

#### Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Youth Work





This toolkit was created during the project "Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Youth Work" - a seminar in November 2019 in Ligonchio, Italy. The following participants of the seminar have contributed to the publication: Adele Andreoli, Adelina Dragomir, Ali Rezae, Alma Maria Montoro Lopez, Anna Parpa, Cristina Fernandez del Valle, Danai Tessa, Francesco Paoletti, Giulia Pongiglione, Hélder Costa, Jaka Šoster, Jorge Alberto Jimenez Castro, Loreto Garcia Saiz, Lua Esther Marie Bouclier, Magdalena Ilieva, Maria Inês da S. Peixoto C. Alberto, Muserref Uzunkaya, Natalia Stavroula Andrigiannaki, Remus Flaviu Pop, Szonja Lilla Arató, Tijana Njemoga, Vitalii Bortnik and Yasmina Nakib.

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## Introduction

**P.E.CO.** - **Progetti Europei di Cooperazione** is an NGO from Genova, Italy, that works with international mobility projects for young people to create inclusion. To make our projects always more inclusive we exchange with and learn from partners about a variety of topics of how to **include** young people with fewer opportunities and make projects (and society) always more inclusive and safer for everyone. To foster this inclusion, we and our partners (20 other NGOs from 14 countries) therefore saw it as a necessity to address gender stereotypes in youth work through the seminar "Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Youth Work". The seminar took place in Ligonchio, Italy, from the 7th to the 14th of November 2019.

We discussed the following **topics**, using non-formal education methods:

- Gender and Sexuality as topics in youth work
- Gender stereotypes how they influence youth work(ers) and how they impact young people/ their development
- Stereotypes and assigned roles in storytelling in oral traditions, fairytales, books, movies etc.
- The dangers of stereotypes leading to violence and challenges in the personal development of young people

#### With the **objectives** of:

- Sensitize to gender education and its objectives
- Acquire NFE tools for the promotion of equality and inclusion
- Understand gender stereotypes or stereotypes about sexualities in storytelling such as fairy tales, movies, etc. and how they affect young people
- Understand the link between stereotypes / normativity and gender-based violence
- Exchange tools, strategies and best practices on how to tackle and overcome situations of gendered discrimination / violence in working with young people
- Reflect on our gender stereotypes or stereotypes about sexualities, and how they affect our work
- Make youth centers, workshops and projects for young people more inclusive and safer

As the final objective we set ourselves the goal to create a manual in which we communicate our main learning points to other youth workers, educators and other stakeholders. With the following pages we attempted to do summarize. The information is based on our discussions and the agreements we reached (unless another source is specifically named).

# Why do youth workers need to be aware of gender and stereotypes, expectations, roles etc. attached to it?

We live in communities and we generally **assume** to know the realities of other people because of social norms and stereotypes. By the way people dress or behave, we often assume we know their gender, their pronouns and we have expectation about the roles they should play. This is misleading through. Gender identity and gender expression are two different things. **Gender** is defined as:

"the social and cultural construct of being a man or a woman. Gender exists independently of sex, and an individual's gender does not always correspond with the sex assigned at birth".<sup>1</sup>

Instead, it is the society in which the person lives that defines these **norms** and not just the western understanding of a binary definition of man/women. There is a wider spectrum of genders and those are linked with diverse social and cultural codes of the specific societies. This broad spectrum is connected with historical social oppressions such as class, ethnicity etc.

In this mosaic of genders, we have so many expressions and identities, which are still trying to receive recognition from their societies/ communities in order to achieve legal rights and acceptance in those social structures. The gender identity and expression are influenced by the **social role** that is shaped by the norms of society. In the work with young people, it is important to promote awareness of these links and make them visible. Only by making people aware of this they can also be made aware of their own power in changing normativities.

Here some definitions that might be useful:

- **Gender identity**: *"internal perception of one's gender (can be male, female or otherwise). It may not correspond to the one assigned at birth."*
- Gender Expression: "manner in which we present ourselves to the world through clothes, voices, haircut or mannerisms"
- **Gender role**: "socially construct and cultural specific behaviors and appearance expectations imposed on men and women."<sup>2</sup>

To summarize, there is a sex (XX or XY or intersex) assigned at birth based on chromosomes, genitalia and other physical factors. There is also gender identity, which may or may not be identical to the sex assigned at birth. When a person is assigned one sex and then also identifies with the same gender, we call this cis-gender. When the two do not correlate we call it trans-gender.

<sup>1</sup> SCI, 2019, "Free to be you and me" <u>https://www.sci.ngo/images/Gendered Realities/Long English web compressed.pdf</u>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The three previous definitions come from SCI, 2019, "Free to be you and me" as well.

## Why is it important to speak about gender in youth work?

**Equality** between girls and boys, or any gender is a fundamental principle in our educational practices as well as freedom of expression, respect, kindness, empathy and so on. This equality encourages a calm atmosphere within the group, ensures a protective framework - without behaviors or sexist violence - and it promotes gender diversity and equality in society in general.

It is important to do so to:

- respect other people's identities
- create a more inclusive and equal society
- fight against social norms, since don't apply to everyone and therefore automatically exclude
- raise awareness and prevent gender-based violence
- educate the future decision-makers to be more gender sensitive

It is important in youth work to do so to:

- promote self-acceptance and open-mindness
- create a safer space, where people can express themselves however they want without being judged (giving young people the possibility to develop their own personality without limits)
- prevent domination of the space or speaking time and to create equal opportunities for everyone to participate
- promote that women and non-binary people's opinions and experiences are just as important as those of cis-men
- develop youth as multipliers that can share their knowledge and experience further in the society

In order to be able to reach this level of **inclusiveness** or at least go towards is, the seminar group developed a check list for youth projects and centers:

- **Group agreement**: in all groups you work with, it is important to take the time to create this agreement in which young people take ownership of their group development by defining themselves which are the rules they want to abide by during the project/ youth center activities
- **Consent**: set clear rules about consent and promote actions that ask for consent instead of assuming it
- **Promote diversity** and awareness of the differences within a group/ society: (dis)abilities, cultures, genders, religions, classes, educations ...
- **Non-binary bathrooms**: Even though in some contexts you are legally obliged to have gendered bathrooms, make sure you have at least one bathroom in the whole house that is not specifically assigned to male or female identifying people
- **Discuss** in an open-minded manner and without taboo sex (education) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), so the young people know they can turn to you about this topic without being judged

- **Foster reflection** and critical thinking about stereotypes and prejudices
- **Safe room**: a space that is cozy, has soft pillows and fabrics, to which people can retreat for relaxation or simply to be alone and go through emotions (agree on rules about this room in the group agreement, e.g. if you see someone crying in there, so not push them to share but just go sit in the room if you want to give them the opportunity to share)
- Access for everybody: in physical (consider e.g. disabilities) as well as legal and cultural barriers (consider e.g. which gender box a person that is non-binary or intersex could tick if the application form only offers two genders as possibilities)
- **Normalize feminism**: create and understanding of feminism(s) that sees their plurality and most importantly focuses on feminism struggling for a world in which we all (also men) grow up without social/ cultural/ legal/ etc. normativities attached to our sex assigned at birth/ gender
- Use non formal activities, to do team-building activities and take care of group dynamics

Before all of this can be done, the **youth workers** themselves have to reflect on their own stereotypes, gender normative upbringing and how those structure their everyday lives and work. We encourage you to invite a gender expert to work with your team, so your team will then be able to work with young people in a way that gives them the chance to develop freely, not exclude anyone or reduce anyone to a stereotype.

# **Creating the Gender Utopia Youth Center**

In creating a youth center that can guarantee the above-mentioned points it is important to consider the following areas:

### Space

- Gender neutral bathrooms are important to make sure that it is not excluding any gender identities or anyone with disabilities.
- Make sure the decoration is non-discriminatory and gender neutral (see activity): avoid sexualized materials, stereotypical images or messages, culturally insensitive decorations. Try to stay away of political propaganda.
- Make sure the space is as much inclusive as possible (for people with disabilities, etc.): as much as possible, have ramps, elevators, accessible activity rooms, proper lighting, easily accessible power outlets, avoid sharp edges, etc.
- If possible, have special rooms to meet specific needs (prayer room, comfort room, counselling room, etc.): try to adapt your environment to the needs of your participants.
- Be a steady point of reference that the young people can refer to: make sure the center opens when it says so and have at least one staff available: post the program online, create public events in social medias, and establish regular opening times and days, so people can know when to come to you.
- Suggestion corner/media room or wall: you could put at disposal cultural materials for gender education: books, manuals, movies, etc. and the adequate resources to watch it.

## Language

- Make sure that the staff of the center is familiar with terms such as discrimination and microaggression so they can intervene if they observe a situation
- Promote gender inclusive language in the way words are used in everyday conversations
- Make sure to discuss pronouns with your participants and integrate activities in which young people can express the pronoun that they each want to be referred by, and then ensure that you and the others use the correct pronouns

## **Emotions**

- Create activities that show young people that emotions are ok/ good and can be expressed
- Create parts in the group agreement that refer to the emotions, such as the "thumbs up" rule (when a youngster leaves the room they give you a thumbs up if they are ok, but if they do not give you the thumbs up either you or your colleague will follow them and check on them)
- Emotions board: devote a specific space or board for the participants, people visiting or staff, to anonymously post their emotions and feelings at any given time. Make sure you have at least one person that read them and take them in consideration regularly. Another option is to create an anonymous box: you can place a box in which participants, people visiting, or staff can post their questions, interests, propositions or feedback anonymously. Again, make sure that they are read and considered. The advantage of the box is the heightened anonymity because only team can see, while the emotions wall has the benefit that everyone can read and therefore the whole group takes responsibility or the emotions of everyone and taking care of each other.
- Create a room where people can retreat to if they are working through emotions

## Activities

- Activities to get to know each other that includes pronouns: when new members/groups are getting to know each other, make sure that you include, alongside the names, how they would like to be addressed (he, she, they, just name or more).
- Gender unicorn<sup>3</sup>/gender bread person to introduce those differences: When it is possible, organize an activity like this; give printout so they can reflect individually or, if it's appropriate for the group, the activity can be done in pairs. The explanation of the terms beforehand is necessary. Make sure that sharing about their own personal identity and experiences is voluntary and what they choose to share cannot be commented on by the other person.
- Terms definition activities: a brainstorming or card game activity that leads to the definition and explanation of terms (regarding gender, sexual orientation, discrimination, consent, microaggressions, relations of power, abusive relationship etc.) can be very helpful. Finding a space to put the definitions and term on the wall, and be available to explain them again in individual conversations with participants interested
- Movie nights, YouTube parties etc. in order to promote/share medias on the topic: it is a nice chance to introduce different topics and issues, that can lead to a discussion later.
- If possible, activities in nature: use the youth center as a starting safer space, but remember to get out of it with the members when possible (yoga, reflection walks, camping, physical activities

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> About the gender unicorn: <u>http://www.transstudent.org/gender</u>

...etc.). Relation between nature and humans; activities to learn how to take care of the earth (ecofeminism)

- Use arts to address and help express gender issues and discriminations. Including theatre of the oppressed, role playing games, photo voice, etc.: good for creating empathy, discussing real life situations, expressing repressed feelings and finding ways to resolve conflicts. Caution, it has to be a performance and it is important to make sure that everyone is getting out of its role afterward.
- Activity of post-it to target gendered decoration: in order to create a more neutral space, you can organize an activity in which members will have to explore the space and stick post-it with questions on everything that they believed is gendered or discriminatory.
- Open space: creating a participatory wall of topics that the youngsters can organize and share with themselves
- -use activities while keeping in mind the age of young people to improve and train emotional and relational intelligence of people you are working with: ask how do you feel?, give space to the emotional aspect of each activity; help them to name these emotions and give resources to understand them (use experts)
- constant training of the youth worker teams either organize it yourself or attend already existing trainings (different topics); decide periodically which topic(s) your team should go deep in and open the training to other social workers.

#### **Know your resources**

- Have a "help board", giving contacts that are related to specific needs and groups (trans youth, domestic violence helping groups ...)
- When possible, invite organizations or persons that are specialized on gender issues or other specific issues to do sensibilization/ share ideas or activities/ do public talks.
- Collaborate with other organizations and NGOs locally, nationally and internationally in order to organize bigger events on the topic, share tools and help spread awareness
- Support other organizations that are related to the topic, by, if possible, sharing the space.
- At a local level try to engage and work in synergy with other realities (services and facilities from the neighborhood, educational institutions) to solve and to deal with problematics; meeting at a personal level with these people from the local community

# **Creating a safer space on a Youth Exchange right when people arrive**

Also for the youth exchanges our seminar group put together a list of some things to consider:

- Make sure that **leaders** and **facilitators** are **part of the group**: You could talk about what constitutes a good group leader/ trainer/ facilitator as a group with all the participants. Trust is important for a safer space, and a connection is important for trust, so it's good to make sure that the participants are connected and comfortable with the facilitators, trainers and group leaders.

- **Consent** is important for everyone's comfort. We have different experiences in life and some people might not be comfortable with physical contact, some topics, activities, or other. Don't assume what other people think or how they feel and always ask for consent. Be sure to include a discussion about it in the creation of the group agreement. We propose this definition of consent: "to agree to do something, or to allow someone to do something"<sup>4</sup>. We recommend doing exercises about asking for consent. E.g. after an activity you congratulate your neighbors by tapping on their shoulders, but only after asking for their consent. An interesting video that you can see with your participants is "Tea and Consent" (https://youtu.be/oQbei5JGiT8).

- Using the correct **pronouns** for people ensures that they feel comfortable, accepted and affirm their identity. In English, we have different pronouns: She, usually applies to female identifying people, He to male identifying people, and They can be used for people don't identifying themselves as female or male, but also for people that do. Some people prefer to be called only by their name and not by a pronoun. You can address this e.g. through a round of names and pronouns (and stickers), or creating name tags for everyone where they fill in the name and the pronoun. You can repeat this activity every day once to give someone the chance to say another pronoun. Repeating the activity can be useful as some people might not feel comfortable to name a non-normalized pronoun the first day and with time will.

- In a Youth Exchange the group is usually quite big and it's not easy to remember all the **names**. Some of the participants could take it personally and feel offended if some people don't remember their name, so it's important to help the group learning each other's name and taking care of that. Ask (and respect) people how they want to be called and which name they want to use. Already in the application form give people the opportunity to distinguish between the name on the passport and the name they use, as they might be different. You can e.g. make a game with scotch tape: each person writes down on the scotch tape one bar for each letter of their name and then the group starts moving and trading letters with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/consent

other people. You can exchange with each person only once and give each letter away only once. This way the participants get familiar with the names and the pieces of scotch tape can be used as name tags for the first day.

- **Respect** is a wide concept, but It's very important in a Youth Exchange. Participants need respect in order to feel comfortable and safe. Sometimes other people's choices are perceived as strange, but we can help participants accept them, in order to include all the participants. In a Youth Exchange there is usually a big diversity inside the group, due to cultural differences, personalities, experiences, classes, gender identities etc. Respect refers to accepting and valuing these differences as well as being aware of the space a person is taking and making sure to listen to each other.

- **Microaggressions** usually refer to statements or questions that minorities often hear which point out the ways in which they are considered different, however, they also include any kind of bigoted acts that are usually not perceived as violence. Microaggressions can be accidental and without a bad intention, but they are harmful nonetheless. While microaggressions have no place in a safe or safer space, we think it is important to consider how informed the group is as well as the aims of the exchange. If discrimination topics are going to be discussed, it is sometimes okay to make exceptions in order to create an educational space, where there are "no inappropriate questions." However, we feel it is paramount to ensure the safety and consensual participation of the people getting asked these questions. A more general approach might be to observe the group and talk about the issue as it arises. In these cases, it could be better to simply explain microaggressions and kindly ask the participants to mind their language and point out examples of specific phrases that are off-limits. If the concept of microaggressions is not clear to you and/ or your participants, have a quick look at the video "How microaggressions are like mosquito bites" (https://youtu.be/hDd3bzA7450)

- **Group Agreement**: A good and simple way to ensure a safe space is to create a group agreement with the participants. (The specifics of the group agreement are discussed in detail elsewhere in this document.) The tool is easy to use and quite intuitive, but we have to be careful that the rules don't protect possible aggressors and that, as facilitators, we guide the thought process towards rules that protect marginalized people. We encouraged each participant to speak up and tell everyone what they think is important in a group agreement.

- **Confidentiality**: Make sure that in the group agreement you agree on the "Las Vegas rule". This rule states that whatever is shared during the exchange is confidential. Therefore, if a participant has a coming out during the exchange, they know it will not be shared with others outside this group unless they specifically agree to it.

- **Care Box**: It might be legally required in your country, but even if it is not we recommend having one. Having access to necessities contributes greatly to a sense of safety. Things like condoms, lubricant, pads, tampons and other hygiene and pharmaceutical products should be made readily available, in a way that participants can just take without having to ask. The participants could be made aware of this care 12 box with a simple speech at the beginning of the exchange. It's also useful to remind people to be mindful and take only as much as they need.

- **Bathrooms**: Like in a youth center make sure that you have at least one bathroom that is not assigned to one specific gender identity. This has to be done before the participants arrive, so it is normalized to have this. If you arrive to a center where they have only gendered bathrooms, turn one of them into a non-gendered bathroom through stickers/ covering the signs.

- **Gendered bedrooms**: Legally in many places you have to have gendered bedrooms for the participants, especially when working with minors. Check the laws on this. If it is not the case, we recommend instead to let participants choose their rooms themselves, while ensuring that the country groups are spread through the different rooms. Another option to make sure that everyone is included is to have 2 gendered rooms and one or more where the gender does not matter. Be careful to let participants themselves choose the rooms. Putting a non-binary person in a binary system of rooms can reinforce societal exclusion. Putting a transgender person in the wrong room or forcing them to go into a non-binary room even though they strongly identify as either male or female will have the same effect.

- **Anonymous box**: You can create a box in which people can put papers with questions that maybe they are too shy to ask and with emotions. As a facilitator check the box twice a day so you can react to them.

- **Emotions matter**: On the first day it is important to make sure that participants know that they can come to you with their emotions and that they will be taken seriously no matter what. Therefore, we recommend creating an emotions wall where people can write how they are feeling and others can react to it in a respectful way. If possible, create a room for emotions where people can work through what they are feeling. (see description in youth center recommendations.)

- **Shared tasks**: Make sure that the participants share tasks around the house and for the program and that they are not divided by gender.

- **Teambuilding**: Finally, focus quite some time on teambuilding activities. Only when people trust each other, have learned a little about each other's backgrounds and have learned about the behavior of others can they develop a feeling of basic trust in the group. In this process you have to constantly be with the group and be very observant whether some comments or behavior of one person is making another uncomfortable. When managed badly and without a reaction to inappropriate behavior/ comments the teambuilding can have the opposite effect and make people feel uncomfortable.

### Preparing for a safer space on a Youth Exchange

This chapter contains suggestions and tools for creating a safer space on the preparation of a Youth exchange.

#### **Call for partners**

When writing the call for partners it is good that you inform your future partners about the topic of the project, the activities and the objectives. Also, it is important to mention that discrimination in any forms is not allowed. You need **partners** that **agree** with you on this and **prepare** their participants accordingly. You can mention the example of naming pronouns as a way to foster inclusion already in this contact.

#### Participant's form to be filled

Mention in the introduction: "All this info we need it so to create a safer space for you but also for the group. This information will be used by the organization only."

Personal info: Don't give gender boxes to tick, and instead ask Gender with an open box to fill in whatever way they want.

Ask for the name twice: Name you want to be called AND the name in your documents in the end. Give the option to answer to: Would you feel comfortable with mixed rooms?

Again repeat the sentence about discrimination that you wrote in the call for partners.

Create an open question in which people will be able to mention whatever they feel we still need to know about them: "Do you want to share any other kind of info about yourself? This information will be confidential and collected to create a safer space for you and for the group."

Already ask whether people are ok with being photographed and whether you can share their contact details.

#### Infopack

Use this sentence: "Since we want to create the safer space, this Youth exchange will not allow sexist, racist, homophobic or any kind of violence/discrimination."

Accommodation: Specify if the rooms will be divided by gender or not, taking into consideration the national law where the project will take place.

Keep in mind that the participants should be prepared for the topic of the exchange as well as regarding discrimination and violence/ microaggressions.

It is important that you add the program and explain it can change depending on the needs and expectations of the participants, since we will work through non-formal education methodology.

In the description of the venue specify certain details: if it's adapted or not for people with disabilities, if there will be animals around, sharing the link of the webpage of the venue. Try to find a venue that is adapted for all disabilities.

Specify weather conditions.

Write in the end a contact email in case someone has doubts and be sure to react quickly to their questions.

#### Making sure all people know they will be accepted

Introduce already in the infosheet the question of pronouns.

Preparation of topic or workshop or energizers and also regarding respect. Talk about fears and expectations with the national group before coming.

Reflection groups in national groups.

It is better if the group leaders have taken part into previous youth exchanges and they should speak English. This way they will be able to explain and translate for the members of their groups.

Emphasize the role of group leaders and facilitators as reference people in case of problems or feeling uncomfortable. Choose and prepare them well

#### **Group agreement**

In order to be as productive as possible it is crucial to **make everyone feel comfortable and safe**. For this everyone needs to be aware and have a common understanding of the impact of their actions and words. A group agreement is a way to build up good group dynamics with becoming familiar with each other's values and perspectives in order to respect them.

A group agreement, or what is sometimes referred to as a group contract, is a set of bottom-up "rules", created by the participants of a project. It is a good practice to prevent discrimination and promote acceptance amongst a diverse group of people. It is important to mention that all guidelines apply to both free-time and activities. It is created democratically, with everyone having a say, an opportunity to propose or to veto/question a guideline. It is practical to have it as one of the first steps of the project, one of the first activities upon arrival.



Source: <u>https://avp.international/section/section-3-workshop-processes/group-</u> agreements/?fbclid=IwAR2gAO7\_AeiPtpn2gdXTTa2IALVfbDt6kTfxy8QWh\_crEItO2M3uynzyQtw

The initial step is to present the meaning and the importance of the agreement. One way of creation is the snowball method. First each participant, including the facilitators/organizers, collect individually what rules/ guidelines they need in order to feel comfortable and work well. Secondly, they pair up and create their common set. Thereafter two pairs and later two fours share their ideas. Finally, the groups (including one group of facilitators/organizers) work on a common vision with each group presenting their ideas and the others expressing their opinion with the silent clap or crossing their arms in front of their chest as a sign of disapproval. If someone expresses their disapproval the participants must discuss and revise the guideline. The guidelines which are approved by everyone are put down on a poster that is later hung on a visible place. When everyone is happy and comfortable with the collection and feels closure about them each participant signs the paper.

You as a facilitator or leader can wait whether all the points you wish to make are mentioned, and in the end ask the group to add the ones they didn't add:

- **Consent**: Guidelines about consent are one way to make participants feel safer by giving them opportunities for providing or withdrawing their consent. For example, every physical contact needs permission, but also certain topics, activities, etc. Participants should always feel free to leave any situation they feel uncomfortable with. If needed the participant can always ask for support upon leaving by using a sign to express rather they need some space or one-to-one support.
- **Equality** (ability, age, class, gender, nationality, personal background etc.): Each participant should have equal opportunities regardless of their ability, age, class, gender, nationality and personal background.
- **Inclusion** (address empathy, language, support): Participants should be encouraged to make everyone feel included and appreciated, give support to those feeling disregarded and help out in situations when someone faces a barrier, for example a language one (not known terms used, not known language used).
- Respect (mention active listening, pronouns, privacy, safer space and "assume good intentions"
  with the last one we mean not to judge someone based on one comment that made you feel uncomfortable and instead point out the comment to the person becomes aware of their own impact on other when they do or say similar things): While projects are usually educational spaces to have a sense of safety for sharing, a safer space should be achieved as much as possible. This for example includes the usage of the desired pronouns of the participants, providing them with privacy, but also active listening and respectful responses.
- **Responsibility** (address active participation, assigned tasks, punctuality): Each participant is accountable for their actions, their active participation and any extra tasks they might take on. Regarding punctuality basic guidelines are also useful to establish.



Thank you for reading this manual! We hope our exchanges and learning have also helped you to grow and make your youth work more inclusive!