

SUBJECTIVITY AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE VALUE OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Sandra Biewers Grimm, Daniel Weis, & Anita Latz

*Department of Social Science (DSOC), Centre for Childhood and Youth Research (CCY),
University of Luxembourg (Luxembourg)*

Abstract

Due to its principles of voluntariness and openness, and because of its diverse offer of experiential and subject-related educational opportunities, open youth work is increasingly seen as having a special potential in supporting the acquisition of key competences and life skills. But which educational opportunities are meant here and what form of education are we talking about here at all?

These are the questions addressed by the qualitative-reconstructive study "Educational Experiences in Non-formal Settings", which is being conducted at the Centre for Childhood and Youth Research (CCY) at the University of Luxembourg. The study examines the subjective educational experiences of young people in open youth work on the basis of ethnographic observations in youth centers, in problem-centered interviews and group discussions with young people as well as a supplementary quantitative survey.

The study is based on an understanding of education that follows the tradition of subject-scientific theory (v. Humboldt, Koller) as well as the recognition theory (Honneth) and discusses education with concepts of self-determination and maturity in dealing with social norms and routines. The starting point of this consideration is that education can be determined as the transformation of the relationship to the self and the world. It is also linked to the theoretical work of Albert Scherr (1996), who defines the development of self-awareness, self-esteem, self-determination and thus ultimately subjectivity as the central educational goals of youth work. Empirically, it is thus not primarily a matter of investigating processes of knowledge acquisition, but rather of describing "innovative moments in the development of individual ways of thinking and acting (Koller, 2018, p.112).

The results of the data analysis show a differentiated description of youth-related educational occasions and marks small-scale experiences of the appropriation of personal, social and everyday life references. They also highlight moments of expanding young people's ways of thinking, possibilities of action and dispositions in the context of open youth work. The high importance of social recognition as a basic prerequisite for educational processes (among the young people involved) becomes visible.

Keywords: *Non-formal education, youth work, reconstructive social research, youth research, educational theory.*

1. Introduction

This paper presents the design and initial findings of an ethnographic-reconstructive study in the context of empirical educational research in Luxembourg. The study "Educational experiences in non-formal settings" aims to describe what educational experiences young people generate in non-formal educational settings and what value these experiences have for them in their current life contexts and for their future life plans. Open youth work in Luxembourg was chosen as an exemplary field of investigation, which, as a genuine field of social pedagogical action, also has a legally anchored non-formal education mandate.

The study focuses on the question of how "education" in the context of open youth work can be represented empirically within the framework of interpretative research contexts and from the perspective of young people.

2. Research context

By redefining the youth sector as an area of non-formal education, Luxembourg has followed an international trend that has been flanked for years by the reporting of supranational organisations (OECD, UNESCO, EU, etc.). The origin of this development can be traced back to a crisis in the education system discussed throughout Europe and also in Luxembourg, as evidenced by international studies and research such as the Pisa study. One aspect of this debate is the importance of non-formal education approaches. In the sense of holistic, local educational landscapes, the aim is to contribute to promoting the complementarity of educational offers and to achieve a fairer and altogether more successful education in the sense of young people. In this context, youth work was introduced as a non-formal education partner of the formal educational institutions.

In Luxembourg, this redefinition of the youth sector can be seen in two changes in particular:

(1) With the introduction of a national education framework in Luxembourg in 2017, the understanding of youth work as educational work has been consolidated.

(2) With the adoption of the new school law of 29.08.2017, concepts of school social work and cooperation between school and youth work services have been implemented. Youth work is thus assigned the role of "supporting partner" of formal education.

3. State of the art

In recent years, Delmas and Scherr (2005) and Cloos et al. (2009), among others, have dealt with the special educational potential of youth work. Their findings show that young people have reported many different learning and educational moments when taking part in open youth work activities, which they rate as particularly positive. These moments often involve the acquisition of competences, for example in concrete educational projects. In contrast, the professional experts interviewed by the authors hardly describe their work in open youth work as educational work and thus fail to recognise educational potentials which subsequently remain unused. Moreover, in their extensive ethnographic study, Cloos et. al. found numerous examples of the co-construction of educational processes between youth workers and young people. These took place in a wide variety of interaction frameworks and were partly unconscious and unreflected. These empirical results, which can only be briefly reported here, show that educational work does take place in open youth work. However, this is usually not targeted or planned, and often even unconscious. This makes it difficult to adequately use the educational potential of youth work in an educational partnership with formal education.

All in all, the user perspective has not yet received much attention from youth work research (Biewers, 2020). For example, there has hardly been any empirical research on the mode of educational experiences of young people within youth work, i.e. which changing and developing moments they actually experience there and how they evaluate them. The questions as to what extent the socio-pedagogical support function of youth work in the context of personal or social learning processes and/or changed family structures is important for the young people and what contribution youth work makes to coping with the increasingly complex problems of adolescence in connection with digitalisation or the increasing pressure to perform are also largely unanswered.

4. Theoretical framework

The study is grounded on an understanding of education that is in the tradition of subject-scientific theory (v. Humboldt, Koller) as well as recognition theory (Honneth) and discusses education with concepts of self-determination and maturity in dealing with social norms and routines. The starting point of these considerations is that education can be determined as the transformation of the relationship to the self and to the world. It also ties in with the theoretical work of Albert Scherr (1997), who defines the development of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-determination and thus ultimately subjectivity as the central educational goals of youth work. Scherr starts from the idea of a largely "autonomous subject" and at the same time considers this subject and its development embedded in the social and societal environment (p.50). Through these connections with the expectations and rules affecting the subject from the external, its autonomy is limited in parts and the subject is faced with the task of balancing the interplay of internal ideas and dispositions with the external norms and rules. Scherr considers "becoming a subject" to be the fundamental educational goal of every human being, so to speak. According to his theory, the core task of youth work is to enable a responsible subject "who develops a self-confident and self-determined life practice based on the reliance on structures of mutual recognition" (Sturzenhecker & Deinet, 2018; p. 697). Empirically, therefore, the study is not primarily concerned with examining processes of knowledge acquisition, but rather with describing "innovative

moments in the development of individual ways of thinking and acting" (Koller, 2018, p.112). To this end, the study is oriented towards approaches of ethnographic-reconstructive social research in combination with grounded theory.

5. Objectives and research questions

The study presented in this paper addresses these gaps in research. The aim is to highlight, on the basis of empirical data, which concrete educational experiences young people generate in the different settings of open youth work, as well as which significance and which benefits they attribute to these experiences with regard to their own development and life situation. Therefore, the following questions are the focus of the study: What subjective educational and learning experiences do young people generate in open youth work? How can these educational experiences be characterised? And what value do the young people attach to these experiences for their subjective development?

6. Methods

To answer the research questions, the study was grounded on a mixed methods design. It used 1) ethnographic observations in 8 youth centers, 2) problem-centered interviews and group discussions with 35 young people in open youth centers and 3) a quantitative online survey (n = 101 participants). These triangulation of methods and perspectives should lead to a holistic view of the educational experiences of young people in open youth work.

The individual sub-studies pursued different goals: The ethnographic-qualitative methods served to open up a previously poorly researched subject area in depth and to a large extent. For this purpose, the interactions of the young people were first observed ethnographically in selected pedagogical settings within the youth centers and the young people were then questioned about their experiences on the basis of these observations. In addition to predefined guiding questions, open observation protocols were kept. In the quantitative online survey, the study was opened to all young people attending a youth center in Luxembourg. The aim here was to extend and validate the results of the qualitative study. The use of a variety of data and perspectives was also due to the fact that "research practice is considered to be highly dependent on milieu and situation, shaped by the subjects involved, their lifestyles and conditions, and the imponderables of everyday life" (Lüders 2013, p. 393). This research practice in the youth center required a certain flexibility.

7. Findings

The results of the data analysis indicated a) a differentiated description of youth-related educational reasons, which show that the young people's reflexive examination of themselves and/or their environment is often based on certain "subjective occasions", which are addressed by the professionals as well as by the peers. These include, for example, the desire to overcome an existing crisis or a family problem, but also the discovery of the "foreign" and the difference to previous experiences. Such occasions and educational opportunities are often identified as starting points for transformations, and the young people begin to think about new options for action (with the support of the professionals). Social interaction usually provides a supportive and even protective framework. Many of the young people interviewed talk about "feeling supported by the group" or "having found a community in the youth center" in which and with which they have developed further.

The results mark b) a variety of situations and "innovative moments" in which developments occur in which young people acquire new personal, social, societal and everyday references. In retrospect, these were moments that proved to be trend-setting for the young people. Such formative experiences can be seen, for example, in the first overnight stay outdoors, in conversations and contacts that led to a certain career choice or also in the fact that young people did not commit a planned criminal act. This also includes the expansion of the young people's ways of thinking, possibilities of action and dispositions in the context of creative, musical or social offers and projects that are very close to the young people's topics and interests.

The results also show c) a high level of satisfaction among the young people about the community lived in the youth center, which contributes to well-being and an atmosphere of appreciation. A common thread running through the data is the high importance of social recognition as the basis for self-esteem, self-confidence and openness to expand one's own horizons.

8. Conclusions

This study aimed at systematically recording and describing the subjective educational experiences and learning moments that young people generate in their participation in the offers in different settings of Open Youth Work, thus arriving at empirically supported statements about the educational potentials and the value of Open Youth Work from the young people's point of view. The results show that young people find a variety of opportunity structures and possibilities in the settings of youth work, in which they can participate with their individual ideas, needs and interests, and in which these are respected and recognised. It could be shown that education in youth work is much more than the mere transfer of knowledge and competences. Rather, youth work shows itself to be a place of education where, due to its professional setting of openness, voluntariness and low threshold, it comprehensively succeeds in supporting young people to develop themselves with "all their strengths" and in "all directions" (v. Humboldt, cited in Koller, 2018).

References

- Biewes Grimm (2020). *Qualitätskonstruktionen. Zur Verarbeitung divergierender Qualitätsanforderungen in der Jugendarbeit*. 2. Auflage. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Bock, K. (2008). Einwürfe zum Bildungsbegriff: Fragen für die Kinder- und Jugendhilfeforschung. In H.-U. Otto & T. Rauschenbach (Hg.), *Die andere Seite der Bildung: Zum Verhältnis von formellen und informellen Bildungsprozessen* (2. Aufl., S. 91–105). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften/GWV Fachverlage GmbH Wiesbaden.
- Cloos, P., Köngeter, S., Müller, B. & Thole, W. (2009). *Die Pädagogik der Kinder- und Jugendarbeit* (2., durchgesehene Auflage). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. <http://www.socialnet.de/rezensionen/isbn.php?isbn=978-3-531-16597-4>
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91557-9>.
- Delmas, N. & Scherr, A. (2005). Bildungspotenziale der Jugendarbeit.: Ergebnisse einer explorativen empirischen Studie. *Deutsche Jugend*, 53(3), 105–109.
- Deinet, U. & Sturzenhecker, B. (2018). Kinder- und Jugendarbeit. In *Kompendium der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe*. Springer Verlag. pp 693–712.
- Koller, H.C (2018). *Bildung anders denken. – Einführung in die Theorie transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse*. 2. aktualisierte Auflage. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag.
- Lüders, C. (2013). Bildungsbiografien von Kindern, Teenies und Jugendlichen im Kontext ihrer Peers. Discourse. *Journal of Childhood and Adolescence Research*, 8(2), 243-246. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-392545>.
- Scherr, A. (1997). *Subjektorientierte Jugendarbeit. Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen emanzipatorischer Jugendpädagogik*. Weinheim und München: Beltz Verlag.
- Soeffner, H.-G. (2011). Sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff & I. Steinke (Hg.), *Qualitative Forschung - Ein Handbuch* (8. Aufl., S. 164–174). Rowohlt.
- Sting, S. (2013). Sozialpädagogische Zugänge zur Bildung in der frühen Kindheit. In Sektion Sozialpädagogik und Pädagogik der frühen Kindheit (Hg.), *Konsens und Kontroversen: Sozialpädagogik und Pädagogik der frühen Kindheit im Dialog* (S. 14–24). Beltz Juventa.
- Sturzenhecker, B. (2008). Zum Bildungsanspruch von Jugendarbeit. In H.-U. Otto & T. Rauschenbach (Hg.), *Die andere Seite der Bildung: Zum Verhältnis von formellen und informellen Bildungsprozessen* (2. Aufl., S. 147–165). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften/GWV Fachverlage GmbH Wiesbaden.
- Thiersch, H. (2006). Leben lernen: Bildungskonzepte und sozialpädagogische Aufgaben. In H.-U. Otto (Hg.), *Zeitgemäße Bildung: Herausforderung für Erziehungswissenschaft und Bildungspolitik* (S. 21–36). E. Reinhardt.