European Conference 2014
**"1914-2014: Lessons from History?
Citizenship Education and Conflict Management"**

16-18 October 2014
Vienna, Austria

Workshop 8
"The role of conflicts and power structures in citizenship education"

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When I was 15, I joined an international youth organization and spent the following years of my live participating in and organizing weekend-activities, summer camps and exchanges with peers from all over the world. Through this path I got involved in the European Youth Sector, particularly the work done by the Council of Europe through the European Youth Centres. Since 2004 I have worked with a vast number of different youth organizations, organizing seminars and training courses on Human Rights, Intercultural Learning and Citizenship Education. The theses I present below are distilled from these experiences.

Context: Formal and non-formal education play an important role in citizenship education. They differ in their purposes and which needs they address, they differ in their settings and in what they put their content focus on and, largely, they differ in how the education is taking place. Non-formal education uses experiential learning to reach its goal, which in general terms can be understood as the empowerment of individuals and communities to be the agents of their own destiny and live in peaceful societies.

As discussed in the workshop among the panel and participants of the workshop, when we talk about 'education', we don't refer to the limited understanding of education as 'formal' education, with a clear curriculum and desired outcome, but rather as an act of liberation and growth, where the role of the educator is not to prescribe what the learners need to understand and learn, but rather facilitate the process of knowledge and skills acquisition as a process of liberating oneself.

Thesis 1: To empower people to active citizens, you have to actually give them power.

A core goal of citizenship education is, or at least should be, the empowerment of those participating in it to become agents of their own destiny and develop an ownership for their community that they shape with their peers. For this empowerment to take place within the educational process the educator has to actually share power over the process with the participants. What to focus on, which problems to work on, which directions to take – all these decisions can and should be a microcosm of the process of citizenship: discussion, exploration of options, debate and consensus building.

If the educational process is a replication of existing power structures where one mightly powerful person decides what is important and where to go and for the rest to follow, true empowerment cannot take place.

Thesis 2: If young people don't learn about power, power structures and how to operate within them, they will remain uninvolved in public life.

Power has a bad reputation in most non-formal education settings. It is seen as synonymous with aggression, intolerance, domination and corruption. It is seen as undesirable to want to have power or to try to seek it. However, for young people to develop their potential as citizens, as active contributors to their communities and the wider society, it is important for them to learn how power works, how power-structures function and how to read them, how to operate within them and how to understand the implications of these for oneself and others.

Thesis 3: Focusing citizenship education on 'tolerance' has lead to ignoring conflict, rather than learning how to deal with it.

What is true for *power* is also true for *conflict*. In most educational settings, conflict is being seen as something negative and to be avoided, while tolerating those with different points of view is seen as the desirable outcome. However, *tolerance* has a deep underlying connotation of power: only the powerful can chose to tolerate, while those tolerated have no power to decide whether they want to be tolerated. Peaceful societies need understanding, respect and acceptance of diversity – but this requires the ability to deal with conflict, listen to and debate with those whose points of view are different and be grounded in human rights.

Thesis 4: Learning is most powerful if the learners are emotionally involved. For that you need conflict.

The experience of non-formal education around citizenship and related concerns shows time and time again that the more the learners are emotionally involved, the deeper and more sustainable the learning is. A wide range of methods is intently designed to foster disagreement, conflict and friction between participants. The educational setting can then offer the necessary safe space to work through the conflicts, dissect them and have deep discussions on their origins and what they mean in the larger context of society.

Thesis 5: Current European programmes don't foster the 'political literacy' of youth because they are de facto de-politicized.

On the one hand, the European programs don't address themes relevant to young people's daily lives and social realities as political. They also don't offer real opportunities to engage in politics and critical action for change (simulation rather than real active participation in change processes, for example, model united nations or model parliaments). Furthermore, the programmes put a strong focus on skills for the labour market rather than on life skills (e.g. Erasmus+ youth in action activities have to show contribution to employability to access funding). And the economic dimension of citizenship and its relationship to politics and power are completely missing.
On the other hand are the people running European activities, who are often afraid of conflict, seeking to prevent it rather than embracing it as part and parcel of the intercultural process people from different places and backgrounds need to go through to achieve cooperation

(e.g. how youth exchanges are prepared and run in national groups…). This has to do with a general culture of conflict avoidance in the European Youth Work scene as well as with a lack of training in how to deal with conflict, mediate it and facilitate consensus building. Beyond that, difference and diversity are treated in a folkloristic manner rather than as socially and politically constructed (international evening = intercultural learning, for example).

Thesis 6: We learn best about politics through politics: by engaging in the political process of conflict, dissent and compromise as part of the educational process.

Learning about the political process as an abstract subject is boring. It becomes interesting when it is relevant and it becomes relevant when there is potential for change and for solving a real problem that learners share. A large part of local non-formal education programs focus on empowering young people to solve a problem they face. This can range from installing a skate-park in a city, to rallying against bullying in the school. By embedding a subject in a thematic area that learners are already invested in the motivation to work on it and understand its different components becomes intrinsic and therefore sustainable.