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Reaching out - public libraries against exclusion with art based methods

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Abstract:

The main goal of the project Invisible Youth is to develop a service model for public libraries to outreach young adults aged between 16 and 30 who are at the danger of social exclusion. Success requires that libraries are receptive and willing to engage with those social actors who are involved with risk groups. New networks enable libraries not only to acknowledge the indicators of social exclusion but above all else to outreach invisibles. Invisible Youth has successfully applied art based methods to start interaction with invisible young and offered them platforms to become seen among the community.

In Finland, the new public library act highlights the active role of libraries and instructs them to promote equality in the society. The demand is not new and we may argue that to some extent Finnish libraries have orientated themselves towards these goals. Anyhow, there are people whose information needs are unrecognized and among them are an enormous amount young people at the risk of exclusion. Invisible Youth stimulates libraries to achieve those who withdraw from the community. Collaboration and art based methods are huge potential for inclusion in libraries. The progress of project has been significant and it continues to build new possibilities for the invisibles.

Keywords: social exclusion, young adults, art based methods, public libraries, collaboration

Introduction

Social exclusion is one most extensive social problem in the Finnish society. For the variety of reasons, early adulthood is a phase when people confront difficulties of finding a direction for

their lives. Too often uncertainty leads to a situation where an individual starts to drift outside of the community. To prevent this, all operators are encouraged to attack the problem and especially public libraries should be at the forefront against exclusion. However, the task is demanding since the risk group is diverse. Often young adults at the risk of social exclusion are not library users, problems in writing and reading skills are common and they don't see libraries as a place for themselves.

In Finland, the new public library act highlights the active role of libraries and instructs them to promote equality in the society. The demand is not new and we may argue that to some extent Finnish libraries have orientated themselves towards these goals. Nevertheless, there are people whose information needs are unrecognized and among them are an enormous amount of young people at the risk of exclusion. *Invisible Youth* stimulates libraries to achieve those who withdraw from the community. Collaboration and art based methods offer large potential to support inclusion in public library environments. The progress of project has been significant and it continues to build new possibilities for invisibles.

Need for the Project Invisible Youth

Although the word "exclusion" has been used to an increasing extent since 1980's there is no shared definition of the term. In general, social exclusion describes the sad set of circumstances like unemployment, insecurity or isolation. Often these are consequences of local or global changes which focus either on societies, communities, families or individuals. Social exclusion indicates not only the causes but also the effects of poverty, discrimination and disadvantage. Leaving no one Behind, UN's Report on the World Social Situation (2016), uses the term to describe "lack of participation in or exclusion from economic, political, cultural, civic and/or social life. Lack of participation in political processes, in civic life or in the labor market are construed as aspects of overall social exclusion." The opposite of the term exclusion is inclusion. The social inclusion process is considered improving the membership, prospects, dignity and status of people who live in the situation of disadvantage.

Finland is the European Union member state and it is one of the Nordic countries which are not usually connected to the phenomena like social exclusion or marginalization. Despite this, the exclusion is a problem in the stable society of Finland. According to studies, approximately 50,000 under 30-year-olds young adults are categorized to suffer from the social exclusion (Finnish Youth Work Statistics, 2015). Although we may say that at the risk of exclusion are potentially anyone there are indicators which are identified to arise the risk level. Particularly poverty, limited education, disabilities or minority background are each an indicator which might be in the background of exclusion or can start the process of exclusion. Social exclusion effects on identity both at the level of an individual and group. In the terms of marginalization people suffering of exclusion are ignored in large extension and in general they are not involved in social discussion but left in the position of others. (UN, Leaving no one Behind, 2016.)

United Nations 2030 Agenda presents 17 goals for Sustainable Development. Goals arise issues like health, education, poverty and inequality which are key factors for social inclusion not depending on the continent an individual stays. Particular, the aspect of inclusion is emphasized in the goal 16 which maintains to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies". The Finnish Library Association has committed to the goals among the other non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Finland (Maarno, 2016). Especial, the Library Association has encouraged Finnish public libraries to support newcomers in the society and welcome them to

libraries. In large extent, libraries have offered their venues, skills and knowledge and they have done significant work with immigrants and refugees during the past few years.

The recent Public Library Acts (1492/2016) express rather explicitly that community based approach is an imperative goal for libraries. Among other things, the objective of the act is not only to promote equal opportunities or access to documents, collections, information and cultural contents but also to support active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression. In addition, the act expects sensitivity towards the variety of communities, pluralism and cultural diversity. According to the act, Finnish public libraries should focus on communities and no one should be left outside.

Finnish public libraries reach nearly 70 % of the population and they could be called rather equal organizations for they are free and open. In the public libraries there are no limitations but anyone can entry into the venues, use computers, borrow materials and participate in the events or training. In addition, library professionals are used operating with the diverse communities and recognizing the information needs of surrounding collectives. However, libraries have acknowledged that young adults are a challenging group. According to presumption, young adults live the phase when they are busy with their studies, career and families so they are not even considered to be active library users. The project *Invisible Youth* has awoken libraries to notice that in fact there is a number of young adults who are not occupied with particular activity but quite opposite they should be activated and reached before it is too late.

Goals and Steps

An all over objective of the project *Invisible Youth* is to design a service model for public libraries to outreach young adults aged between 16 and 30 who are at the risk of social exclusion. Shortly the stakeholders of the project are invisible young adults and library professionals. In addition, the students of the project institutions are significant for in a few years they will be new professionals in working life. Students are active in the project so their knowledge and skills will benefit libraries and other work communities.

Invisible Youth has adopted the service design process where understanding, interaction, co-creation, agile reaction, piloting, feedback and implementation are essential. The first step of the process was to understand the big picture: What is the issue called exclusion? Why the phenomenon does exist? Who are young adults at risk of social exclusion? Where are they and how to get in contact with them? What is the existing situation in libraries in the perspective of young adults? To get answers, the project concentrated on data collection which was done by studies, surveys and interviewing experts like social workers, NGO operators, project workers and library professionals.

The analysis of the mapping indicated that target group is extremely heterogeneous and even though libraries might have recognized the problem they have no resources or skills to concentrate on the issue. However, the social exclusion of young adults is not visible in the libraries firstly because there are no particular signs to distinguish who are in the need of special support and secondly for the target group is not an active library user. The analysis shows that the NGO sector is effective and reaches young adults at the risk of exclusion. Moreover NGOs are agile, they have knowledge how to communicate with young adults and what are the topic they are interested. First of all NGOs are eager to do co-operation and with their help libraries

could not only to acknowledge the indicators of social exclusion but above all else to outreach invisibles. Most living at the risk of exclusion live restricted life and they need strong encouragement to take any new steps. They need confidence and if they are not familiar with library services libraries will stay out of their everyday paths. Art based methods are soft tools starting the communication and localities of NGOs are open.

The project *Invisible Youth* implemented active training not only for librarians but also for youth work professionals and NGO operators. The experience was successful and dialogue between different sectors was needed that the goals of the project can be achieved. The active pedagogy used encouraged operators to communicate, work together both during the course but also outside the class room. Getting to know each other was essential step and it clearly reduced barriers between operators but also progressed designing the service model.

Art Based Methods

The project team is multidisciplinary and operators represent higher education in the branches of library, media, communication, music, literature and writing. Particular, the project members are experts in service design, cartoons, creative and therapeutic writing, digital storytelling, rap music, video producing, visual design and library work. In addition, the public libraries of the cities Jyväskylä, Seinäjoki and Turku are active collaborators and they offer their skills and authentic library environments for the project to operate, collect information, observe and pilot the methods and tools. Workshops organized in libraries are occasions where librarians are able to create dialogue with young adults and attempt them into the library.

Art based methods have two functions in the project. Firstly supporting the self-expression skills of the youth. Secondly offering a tool for librarians to make contact with young adults and to understand their needs and wishes. The key challenge discovered during the project has been the youth lacks places to meet, things to do and they are hard to reach as one group. They don't necessarily see the library as a place for them or they lack skills and abilities to utilize library services and collections. On the other hand, libraries seem to lack practical, easy to use methods, cooperation partners or their premises and equipment have shortcomings. Many librarians are also uncertain of their skills, abilities to reach and encounter this target group or take over new methods.

The challenges mentioned before are issues the project has discovered during workshops. The overall result of the project, *Invisible Youth* service model and handbook aims to facilitate these encountered problems. Through the process of prototyping the service model multi-professional networks have been involved including librarians, youth and social workers and the target group itself, young adults. Service design methods have been applied in the process and prototype has been tested and developed via inclusion and feedback. Involving participants, the aim has been to create a user-friendly model that encourages and inspires libraries to take an active role with this important task.

The project team solving this task includes three higher education and partner institutions: Jyväskylä University, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences and Turku University Universities of Applied Sciences. All partner institutions have their own expertise areas and they bring to the project know-how of their staff and professionals of different art based methods.

The created service model uses narrative expression enriched with other art based methods utilized young people's abilities and skills to use and create digital content. Used art-based methods have been cartoons, therapeutic and creative writing, rap music, visual and video expression. All methods are autobiographical and aim to foster participant's abilities and skills for self-expression creating digital stories applying versatile media tools using pictures, video, voice, music, drawings or text to bring participants stories visible to all.

Workshops mentioned before were organized reaching out for the youth but also to involve libraries and other participants working with this target group. During these workshops via different autobiographical assignments participants are given the possibility to explore their identity. Themes in the workshops have also been young adult's strengths, talents and dreams. Participants are guided and supported to express themselves with given methods in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere in which people are able to focus on their expressions and associated emotional responses. This can enhance the participation and empowerment of participants. Created digital stories as result of the workshops are important, but the most important and meaningful aspect of the workshops has been the journey the participants have made together.

Lessons Learned

The workshop feedback has been used actively to develop the service model further and mainly results are promising. The project *Invisible Youth* aims to create interaction between youth and the surrounding community by publishing workshop outcomes, created stories and artwork, online to support the empowering process via positive feedback and conversation. Excited examples have been seen during the project and sharing one's own story has inspired to publish more and examples have also encouraged others. Publishing a story in the YouTube-channel might have been far too big step but anyhow mostly participants have enjoyed working among others.

Young adults have seen art based methods as inspiring tools which help them to open the door to their lives, dreams, crises or future plans. Participants have said that by the art based methods they have found a new language to express their feelings and they appreciate that tools can be connected easily to interactive platforms where stories can be shared with others. The successful workshop offers a secure space to arise sensitive questions often connected to identity, appearance or acceptance but uncertainty of the future was expressed clearly and youth wonder if they are ever able to find their place in the community.

The feedback of immigrant background young adults have been the most encouraging. They have enjoyed the workshops, their attitudes towards the future seem to be positive and they are willing to come to libraries if they are welcome. If not evaluated in the same criteria as others, one workshop was a great success. It was planned for minority background young adults but unexpectedly the attendees were older members who wanted to know more about the project and method. Discussions with representatives were exceptional and they argued that library services are not for them and their culture and traditions is not familiar or even accepted by the majority. For young adults, the situation is unbearable and otherness is the main reason for exclusion. As a conclusion of this encounter was that to solve the question of this minority a new project is needed.

Those young adults who studied in the preparing classes for secondary education were the most critical. Their workshops were organized at the education institution which was later evaluated as a mistake. Even though preparing classes are not included in the formal education it follows the rules, structure and hierarchy of the education organization. Participants considered that they must work in the workshop, the tension among the groups was visible and teachers were occupied with other duties. Youth were frustrated and mainly they stayed passive during the four-day workshops, instructors were not able to achieve their attention and they were not inspired of library venues. There are several obstacles which prevent to arrange workshops in libraries. Although a library building might be new and modern there is no place for quiet and intensive working. On the contrary, often small branch libraries have good facilities but they are not in the same area as young adults.

During the first round, the workshop instructors were experts from the project *Invisible Youth*. They noticed that experience is needed and even though first workshops were carefully planned they were not flexible towards the ideas of the participants. Experience grew the competence of the instructors and they were able listening to the attendees, catch and support their ideas and not only follow the plan. Yet librarians understand the situation and the demand for inclusive services they are surviving in the middle of diminishing resources. On the other hand, librarians think that art based workshops are so demanding that they are not able to conduct them. The project has been able to prove that collaboration is essential to reach the invisibles but in addition the method can be applied in libraries by the amateurs.

The project *Invisible Youth* have organized training for librarians and encouraged them to test the method in the supervision of the project experts. Workshops have been excellent environments to start interaction with the variety of people. The project has been able to connect NGO operators, educational institutions, social workers, public sector and library professionals together. In addition, through the art based workshops it has been able to link young adults at the risk of exclusion with libraries and arise the question of inclusion to the front page.

The pilot phase rose several information needs which could be designed towards services. One important observation was low level of reading and writing skills among the young adults attending the project workshops. Finland has long been a country of comprehensive reading and writing skills and traditionally the literacy rate has been nearly 100 % but studies show that the tendency is changing. This discovery is significant because literacy is at the core of library work and has motivated libraries to adopt the methods. On the other hand workshops organized in library venues have offered attendees an easy entrance to libraries. They have noticed that libraries are not demanding but they welcome anyone. Moreover, attendees have been comfortable among other people and during the workshop meetings they expressed that they were able to get in contact with others. Invisible young adults have clearly expressed that the service model designed is imperative.

Conclusion

Prevention of the social exclusion of youth is in priority in all agendas in the society. Even though the phenomenon has economic and political dimensions we can argue that the human aspect is the critical point. All operators are challenged to stop exclusion and public libraries do not make an exception. Quite contrary, libraries are demand to be in the front line since they are important public actors in the society of Finland.

The perspectives of library staff, youth workers and NGO have been utilized throughout the development of the service model by evaluating each phase. Special training periods for these associates are also part of the project to create better understanding about the methods used in *Invisible Youth*. Through these training sessions, the project wants to encourage the use of these methods, promotes the library personnel's and other professionals' abilities to develop new activities for this target group.

Young adults are the diverse and sensitive group of people who can be reached. Mainly they are willing to participate and involve activities but for the variety of reasons they need more support and encouraging as other young people. Their self-confidence is low and their life is restricted. Libraries could offer them a space where they could be empowered by seeing and meeting other people, training and developing their skills, telling and publishing their stories. The project *Invisible Youth* has shown that public libraries have all the potential to include young adults to the community.

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