



National POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: FINLAND (2 OF 2)

Intergenerational Contests and Spatial Occupations in the City

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Finland, our research included two different case studies: one on young mothers in multicultural Finland, and one on how young people and young adults (especially urban activists) experienced intergenerational contests and spatial occupations in the city of Helsinki.

This policy brief is concerned with how culturally and politically active young people and young adults use different public and semi-public spaces in Helsinki. This research focused on intergenerational contests and conflicts, and how young people negotiate them in the urban space. More specifically, the research was situated in the context of a youth cultural and community centre, which is located at the intersection of municipal youth work, and the tradition of underground and DIY activism and anarchism. Research participants were 16-30 year old young people who participated in different activities at the centre, such as performing subcultural circus and queer theatre.

Many of the participants in this study were critical about the current Finnish government's politics (such as cuts in the welfare sector), and were themselves in an economically fragile situation. Furthermore, their life trajectories did not necessarily follow the ideal route of quick education and transition into employment. Thus, many of them voiced an intergenerational distrust towards governmental politics and decision-making in Finland. What is extremely relevant is how intergenerational relations and conflicts were intertwined into many layers of the research participants' experiences of society as well as their ways of becoming active in the urban space. Firstly, the key experiences of conflict and stigmatisation were voiced as generational, including party politics, ideals of individualism and success as well as discrimination in the public spaces. Secondly, the participants shared the understanding that their activities were a generational experience, whether it meant rainbow activism or experiencing agency in a community based on practices such as peer learning. In addition, space was, in many ways, linked to the social and the understanding of a specific generation. Importantly, while many of the research respondents were not in a very vulnerable

situation socially, their opinions echo that of a generational experience of disappointment and distrust in society as well as the need for their own community and spatial occupation.

The policy recommendations are directed towards youth work and cultural youth work sectors in municipalities and NGOs. The recommendations can also be used as part of urban planning. The recommendations foreground, firstly, the importance of providing free and loose spaces for young people and young adults. Secondly, the recommendations highlight a critical view of creating free and safe spaces from an intersectional perspective. The aim of the recommendations is to promote culturally active young people and young adults' viewpoints on urban planning and cultural youth work.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide free and open spaces for young people and young adults

The research found that free and open urban spaces were extremely important for the participants. What was especially essential for their sense of belonging to the youth cultural and community centre was the fact that it was a free leisure space, with no need to pay fees or to buy anything to gain access to the space. For the respondents, the community-building values of the youth cultural and community centre were deeply intertwined with the material space; for example, the walls covered with graffiti and political sticker art, the unisex toilets, the second-hand furniture. Furthermore, the space carried its own youth cultural norms following the transnational DIY tradition, which was repeated in, for example, peer teaching and learning, sharing knowledge and creating tight communities. Importantly, many voiced the need for more open urban spaces for young adults over the age of 18. This age group (18-29) becomes often invisible in municipal youth work, where most activities are planned to preteens and teenagers.

- Urban planning needs to recognize the needs of young adults who are often left outside of municipal youth work. Free or cheap leisure spaces for creative activities and community-building need to be provided.

2. Critically focus on the exclusions and hierarchies in 'open' and 'safe' spaces

The research found that explicitly naming a space safe open and welcoming for all can create invisible hierarchies and exclusions. The micro power relations inside the centre and in different groups were marked by subtle hierarchies that became visible during ethnographic fieldwork. Some respondents voiced explicit opinions on some practices that they experienced as excluding. While 'safe spaces' and 'safer spaces' are frequently discussed and applied in contemporary youth work, the limits, the rhetoric of keeping the doors open as well as welcoming and respecting everyone can also turn into a dominant discourse that actually hides any hierarchies or inner struggles in the communities.

- Youth work and cultural youth work needs to continue critical discussions about the understandings of safe and safer spaces. Naming a space 'safe and welcoming' is not enough. Safety of a certain space needs to be analysed intersectionally in relation to race, social class, age, sexuality, gender and ability.

3. Enhance appreciation of young people's subcultural activities and alternative forms of learning

The research found several creative, subcultural and alternative forms of learning, shared in the communities of young people and young adults. Peer learning and support were influential and outspoken practices shared at the youth cultural and community centre. Many participants pondered this 'different way' of learning and sharing in contrast to the societal pressures of individual success and a goal-oriented,

neoliberal life trajectory. Many talked about intergenerational expectations and pressures they experienced from school, work or social services. Many had experienced devaluing of their activities in contrast to more established fields of art.

- Young people and young adults' alternative ways of learning as well as their subcultural knowledge and practices should be more widely recognized and appreciated in cultural youth work

4. Enhance knowledge on and tackle urban discrimination based on gender, race, social class, sexuality and age

The research found several experiences of urban discrimination and harassment in the public space. An important context for experiencing intergenerational distrust was related to the complex negotiations of belonging to the city. Different urban spaces are produced socially and can be understood through the struggle for belonging and as arenas, which produce us as subjects of a certain gender, age, ability and ethnicity. Urban encounters between people reflect and remake urban racialised, class-related, age-related and gendered hierarchies. The rainbow group members in particular voiced experiences of discrimination in the public space.

- Urban youth policies need to recognise and tackle discrimination faced by young people and young adults.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on 20 interviews and fieldwork at a youth cultural and community centre with a subcultural profile in Helsinki. The most intensive period of fieldwork was done over three months (approximately 7 hours/week) between February and May, in spring 2017.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement (PROMISE)
COORDINATOR	Jo Deakin, <i>University of Manchester, UK.</i> Jo.deakin@manchester.ac.uk
CONSORTIUM	Raffaele Bracalenti, <i>Istituto Psicoanalitico per le Ricerche Sociali, Italy.</i> r.bracalenti@iprs.it Eckart Müller-Bachmann, <i>Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands e.V., Germany.</i> eckart.mueller-bachmann@cjd-nord.de Zyab Ibanez, <i>Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.</i> zyab.ibanez@eui.eu Raquel Matos, <i>Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal.</i> rmatos@porto.ucp.pt Ivan Chorvát, <i>Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici, Slovakia.</i> Ivan.Chorvat@umb.sk Kaisa Vehkalahti, <i>Finnish Youth Research Network, Finland.</i> kaisa.vehkalahti@youthresearch.fi Annett Wiedermann, <i>YES Forum (Youth and European Social Work), Germany.</i> annett.wiedermann@yes-forum.eu Anna Markina, <i>University of Tartu, Estonia.</i> Anna.Markina@ut.ee Markus Quandt, <i>GESIS - Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften E.V., Germany.</i> Markus.quandt@gesis.org Elena Omelchenko, <i>National Research University, Russia.</i> omelchenkoe@mail.ru Ben Perasović, <i>Ivo Pilar Institute, Croatia.</i> ben.perasovic@gmail.com
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WEBSITE	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/newsfeed/
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Eckart Müller-Bachmann (eckart.mueller-bachmann@cjd-nord.de) Heta Mulari (heta.mulari@youthresearch.fi)
FURTHER READING	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Intergenerational-contests-and-spatial-occupations-in-the-city.pdf