



# LAUREA

**AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU**  
*University of Applied Sciences*

LAUREA LONG 13 | 2025

Riikka Kanervo, Johanna Kurki, Giulia De Santis, Zachary Ergish & Pieter Frederix

## The YEA Project's Journey in Youth Engagement



Co-funded by  
the European Union

## Abstract

*This article offers a reflective look at the YEA project (Youth Empowerment through co-creative Activity), a European initiative that brought together young people and professionals in Belgium, Finland, and Italy to co-create inclusive leisure activities. The project focused on empowering youth in vulnerable situations—such as those with migrant backgrounds, disabilities, or diverse gender and sexual identities—by giving them space to express their needs, build trust, and shape their communities.*

*Through methods like Photovoice and collaborative workshops, the project uncovered both the challenges and opportunities of youth engagement. It highlighted the importance of flexibility, informal encounters, and youth-led communication in building meaningful participation. The article shares insights into how professionals and organizations adapted their approaches, navigated uncertainty, and learned to listen more closely to young voices. It also explores how inclusive spaces—both physical and digital—can foster a stronger sense of belonging and agency among youth.*

*By documenting the lessons learned and the creative solutions developed along the way, this article contributes to the broader conversation on co-creation, inclusion, and community-based innovation. It is a valuable resource for anyone working to support youth participation in a rapidly changing world.*

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Social Inclusion, Co-creation, Participatory Methods, Community Engagement

# The YEA Project's Journey in Youth Engagement

**T ALL STARTS** with an idea – a small spark that grows and evolves into a project plan. Later, with a positive funding decision comes excitement: now we're going to make a change, create something new! But projects don't always unfold as planned. Even the most carefully crafted plans can falter in practice. In project work, flexibility is key – the ability to approach challenges from new angles and adapt when things don't go as expected.

YEA – Empowerment through co-creative Activity 06/2023-05/2025) is a European Erasmus+ initiative that promotes the social inclusion and empowerment of young people in vulnerable situations through co-creative leisure activities. By engaging youth, community representatives, and professionals from support and youth organizations, the project aims to foster collaboration and build bridges between individuals and communities. The goal is to strengthen young people's sense of belonging and agency by supporting them in shaping inclusive, meaningful activities that reflect their interests and identities.

YEA is implemented by a consortium of three partners: University of Applied Sciences Leuven-Limburg UCLL (Belgium), Laurea University of Applied Sciences (Finland), and European centre of studies and initiatives CESIE (Italy). UCLL coordinates the project, Laurea contributes expertise in youth participation and social services, and CESIE brings experience in working with diverse and socially excluded groups.

In this article, team members from UCLL, Laurea, and CESIE reflect on the journey of the YEA project as it nears its conclusion. We delve into the challenges faced, the successes achieved, and the valuable lessons learned along the way. Through this reflection, we aim to share our experiences and insights so that others may avoid the pitfalls we faced and build on the practices that proved successful. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on inclusive practices, co-creation, and community-based innovation.

## PROJECT CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

The 2020s have been marked by major global upheaval. Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have cast a shadow over the lives of young people—especially those already in vulnerable situations—bringing with them a sense of uncertainty and hopelessness. Teenagers and young adults who are LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities), have disabilities, or come from refugee or migrant backgrounds have faced even more pressure. Mental health struggles, loneliness, financial stress, and safety concerns have all become increasingly common (Volkin 2020; Biraaro 2020).

For some young people, it's hard to feel connected to their communities. Sometimes public services don't reach them, or the activities on offer just don't feel like they're meant for them. That's where youth and community workers alongside with other professionals working with youth can make a real difference – when they're given the tools and space to do so.



**Picture 1.** Enthusiastic YEA project team during the Kickoff meeting held at Laurea in August 2023. Photo: Riikka Kanervo.

In the YEA project, we wanted to bring young people and the professionals who work with them to the same table – to share their stories and build mutual understanding. Our goal was to give young people a chance to make their voices heard and, through collaboration and co-creation, to develop leisure activities that are genuinely based on their needs and wishes.

The project was grounded in the belief that youth participation is essential for building inclusive societies. However, young people in vulnerable situations often face barriers to participation, such as lack of trust, limited access to information, or feelings of exclusion.

## CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

In the project plan, we had set an ambitious goal – not only in terms of the project activities and workshops, but also regarding the number of young people and professionals involved. In line with the project plan, the first step was to gather information from young people themselves about their experiences of inclusion and the barriers they face. Professionals were also asked to share how their organizations have attempted – and succeeded – in involving young people in planning and decision-making processes. In the following phases, this information would serve as the foundation for networking and building bridges between young people and professionals through a series of workshops. The workshop process would culminate in jointly envisioned and implemented Multiplier Events in Belgium, Finland, and Italy.

However, all partner countries faced early challenges in reaching both youth and professionals. Building trust with young people proved to be time-consuming, and this need for time had not been fully anticipated in the project planning phase. In hindsight, Belgian project staff spent the early stages simply hanging out with young people just to build connection. In Finland, outreach involved contacting various organizations and meeting young people in person. Still, many youth expressed distrust or even fear toward unfamiliar adults. In Italy, after initial difficulties, both young people and professionals were successfully engaged.

Due to these challenges, not all workshops and methods outlined in the original plan could be implemented. The initial idea was to first organize separate national workshops for youth and professionals to explore inclusion and community from their respective perspectives. Later, these groups would come together to share insights and co-create ideas for improving youth participation in their local communities. The goal was to build bridges between young people, professionals, and decision-makers, and to co-develop activities based on young people's needs and aspirations. In practice, we ended up meeting young people and professionals in more informal settings, rather than through official-sounding workshops. To reduce the overall number of sessions, we also decided to combine themes that were originally planned as separate workshops.

In Italy, CESIE succeeded in establishing long-term collaboration with youth-focused organizations, which helped sustain youth engagement. In contrast, Belgium and Finland experienced more uncertainty and interruptions in collaboration with both professionals and youth. Many youth organizations operate under short-term project funding, and when funding cycles end, gaps in staffing and services often follow. High staff turnover is also common due to these unstable conditions.

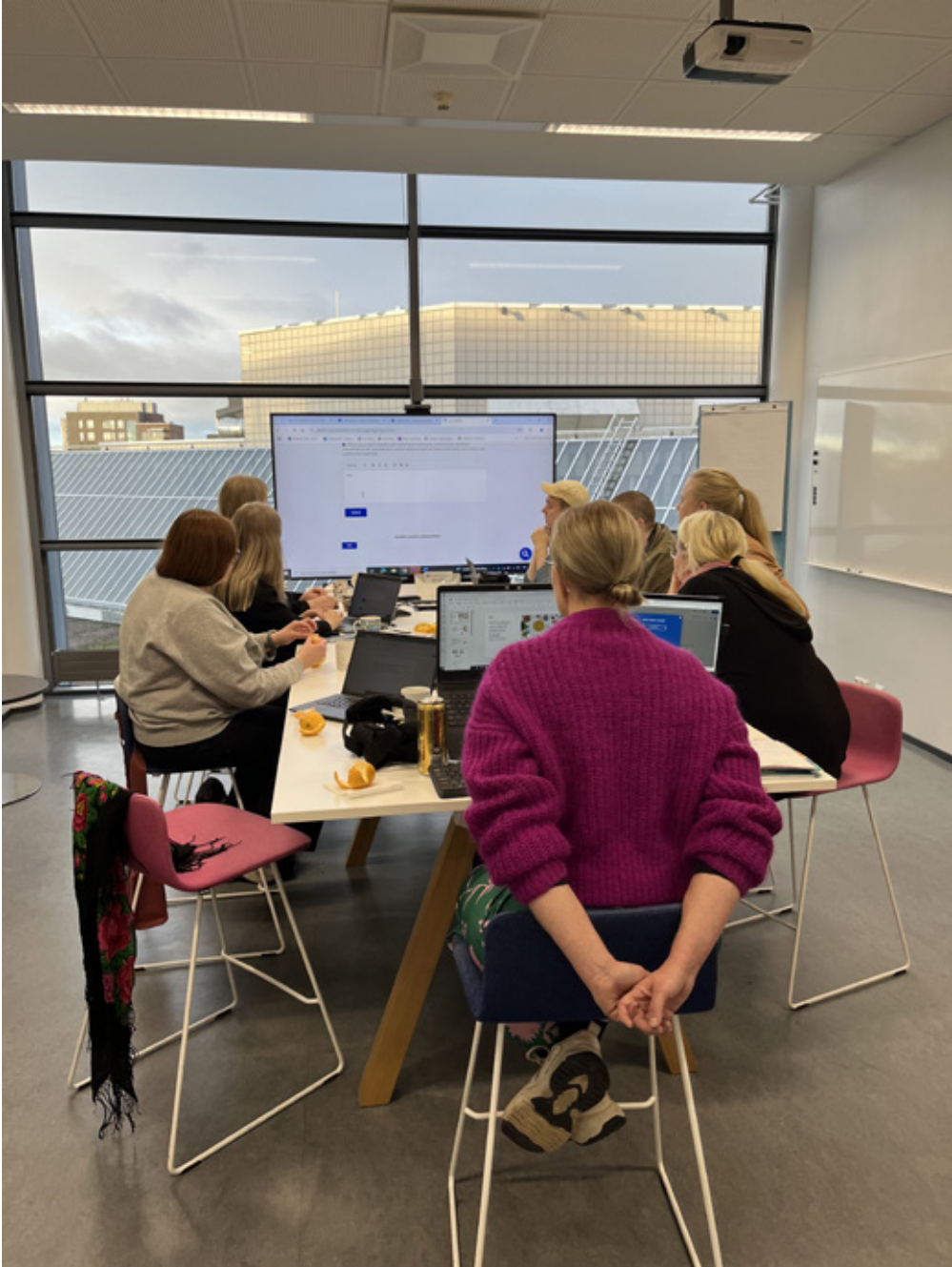
Among youth, uncertainty was also shaped by external factors. For example, asylum-seeking youth in Belgium faced such instability in their lives that committing to a long-term development process was nearly impossible. Life in reception centers is marked by waiting – for placement decisions, asylum outcomes – and uncertainty becomes the only constant.

## COMMON THEMES

### Social Media and Youth Outreach

Across all partner countries, a recurring theme emerged during the workshops: how to effectively reach young people through social media and online platforms. Young participants consistently emphasized that traditional communication methods often fail to engage them. They called for messaging that is timely, relevant, and delivered through the platforms they use – such as TikTok and Instagram.

One of the key challenges identified was the mismatch between institutional communication practices and young people's media habits. While many organizations rely on websites or printed materials, these often go unnoticed by youth. In Finland, for example, professionals and young people alike noted the difficulty of finding the right channels to promote events and services. Each organization tends to use its own social media accounts, which mostly reach those already involved. As a result, many still resort to physical posters and bulletin boards in youth spaces. In Vantaa, youth centers even maintain old-fashioned folders filled with printed flyers. This sparked a discussion about the need for a shared, easily accessible "virtual noticeboard." Interestingly, such a tool already exists – the Vantaa hobby and event calendar – but its usability and visibility could be improved. This realization led to the idea of organizing a co-creation workshop with the city's web administrators to explore ways to enhance the platform.



*Picture 2. Professionals reflecting on how to improve the usability of Vantaa's event and hobby calendars during a YEA project workshop at Laurea in November 2024. Photo: Riikka Kanervo.*

A similar insight came from Belgium, where a football tournament organized as part of the project initially struggled to attract participants through flyers and formal announcements. It wasn't until young people began sharing the event within their own networks that it gained traction and reached the right audience.

These experiences highlight a common challenge across partner countries: despite the abundance of digital tools and information, professionals often struggle to find the right channels and language to connect with youth. To bridge this gap, it's essential to involve young people directly in shaping communication strategies and to foster collaboration between institutions and third-sector actors, who often have closer ties to young communities.

### Youth-Friendly Environments and Meaningful Engagement

Across partner countries, young people consistently voiced the need for accessible, welcoming spaces where they can simply spend time together. In many neighborhoods, such places are either lacking or hard to find. During the project's Learning, Teaching and Training Activity, Youth Advisory Board members, youth workers, and project staff discussed how youth spaces are often repurposed office buildings – difficult to locate, uninviting, and underfunded.

Participants also noted a double standard in how public gatherings are perceived: when young people meet in parks, it's often seen as a threat, while similar gatherings by older adults are viewed as community-building. This contributes to a sense of exclusion and mistrust.

In Palermo, young people highlighted how they often rely on third-sector organizations for recreational and volunteering opportunities – for example those funded by Erasmus+ – as many leisure activities are too expensive or too far away. These programs not only offer free or low-cost access to hobbies and events, but also help youth build networks, develop soft skills, and gain confidence. One participant shared how joining an after-school support group during a personal crisis became a turning point in his life, offering emotional safety and a sense of belonging.

In Finland, similar concerns were raised. While there are plenty of cultural and sports activities for children, middle-aged and older adults, there are far fewer options for youth and young adults. Professionals and young people alike expressed a desire for more inclusive and affordable leisure opportunities – like open-air sports areas, swimming pools, or creative spaces.

In Palermo young people and professionals working with them also explored how abandoned public spaces could be revitalized through youth-led art projects, such as murals or graffiti. Involving students from art academies or language schools was suggested as a way to foster community pride, environmental care, and a sense of shared ownership.

Ultimately, both the lack of physical spaces and the challenge of reaching youth through the right channels – whether digital or physical – highlight the need for more youth-centered design in both infrastructure and communication. When young people are given the tools, spaces, and trust to shape their environments, they not only participate – they thrive.

### Photovoice: Amplifying Youth Perspectives Through Visual Storytelling

In the YEA project, it was important for us to give young people the opportunity to share their experiences of their own communities and sense of inclusion. We used the Photovoice method, where participating youth were asked to take photos of, for example, places where they feel they belong, or things they would like to change in their lives (Wang & Burris 1997). Later, we interviewed the young people, who shared their experiences through the images they had taken.

Photovoice offered significant benefits for data collection and engagement by enabling young people to express their experiences and emotions visually, providing a powerful alternative to traditional verbal communication. It allows participants to capture images that reflect their sense of community, belonging, and challenges, making it easier for them to share personal stories in a way that feels safe and authentic.

Through Photovoice method, youth could convey complex feelings that may be difficult to articulate with words, especially with people who are not closer to them and might not feel safe to share. Photovoice also fostered a deeper connection between participants by encouraging open dialogue about the images, which helped build empathy and understanding.

In Palermo, for example, one participant highlighted issues such as poor waste management and the lack of job and leisure opportunities. From the beginning, the young participants showed strong motivation to share their ideas for improving community life. Suggestions included creating more structured and sustainable services for people experiencing homelessness—something they felt the city should take more responsibility for.

Photovoice stories were collected in all partner countries: Belgium, Finland, and Italy. You can read more about the implementation of the Photovoice method in the YEA project [here](#), and about the international Photovoice carried out during [the Learning, Teaching and Training Activity in Palermo](#). The Photovoice stories have been [compiled on the project website](#).

Photovoice proved to be an accessible and inclusive method for many participants, allowing diverse voices to be heard. Additionally, it empowered youth to actively engage in the data collection process, making them co-creators of the insights and solutions that emerge from their experiences, while being reassured that the following activities would have been co-built based on their inputs, interests, concerns and feedback shared in that initial phase.



**Picture 3.** YEA project's Learning, Teaching and Training Activity in Palermo, held in May 2024. Photo: Riikka Kanervo.

## EXPERIENCES FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

### Belgium: Organizational Learning and Reflection

The project gave organizations a valuable opportunity to reflect on their own strengths and areas for improvement. It served as a moment of self-evaluation, helping them better understand how they could enhance their commitment to youth engagement.

However, it's important to recognize the need for long-term commitment. Priorities among young people can shift, and staff turnover within organizations can disrupt continuity and evaluation efforts.

Organizations were able to compare their strengths and challenges with those of others. In some cases, their strengths complemented each other; in others, one organization supported another in areas where improvement was needed. For example, a youth organization demonstrated strong practices in involving young people in decision-making, while the city faced more difficulties in this area. These differences were clearly highlighted during the workshops.

The consistent presence of both young people and professionals throughout the process ensured continuity and progress. Regular participation helped maintain momentum and supported the achievement of project goals within the planned timeframe.

### Finland: Building Trust and Professional Networks

The biggest challenge in reaching young people was finding enough time to build trust. Despite our efforts to lower the threshold for participation in the project's activities and co-creation processes, the barrier remained too high for many. The idea of joining an "official" workshop alongside professionals felt too intimidating, even though the professionals involved were approachable individuals who work with youth daily.

As a result, we chose to amplify young people's voices through the professionals involved in the project. After the initial challenges, the YEA project successfully brought together a broad network of youth professionals to reflect on key issues and co-create solutions. These professionals discussed the project's themes with the young people they work with and brought their insights and messages into the workshop process. Through collaboration in various constellations, we were able to design and implement several meaningful initiatives.

Laurea's YEA team together with professionals, organized two "Open Doors Walks" in Tikkurila. During the Open Doors Walks, participants explored local services together in a specific neighborhood, visiting various facilities and meeting the professionals behind them. The aim was to strengthen local networks and increase awareness of available services. The walks proved to be an effective and engaging way to build connections, exchange knowledge, and update one's understanding of the local service landscape. (Ghaderitafreshi et al. 2025.)

At Laurea, youth perspectives were also explored through student collaboration. Social services students from the English-language degree program representing a wide range of cultural and personal backgrounds – brought valuable diversity to the project, enriching the understanding of young people's lived experiences. Together with the YEA project team, Laurea students co-authored the article collection [\*Bridges of Belonging: Exploring Youth Empowerment, Inclusion, and Identity in a Changing World\*](#). The collection addresses the complex challenges and opportunities facing today's youth, examining how inclusion and exclusion shape their sense of belonging and how their empowerment and participation in society can be strengthened.

### Italy: Challenges and Opportunities in Palermo

The YEA project, with its goals and inspiring values, is crucial for Italy and for the local experience in Palermo related to youth participation, which presents both many opportunities and significant challenges. One opportunity is that the third sector, as well as associations, cultural centers, and youth clubs, exist and are very present in the city. They can rely on the support and cooperation with schools and other educational centers. However, often in the case of youth in vulnerable situations, but not only, the information and opportunities for training or related to promoting events, hobbies, and recreational workshops are overlooked, and the young people who are the primary recipients of these opportunities are not reached.

There are still very few moments in which youth workers, institutional representatives, teachers, and other figures linked to youth participation have the time and space to engage in structured dialogue and reflect on the common challenges in the city, as well as the enormous opportunities available in terms of specialized profiles, human availability, and material resources to start a conversation and create structured paths for cooperation. There are very few projects like YEA that offer innovative methodologies and put youth at the center and can easily be conducted by youth workers. An example of this is the Photovoice experience, which was a methodology used in the first phase of the project to collect needs and desires related to the sense of community, as well as to establish initial contact with the young participants and create a first social bridge between project managers, young people, and their peers.

Moreover, in a challenging social context like that of Palermo, where institutions are often seen as difficult to reach, especially regarding the communication channels they use, misaligned with the realities and languages of young people, the dialogue and co-creation processes proposed in long, structured workshops aim to build meaningful connections and foster mutual understanding.

## LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

One of the key takeaways from the YEA project was the importance of flexibility and adaptability. While the project had a clear structure and goals, real-world challenges – such as difficulties in reaching young people or changes in partner organizations – required us to adjust our plans along the way. Building room for such adjustments from the start is essential for any youth-centered initiative.

Another critical lesson was the need to invest time and resources in building trust, particularly with young people in vulnerable situations. Trust cannot be rushed, and meaningful engagement often begins with informal encounters and consistent presence, rather than structured workshops.

Inclusive communication also emerged as a central theme. To truly engage young people, it is vital to use the platforms, language, and tone that resonate with them. Traditional communication methods often fall short, and youth themselves are best positioned to guide how and where information should be shared.

A practical insight concerned resource allocation. While the project successfully engaged young people in co-creation, we realized that having a dedicated budget for implementing their ideas would have significantly strengthened their motivation and sense of ownership. In a sector where financial resources are often limited, even small funds can make a big difference in enabling participation.

The project also highlighted the value of collaboration and networking. Bringing together professionals, organizations, and young people created a dynamic environment for shared learning and innovation. These networks not only supported the project's goals but also laid the groundwork for future cooperation.

Finally, the project reaffirmed the power of empowerment through co-creation. When young people are treated as equal partners actively shaping the process rather than being passive participants, their engagement deepens, and the outcomes become more relevant and impactful.

The YEA project has clearly demonstrated that engaging young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, requires more than structured activities. It calls for flexibility, trust-building, and inclusive communication at every stage. By reflecting on these experiences and sharing what we've learned, we hope to contribute to a broader conversation on inclusive practices, co-creation, and community-based innovation. Looking ahead, our commitment remains strong: to empower youth, foster belonging, and support their agency through collaborative and creative approaches.

The YEA project team extends its heartfelt thanks. The past two years working on the YEA project may not have changed the world – but we believe they made it just a little bit better. And perhaps, in small but meaningful ways, the project left a lasting impression not only on us as project workers, but also on many others along the way.



**Picture 4.** Final meeting and group photo of the YEA project team in Genk, Belgium, in May 2025. Photo: Riikka Kanervo.

AI Copilot has been used to create the abstract and to revise the language of this article.

## References

**Biraaro, D. 2020.** [\*The hidden crisis: How the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting youth mental health\*](#). Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance. Retrieved 29.4.2025.

**Ghaderitafreshi, N., Hallikainen, M., Ingabire, D., Lahtinen, S., Kanervo, R. & Kurki, J. 2025.** Open Doors Walk Tikkurila. In Kaervo, R. (ed). [\*Bridges of Belonging: Exploring Youth Empowerment, Inclusion, and Identity in a Changing World\*](#). Laurea Publications 235, 43–51.

**Volkin, S. 2020.** [\*The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents\*](#). Hub, Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved 29.4.2025.

**Wang, C. & Burris, M. A. 1997.** [\*Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment\*](#). Health Education and Behavior 24(3), 369-87.

**Copyright® authors &  
Laurea University of Applied Sciences  
2025**

## **Authors**

**Riikka Kanervo**

Laurea University of Applied Sciences

**Johanna Kurki**

Laurea University of Applied Sciences

**Giulia De Santis**

European centre of studies and initiatives,

CESIE

**Zachary Ergish**

University of Applied Sciences Leuven-Limburg,

UCLL

**Pieter Frederix**

University of Applied Sciences Leuven-Limburg,

UCLL

**Photos: Riikka Kanervo**