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Riikka Kanervo (ed.)

Bridges of Belonging: Exploring Youth Empowerment, Inclusion, and Identity in a Changing World



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1 Introduction

Riikka Kanervo

BRIDGES OF BELONGING: EXPLORING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT, INCLUSION, AND IDENTITY IN A CHANGING WORLD brings together a series of insightful articles that address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities young people face today. The topics of the articles were approached from the perspectives of inclusion and exclusion – what factors create or challenge the experiences of inclusion for young people and young adults? How can we promote young people’s empowerment as part of society?

These articles are a product of the Youth Empowerment through Co-Creative Activity Development (YEA) project, an Erasmus+ initiative, developed in collaboration with first-year students from the English Bachelor’s programme in Social Services.

In a world that is increasingly interconnected yet marked by inequalities, the YEA project stands as a testament to the importance of building connections and empowering youth, especially those in vulnerable situations. Spanning across three countries—Finland, Belgium, and Italy—its findings underscore the need for inclusive practices that can bridge gaps and support youth in shaping their identities and futures.

Bridges of Belonging invites readers to reflect on the diverse experiences of young people today and presents solutions for building more inclusive, supportive communities where every young person can thrive.

ARTICLES

Collaborative Writing Workshops

A series of collaborative writing workshops guided first-year social services students in producing professional articles on youth inclusion. The process combined multiprofessional guidance, including input from an information specialist, project staff, and lecturers, following the teacher-librarian collaboration (TLC) model. The workshops not only refined research and writing skills but also fostered peer support and interdisciplinary cooperation, creating a meaningful and enriching experience for all participants.

Safer Spaces as a Tool to Help and Support Young Girls Suffering from Anxiety

An exploration of the impact of anxiety on young girls in Finland, focusing on societal pressures such as body image and beauty standards. The concept of “safer spaces” is discussed as a supportive environment where girls can express themselves freely, receive guidance, and build resilience. Initiatives like Nicehearts’ Girls’ Space are highlighted for their role in fostering emotional well-being, community, and self-confidence.

Breaking Barriers and Promoting Inclusion for Young People with Disabilities – Examples from Austria and Finland

Barriers faced by young people with disabilities in Austria and Finland are examined, including physical inaccessibility, social stigmatization, and educational and employment inequalities. The article explores policy efforts and accessibility initiatives, emphasizing the importance of universal design, inclusive education, and ongoing policy reforms to promote full inclusion.

From Loneliness to Belonging: The Impact of Social Connections on Young Adults

The rising issue of loneliness among young adults (18-30) is addressed, linking it to mental and physical health challenges. Barriers such as cost and time constraints that hinder social participation are discussed, with solutions proposed to promote physical activity, raise awareness, and create inclusive communities. The piece emphasizes the need for policies that reduce barriers to youth involvement and highlight the significance of young people’s contributions to society.

Addressing Youth Homelessness in Finland

Youth homelessness in Finland is explored, focusing on causes such as financial instability, lack of life skills, and mental health issues. The article stresses the importance of affordable housing, financial support, and life skills education to prevent homelessness. It also calls for policy reforms tailored to youth needs, emphasizing the adaptation of the Housing First model for young people to ensure long-term stability.

Building Bridges of Identity for a Second-Generation Immigrant

The challenges faced by second-generation immigrants in balancing their cultural heritage with the societal norms of their host country are examined. Key issues include language retention, education, and social integration. The article underscores the need for better support systems to help these individuals navigate dual identities and foster a sense of belonging while promoting the importance of cultural diversity.

Open Doors walk Tikkurila

The Tikkurila Open Doors Walk brought together social sector professionals and NGO representatives to visit local service providers in Tikkurila, Vantaa. The event aimed to enhance networking and knowledge about available services for youth and young adults, helping professionals better guide their clients. It provided valuable insights into local organizations and promoted collaboration to improve social services in the community.



2 Collaborative Writing Workshops

Kaisa Puttonen, Johanna Kurki & Riikka Kanervo

L AUREA IS A partner in the Erasmus+ funded project [Youth Empowerment through Co-creative Activity Development \(YEA\)](#), which aims to strengthen young people's sense of community and social connections through the co-creation of leisure activities. The project aims to reach young people and young adults aged 13 to 30.

In the fall of 2024, first-year bachelor's degree students in social services participated in the project as part of their course Well-being and Inclusion. The group of 21 students comes from diverse cultural backgrounds, and many have experience working with youth. Moreover, both the students and the project's target group belong to the same age range.

The students' task was to reflect on the challenges young people face and to highlight these issues through articles. They were guided to consider questions such as: What factors create or challenge the experiences of inclusion for young people and young adults? How can we promote young people's empowerment within society? The students produced articles during four collaborative writing workshops. The writing process was carried out under multiprofessional guidance. This publication is a collection of the students' articles.

The multiprofessional guidance was provided by an information specialist and two YEA project staff members. Additionally, the project experts had discussed the assignment and its pedagogical framework in advance with the course's lead lecturer.

The course involved three types of collaboration: multiprofessional collaboration among the facilitators, peer collaboration among the students and collaboration among all of the above during the writing process.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SENIOR LECTURER, INFORMATION SPECIALIST AND PROJECT STAFF

The students needed high-quality and reliable information sources for their writing process. They also needed to practice their information search skills, which are essential both in studies and in working life. These requirements led to the idea of multiprofessional collaboration between the lecturer, project staff, and information specialist.

The collaboration followed the teacher-librarian collaboration (TLC) model. Integrated instruction within the TLC model means that there are shared teaching objectives, with separate areas of expertise being integrated into classroom instruction to support these goals. The aim of this collaboration is to deepen the students' learning experience (Montiel-Overall 2005, 37). During the course, the information specialist guided students in gathering and managing information sources, while project staff focused on helping students use and synthesize the information. Both parties addressed ethical considerations, such as correct citation practices and respect for others' work. In other words, students learnt about scholarly and professional ethics.

Multiprofessional collaboration and co-teaching can be successful when there is trust and open communication between partners, as well as a sense of equality. From the lecturers' and project staff's perspective, the complementary expertise leads to the updating of their own information skills and an opportunity to observe the development of students' information skills. From the information specialist's perspective, co-teaching offers insight into how to contribute to content-based teaching. Ultimately, students receive targeted guidance for the specific tasks at hand and personalized, immediate support during the workshop (Montiel-Overall 2005; Perez-Stable et al. 2020).



Multiprofessional collaboration and co-teaching can be successful when there is trust and open communication between partners, as well as a sense of equality.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS

The YEA project staff organized a total of four workshops, each lasting three hours. The first workshop was attended also by the information specialist. The remaining three workshops were carried out by the project staff. One of the project staff members, who is also a lecturer in social services with pedagogical expertise, supported the students' guidance.

Before the writing workshops, a Word template for each small group was created. The template included the article's structure and guidelines for the different sections. It also had instructions on what should be conveyed to the reader in each section. All group members and project staff had editing rights to the templates.

The first workshop focused on selecting and narrowing down the topic, as well as information search. The second and third workshop concentrated on writing the different sections of the article. The fourth and final workshop focused on finalizing the articles. The overall workshop process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Co-Writing Process: From Idea to Final Text

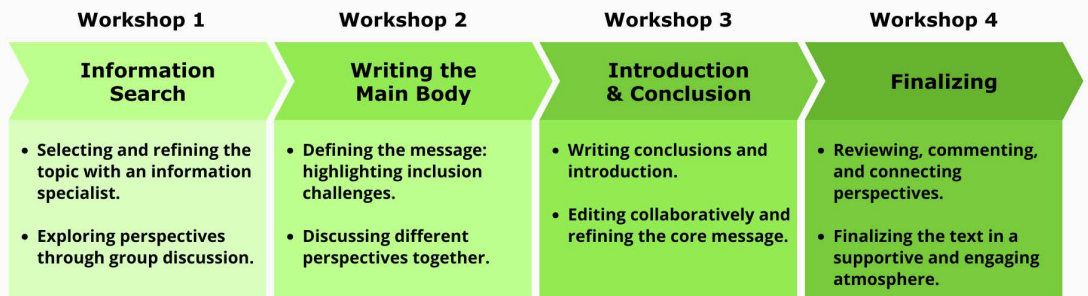


Figure 1. Co-Writing Process: From Idea to Final Text. (Figure: Johanna Kurki.)

Workshop 1: Searching for information

The lecturer introduced the assignment in the beginning of the first workshop. Then, the information specialist presented information sources, which are useful for the general theme of the articles. The focus was on open access resources, which contain high quality and reliable information. It is important that students familiarize with these research-based open sources as they can also be used later in their professional lives. Examples included *Journal.fi*, a platform for open access Finnish scholarly journals, and the tailored online-service *Laurea Social Service Libguide*. Additionally, students were introduced to *Keenious*, an AI-based search tool for scientific articles.

Before hands-on work, students watched a video explaining how to evaluate sources based on timeliness, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose. It is expected that the students have the capacity to assess their sources carefully.

Students worked in groups, choosing topics and exploring different perspectives. The project staff circulated among the groups and facilitated discussions, while the information specialist assisted with selecting appropriate keywords and conducting focused searches. Students also raised questions about using online sources and making correct references.

The first workshop helped students outline and refine their topics by exposing them to a wide range of perspectives they came across during information searches. The search results were shared and discussed in the groups. Hands-on searching, supported by multiprofessional guidance, provided students with valuable material for the following workshops.

Workshop 2: Writing the Main Body

In the second workshop, the focus was on the article's main body. The students began to outline and write the articles, drawing on research-based information. In this workshop, students had the opportunity to use the information they had gathered in the information search workshop. Students were encouraged to reflect on what is the main message in their articles. Project staff emphasized to the students that they should highlight the challenges and barriers to inclusion faced by different youth groups. The different perspectives were explored and weighed in peer discussions as well as in discussion with the project staff.

Workshops 3 & 4: Introduction, Conclusion & Finalizing

In the third workshop, the students continued writing the main body. In addition, they began to outline the introduction and conclusion sections. Once the more factual main body was coming together, it became easier for the students to build bridges and organize their thoughts related to the topic. In this workshop as in the previous ones, group discussions played an important role. If the students found it challenging to build bridges between sections of text or ideas, they could discuss the problems together. Collaborating with peers and project staff helped clarify the central message of the article, and the writing progressed further.

The third workshop also dealt with different types of texts. The students felt writing an article is challenging, as they had just submitted a different kind of text, an essay. Therefore, it was important to introduce a new text type, a professional article. The different text types were discussed, which resulted into a clear understanding of the requirements of a professional article.

In the final workshop, the articles were finalized. The project staff had read and commented on the students' texts in advance, and the students had gone through the comments. This formed a basis for checking the status of the articles with each group. It was possible to make suggestions for final revisions and discuss illustrations.

The workshops offered a safe environment, where the students were able to practice brainstorming, thinking aloud, writing, and evaluating together in groups. They had peer support during the whole writing process. In addition, they were aware that professionals helped at any stage if needed.

CONCLUSIONS

Integrating the YEA-project to a course for social service students was a rewarding experience. The students were able to experience peer support in learning a new skill, while writing professional articles. Their diverse cultural backgrounds and different work experience in youth related fields enriched the collaboration during the writing process. The diversity contributed as broader perspectives to the final texts. In addition, the students represented the same age group as the target group of the YEA-project. Therefore, they were able to relate to the group they were writing about and shed light to the challenges young people face in today's society.

The writing workshops were carried out with multiprofessional guidance. There was a combination of pedagogical expertise, know-how in accessible communication and text visualization, and specialization in the information field. The facilitators applied the teacher-librarian collaboration (TLC) model by Montiel-Overall. Integrating various fields of expertise was a way to deepen the students' learning experience. The lecturer, project-staff and information specialist also gained new insights to their own professional expertise.

The key for the successful outcome was multifaceted collaboration. Two facilitators with different areas of expertise were present at the same time in the workshops, interacting together and with the students. The students experienced peer support and were able to progress in their writing process with the help of shared discussions. It was also crucial that the students knew they could get support from any facilitator during the whole writing process.

Overall, the collaborative process of writing articles in four workshops was a fruitful implementation with good results. The facilitators found new ways to work together in the future, the students feeling of belonging together strengthened and the YEA-project got a valuable input. Last but not least is the students' sense of pride when they were able to create a publication with articles written by them.



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3 Safer Space as a Tool to Help and Support Young Girls Suffering from Anxiety

Heli Aarnio, Silvana Gamarra, Wakana Sakamaki, Ehite Wondafrash, Riikka Kanervo & Johanna Kurki

AS OF SEPTEMBER 2024, 24% of the population in Finland is affected by mental health conditions such as burnout, depression, and anxiety, making mental health the most prevalent health issue (Statista, 2025). Anxiety and depression disorders are particularly widespread in Europe, with over 70% of girls aged 10-19 affected (Statista, 2021). Among women aged 16–34, the number of sickness allowance days due to depression has approximately doubled between 2005 and 2021, and the number of days granted for anxiety disorders has nearly quintupled (Blomgren & Perhoniemi 2022).

What can be done to support young girls facing such challenges? In this article, we highlight some key facts that show the prevalence of anxiety among young people, especially girls. We examine the topic of anxiety and introduce the concept of safer space. Finally, we offer our reflections and suggest ways forward to improve the situation.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY FOR YOUNG GIRLS AND WOMEN?

Supporting young girls, particularly teenagers, in growing into confident and balanced adults requires fostering a sense of belonging, preventing exclusion, and providing opportunities to learn new skills and feel valued by society. However, there are still areas that need improvement, particularly in terms of inclusion regarding gender, age, race, learning styles, participation, and new activities to promote change. According to Rae, Nelson, and Pedersen (2005, session 1), these determinants are essential, especially for girls who struggle with self-esteem and self-worth.

Today, being an active part of society, developing skills, and contributing meaningfully are vital. These activities not only influence the individual but also impact others, contributing to societal change. However, peer pressure can make girls vulnerable, leading them to conform to societal standards of appearance and body image. Rae et al. (2005, session 4) suggest that this peer pressure can cause insecurity in girls, who might question whether they are “enough.” This shift in identity and belonging is particularly impactful during adolescence.

WHAT IS A “SAFER SPACE” AND HOW CAN IT HELP YOUNG GIRLS?

While the causes of anxiety among young girls are complex and rooted in societal pressures, feelings of exclusion, and issues related to self-worth, creating supportive environments can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. One approach to fostering emotional well-being is the implementation of “safer spaces,” which provide young girls with environments where they feel accepted, valued, and free from judgment.

A safer space is an environment where individuals feel physically, emotionally, and socially secure. It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination, bullying, harassment, and violence through proactive prevention and intervention. Additionally, a safer space is inclusive, accessible, and free of barriers. (Vantaa, 2025.) These spaces can help mitigate the negative effects of peer pressure and promote a sense of belonging, which is especially important during adolescence. The following section explores the concept of safer spaces in more detail, using Nicehearts as a case example to illustrate how such environments can positively impact young girls’ mental health and social connections.

According to United Nations Population Fund “A safer space is a formal or informal place where people can feel physically and emotionally safe. The term ‘safer’ in this context refers to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or the fear of violence), or abuse. It is a space where people can freely express themselves without fear of judgment or harm”. (Maglietti & Miquel 2015, 5.).

Safer space principles according to UN Youth of Finland (2024) include:

- **Don’t assume** – Be aware of the assumptions you make about others, and be open to different people and topics.
- **Don’t degrade** – No one should be degraded or embarrassed by their appearance or identity.
- **Don’t reproduce** – Avoid perpetuating sexist, racist, or harmful stereotypes in speech, actions, or behavior.
- **Intervene** – If you witness offensive behavior, it is crucial to intervene.
- **Respect** – Respect others’ physical, mental, and emotional space. Always ask for permission before touching someone.
- **Give space** – Ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate in discussions, especially sensitive topics.
- **Give and receive feedback** – Everyone should be able to give and receive appropriate, constructive feedback.

CASE EXAMPLE: GENDER-SPECIFIC SOCIAL YOUTH WORK

Gender-sensitive social youth work (sukupuolisensitiivinen sosiaalinen nuorisotyö) recognizes how gender and other identity factors shape young people's growth, well-being, opportunities, and challenges. It is both a value-based approach and a way of working that operates on individual, community, and societal levels. The focus is on equality, justice, and creating safer spaces where everyone is seen and heard. Special attention is given to supporting marginalized youth, fostering inclusion, and promoting voluntary participation (Loistosetlementti 2025).

Although most youth centres in Finland are open to all young people, some spaces are specifically designed for girls and those who identify as girls, as well as for boys and those who identify as boys. These gender-specific spaces acknowledge gender diversity and prioritize self-identification.

A case example of gender-specific youth work is Nicehearts, which operates Girls' Spaces in Tikkurila, Vantaa, and Lappeenranta. These spaces offer a welcoming environment where girls can express themselves freely. The aim is to create safer spaces where girls can learn about mental health, practice self-care, and build resilience. By bringing together girls from diverse backgrounds, the organization fosters friendships and solidarity across socioeconomic and cultural lines (Nicehearts, 2024).

The concept of a safer space in gender-specific youth work recognizes that mainstream environments may not always address the diverse needs of young people. By offering identity-affirming environments, organizations like Nicehearts allow participants to explore their identities without fear of judgment. This approach not only promotes personal empowerment but also challenges societal norms around gender and inclusion. Furthermore, relational safety—built on trust and mutual respect—enhances participants' overall well-being and social connectedness.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy make young girls particularly vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress. As this article highlights, these conditions can push girls into socially vulnerable positions, potentially leading to a loss of identity.

There is an urgent need for initiatives that foster self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence in girls, especially those who have experienced or are experiencing bullying. New approaches are necessary to support girls dealing with bullying, feelings of inferiority, and low self-worth. As Rae et al. (2005, session 3) define it, "Appreciating my own worth and importance and being accountable for myself and my responsibilities towards others" is crucial for developing positive self-esteem and thinking.

We must create warm, non-judgmental environments where girls can feel safe and supported. By establishing support groups or safe spaces where they can express their feelings freely, we can help them build resilience and confidence. Communities must respect diverse values and create inclusive spaces that accept everyone, regardless of gender, body type, or cultural background.

By applying the principles of safer space (Figure 1) in our everyday lives, we can contribute to improving the situation.



Figure 1. Principles of Safer Space. (Figure: Johanna Kurki.)

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4 Breaking Barriers and Promoting Inclusion for Young People with Disabilities: Examples from Austria and Finland

Stephanie Drexel, Anna Schekulin, Riikka Kanervo & Maria Normann

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH disabilities face significant barriers in participating fully in various aspects of society, including education, employment, and social life. World Health Organization (2011, 302) defines barriers as “factors in a person’s environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability — for example, inaccessible physical environments, a lack of appropriate assistive technology, and negative attitudes towards disability”. These barriers often stem from structural obstacles and attitudes of non-disabled individuals, which hinder the realization of equal inclusion.

This article examines the experiences and approaches of Austria and Finland in advancing the inclusion of young people with disabilities. The examples highlight how inclusion and participation can be advanced at the levels of national policy, practical measures, and community thinking. While both countries still have progress to make in achieving full accessibility and participation, they offer valuable learning opportunities for each other and for the broader global community.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS A MARGINALIZED GROUP

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 defines persons with disabilities as individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. Disability is often viewed through a medical lens, focusing on individual impairments rather than the social and environmental barriers that hinder inclusion. Discrimination and societal attitudes are among the most significant obstacles young people with disabilities face.

Disability Studies scholar Petra Fuchs (2022, 45) emphasizes that disability is shaped by restrictive social and structural barriers, not just individual impairments. Inaccessible infrastructure and a lack of supportive policies reinforce the perception of disability as a limitation instead of a social accessibility issue (Köbsell 2022, 67).

In Austria, young people with disabilities face significant marginalization across various aspects of life, from education to employment. Austria's Behindertenrechtskonvention, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, recognizes accessibility and inclusivity as fundamental rights. Yet, young people with disabilities in Austria still face significant inequalities, as evidenced in recent reports documenting ongoing social exclusion and limited public accessibility (BMSGPK 2016, 12; Kastenmeier 2024). Without a commitment to inclusive design and accessibility, young people with disabilities remain excluded from full participation in social, cultural, and economic life (BMSGPK 2016, 25).

The situation in Finland is similar: in addition to functional and appropriate legislation, a suitable environment and accessible public services are needed for everyone. To ensure equality in society, special services are also required. These services are designed to address specific needs and to ensure that individuals with disabilities can participate fully in all aspects of life, complementing the general framework. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023.)

CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION

Young people with disabilities face several barriers to participation. These can be categorized as follows:

Physical Barriers

Public spaces do not always comply with universal accessibility standards. Although the Behindertenrechtskonvention in Austria and Government Decree on the Accessibility of Buildings in Finland mandates equal access, young people with disabilities struggle with limited mobility and access in their communities, underscoring gaps in infrastructure (Hirschberg 2022, 102; BMSGPK 2016, 34; Valtioneuvoston asetusrakennuksen esteettömyydestä 241/2017). These barriers restrict independence and full social participation.

Social Stigmatization, Discrimination & Educational Inequality

Social attitudes also marginalize young people with disabilities. Waldschmidt & Schillmeier (2022, 88) note that societal perceptions of disability as a deficit reinforce stereotypes, creating additional challenges for full integration.

In the field of education, the groups most often experiencing discrimination were disabled individuals attending school or studying, particularly those under the age of 25. Discrimination was also reported in areas such as access to education, language and communication barriers, accessibility issues, physical inaccessibility, and economic challenges such as poverty. (Teittinen & Vesala 2022.)

Educational Inequality

Inclusive education is essential to integration, yet Austria often places students with disabilities in specialized schools. Waldschmidt & Karim (2022, 17) argue that this segregation perpetuates marginalization by isolating students with disabilities, limiting social engagement. Integrated educational experiences are essential for fostering understanding and empathy between peers, but Austria's educational systems still fall short of these inclusive ideals (BMSGPK 2016, 12).

Disabled individuals face discrimination starting from preschool and continuing through primary and higher education, as well as throughout their lives. Schools, operating on terms set by non-disabled individuals, often contribute to societal inequality. The emphasis on abilities within the educational system promotes segregation, while a contradiction emerges when the formal education of disabled individuals is seen as important, but their participation in the workforce is not given equal significance. (Teittinen & Vesala 2022.) Stigmatization impacts hiring practices and social engagement, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion (Kastenmeier 2024).

Economic Marginalization and Employment Disparities

Employment is another area where young people with disabilities face significant limitations. The Behindertenrechtskonvention emphasizes economic inclusion as essential for dignity and self-reliance, yet many workplaces in Austria remain inaccessible, leading to low employment rates and economic dependency among young people with disabilities (Köbsell 2022, 55; BMSGPK 2016, 25).

The situation in Finland appears to be similar. Disabled, long-term ill, and neurodiverse young people often face significant challenges in the labor market, as highlighted in surveys like the one conducted by Vamlas in 2022. Despite recognizing structural inequalities and discriminatory practices, many of these young people also attribute their difficulties in employment to their own perceived shortcomings. This reflects a broader issue where societal attitudes toward disability and employment remain a barrier. As in other countries, these young individuals often find the job market to be unforgiving and their future prospects uncertain. (Ikävälko 2022.)

PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION AND INTEGRATION

Achieving a more inclusive society for young people with disabilities requires a comprehensive approach, including accessibility, universal design, integrated education, public awareness, and strong policy enforcement.

Accessibility

Accessibility means considering human diversity in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of the built environment. It enables equal participation by providing accessible environments, services, tools, and comprehensible information. Accessibility supports living, working, studying, and engaging in hobbies, while also promoting sustainable development. (Invalidiliitto 2024.)

It is not only about facilitating mobility but also addressing needs related to vision, hearing, understanding, and communication. An accessible environment is safe, high-quality, and inclusive, taking diversity into account without distinguishing people based on their functional abilities. (Invalidiliitto 2024.)

At the European Union level, accessibility has been actively promoted. The EU Accessibility Directive (2019/882) requires both public authorities and the private sector to make certain products and services accessible. The implementation of accessibility requirements will begin on June 28th 2025, after which products and services entering the market must comply with these standards.

Implementing Universal Design

Accessibility is closely related to Universal Design. The aim of this approach is to consider the needs of diverse users from the very beginning of the design process, creating a single service or product that can be used by people with a wide range of abilities and characteristics. The goal is to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their differences, can benefit from the same service or experience. (Aluehallintovirasto 2024.) Universal design should be prioritized in public infrastructure to allow for equitable access from transportation to digital services. Adopting universal design would support independence and enable young people with disabilities to participate in all areas of life (Behrisch 2022, 123; BMSGPK 2016, 34).

Inclusive education

Integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools reduces stigmatization and promotes social understanding. Bösl & Frohne (2022, 140) note that inclusive education benefits all students by fostering empathy and respect for diversity. Austria's education system should accommodate diverse learning needs, with adaptable technologies and comprehensive training for teachers (BMSGPK 2016, 12). According to the Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (Kehitysvammaliitto 2024), most children with disabilities participate in early childhood education in the same groups as other children. However, during primary school, significant differences emerge between municipalities. Some municipalities strive to offer children and young people with disabilities opportunities to make choices regarding their educational paths. More commonly, only special classes or special schools are available. The reform of vocational education, along with the resulting budget cuts, is significantly undermining the opportunities for young people with disabilities to pursue professional qualifications.

APPROACHES SUPPORTING SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONALS IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Social work and social services professionals play a key role in promoting the inclusion and participation of young people with disabilities. To address the barriers and inequalities they face, and to develop effective methods of inclusion and integration, both students and professionals benefit from understanding and applying approaches that challenge the traditional medical model, which often focuses solely on an individual's impairment.

This section highlights critical theoretical frameworks that are essential for social work professionals advocating for inclusion and equality. These frameworks include the Social Model of Disability, CRIP Theory,

and Norm-Critical Approaches, all of which emphasize that the responsibility for removing barriers and promoting inclusion lies with society, rather than the individual. This chapter provides a brief overview of these approaches, demonstrating their relevance to social work practice.

The Social Model of Disability

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006, after years of negotiations. The purpose of the convention is to ensure that persons with disabilities fully and equally enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006.) The UN Convention takes a social approach to disability. It asserts that, regardless of any impairment, every individual has an unquestionable right to equality, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

The social model of disability emphasizes that a person's characteristic becomes a disability due to the barriers and attitudes imposed by society. For example, the limitations brought by a physical disability depend on how well a wheelchair user can navigate spaces and how they are perceived within the community. While the social model acknowledges the medical perspective of the disability itself, it highlights that the harm caused by the disability arises not from the impairment but from the environment and societal structures. When viewed through a social lens, disability is ultimately about the attitudes and prejudices of the majority population. (Veneri.net, 2024.)

Crip Theory

Crip theory (derived from 'cripple'), emerges from disability studies and queer theory, challenging conventional notions of "normal" by critiquing the emphasis on able-bodiedness. It questions the binary of "able-bodied" versus "disabled," advocating for a broader acceptance of diverse bodies and experiences. The concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness," which shapes societal views on disability and makes it appear undesirable. The theory rejects the idea that disability needs to be fixed, instead calling for inclusivity and for recognizing the problem not in disabled individuals but in societal structures that marginalize them. (Mery Karlsson & Rydström 2023.)

Crip Theory urges a shift from a narrow view of normality to one that embraces all forms of embodiment, challenging norms around physical and mental abilities. It encourages society to move beyond seeing disability as a problem, advocating for a more diverse and inclusive world that accepts all forms of existence (Mery Karlsson & Rydström 2023).

Norm-Critical Theory

Similarly, norm-critical theory calls attention to the ways in which societal norms perpetuate inequality and exclusion. In this framework, norms are not neutral but are socially constructed and reinforced through institutional practices, policies, and everyday interactions. A norm-critical approach encourages the questioning of these norms, advocating for systemic change that fosters inclusive environments for all individuals, regardless of ability or disability (Bösl & Frohne, 2022).

The approaches of Crip Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Norm-Critical Approaches are essential for social work professionals who advocate for the inclusion of young people with disabilities. These frameworks challenge ableism and societal norms, offering new ways to think about disability and inclusion. They shift the responsibility from the disabled individual to society, urging the removal of barriers, the change of negative attitudes, and the creation of inclusive spaces.

These theories also help us understand the goals of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). They guide professionals in aligning their work with international standards and support efforts to reshape policies, improve education, and empower young people with disabilities to take an active role in society. Ultimately, they contribute to building a more inclusive and equal world for all.

MOVING TOWARD TRUE INCLUSION

While Austria and Finland have made progress in promoting accessibility, full inclusion for young people with disabilities remains incomplete. Key challenges include inaccessible infrastructure, educational inequalities, and employment disparities.

Social work and social service professionals and students must understand and apply inclusive approaches in practice. This requires connecting theory to practice and actively challenging societal structures that marginalize young people with disabilities.

Achieving inclusion requires a comprehensive approach that combines universal design, attitude shifts, and structural changes. Disability should not be seen as an individual deficit but as a societal issue that demands collective responsibility.



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5 From Loneliness to Belonging: The Impact of Social Connections on Young Adults

Catherine Ngwa, Nadia Moniruzzaman, Yusuf Ince, Julia Ruostetsaari, Riikka Kanervo & Johanna Kurki

HUMANS HAVE A fundamental need to belong and form close friendships. That's why the absence of meaningful connections can feel deeply painful. (Saulio, Janhunen, Forsbäck, Östling & Rouhiainen 2024). Despite the world being more digitally connected than ever, many young adults still struggle with loneliness. Social media, while offering connection, can sometimes amplify feelings of exclusion. This article examines strategies to address loneliness and foster a sense of belonging in young people aged 18-30.

LONELINESS

Loneliness is a complex feeling and experience that differs from person to person. Certainly, everyone has experienced loneliness, and its impact at some point in their lives. Nowadays it is becoming more of an issue and concern, especially among young adults. Loneliness can result in several health issues and there are studies that have linked loneliness to several chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cardiovascular disease, stroke, metabolic disorders, and many more (Yanguas, Pinazo-Henandis & Tarazona-Santabalbina 2018).

Loneliness is not a new phenomenon, but rather one that stems back in human history. Before the nineteenth century, loneliness was associated with physical feelings, rather than emotional or psychological ones (Burnett 2023). As we have changed and evolved as a society, we have become far more knowledgeable about loneliness and its impact. Nowadays we have a much better understanding of the term and what it entails. We now know and understand that loneliness is the product of many factors, such as our environment, culture, socio-economic and political conditions (Bower et al. 2023). All these components play a key role in someone becoming lonely and developing loneliness.

LONELINESS AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG ADULTS

Loneliness and being alone are two different states. Sometimes, people need solitude to recharge before socializing again. However, loneliness means lacking a group or a close friend with whom one can truly be oneself. It is never a choice, nor something one can enjoy. (Saulio, Janhunen, Forsbäck, Östling & Rouhiainen 2024).

Loneliness sometimes results from chance or changes in circumstances. Moving to a new area or switching schools can challenge friendships, and forming new ones may be tough if social circles are already established. (Mannerheimin Lastensuojeluliitto 2025.)

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with poorer physical and mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. Social isolation is also associated with higher health complaints, alcohol use, as well as poorer cognitive and physical functioning. In addition, loneliness is linked with higher obesity rates, lower quality of life, sleep difficulties, higher perceived stress and its negative effects. Health literacy such as social support for help and health information decreased with higher loneliness levels. (Vasan, Eikelis, Lim & Lambert 2023; Christiansen, Qualter & Lasgaard 2021).

Strategies can be proposed to reduce these negative impacts and increase social relations. For example, programmes that enhance physical activity and social interactions can be supported to reduce loneliness. Physical activity had positive effects on loneliness by fostering new relationships and enhancing social skills (Christiansen et al. 2021). Beyond individual strategies such as physical activity, a broader approach involves strengthening social networks and creating inclusive communities where young adults feel valued and connected.

It is also important to raise awareness and encourage young adults to seek help when they experience isolation, loneliness and their effects. Awareness about loneliness and its health effects can contribute to the development of effective public health policies targeting young adults, their use of health services and informing them about health issues (Vasan et al. 2023).

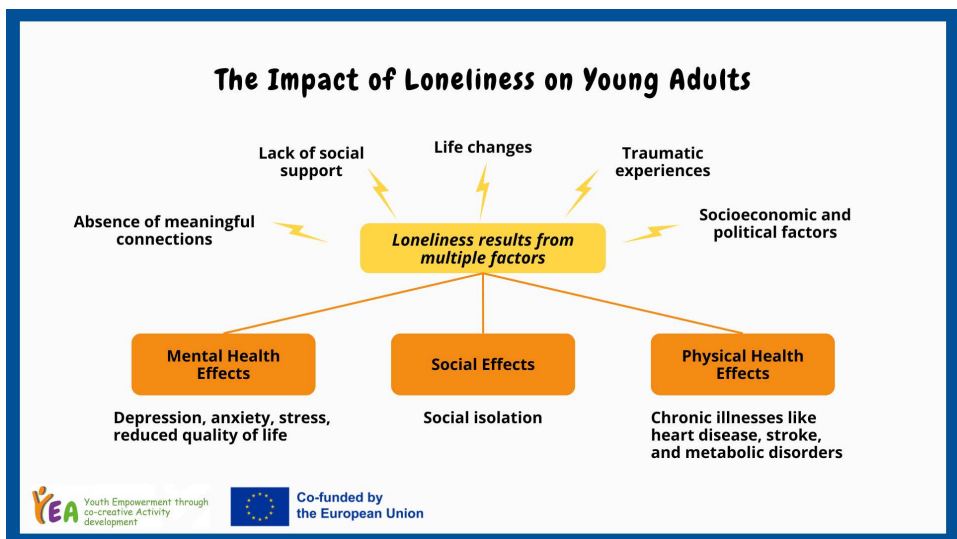


Figure 1. The Impact of Loneliness on Young adults. (Figure: Johanna Kurki.)

As illustrated in Figure 1, loneliness negatively affects both mental and physical well-being, contributing to issues such as increased stress, poor sleep quality, and a decline in overall health. Beyond individual strategies such as physical activity, a broader approach involves strengthening social networks and creating inclusive communities where young adults feel valued and connected.

ELEMENTS FOSTERING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

McMillan and Chavis (1986, as cited in Rovai 2002) describe a community as a sense of belonging among members, a recognition that they matter to each other and to the group, and a shared confidence that their needs will be fulfilled through their commitment to staying together.

In the past, large families and village communities provided a sense of belonging and social connections. Although many have moved away from rural areas, the need for relationships and community remains unchanged. Today, belonging to a community often requires effort rather than happening automatically. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of relationships and networks, especially in times of crisis. (Halonen 2023.)

Humans are inherently social beings, so maintaining good relationships is essential for their well-being and social life. Having a loving relation with family and friends is most favourable and desirable for our social and healthcare. Interactions with others is an important aspect that keeps us balance in many aspects of our lives (Mushtaq et al 2017, as cited in Rönkä, Sunnari & Taanila 2020).

Therefore, a sense of community is fostered when people know they have a role to play, feel accepted for who they are, and receive care tailored to their specific needs, enhancing their well-being. This also means that their concerns are acknowledged, and they are free to express their views on matters affecting their welfare and that of the community. A sense of belonging is created when individuals feel that their opinions matter, making them more open to constructive feedback and guidance that can improve their lives and well-being. People are more likely to accept advice from those who value and respect them, trusting that it is intended to help them become better versions of themselves. (Communities Reinvented 2021.)

Thus, to foster a sense of community, activities should be designed so that everyone has a role, participation is inclusive, and all individuals are invited to take part. Additionally, people should have a voice in decision-making, and their contributions should be valued (Communities Reinvented 2021). While strong communities can help reduce loneliness, many young adults face obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in social and civic life. Understanding these barriers is key to building inclusive and accessible communities.

BARRIERS FACED BY YOUNG ADULTS IN PARTICIPATION AND HOW THEY CAN BE OVERCOME

Young adults face several barriers to participating in community and civic activities. Common challenges include access issues, such as transportation difficulties and long distances to events, as well as affordability concerns, with fees, membership costs, and equipment expenses making participation inaccessible. Awareness is also a key barrier, as many young adults are unsure of how or where to get involved. Even when these barriers are addressed, limited time or lack of interest can still hinder their willingness to actively participate in their communities. (National Center for State Courts 2025.)

To address these barriers, effective strategies must be implemented to facilitate easier participation. For example, when time is a constraint, activities could be scheduled at times that better accommodate young adults, such as in the evening for those working standard hours. To address cost and transportation issues, offering remote participation options or reducing fees could significantly increase accessibility. (Trappet 2022.)

Additionally, young adults often feel less confident than older age groups in their ability to engage in social and civic activities. Despite this, they tend to be more eager to increase their involvement in activities such as joining NGOs, participating in hobby clubs, or voting in elections (Hantula, Lovio & Takkinen 2024). However, many young adults perceive their skills and knowledge as insufficient for full participation.

According to Kirsi Hantula, a lead expert at Sitra (as cited by Hantula, Lovio & Takkinen 2024), many young adults feel uncertain about their leadership and networking abilities, often lacking the confidence or social skills needed for engagement. She suggests that young adults tend to compare themselves to an idealized image of political influencers, which can discourage participation. To encourage greater societal engagement, it is important to help them recognize that they are already enough as they are.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion loneliness is a universal feeling and experience that everyone can relate to. Loneliness is not a new phenomenon, but one that has been around for centuries.

Research shows that loneliness has many negative impacts on young adults, impacting their mental and physical health. It is associated with depression, anxiety, higher obesity rates, decrease in sleep and life quality. To better support young adults, it is crucial to raise awareness about health issues and impact loneliness. Implementing support programmes to combat loneliness, and policies aimed at the use of health services, and inform young adults are essential.

Young adults face several barriers to community participation, including cost, transportation, time constraints, and lack of awareness. While many want to get involved, they are unsure of their skills and are prone to comparing themselves to others. Supporting their confidence and reducing barriers can promote participation.

From the above, loneliness is a major issue that needs to be taken seriously, it poses a great challenge for the youth. The youths are the future generation of any nation. However, loneliness is a huge challenge that can present a future that looks bleak for the youths. Policy makers should take this into consideration to create low threshold programs and activities that youths can participate in and interact no matter their background that gives them a sense of belonging. Also, that their contribution to society matters.

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6 Addressing Youth Homelessness in Finland

Zainab Alizada, Giedre Hakala, Julia Laiho, Oluseyi Oyinloye & Riikka Kanervo

THERE IS NO single explanation for youth homelessness. Each young person facing homelessness has a unique situation. However, there are factors in our society that generally make it more difficult for young people to obtain housing and live independently.

Cities are desirable places to live, but affordable rental housing is hard to find. Young people are often on low incomes, which makes securing rental housing even more challenging. Not all young people have someone in their close circle who can help with finding housing or teach them the skills necessary for independent living. Additionally, a young person's own life challenges may also contribute to their difficulty in obtaining or maintaining a home.

This article explores youth homelessness in Finland, the obstacles young people encounter, and potential solutions to ensure the security of their own home for every young person.

HOMELESSNESS IN FINLAND

Homelessness has been tracked in Finland since 1987, when nearly 19,000 people were without a home. Initially, homelessness work primarily focused on long-term homeless men who used alcohol and lived in shelters. Today, homelessness has become more diverse, with short-term homelessness becoming increasingly common. (Pitkänen, Koramo, Valtakari & Mäki 2023.)

In 2024, there were 3,806 single homeless individuals in Finland, an increase of 377 from the previous year. This marked the first rise in single homelessness since 2012. Of those experiencing homelessness, 22%

were women, 15% were under the age of 25, and 21% had an immigrant background. (Asumisen rahoitus- ja kehittämiskeskus 2025.) These numbers do not tell the whole story, as they do not include, for example, the widespread hidden homelessness among young people. Hidden homelessness refers to a situation where a person alternates staying at friends' or relatives' homes.

The majority of homeless individuals (63%) were temporarily staying with friends or relatives, and their proportion increased from the previous year. The number of people sleeping outdoors, in stairwells, or in emergency shelters also grew. (Asumisen rahoitus- ja kehittämiskeskus 2025.)

Economic difficulties, such as debt and low income, are playing an increasing role in the risk of homelessness, affecting a broader segment of the population. (Pitkänen, Koramo, Valtakari & Mäki 2023.) Municipalities have identified the key reasons behind the rise in homelessness as the shortage of small and affordable housing, cuts to social security and income support, high housing and living costs, as well as the increase in payment defaults and rental debts. (Asumisen rahoitus- ja kehittämiskeskus 2025.)

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

There are many reasons behind youth homelessness. Housing issues can arise if a young person has not yet learned essential living skills, such as maintaining a home or being considerate of neighbours. Challenges such as substance abuse, gambling, or mental health problems can also contribute. Additionally, some young people struggle with managing finances, and unexpected changes, such as unemployment or illness, can disrupt their financial stability. Life situations can change suddenly, for example due to a relationship breakdown. (Mannerheimin Lastensuojeluliitto, 2025.)

According to Tyler & Johnson (2006, as cited by Thompson 2012, 28), young adults experiencing homelessness often face instability during their transition to adulthood, largely due to the absence of stable employment.

Youth homelessness represents a significant portion of the homelessness statistics in Finland, accounting for around 15% of the total (Nuorisosasuntoliitto 2025a). However, much of youth homelessness remains hidden, as many young people without permanent homes do not appear in official statistics. They may stay temporarily with friends, in short-term housing, or move frequently without being formally recognized as homeless. Many young people do not identify as homeless themselves, which makes it more difficult to identify their needs and offer appropriate support. Hidden homelessness is driven by financial struggles and family conflicts, which complicates efforts to assess its full scale and provide effective assistance. (Lopez 2023.)

Lindsey and Williams (2002, as cited by Thompson 2012, 18), noted that societal stigma and discrimination against homeless young adults can create significant barriers to their community integration and access to necessary services. For example, some young adults may find it challenging to attend schools where strict rules are implemented, like compulsory attendance. These negative perceptions often marginalise them, limiting opportunities for social acceptance.

THE IMPACT OF HOUSING BENEFIT CUTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN FINLAND

In 2024, cuts to housing benefits came into effect, also impacting students. Students were removed from the general housing benefit system, and housing support became more tightly linked to student financial aid. At the same time, the indexing of student financial aid was frozen, and living costs rose due to global events.

In the spring of 2024, the Finnish Youth Housing Association (NAL) conducted a survey to explore the experiences of young people and social service professionals working with them regarding these cuts to social security. The survey revealed the significant impact these cuts have on young adults, especially in terms of increased anxiety around income, financial stability, housing security, and other daily life challenges. (Nuorisotasuntoliitto 2025b.)

Cuts to financial support, coupled with rising living costs, have raised concerns among social workers working with homeless individuals. They worry that the reduction in housing benefits could contribute to an increase in homelessness among young people.

COMBATTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is not merely a statistical issue, but a profound human crisis that affects young people in numerous ways. It heightens the risk of social exclusion, complicates daily life, and exposes individuals to crime. Homeless youth often face additional struggles, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and barriers to education and employment (Lopez 2023).

However, youth homelessness can be prevented and reduced through various measures. Key actions include increasing the production of affordable housing, ensuring sufficient income for young people, and enhancing low-threshold housing support services, as well as mental health and substance abuse care. Effective solutions and policy decisions are essential to improve the well-being of young people and reduce homelessness. These actions should be implemented now so that in the future, every young person can have a stable home where they feel secure. (Nuorisotasuntoliitto 2025a)

Since 2008, the Housing First principle has been Finland's cornerstone strategy to address homelessness (Pleace 2016). This model is specifically aimed at individuals struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as those who have experienced long-term or recurring homelessness. The Housing First approach prioritizes providing permanent housing before addressing other challenges, offering stability as the foundation for further support. However, this model does not serve as a solution for youth homelessness, which requires different approaches and support structures tailored to the unique challenges young people face.

HOUSING FIRST PRINCIPLE

The Housing First principle is based on the idea that housing is a fundamental human right. It prioritizes providing individuals experiencing homelessness with a permanent home, creating stability before addressing other challenges. This model has been effective for those facing mental health issues, substance abuse, or other limiting conditions, particularly those experiencing long-term or recurring homelessness. Housing First views housing as the foundation for further support, not the end goal. (Y-säätiö 2025; Pleace 2016.)

A shortage of affordable housing exacerbates the housing situation for those dependent on housing benefits, as the supply of low-cost apartments fails to meet demand. This imbalance leads to prolonged waiting times for stable accommodation, making it particularly challenging for young people to secure housing promptly.

CONCLUSION

Youth homelessness in Finland is a significant societal issue that reflects deeper structural challenges in society. The reasons behind youth homelessness are diverse, including financial instability, lack of life skills, mental health struggles, and societal stigma. Young people need support in life skills such as managing finances, taking care of their home, and respecting neighbours by following community rules. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and preventive approach that not only focuses on providing housing but also integrates support services such as mental health care, education, and financial guidance.

Effective solutions must come from policy reform that tackles the root causes, such as the scarcity of affordable housing, cuts to housing benefits, and high living costs. At the same time, youth homelessness is a human rights issue that demands societal commitment to ensure every young person has access to a safe, stable home and the opportunities to build a fulfilling life.

By strengthening support systems and investing in early intervention, we can help prevent youth homelessness and reduce its long-term impact. Addressing this challenge is not just a moral obligation but an investment in the well-being of society, ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to grow and thrive.



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7 Building Bridges of Identity for a Second-Generation Immigrant

Shalom Wetu, Abdirahman Mohamed, Sudip Panday & Riikka Kanervo

IN AN INCREASINGLY globalized world, second-generation individuals often navigate a multifaceted experience. Their lives are shaped by the cultural expectations of their familial heritage and the societal norms of the country they call home. This duality can create both opportunities and challenges, fostering a rich, bicultural identity while sometimes leading to feelings of partial belonging or cultural tension. This article discusses the challenges second-generation immigrants face in reconciling these cultural expectations, examining the delicate balance between maintaining one's heritage and adapting to the host culture.

NAVIGATING DUAL EXPECTATIONS AS SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRATION

Culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, practices, and artifacts that define and distinguish different individuals. It serves as the lens through which individuals perceive and interpret their world, shaping their interactions, aspirations, and identity. Culture has a role as both a unifying and differentiating force in human societies (Hernandez & Gibb 2019). By understanding culture as both a collective heritage and an adaptive process, second-generation immigrants can find ways to harmonize their dual cultural expectations while contributing to a more inclusive societal narrative.

Second-generation immigrants, also referred to as second-generation migrants, are individuals born in a host country to at least one parent who migrated from another country. This group is distinct from first-generation migrants (who themselves immigrated) and third-generation individuals (whose parents were

born in the host country). According to the European Migration Network Glossary (2025), this term highlights the intergenerational transmission of migration-related identity and integration challenges, often reflecting the complexities of balancing cultural heritage with the norms of the host society.

Second-generation individuals often grow up in a world fractured between two sets of cultural expectations: those kept by their family and heritage, and those of the wider society around them. This twofold expectation creates a distinctive experience, where many feel they belong both to their ancestral culture and to the culture of the society.

State statistics often collect data on the background of parents, particularly their mother tongue and immigration status. In Finland Statistics Finland provides detailed insights into the diversity of language and multicultural composition of families in Finland. Immigration picked up in the early 1990s after which the number of second-generation immigrants has slowly started to increase. Of the 40,000 immigrants of today 80% of the second-generation are children under 15. (Ruotsalainen & Nieminen 2012.)

Young men of foreign background born in Finland have, on average, a higher risk of remaining in low educational attainment compared to others. However, their situations vary depending on their parents' country of origin and socioeconomic status. Educational and financial disadvantage has been shown to increase the risk of young people dropping out of education. (Helsingin kaupunki 2025.)

NAVIGATING DUAL EXPECTATIONS: FAMILY

Second-generation immigrants often find themselves caught between two powerful, sometimes conflicting, sets of expectations: from their family and society. This pull between familial commitment and societal demands is a common experience worldwide and can create significant challenges in balancing personal desires with external pressures, particularly regarding career choices, relationships, and lifestyle. Negotiating these dual expectations is a delicate and often difficult process. (Yuen 2023.)

The retention of heritage language among second-generation immigrants plays a critical role in maintaining their cultural roots while adapting to the broader society. Research suggests that children raised in homes where parents speak their native language are more likely to retain it. This bilingual proficiency not only enriches their cultural heritage but also enhances cognitive flexibility, supporting better social integration in multilingual environments. Furthermore, maintaining one's heritage language has been linked to higher motivation and engagement in learning and overall academic success. (Alaffi 2025.)

NAVIGATING DUAL EXPECTATIONS: SOCIETY

The experience of second-generation individuals is often defined by their need to balance dual expectations: the cultural norms and values of their family's heritage and those of the wider society they live in. The duality creates both challenges and opportunities as individuals navigate these conflicting demands. For example, many second-generation Albanians in Europe face the pressure of maintaining loyalty while adapting to societal norms, which can shape their educational, social, and cultural integration. (Vahti 2015.)

Experimental evidence shows that, In Greece, Albanian-origin students outperform other immigrants groups academically, but girls generally achieve better outcomes than boys, who are more likely to drop out early for work. Similarly, in Italy, Albanian children display high academic achievement, yet their integration is influenced by parental attitudes towards education and societal perceptions of their ethnic identity. The

challenges of transnational ties also play a role; while maintaining connections with their heritage provides a cultural anchor, it sometimes hinders full assimilation into the host society. (Vahti 2015.)

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL THOUGHT

Second-generation individuals experience a unique journey shaped by the interplay of familial and societal expectations. Balancing bicultural identities presents both challenges and opportunities, from navigating familial obligations and heritage preservation to adapting to the societal norms of their host culture. Maintaining a heritage language emerges as a key factor in cultural retention and cognitive growth, while societal pressures influence educational and social integration, as seen in second-generation Albanian communities in Europe. These dual influences highlight the resilience required to bridge two cultural worlds successfully.

Future research could explore how evolving societal attitudes toward multiculturalism impact the integration and identity formation of second-generation immigrants. Additionally, studies could examine the role of transnational ties and their influence on both assimilation and the preservation of cultural heritage. For readers, this topic invites reflection on the broader implications of cultural identity and belonging in an increasingly globalized world.

In the end, the experiences of second-generation individuals remind us of the value of cultural diversity and the strength found in embracing multiple identities. How can societies better support these individuals in navigating their dual expectations while fostering a sense of belonging for all?

As global migration continues to grow, the experiences of second-generation immigrants will be a crucial area for research and policy development. Understanding how evolving societal attitudes toward multiculturalism impact the integration of second-generation immigrants can help shape a more inclusive society. Moreover, future studies should explore how transnational ties, and the preservation of cultural heritage influence the identity and integration of these individuals. By embracing cultural diversity and fostering acceptance, societies can better support the dual identities of second-generation immigrants, enriching the fabric of the community for everyone. In a world where cultural boundaries are increasingly fluid, how can we foster societies that truly embrace and empower bicultural identities?



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8 Open Doors Walk Tikkurila

Niloofar Ghaderitafreshi, Miina Hallikainen, Divine Ingabire, Samu Lahtinen, Riikka Kanervo & Johanna Kurki

THE LAST DAY of October dawned sunny, offering excellent conditions for the Tikkurila Open Doors Walk. Around thirty social sector professionals and NGO representatives gathered at Tikkurila railway station Dixi, more specifically in front of Vantaa Info, with the goal of visiting eight different locations in four hours, learning about the services of eleven providers.

This article introduces the Tikkurila Open Doors Walk, coordinated by the Youth Empowerment through Co-creative Activity Development (YEA) project and carried out in collaboration with the project's staff, the walk's presenters, and first-year social services students from Laurea.

OPEN DOORS WALK CONCEPT

The inspiration to organize the Open Doors Walk in Tikkurila came from the [SMILE Project](#), a joint initiative of the City of Vantaa and Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The project pilots community-based methods and develops new dialogue between communities, schools, and services in Vantaa. The goal of the Open Doors Walk concept was to introduce local actors to one another and to familiarize them with the services and facilities where they operate. The SMILE Project organized Open Doors Walks in three areas in Vantaa: Hakunila, Koivukylä, and Martinlaakso. (Räty 2024.)

Whereas the Open Doors Walks organized by the SMILE Project were open to everyone interested, the target group for the Open Doors Walk in the Tikkurila area was professionals working in the area. Since the Tikkurila Open Doors Walk was coordinated by the YEA project, its main theme was services aimed at youth and young adults.

At the beginning of 2023, social and healthcare services were transferred from municipalities to wellbeing services counties. The wellbeing services counties reform has brought changes to the organization of services and the placement of personnel, and in addition many organizations provide quite a few project-based and therefore temporary services and activities. The Open Doors Walk helped to get a clearer picture of what is happening in the area and what kind of support clients can receive from different organizations.

Professionals, in particular, might refer their clients to services or activities they have never visited themselves. The idea behind the Open Doors Walk Tikkurila was to provide a low-threshold opportunity to get to know the area's services and organizations, as well as employees. During the Open Doors walk we visited eight different locations in person and got to know eleven different service providers in the Tikkurila area. This kind of concrete knowledge makes it easier to guide clients to different services.



Photo 1. Participants entering Vantaa museum through its arched wooden doors during the Open Doors Walk held at Tikkurila. (Photo: Johanna Kurki.)

PROFESSIONALS AS ADVOCATES FOR CLIENTS' INTERESTS

Networking offers better access to knowledge, guidance, empowerment and other types of “social capital” that allows other people to be more effective at their jobs and improving their productivity. In addition, people who engage in professional networking are often able to use their increased efficiency to achieve long-term career success and greater career job satisfaction. (Porter 2023.) Whereas networking in the business world can lead to higher salaries and career advancement, in the social sector, networking primarily benefits the clients.

The role of social services professionals is to promote the best interests of their clients. Networking plays a crucial role in this – in order to help clients in the best possible way, professionals must be aware of all the support and assistance options available in the area. Therefore, networking is not just about expanding one’s professional network, but also an essential tool in their work. (Social Welfare Act, 16§.)

***In the social sector,
networking primarily
benefits the clients.***

Social guidance is needed to provide personal support and information about available services to help individuals apply for benefits. Many also require guidance and support in their daily lives; in some cases, clients in need of services must be picked up from their homes and escorted to the required services. For example, young people who have been excluded from education and working life might require long-term guidance to help them move forward in their lives. In social guidance work, it is essential to support and motivate clients toward independent functioning. This work is grounded in a human-centered approach that emphasizes the client’s subjectivity and autonomy. (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2024, 68-69.)

Social guidance is based on the principle of collaboration between the client and the worker. Rather than acting on behalf of the client, the worker works alongside them, providing support as needed. The primary aim of social guidance is to enhance the client’s well-being, functionality, and resources. This includes addressing various aspects of well-being, such as financial, physical, psychological, and social dimensions. The term “holistic well-being” is often used to emphasize this comprehensive approach. Nevertheless, social guidance can also focus on more specific goals, such as improving the client’s social well-being (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2024, 68–69).

Overall, social guidance also involves service coordination and support. The primary role of social services professionals is to advocate for the client’s best interests. To do this effectively, they need strong networks and up-to-date information about the best available services and forms of support. The Tikkurila Open Doors walk was an effective way to make new contacts and networks, as well as to update one’s knowledge.

OPEN DOORS WALK TIKKURILA

The Open Door Walk in Tikkurila was an afternoon event designed for social services professionals to familiarize themselves with the various services available in the region. During the walk, we visited eight different locations and met with 11 service providers. Each visit lasted 15 minutes, providing a wealth of useful information. Presenters were asked to briefly introduce their premises, services, and activities, and provide brochures and flyers for further details.



Photo 2. Photo collage from the Open Doors Walk. (Photos: Johanna Kurki and Niloofer Ghaderitafreshi.)

Vantaa Info

The walk began with the gathering of invited professionals from various wellbeing sectors at [Vantaa Info](#), the first stop. Vantaa Info serves as a central point where residents can access a wide range of municipal services, including information on housing, social services, healthcare, and support for employment and education. It aims to help residents navigate available public services efficiently.

Vantaa City Museum

The second stop was [Vantaa City Museum](#). The museum is not only a place to explore history, but it also offers visitors the opportunity to study or work remotely in its inviting spaces. In addition to its exhibitions, the museum provides a variety of services, including guided tours, educational programs, and workshops for schools and groups. It also hosts events and cultural activities.

Venäläinen Klubi

The third spot during the walk was the [Venäläinen Klubi in Vantaa](#), a community center offering a variety of services to Russian-speaking individuals and those from other regions, including Lithuania, Latvia, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. Their activities cater to a wide demographic, providing support for integration, social well-being, and everyday needs.

Tikkurilan kirkko

The fourth stop was [Vantaan seurakunta](#), including [Tikkurilan kirkko](#) and the [MoniNainen Arki](#) project. Tikkurilan kirkko offers various services such as a café, spaces for community events, and family activities. It also supports social inclusion and community well-being such as housing and cultural projects. Tikkurila Church welcomes everyone, regardless of religion or belief. The MoniNainen Arki project helps immigrant women, particularly mothers, integrate into Finnish society.

Tikkurila Library

The fifth stop was [Tikkurila Library](#), which offers much more than just book lending. Visitors can access digital tutoring, borrow sports equipment, and use facilities like the "soittohuone" (music room) for practice. The library serves as a community hub, providing a wide range of resources and activities to support learning and leisure.

Liito multi-purpose venue

The sixth stop was [Liito multi-purpose venue](#) (Nuorten monitoimitila Liito) that hosts various services for youth and young adults, among other things Tikkurila youth center, Tikkurila gaming center and services for young adults, such as Ohjaamo Vantaa and workshops (työpajatoiminta) in areas such as cooking, culture, and crafts, along with starter coaching (starttivalmennus). Behind one door, you'll find support, help, and activities for both young people and young adults.

Tikkurila youth centre offers various activities and is staffed by professionals who provide guidance on challenges such as studies, job searching, and personal issues. The services for young adults, available to Vantaa residents aged 16 to 29, aim to strengthen their social well-being, independence, and transition into adulthood. This includes individual and group coaching focused on work and education for those outside of employment or schooling. Workshops for young adults (nuorten työpajatoiminta) provide young adults with support and guidance in life management, education, and the workforce alongside with developing skills in areas such as cooking, culture and crafts. Outreach youth work supports young people at risk of falling outside the service network, while individual and group guidance services focus on helping them achieve their personal goals through long-term, systematic support. Ohjaamo, for young people under 30, is a one-stop service offering help with any issue. Their motto is: "If you don't know where to start, start at Ohjaamo."

In the same venue, Pikku Liito provides open early childhood education services for families in Vantaa. It offers a spacious, accessible environment where parents and children can engage in activities such as music, crafts, physical exercises, story sessions, and sensory activities, all designed to support children's development. The goal is to create a supportive, interactive space where families can connect and enjoy enriching activities together.

Nicehearts ry

The seventh stop was Nicehearts ry, an organization that provides a range of services aimed at supporting women and girls, particularly from immigrant backgrounds. Nicehearts promotes empowerment, social inclusion, and practical support for women facing various challenges.

Tikkurila Asukastila

The eighth stop was Tikkurila Asukastila, a Vantaa-funded community space offering events, networking opportunities, and reservable meeting areas. It features a negotiation room for up to 20 people, a larger space for 35, presentation equipment, and a kitchen. The organization promotes social inclusion across all age groups and also provides digital support for those in need.

Laurea, Vantaa Skills Centre and Kulttuuripaja Kide

The final stop was Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The Multisensory Space was used for gathering, where two more organizations were introduced: the Vantaa Skills Centre and the Cultural Workshop Kitee, through virtual presentations. The goals and activities of the YEA project were also reviewed.

Guidance and counseling are provided at the Vantaa Skills Centre for unemployed immigrants in Vantaa on job searching, skills recognition, and skill development. Services include, for example, two-week guidance courses held in plain Finnish, personal counselling, and thematic afternoons on various work-life related topics.

Activities are offered at the Kulttuuripaja Kide for 18-35-year-olds facing challenging life situations or mental health issues. A variety of free, activity-based groups are available for participation, and a space for casual relaxation and coffee is provided. New peer mentors are regularly trained at Kide.

NETWORKING AND BUILDING CONNECTIONS

We discussed the Open Doors Walk overall experience over coffee and gathered informal feedback from the participants. They took the opportunity to reflect on the day's activities. The walk was a positive experience, although more time would have been preferred at some of the locations. During the walk, names that were previously familiar from work became associated with faces, and the understanding of the services offered by various organizations deepened. New collaborations were planned in between conversations, and contact information was exchanged enthusiastically.

Connections were made at all the stops, and some participants even knew each other beforehand, which was a positive sight to see.

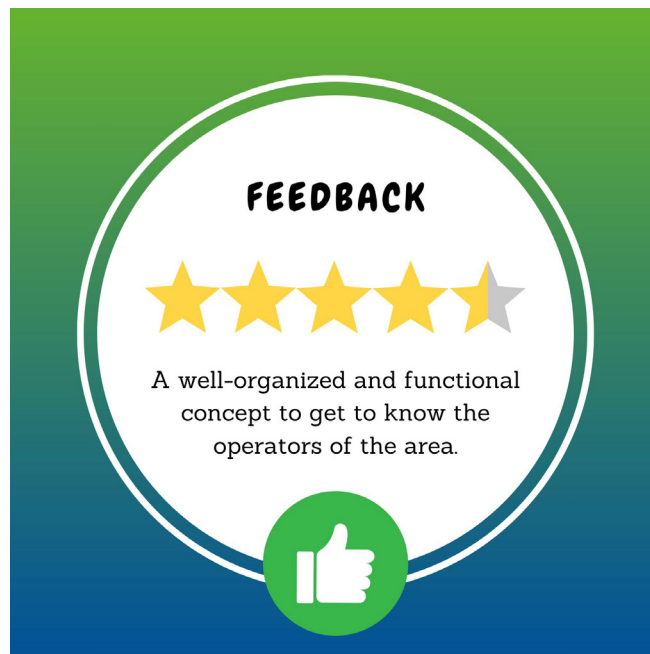


Figure 1. Participants' feedback on the Tikkurila Open Doors Walk experience.
(Figure: Johanna Kurki.)

In addition to informal discussions, a feedback form was sent to participants after the walk. The event received a lot of positive feedback from participants (Figure 1). The walking tour was praised as an excellent way to get to know local organizations. Participants also appreciated the well-organized structure of the event. Suggestions for improvement included organizing similar walking tours for different target groups, such as individuals with immigrant backgrounds, to make it easier for them to engage in new activities by providing better awareness of local opportunities. There was also interest in hosting similar events with a broader range of organizations represented.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that the Open Doors Walk in Tikkurila is a concrete example of an effective strategy to promote professional networking in social services work, especially by creating opportunities for professionals to have direct contact with local services and organisations. The event made it easier to share information, collaborate and strengthen relationships between professionals, eventually improving their ability to serve clients in a holistic way. Key results included better awareness of available resources, practical insights into the activities of different services and the promotion of inclusive social guidance.

While information is readily available on organizational websites, finding specific details to meet clients' needs can be time-consuming. With this direct knowledge, professionals can more effectively assist clients and make the most of available social and well-being services. Another key benefit of the walk is the opportunity for professionals to exchange ideas and collaborate, ultimately improving the quality of services over time.

This activity highlighted the importance of networking not only as a tool for professional development, but also to benefit clients via evidence-based referrals and integrated service delivery. Integrating such networking events into regular professional practice can improve the efficiency of services and foster innovation in social work field. The energy and partnership observed during the Open Doors Walk shows that small steps can make a big difference.

For future events, it would be beneficial to include more inclusive debriefs, provide deeper insights into specific service areas, and involve clients more actively to ensure their voices influence service development. Additionally, using virtual platforms could be very useful for those unable to attend in person on the day of the event. This idea inspired us to create virtual summary of the Open Doors walk. Video presentations of each location have already been produced by first-year social services students, and based on these, we will be creating a Virtual Open Doors Walk summary.

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BRIDGES OF BELONGING BRINGS TOGETHER A COLLECTION OF INSIGHTFUL ARTICLES exploring the diverse challenges faced by young people in a rapidly changing world. Addressing youth empowerment, inclusion, and identity, this anthology delves into topics ranging from mental health and disabilities to homelessness and cultural identity. Written through the collaborative efforts of social services students and professionals from the Youth Empowerment through Co-Creative Activity Development (YEA) project, these articles provide an in-depth examination of youth participation, belonging, and community-building in today's society.

In the fall of 2024, students from the Well-being and Inclusion course participated in a project for the YEA project, contributing articles produced during collaborative writing workshops. These articles reflect the intersection of academic inquiry and real-world experience, shedding light on the opportunities and challenges young people face and offering practical solutions for fostering inclusion, resilience, and belonging.

The YEA project, an Erasmus+ initiative, addresses the need for youth in vulnerable situations to create meaningful connections within their communities. Through co-designed leisure activities and strengthened collaboration between young people and professionals, the project works to enhance youth engagement and promote a sense of belonging. The project's reach spans three countries—Finland, Belgium, and Italy—and its findings are a powerful testament to the importance of connection, inclusion, and empowerment for the next generation.

By addressing these critical issues, Bridges of Belonging offers a comprehensive look at the complex interplay between youth, inclusion, and identity, while also presenting tangible solutions to build stronger, more supportive communities.