

Social work with young people in a changing Europe

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Outreach work is about

- mediating young people's place and role in society and
- Making society able to understand the concerns ('troubles') of young people as indicators of social transformation processes

'youth' as a contentious social construct

- Onset of puberty by 2000 five years earlier than 1800
- Commercial pressures on ever younger people
- higher upper limits (15 year 'moratorium'):
 - Longer compulsory schooling
 - Delayed entry into stable work careers (youth unemployment)
 - Later marriage age

Factors complicating identity formation

- Demographic changes:
 - aging population, falling birth rate (youth = minority), patchwork families
- Cultural changes:
 - Cultural merging, new ‘tribal’ allegiances (labels), migration patterns
- Electronic revolution:
 - New relationship patterns; unstructured knowledge diffusion, power and mobbing
- Political changes:
 - Populism, end of ideological positions, single issue politics

Impact on self-perception

- ‘future-horizon’ limited to immediate concerns (long-term unpredictability, ‘flexibilisation’)
- Individualism demanded by market principle (‘making something of oneself’), the ‘selfie’
- Plasticity of physical limits (body enhancements, tattoo/piercing)

Widening 'opportunity gap'

Expansion of personal autonomy (freedom from traditional restrictions, access to networks, easier travel and communication)

Discrepancies in the realisation of autonomy:

- Material resources
- Cognitive resources
- Emotional resources

Symptoms in young people (result of 'decision-overload')

- Withdrawal (increase in depressive illnesses)
- Acting out behaviour (bullying, mobbing, ADHD)
- Over-competitiveness
- Search for 'given structures' (neo-Nazis, racist groups, mafia-involvement, religious groups)
- 'alternative economies' (street-children economics, drug-dealing, delinquency)

Outreach work as 'getting the message'

- comprehensive awareness of change processes that affect all of society and not only young people
- analysis that distinguishes the positive and the dangerous aspects of those changes, particularly with a view of which developments aid integration and which further splits and segregation in society
- Reflexion on one's own 'coping patterns' and role as 'part of the system'

Function of outreach work

- ‘early warning system’ – young people indicate general changes in society
- Re-connecting young people to decision-making structures and bodies
- Low-key responses, avoidance of ‘labelling’
- Providing role models / reference points / setting limits
- Handling crises and positive risk-taking

Methodological principles of outreach work

- combine the respect for privacy, individuality and self-determination with the 'pedagogical courage' to challenge established modes of adjustment manifest either in terms of withdrawal (and isolation can be a mode of adjustment, withdrawal to the computer console) or in terms of over-attachment to groups ('gangs' as much as dependency on virtual social networks)

- Recognising the ‘coping potential’ in young people’s behaviour even where it appears ‘problematic’
- Furthering a sense of ‘authorship’ (instead of ‘professional victimisation’)
- Political participation matters (sense of citizenship) in conjunction with resources
- Setting boundaries based on rights and aimed at emotional security

Dual role of outreach work with young people

signals to young people that they are not alone in their search for identities, securities, future perspectives, emotional conflicts etc. but that there are people, representing other spheres of society, for whom **they matter**.

The way of reaching them must, however, not amount to a threat, to an intrusion into worlds that are 'still under construction' by the young people themselves.

monitoring changes and ruptures on behalf of the entire society.

Young people are a kind of **seismograph of social change**,

Give messages society feels unable to face up to

Outreach workers are therefore a kind of interpreter between two linguistically divided worlds.