

Declaration on Youth Empowerment



Young people and youth work and youth policy professionals, gathered at the *Youth, Education and Power Seminar: Is Youth Empowerment a Chimera?* (5th-6th July 2021) held at the finalisation of the **HEBE Project. Identification of factors enhancing and constraining youth empowerment: Analysis of discourses and practices of educators**, agree with and endorse the following declaration:

On the concept of youth empowerment

1. Mainstream discourse and specialised language in the field of education, centred on the concepts of individual success and meritocratic careers, often do not consider these concepts under the parameters of justice and social transformation. From this, it can be ascertained that there is a certain **domestication and depoliticisation of the concept of empowerment**.
2. An **adultcratic** and **adult-centric** (and therefore very univocal) vision of participation is predominant in society. For this reason, it is necessary to develop **practices where young people play a leading role in socio-educational action**, precisely in the opposite direction to what is habitual. The participation of young people, both in the dynamics of socio-educational projects and in decision-making in their life process, is key to empowerment and should be encouraged by professionals. But there is also a need for more experiences that foster situations where young people can participate in and experience practical processes where power is shared between adults and young people. To this end, it is necessary that there is a certain transfer of power from the community and the adults to the young people: with regard to power, what is really important is to learn how to share it.
3. A full consideration of empowerment requires **projection at both the individual and community levels**. However, there is a majority tendency towards a more individual approach to the detriment of the community and socio-political awareness for transformation. In this sense, we emphasise that the community approach and, therefore, the work on community identity and the rooting of people in their territory have a socio-educational function, both preventive and restorative, also for the young people themselves in their individuality. Consequently, it is necessary to promote processes of socio-educational action that recognise the importance of community dimensions for youth empowerment, focusing these processes not only on the young person him/herself, but also on his/her environment and context. In the promotion of these processes, the role of educators is of vital importance.

4. Although the concept of youth empowerment is applied interchangeably to top-down and bottom-up perspectives of socio-educational action, we understand that the more genuine perspective is the latter: **it is young people themselves who are empowered** by the capacities they possess and how they put them into practice in their respective life contexts.

On methodologies, strategies and spaces

5. In contrast to an excessively reflexive and theoretical language in educational action, the use of **a diversified and inclusive methodology** that takes into account divergent thinking and artistic language facilitates the observation of one's own socio-educational practice and favours the emergence of emotions and the development of creativity. The use of these methodologies requires professionals trained in specific skills and competences.
6. A better recognition of youth, a greater relevance of youth policies and a more effective connection between services and professionals involved in these policies would contribute to **community action as a strategy that can favour youth empowerment** and involve young people more in the community and take them into greater consideration.
7. Policies are needed to make the emancipation of young people both possible and real. The creation of **public spaces and facilities managed by young people and community spaces** is needed (in many cases co-created and self-managed) in which they can rehearse, develop and acquire the basic, transversal skills that society demands of them and that favour their emancipation and the capacity to transform reality.

On educators

8. The initial training of youth professionals (including specific training) is considered insufficient. The youth condition, the diversity of possible life itineraries, their precariousness and the prolongation in the consideration of age require professionals with **a specific, intensive, flexible and in-depth training in youth**. Furthermore, the recognition of this training by the institution in which they work and the opportunities throughout their professional career are important.
9. **Empowered socio-educational action professionals** are required. They need to be aware of the limitations and possibilities of the political, economic and social system and of the task and role attributed to them. This requires spaces, resources and time for reflection on practice and action (spaces for dialogue, creation and confrontation of discourses and practices for professional growth and updating). Spaces are therefore needed that allow them to step out of their daily work to open up and/or recover other perspectives that broaden the integration of knowledge in their professional practice.

On policies and programmes

10. The abundance of **short, unconsolidated projects, with unstable teams of professionals, with short-term resources and objectives**, often without the necessary evaluation and/or with a merely welfare vision, limits the possibilities for the empowerment of young people. Social and educational policies are therefore required to help plan for the medium and long term and to consolidate socio-educational projects related to empowerment.
11. It is necessary to **evaluate, with the involvement of young people themselves, the programmes aimed at them**, despite the complexity involved in making this evaluation in socio-educational intervention operative. Evaluation allows for **reflection and the creation of knowledge** and becomes a means for **improvement and transformation**.

On young people

12. It is not us, the professionals in education, youth work and youth policies, who should build young people's futures and discourses, but rather it should be they themselves who, with their own right to be heard and to make decisions, exercise their roles of leaders in a central position in society. This entire declaration, therefore, is born in a subsidiary way to advance in this direction, with full awareness of the conceptual limitations that this implies.

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