult to achieve such an ambitious objective through a partial study such as this, and thus propose a more feasible objective: to explore the personal situation of excluded young people, their needs and motivations.

Changes in the Initial Research Objectives

The spirit behind this study did not change, but, having drawn conclusions, the authors recognised a deficit in their work and reformulated their objective: we wish to make concrete contributions to reconciling the European programmes to the needs of excluded young people so that the latter can participate in the former.

Thus, there was a substantial change in emphasis. It was no longer a matter of defining the needs and motivations of excluded young people with respect to the EVS, but rather a matter of making proposals as to how the EVS could adapt itself to excluded youth.

As explained in the personal evaluation, there is no doubt that this change also had negative effects. These however, did not invalidate the findings, but must be taken into account.

Main Research Results

We shall present the results under four headings: employment, material standard of living, emotional relationships and thought, psychological and intellectual factors.

Employment

Firstly, from the interviews with these nine young people, it is clear that they experience feelings of tiredness and lack of motivation. Despite this, they show a certain hope for the future as they are thinking about studying for future employment, either in the social or health area.

Secondly, they find it difficult to encounter worthwhile employment. While on average they have 2.2 years' work experience and are aged 22, the work done has been unstable and badly paid. Thirdly, a difference emerges between the Danish and French young people on the one hand and the Portuguese on the other. The Danish and French have benefited from incentive employment schemes, in which the employers received state grants. However, this is not the case of the Portuguese young people.

Standard of Living

The first point to be highlighted is that these young people have changed address on numerous occasions – in many cases they had no choice. Furthermore their accommodation is often part of a social benefit package and does not facilitate the mobility and availability required by a European exchange programme.

Secondly, the poor living conditions of these young people must be borne in mind when considering their participation in European voluntary service. Furthermore, they neglect their basic needs in favour of secondary needs that are important for their self-fulfilment. In other words, they are trapped in a misinterpretation of freedom.

Thirdly, these young people are excluded, that is, they do not belong to any social group. If to this we also add their difficult present situation and standard of living, it is clear that they lack a sense of belonging. All these factors form a barrier to participation in a voluntary work programme.

Emotional Relations

Firstly, they have all experienced difficulties and breakdowns in relationships, and consequently the conclusions in this section can be applied to the entire universe of excluded young people.

Secondly, there is an absence of stable relationships, in the realm of friends, love and family. This further underlines the lack of balance in their lives.

Thirdly, as a result of the above, they experience continual psychological changes that tend to be accompanied by addictive and destructive behaviour.

Fourthly, they lack a setting in which to settle down and reconstruct their lives – their emotional, work and material context gives them negative feedback.

Thought, psychological and intellectual factors

Firstly, the combination of all the previously mentioned factors leads to a way of thinking that feeds a set of contradictory and unreal values and aspirations which, as time passes, separates them, leads to their exclusion and self-perception as loners.

Secondly, there is nothing in their environment that urges them to undertake new experiences, that is, they live in a context of continual resignation.

Conclusions from the Main Research Results

One of the most relevant conclusions concerns not so much the study itself as the overall context of the European programme. The European Commission texts refer to the voluntary schemes as satisfying the needs and expectations of all European young people. However, for excluded youth the situation is different: since they do not belong to a recognised social group. One must belong to a recognised social group if one is to participate in a European programme.

It must be remembered that the European programmes set out to offer a change, a new experience and perspective, factors that facilitate a certain degree of self-determination and democratisation. However, this can be dangerous for excluded youth as, for one thing, they are not equipped for these experiences, and secondly, these factors do not allow them to satisfy all of their needs and expectations.

In addition, these programmes are directed towards training, language learning and understanding alternative ways of living and operating. All of this is part of a journey through life, and is dependant on the sort of experiences that the majority of young people have already had. This experience allows them to make the most of the exchange programmes. However, this is not the case of the excluded young people.

Therefore, there is a need to adapt the European programmes to each specific group. However, while they must adapt to specific needs and expectations, they must also maintain an identical form for all the different groups, so as to avoid creation of a new exclusion category.

Main contribution to the objectives of the YFE Programme

In keeping with the objective specified by the authors, the principal contribution to the YFE objectives of this study is that it highlights the needs, motivations and expectations of European excluded youth. There is no doubt that the study provides us with sufficient data for a preliminary approach, but is this enough? We will address this question in the personal evaluation.

Secondly, the authors, after describing the theoretically commendable objectives of the YFE programme, also demonstrate the mismatch between theory and practice. This lack of agreement is even more evident when dealing with excluded youth. The authors propose two criticisms of the YFE: firstly, a criticism of the YFE philosophy in which these European programmes emphasise the idea of a change, new experiences, adventure and new perspectives. For excluded youth this constitutes a barrier as they do

not have a stable base from which to work. The second criticism concerns the objectives: the programmes are concerned with training, language learning and understanding other ways of living. All of this is fundamental in constructing an identity for the citizens of the new Europe, but in order to make the most of this a life experience is needed which these excluded young people do not have.

Thirdly, the previous points show us that it is necessary to adapt European programmes to the needs of excluded young people if the latter are to participate in them in any real sense. It is essential for intervention to affect the basis of these programmes. In addition, since it is impossible to modify the needs and expectations of these young people perhaps it would be easier to reorient the sending and hosting organisations with a view to achieving the points set out in the conclusions.

Fourth, the changes proposed by the authors are as follows: to allow excluded youth to obtain a status that is recognised by society; to offer them scope to use their social skills and motivation, for example, through working groups, communication activities; to facilitate personal contacts and forms of participation with a view to fostering autonomy and creativity – this will require that projects have a collective or community dimension; to offer a framework that will ensure communication and that will value skills, that is, a sensitive setting must be found for dealing with the problems of excluded youth; the value of non-formal education must be recognised; the organisations which receive these young people must create the conditions for successful communication with them.

Having made these proposals, the authors make recommendations for verification and follow-up; two approaches are possible: a theoretical focus to determine the essential elements for successfully receiving and /or sending these young people on voluntary service. This will require redefinition of the ideal structure; and secondly, a practical focus consisting of surveys of a large number of organisations that use the EVS programme, in order to determine the problems encountered.