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# YOUTH WORK IN FINLAND



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## Abstract

The article examines Finnish youth work and its objectives and development through legislation. In current legislation, youth work is assigned the task of promoting young people's active citizenship and participation. Other key objectives of youth work include young people's social empowerment and independence, as well as improving young people's growth and living conditions. Nevertheless, a young person is not an object in youth work, but an active agent, who is supported by the youth worker through a dialogic relationship. Youth work is part of youth education, which supports the educational duties of home, school and the surrounding society. Its objective is not only to provide knowledge and technical skills, but to allow young people to learn how to operate as full members of communities and society. Youth work is based on the willingness of young people to participate in their leisure time in activities together with other young people. Youth work employs a broad range of methods that vary according to the interests of the young people involved. Finland is characterised by a large number of youth work professionals. Youth work education is provided at upper secondary and university levels in Finland. The government and local authorities are responsible for creating framework conditions for youth work, as well as for supervising the funding and implementation of youth work. In matters affecting young people, different authorities are expected to work in cross-sectoral cooperation at both national and local level. The state provides subsidies for youth work, although the amount spent by local authorities on youth work is several times higher than the subsidies.

*Key Concepts: Youth Work, Non-formal Learning, Participation, Active Citizenship, Social Empowerment, Dialogic Relationship.*

## Young People as Objects? – No, but Working with Young People

This article presents an overview of youth work in Finland: its objectives, legal basis and evolution through legislative changes. Youth work will also be reviewed briefly in the framework of youth education. In addition, a review of youth worker education is presented at the end of the article. The challenges, methods and future of youth work are left outside the scope of this paper.

Youth work is based on the voluntary participation of young people. Youth work fosters learning and mainly takes place in groups or communities. Youth work is preventive by nature, and the range of methods applied is based on the young people involved.

Docent Lasse Siurala (2001), the Director of the Department of Youth, City of Helsinki, has defined youth work as supporting growth into citizenship and developing skills for active citizenship by

- 1) promoting participation in the labour market, cultural life, education and public decision making
- 2) creating opportunities for discussing topics such as identity, knowledge and moral issues
- 3) practising and developing participatory pedagogy
- 4) developing participation skills in practice.

### Statutory Youth Work

In Finland, youth work has been governed by legislation since 1972. The Act on Youth Committees and State Subsidies for Municipal Youth Work (117/1972) laid the foundation for the development of a statutory system of youth committees in Finland. Municipal youth committees operated at the grass roots level, provincial youth work committees acted as expert bodies at the provincial level, and the National Youth Work committees, later the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs, operated under the Ministry of Education. The act secured state subsidies to local authorities for organ-

ising youth work: state subsidies for the salaries of youth workers, operation of youth associations, rental costs and rental value costs of youth facilities, travel costs incurred in youth work as well as discretionary costs related to the construction and renovation of youth facilities. Depending on the municipality's financial capacity classification, state subsidies were granted for 20–65 percent of qualifying youth work costs. Under the legislation of the time, young people referred to persons aged 7–24 years.

The Act on Government Transfers for National Youth Work (1035/1973), effective as of 1974, established the support system for national youth organisations. The Youth Work Act (1068/1985), effective as of 1986, was largely based on the preceding acts. The new act removed the right to state subsidies for youth facilities based on the rental value system. The upper age limit for young people was raised to 29 years at the request of student organisations. In addition, national youth centres, as well as their operational and investment grants, were now governed by legislation. The state subsidy system for local authorities changed considerably concerning youth work with the adoption of yet another new act in 1993. At this time, the subsidy system changed from one based on the financial capacity classification of municipalities and subjects of youth work to one based on a formula. State subsidies to local authorities were now determined by the number of inhabitants under the age of 29 years in each municipality. The objective of the act was to increase the autonomy of local authorities. This also meant removing the statutory system of municipal youth committees. Consequently, the number of municipal youth committees dropped to about a dozen within a few years. (Government Proposal to Parliament for a Youth Act 2005.)

The subsequent act governing youth work, the Youth Work Act (1235/1995), became effective as of 1995. This act broadened the scope of youth work to youth policy. In the act, youth work was defined as work aimed at promoting civic activity and improving the living conditions of young people. Youth activities were defined as young people's civic activities aimed at promoting their growth and citizenship skills. The act did not specify the age range of young people, but state subsidies were still determined by the number of people under the age of 29 years. Under the

act, youth work was defined as part of the responsibilities of local authorities (municipalities), while youth activities were primarily the responsibility of youth groups and youth organisations. The coordination and development of youth work were defined as the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, which would be assisted by State Provincial Offices at the regional level. At the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Culture was responsible for the Division of Youth Work and youth work itself. (Government Proposal to Parliament for a Youth Act 2005.)

The new Youth Act (72/2006) became effective in March 2006. Its “purpose is to support young people’s growth and independence, promote their active citizenship and social empowerment, and improve their growth and living conditions”. The pursuit of these goals is based on “communality, solidarity, non-discrimination and equality, multiculturalism and internationalism, healthy life styles, and respect of life and the environment”.

At the beginning of 2011, the Youth Act (72/2006) was repealed by the Act Amending the Youth Act (693/2010). The new act included a requirement for cross-sectoral cooperation at the local level (Section 7), as well as for referring young people in need of support to services and counselling that promote growth and independence, and improve access to education and the labour market through outreach youth work (Section 7b). At the national level, cooperation between different ministries had already been guided by the Child and Youth Policy Programme 2007–2011. The new policy programme for 2012–2015 was approved in Dec 2011. “The goal of the Child and Youth Policy Programme is to create additional, equal access to education and the labour market for children and young people, according to their age group. Another objective is to promote the active citizenship and social participation of children and young people.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2011.)

In the Youth Act, the term “young people” refers to people under the age of 29 years. State subsidies for municipal youth work are determined by the number of young people, and the unit cost of youth work is determined annually by the Ministry of Education (Act on the Financing of the Provision of Education and Culture 1705/2009). However, local author-

ities are allowed to determine the focus areas and target groups of their youth work. The municipal system of self-government entitles local authorities to decide on the organisation of youth work (Government Proposal to Parliament for a Youth Act 2005). Local authorities are allowed to focus their youth work on specific age groups, and employers are also entitled to determine the qualifications required of youth workers – they are not specified under law.

In Finland, the Government and local authorities are responsible for creating framework conditions for youth work. Sphere of youth and leisure promotes civic activity, well-being, the growth of individuals, as well as communality. Youth work focuses on enabling youth activities, developing young people's living conditions, and securing and expanding young people's opportunities to participation in society. (Mäkelä 2006, 11–12.) Because the Finnish legislation allows local authorities to determine the organisation of youth work, local authorities spent about 160 million euro in youth work in 2009, while the state subsidies covered only 4–5 percent of this amount (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2011a).

## Youth Work Goals

In the Youth Act (72/2006), youth work is defined as the promotion of active citizenship during young people's leisure time, as well as the social empowerment of young people. The objective of youth work is to support young people's growth and independence, as well as interaction between generations.

The core values of youth work have always been to increase young people's activity, develop citizenship skills and support personal citizenship (e.g. Telemäki 1999, 14; Youth Department of the City of Helsinki 2001; Youth in Finland 2004, 28; European Commission 2010, 8). Now those demands have been further emphasised or redefined. Youth work and the non-formal learning it provides are well acknowledged in Finland – the first act on youth work was passed nearly 40 years ago. Youth work is part

of youth education and thereby supports the youth education taking place at school and at home, as well as in other learning environments of young people. The intense professionalisation of youth work has resulted in clearer definition of its objectives. The Ministry of Education and Culture has defined national youth work as follows: It must support young people's social participation and prevent their marginalisation. Youth work has traditionally been preventive and empowering. Based on practices promoting communality, youth work supports the growth of individuals as members of society and their communities. As required by the Youth Act, today's youth work and youth policy focus on promoting active citizenship, improving young people's living conditions, and empowering them socially. The section in the Youth Act on cross-sectoral cooperation and outreach youth work refers specifically to improving young people's living conditions and supporting their growth and social empowerment (Aaltonen 2011, 17).

Youth work can be defined as educational work, which is characterised by young people's voluntary participation. The objective of youth work is active citizenship, which promotes participation in youth communities. The quality of youth work can be improved by providing youth workers with appropriate training. Youth work can be carried out by youth organisations or other youth groups, as well as local or regional actors. (Siurala 2005, 51.)

## **Supporting Growth and Independence**

By educating young people, youth work supports the educational duties of home and school. Youth work methods are intended to enable goal-oriented, non-formal learning outside of the school. Non-formal education refers to goal-oriented, voluntary learning. In youth work, learning takes place in various environments and situations, and learning is not necessarily the only activity or the main point of the event. In non-formal learning, it is rare to document or evaluate learning results or achievements using traditional methods. (Chisholm 2005.)



Youth work aims to improve young people's life management skills. However, the objective of youth work is not to manage young people's lives, but to encourage young people to take responsibility for their own life and its management. Youth work aims to empower young people by providing them with tools and information needed for taking control of their own lives. This also supports their identity formation.

Lecturer Erja Anttonen focused on the context of cultural youth work (Anttonen 2012, 34). The term refers to youth work in which the methods applied are based on the activities of the young people involved. Similarly, the MIMO project focuses on developing and applying art-based methods in cultural youth work for preventing the social exclusion of young people (MIMO - Moving In, Moving On 2011).

## Active Citizenship

Today, promoting young people's participation in society is a key element of youth work and the development of skills for active citizenship. Participation and involvement are terms used in all contexts discussing the framework or development of youth work (e.g. Youth Department of the City of Helsinki 2001; A New Impetus for European Youth 2002, 23, 33; Youth Act 72/2006; European Commission 2010, 8–9; The Council of the European Union 2009.)

Active citizenship requires active participation in economic, social, cultural and political life. In youth work, it also means helping young people to acquire the necessary skills through voluntary activities. The objective is not only to increase the knowledge of young people, but also to create enthusiasm, motivation and skills as well as practical experiences in active citizenship. (Siurala 2005, 45.)

A strong demand for the active participation and agency of young people is spreading across Finland, Europe and the rest of the Western world. In the surrounding society, lack of interest and poor turnout in elections, especially among young people, has raised concerns. Will young people be

able to influence their community or tomorrow's society if they do not exercise their democratic right to vote?

In Finland, schools have traditionally been places where children and young people learn the basic principles of democracy. ICCS -The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz et al. 2010), which investigates the social competencies, participation and attitudes of eighth-grade students, demonstrated that while young people in Finland have an excellent knowledge of social issues, their participation and agency in society are relatively low in international comparison. It could be argued that Finnish teens leaving comprehensive school are not interested in politics or society.

Practicing skills in democracy and citizenship have always been a part of youth work and youth activities. Active participation in youth associations or political youth organisations has provided many key figures the foundation for taking on bigger responsibilities in society. However, interest in youth associations has clearly decreased among young people. Also membership in youth associations has declined. The study on the leisure activities of young people by researcher Sami Myllyniemi (2009, 30–32) showed that what young people value the most is spontaneous free time with their friends – the second most valued activity is leisure time spent with the family, and only the third one is organised civic activity.

The Constitution of Finland (731/1999) guarantees every person the right to participate in civil society and politics, and to influence the decisions concerning themselves. The Constitution states twice the right of the individual to participate in and influence the development of society and decision making of the living environments. These rights apply to people of all ages – the only exception is the right to vote in municipal and national elections, which currently only applies to people who are at least 18 years of age. (Nieminen 2005, 39.)

The Local Government Act (365/1995) also guarantees the residents and service users of a municipality the right to participate in and influence decision making in their municipality. The responsibility for providing opportunities to do so rests with the local authorities (Gretschel 2002, 46). Section 8 of the Youth Act (72/2006) requires young people to be heard

in matters concerning themselves. Also the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) emphasises children's right to be heard, for example, when assessing the need for child welfare actions (e.g. Child Welfare Act, Section 5).

Furthermore, Finland has signed and ratified several international conventions, which require the country to ensure that children and young people are heard and have equal opportunities to participate in society (e.g. the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989). In addition, as a member of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union, Finland has ratified various decisions aimed at promoting young people's social participation and opportunities to influence decision making: for example *A New Impetus for European Youth*, *The White Paper 2001*; *An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering 2009*; *Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field 2010–2018*.

Concern for the decreasing interest among young people to influence matters concerning themselves has resulted in the establishment of a large number of municipal youth participation environments. In 2011, there were active youth councils or similar groups in about 170 municipalities (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2011b). According to youth researcher Anu Gretschel (2002, 86), a key issue for youth participation projects is to deal with matters that the young people involved find important. When discussing projects and the values involved, young people wanted to “influence and make more decisions on matters concerning themselves”; be heard; do things together; build team spirit; build and create something useful; “create change”; and “do something I'll be remembered by”. In order to increase the participation of young people, one must view participation as a place and an opportunity for learning together. (Gretschel 2002, 130.) If the goal is to empower young people and to turn them into decision makers, then they should be included in creating, designing, deciding on, implementing and evaluating projects (Gretschel 2011, 39).

## Social Empowerment

According to the Youth Act (72/2006) social empowerment refers to measures targeted at young people and aimed at improving life management skills and preventing exclusion. Youth work is largely a group activity aimed at the social empowerment of young people at the level of both individuals and groups. In the early days of youth work, volunteers and people interested in youth work became qualified in their jobs through practical experience. Nevertheless, even then the work was driven by a strong collaborative relationship between a young person and the leader. At the time, the relationship was not necessarily based on any real interaction between two people (dialogue), which is an absolute requirement in youth work today for building a pedagogical relationship between a young person and the leader. According to Martin Buber's (1993, initial in 1923) famous thesis on dialogical existence, a dialogic relationship ("I-Thou") can only be based on mutual respect and equality. If the relationship is non-dialogic ("I-It"), it makes educational interaction impossible (Buber 1993; Värri 2002, 63–64).

Youth work is carried out during the leisure time of young people, and participation in youth work activities is voluntary. It is up to the young people themselves to decide which activities to take part in outside of school time or work life. This essential principle sets many qualitative requirements for youth work: it should appear attractive to young people. In the encounter between a young person and the leader, an "I-It" or subject-object relationship does not encourage the young person to participate, and does not create the necessary preconditions in a challenging environment filled with competing (commercial) activities. In youth work, it is important to nurture a pedagogical relationship, which is based on a dialogue between the learner and the educator. Furthermore, as the nature of youth work involves working in groups or communities, a social educational relationship is absolutely necessary in youth education. As a result of social change, social empowerment and the communality it entails have once again become a key focus area of youth work. Indeed, the educational potential of communities is highly important in youth work. The objective of youth work is to empower young people to become full members

of society, who are also heard in decision making. According to Ethienne Wenger (1999, 5), social participation in different communities supports the identity formation and social learning of young people. In addition to building practical skills and identity, social learning includes the community to which the young person belongs as well as the meanings that the learning experiences create for the young person.

The goal of social empowerment is the prevention of social exclusion. The concept of exclusion is well known in the field of youth work and youth education. It has been viewed as a problem to be prevented by creating equal opportunities for all young people, regardless of their background or socio-economic situation. In recent years, however, it has become evident that a more effective way to prevent social exclusion is to promote equal and non-discriminatory participation by all from the very beginning. This paradigm change is best described by the concept of inclusion.

## **Theoretical Framework of Youth Work**

Youth work is part of youth education, which in turn is often seen as part of formal school education. However, the scope of youth education is much broader – different forms of youth work and civic activity as well as upbringing at home and the significance of the surrounding society, are all key elements of youth education. (Nivala & Saastamoinen 2007, 8.)

Youth Research and Youth Work Lecturer of University of Tampere Juha Nieminen (2007a, 39) has argued that youth education should not necessarily aim to become an independent field of science. Nevertheless, as a subfield of educational sciences, youth education should obtain sufficient standing and resources. According to Nieminen, the status of youth education and youth work as scientific fields are also political issues.

In his analysis of the duties of youth work in Finnish society, Nieminen (2007b, 21–27) has discovered certain basic functions. The primary function of youth work is socialisation: helping young people become members of society and culture. The second key function of youth work is its role in the identity formation of young people. The third function is

to compensate for any inadequacies encountered in the socialisation and identity formation of young people. Youth work aims to help and support young people with problems in attaching to society or realising their personal potential. The fourth key function of youth work is resourcing and allocation. In other words, it is the duty of youth work to influence the allocation of public resources.

Professor of Social Work and Social Pedagogy of University of East-Finland Juha Hämäläinen (2007, 173) sees many perspectives to youth work in social pedagogy. The framework, theories and traditions of social pedagogy offer a solid theoretical foundation for youth work. Social pedagogy supports the conceptualisation of youth education and youth work as educational activity in society and its development as a social sphere (Hämäläinen 2007, 174). Today, the participation of young people is pursued increasingly through and together with socio-pedagogical activities. Educational activities are a characteristic feature of socio-pedagogical methodology, as are supporting individuals, communality, self-reflection and the principles of experiential learning (Hämäläinen 1999, 77).

The role of youth work in learning that takes place outside of school has become increasingly important as a result of social change. While most school learning is no longer solely teacher-centred, youth work strongly emphasises the relationship between the learner and the surrounding world. The non-formal education taking place in youth work can be highly goal-oriented, and it can provide valuable support for both the upbringing at home and the formal education at school. However, youth work is based on voluntariness, and the role of the leader is always that of a coach. The youth worker supports, inspires, encourages and activates young people. According to a Swedish view, these are the same tasks as those of social pedagogy professionals working in child and youth welfare (Eriksson & Markström 2000, 74). Social participation and life management are an integral part of young people's active citizenship and the adoption of democratic principles. The objective is to provide young people with good life management skills that allow them to manage their own life and take responsibility for themselves and their life. Hämäläinen (2007, 177) defines youth education in the framework of individual psychology as supporting

young people in their personal growth aimed at building an identity. In social pedagogy, the concept of normalisation refers to actions or measures aimed at restoring, through inclusion, an equal position and opportunities for people who have lost control of their life or are facing other problems (Eriksson & Markström 2000, 127).

In youth work, strengthening active citizenship means learning about agency, activity, participation, equality and democracy. In addition, questions concerning identity formation, rights, obligations and diversity are closely related to active citizenship, as are life management, empowerment and universal human rights. All of the above mentioned issues are an essential part of youth work and youth education. Youth work is part of overall social education – as an element of youth education, it is education as well as part of the *Bildung* process (Hämäläinen 2007, 183).

Finnish youth work has always emphasised youth activities and encountering young people. Only a few decades ago, most youth workers became qualified in their jobs through practical experience, and therefore youth activities were largely based on models developed through experience. Often the experience resulted in good, consistent practices, but the lack of a theoretical framework also resulted in wrong kinds of activities. Activities that are not inspired by the young people themselves, or are planned and organised too extensively by adult leaders, should not be called youth activities in the first place.

## **Education of Youth Workers and Employees**

Youth workers operate with young people in the environment of non-formal education with an extensive range of tasks. They support the personal and social development of young people by working in personal contact with them and by using group work methods. While developing the skills of young people can be the ultimate goal of youth workers, in most cases youth workers adopt a socio-pedagogical or social work approach in their work. In many cases, these roles and tasks are interconnected. (Chisholm 2005.)

In 2005, there were about 7000 people in Finland working in professions related to youth field, in youth work and early childhood education (Mäkelä 2006, 29). About 2600–2700 of them were involved in youth work (Aaltonen 2006), 1700 worked in parishes (Hoikkala & Sell 2007, 13) and about 500 in youth organisations (Aaltonen 2006). In addition, a vast number of people in Finland actively help in organising youth activities voluntarily through youth associations or youth organisations.

How well are youth work professionals and volunteers prepared to work with young people in compliance with the Finnish legislation? With the hardening of values in society and the growing responsibility of individuals for their life choices, it is vitally important to support young people's growth and help them become active citizens who are able to take care of their own and their fellow citizens' well-being.

In Finland, there are several degree programmes providing qualifications for working in various positions in the field of youth work and leisure activities. The Vocational Qualification in Youth and Leisure Instruction (120 study weeks) entitles graduates to work as youth and leisure instructors. This upper secondary qualification can be completed at several educational institutions across Finland, and it can also be earned as a competence-based qualification (Finnish National Board of Education 2011). Those holding the qualification are expected to be able “to instruct, inspire, motivate and educate, as well as organise goal-oriented and experiential activities” (Mäkelä 2006, 12). Persons holding a Further Qualification in Special Needs Instruction for Children and Young People are able to work in positions involving education, instruction and organisation. The Degree Programme in Civic Activities and Youth Work (210 ECTS) is a degree completed at a university of applied sciences. The degree title earned is Community Educator, Bachelor of Humanities. The programme can be pursued at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences, Central Ostrobothnia University of Applied Sciences and Novia University of Applied Sciences. Those who hold a Bachelor's degree and have at least three years of work experience in the field are entitled to apply for the Master's Degree Programme in NGO and Youth Work (90 ECTS). The degree title earned is Community Ed-



ucator, Master of Humanities. The programme can be pursued at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences and Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences. In addition, HUMAK University of Applied Sciences offers an English-language Master's Degree Programme in Youth Work and Social Equality (90 ECTS). (Curricula of universities of applied sciences 2011–2012, details on references.) In addition, University of Tampere offers a Master's Programme in Youth Work and Youth Research (120 ECTS), and students attending the university in another degree programme are entitled to attend the separate module Youth Work and Youth Research (60 ECTS) (University of Tampere 2011).

In the Act on Youth Committees and State Subsidies for Municipal Youth Work (117/1972), state subsidies to local authorities were determined in accordance with qualification requirements set for youth work officials. However, qualification requirements for youth workers are no longer specified under law. Today, youth work is defined as the responsibility of local authorities. They are allowed to determine the focus areas of their youth work activities, and also the number and qualification requirements of youth work personnel. The fact that employers are entitled to determine the qualification requirements of youth work employees creates variety in the type of education required. As a result, there are people working in the field of youth work today who hold other types of Bachelor's degrees, such as Bachelor of Culture and Arts, and Bachelor of Social Services.

The education requirements for Evangelical Lutheran Church youth workers are either Bachelor of Social Services or Bachelor of Humanities, including a 90 ECTS module of ecclesiastical studies required by the Episcopal Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The Vocational Qualification in Youth and Leisure Instruction does not entitle graduates to work as church youth workers. (Mäkelä 2006, 15.)

Many youth organisations provide training for their members, and especially to members participating as instructors or leaders. For example, the Guides and Scouts of Finland trains peer instructors for voluntary youth activities, with consideration for each age group.

## Conclusion

The development of legislation governing youth work has laid the foundation for today's youth work in Finland. The most recent Youth Act (72/2006) provides broad autonomy for local authorities over local youth work: they are entitled to determine the focus areas and target groups of their youth work. Youth work aims to strengthen young people's skills for and growth into active citizenship, to support their social empowerment and to improve their living conditions. The Act Amending the Youth Act (693/2010), effective as of 2011, strongly emphasises the need for cross-sectoral cooperation in matters affecting young people and in the support they require.

Young people are not a homogeneous group. This means that opportunities for different types of participation and experiences will need to be developed actively also in the future. "Young people do not see traditional politics as the path to influencing decision making," and young people do not trust political parties, which are perceived as being removed from ordinary people and their problems (Helve 2002, 232; Helve 2007, 297). For this reason, young people are not interested in political parties, voting or in participating in non-governmental organisations. It is a challenge for the whole society to help young people to grow into democratic decision making, even if they do not trust the structures of society. Young people do not necessarily accept decisions already made by other people – they are looking for their own, personal solutions. While previous generations were determined to build a materialistic welfare state, "today's young people are building their own, personal life story and project" (Helve 2002, 232). Due to the plurality and continuous development of the operating environment, youth work must keep up with the times.

The scope of youth work as non-formal education within youth education is very extensive and challenging. Even though the field of youth work in Finland has historically been based largely on voluntary youth leaders acquiring skills for encountering young people through activities, Finnish youth work professionals today are trained professionals.

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