

Call for effective youth participation in Europe

Speech prepared for the Conference on Youth Participation of the national agency JUGEND on the 7th of April in Hanover
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank the organisers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to talk about a topic that is very important to me. Youth participation is currently on the political agenda of many national and European protagonists. It calls for an exact definition and concrete measures as to how such participation is to be achieved.

Today I will look at the topic of youth participation in light of the relationships between politics, youth and Europe. In the 'European Year of Citizenship through Education' I would also like to focus on the meaning of civic education in this context. I will point out what I consider to be some of the central points and perhaps also starting points for an exchange of our different experiences with, points of views on and expectations of promoting youth participation in Europe.

The relationship between the European Union and young people

The current relationship between the European Union and young people is ambivalent. On the one hand, the EU is currently undergoing huge changes and meeting great challenges. The recent enlargement of the EU by ten new Member States and the ambitious reforms sought by the European constitution will greatly change the European Union- within our lifetimes. On the other hand, European politics is faced with ever increasing distance and lack of understanding among the general public. Young people are in general in favour of the EU and only a small percentage reject the process of European integration. However it is unclear what relevance the EU has for them on an individual basis. The distance between the EU and its citizens became quite clear in the low rate of participation in the elections to the European Parliament in 2004. Less than half of the population and only a third of first or young voters took part in the elections- less than ever. Without the active involvement of the population at large and, in particular, the younger generation in the process of European integration, the future success of the EU is put into question.

The gap between the growing speed of European integration, on the one hand, and the decreasing level of transparency and acceptance of European politics, on the other hand, has been recognised by the EU. The construction of a new public arena, the more intensive participation of citizens and the creation of an active European citizenship have been called for in many reform papers. I will examine to what extent these demands can be met and how education and youth work can contribute.

The importance of Europe in education and youth work

European Union policy has developed at a more than dynamic speed in the last few years and accounts for the majority of national law. European decisions and programmes affect the lives of European citizens directly, influence their living conditions and shape future developments. The enlargement of the EU by ten further countries as well as the planned reforms brings ever closer a level of integration, of deepness of relations, that signals a new stage in European integration. This also influences European importance and meaning on the international stage.

The citizens of Europe and the young citizens in particular must be prepared for these developments so that they don't feel themselves to be the subject of vague political processes, but can understand and actively influence future reforms. The particular challenge lies in the ever growing complexity of political processes which are difficult for outsiders to follow. We are therefore called upon to make politics in general and specifically European politics more comprehensible and to create spaces with which young people can identify themselves and where they can bring in their own interests.

Youth and education work is thereby set the task of reinventing the exchange between youth and politics- in both directions. In this context civic education is called on in particular. First of all new methods and directions in civic education must be developed and realised. This is to address the interest of young people in becoming involved in politics and civic society. This also means to allow for news forms of involvement and to create more possibilities for active participation by young people in society.. In view of the European dimension, an explanation must be provided for the term European citizenship. How can we fill this term with life and bring it to be a constructive and critical mirror of official European policy? The greatest challenge lies in treating European topics not only as topics relevant on a European or national level, but also as a topic to be dealt with and reflected upon at all levels from the local level to the supranational level. Only so can Europe become something that will be engaged with by the general public.

The importance of civic education for Europe

In context of the new educational demands in Europe, civic education's aspect of strengthening citizens' skills needs to be highlighted. In many respects civic education provides a basis for enabling citizen's ability to relate offerings in social and cultural

education to concrete situations, for example in the area of intercultural learning. The task of civic education is to prepare the next generation for socio-political challenges and to enable them to deal with ambivalence, as well as to recognise and use their own opportunities in life.

The European dimension plays a key role in the current economic, social and cultural changes that have been brought by the transformation to an information, knowledge and service based society. This is particularly relevant for the restructuring of the labour market. As it is for increasing internationalisation and globalisation of all life and education contexts, as well as a stronger pluralisation of different social contexts and individual life plans. These issues can be dealt with constructively. Personal and social possibilities to get involved can be critically discussed within the context of civic education.

In contrast to the challenges I've just outlined, civic education has no particular importance in public perception. It plays only a minor role, is underfinanced and threatened by further financial cuts. This results in civic education being perceived as involving short-term projects or spectacular events, but not as what its inherent function implies: A long-term, continuous educational duty of a democratic society. Instead the sector is forced into a insecure financial situation and is finding it increasingly difficult to meet the numerous tasks and challenges facing it. In order to provide civic education that enables and encourages active citizen interest and participation adequate funding must put in place. It is therefore up to political actors to reinforce the importance of civic education and to provide the necessary framework to enable sustainable education processes.

The significance of youth participation as a timely form of active involvement

Young people have high expectations of politics, but are unhappy with how it works in practice and see few possibilities to get involved and have their say. They feel that they are not taken seriously in the political arena. So instead they expect new and unconventional ways of participating in political life that can be realised as projects and activities in clear time periods. These ways should be fun and result orientated. These expectations must be met within the framework of youth work and civic education in order to give youth participation concrete weight. Civic education and concrete participative projects will only be of interest for young people when these are orientated towards their interests and are methodically relevant and appropriate.

Young people are indeed prepared to get involved. They should therefore be considered to be experts for their own situation and their views and demands should be taken in the planning and shaping of their environment into account. This is where youth and education work can help. On the other hand, politicians are called upon to be more open to youth participation and to discover new ways and opportunities for the next generation to shape their future.

A positive relationship between young people and politicians is a precondition for successful youth participation. In order to improve this relationship, one which is all but lively or profitable, those involved in youth and education work must be prepared to critically examine their work to stay attractive and interesting for young people. With this in mind civic education needs to be innovative and future-orientated in order to be able to build a bridge between the concrete needs of young people, social challenges and the politically responsible. When it comes to Europe, this means heightening public awareness of active involvement and to increase the amount of the opportunities for concrete participation by young people in Europe. This is an important contribution to one of the greatest political aims for the future: The creation of a “Europe of citizens”.

I will now make some concrete suggestions, which I believe are of necessity for effective youth participation in civic society:

1. The value of civic education in our society must be increased.

An improved individual orientation ability and the capacity to act is a precondition for the individual members of society to be able to shape their increasingly complex environment. Here a direct connection to the value of civic education can be made. It is not enough to just highlight the importance of social and political educational matters. Concrete initiatives are also necessary to pass on relevant knowledge and skills. As such social and political educational processes are long-term developments, it is important to create conditions where they can ensure a continuous and sustainable anchoring/rooting of civic education in society. In this context campaigns to awake an awareness of participation can be quite useful. However campaigns, large congresses and short once-off events are not enough to strengthen the value of civic education in the long-term. To achieve this, structural changes must be made which in particular increase funding- and secure the currently shaky jobs of those working in the area of youth and education work. The organisers of such initiatives must nevertheless come up with follow-on concepts which are of practical and concrete use for young people and their environment. Otherwise they may be rightly accused of just talking and not acting.

2. School and extracurricular education should be linked wherever profitable.

A link between school and extracurricular education can open up new ways of getting through to young people and is an opportunity to interest a broader spectrum of youth in European issues. Multifaceted methods which enable a direct experience of Europe can grow out of the cooperation between schools and extracurricular education work. A whole series of successful joint projects already exist and can serve as models. A precondition for this is cooperation as equals and the equal recognition of formal and non-formal learning. Existing barriers between schools and youth work need to be removed across the board and the artificial wall between the two forms of learning needs to be broken down.

An initial area in which school and extracurricular education can meet is the broad spectrum of action days and project weeks, for example, "Europe days" or "Europe weeks" in schools, which allow for interdisciplinary and project orientated offers by Europe-focused youth work. Existing offers should be used more extensively. Appropriate conditions and resources need to be provided so that new projects and initiatives can be developed.

3. Non-formal education needs to be more visible.

The PISA study and other European studies on education and learning have shown that informal learning contributes significantly to so-called “key qualifications”. Communication skills, organisational talent, intercultural competence and social skills are only some of the many skills that are acquired through youth work and that are of great importance in a “Europe of Knowledge”. For this reason the importance of non-formal learning for life-long learning must be further highlighted and supported. The results and knowledge gained from extracurricular education and youth work are however still not recognised and valued enough.

In order to improve the standing of non-formal education, we must consider how the qualifications gained in this area can be represented better and how they can be documented better, for example in a „qualification pass“.

4. Youth information and participation need to be intertwined.

Current issues in European politics, such as the debate over the EU constitution, need to be communicated in a way that is suitable for young people- to ensure that young people are aware of basic information. It is particularly important in the context of the discussion about the European constitution to get a broad section of the general public as possible involved in this debate. A target-group orientated information and discussion initiatives, which strictly follows the qualitative standards of youth and education work is absolutely necessary. Such a initiative would positively differentiate itself from the usual, generally superficial information campaigns. In order to carry out such a initiative young people need to be involved in the PR work, preferably as carriers of information themselves. This would allow for a stronger link between youth information and youth participation.

A model for a successful initiative that includes young people in communication strategies for other young people is the concept of peer-group education. A widespread information project on the European constitution in schools and youth centre which includes young people can only be recommended.

5. The dialogue between politicians, young people and representatives from the field of youth work must be intensified in order to come to a better joint understanding.

To enhance the status of youth and education work and to sensitise politicians more, youth and politics need to be brought together. An institutionalised exchange would be good for both sides- on a variety of levels. Here politicians can be sensitised for youth affairs and issues that are relevant for young people. The effectiveness of youth participation campaigns can only be enhanced when politicians are sufficiently informed and when they recognise that young people are experts in their own affairs.

Initiatives in which representatives from youth education work, science, the media and politics develop concepts to improve youth participation together need to be started and linked. The establishment of “lobby groups for youth participation” could be the long-term result of continuous initiatives. In addition training courses on youth issues for politicians could also be considered as a support mechanism for the lobbyists.

6. The results of youth participation projects need to be considered in political decisions.

Funds granted to youth participation projects can only be considered effective when the results are taken into consideration politically. By tying youth participation in with regular political processes both a sustainable quality and an increased level of acceptance can be achieved. Making such a link legally compulsory would be a concrete step in the right direction.

Youth parliaments, youth assemblies or other forms of dialogue with young people are ideally suited in the short-, middle- and long-term for identifying and clarifying the interests of young people in regard to various issues. To progress beyond a mere articulation of young people’s interests, it is necessary to develop regulations so that the suggestions, wishes, feedback and criticism of young people are taken into consideration in the political process and brought to life. Such regulations should govern future dealing between politics and young people and their interests and allow for effective participation. Political and social protagonists are called upon to find concrete opportunities for young people to get involved and to so fulfil the desire of young people to participate in the world around them.

I will finish up by some final remarks.

Today's youth are one of the most important resources we have in Europe. In order to reach this generation those in power need to make a significant investment in both formal and non-formal education. Funding should not be cut in the area of youth education. The scope of youth work needs to be expanded to allow for the necessary europeanisation and internationalisation of the field. Barriers between national and international education can no longer be drawn. European and intercultural spheres of learning and teaching have become local.

In order to increase the effectiveness of youth participation in Europe we need to ask ourselves to what extent youth and education work is capable of making use of the existing options. This is irregardless of how existing structures can be used more effectively or changed for the better in order to meet the diverse challenges of the field. Increasing the awareness of active participation in European civic society and increasing the range of opportunities for participation for young people is an important contribution to the creation of a cosmopolitan Europe of Citizens. This should be the focus of future youth and education work and youth and education policy.

I hope that my thoughts and recommendations will stimulate our discussions and debates. I'm looking forward to the rest of the conference very much.

Thank you very much for your attention.