

Research-based analysis of Youth in Action Programme (RAY):

Study on non-formal learning in Youth in Action projects

Summary of the Polish national report



By:

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1. Introduction

The present document is the summary of the Polish national report “Study of non-formal learning in Youth in Action projects”. The report was elaborated in August 2013 by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Polish National Agency of the Youth in Action Programme, on the basis of two on-line surveys conducted in May and November 2012. Furthermore, the quantitative research was deepened with qualitative analysis consisting in focus groups/group discussions with project participants and semi-structured interviews with project leaders and team members in order to study more in-depth the issues addressed in the specific research questions.

The on-line surveys were answered by 667 project participants and 94 project leaders in May 2012 and by 1057 project participants and 221 project leaders in November 2012. In total, the survey was answered by 1724 project participants and 315 project leaders.

Between January and July 2013 9 in-depth interviews have been organised. 4 interviews involved project leaders and members of project teams with an educational, socio-pedagogic and also, in most of the cases, organisational roles. The project leaders had implemented at least 3 Youth in Action projects prior to the one they were asked about in the interview. The following interviews with project leaders have been conducted:

- 1 interview with project leader (accompanied by two pedagogues) implementing Action 1.1 project;
- 1 interview with project leader implementing Action 1.2 project;
- 1 interview with two project leaders implementing Action 2 EVS project;
- 1 interview with two project leaders implementing Action 4.3 project.

In total, 4 interviews involving 8 project leaders/team members have been conducted. Two projects examined involved young people with fewer opportunities and the leaders and their organisations represented different backgrounds and regions.

Furthermore, the following 4 focus groups and 1 telephonic (Skype) focus interview involving 28 project participants have been organised:

- 1 focus group involving 7 participants of Action 1.1 project;
- 1 focus group involving 7 participants of Action 3.1 project
- 1 focus group involving 9 participants of Action 1.2 project;
- 1 telephonic (Skype) focus interview involving 2 participants of Action 2 project;
- 1 focus group involving 3 participants of Action 4.3 project.

The focus groups involved project participants whose projects ended between 6 and 18 months before the date of the interview. They included people from different socio-economical backgrounds and from different regions. 2 focus groups involved young people with fewer opportunities, including the young people with physical handicaps and the hearing-impaired.

Both types of interviews, with project leaders and project participants, lasted not less than 45 minutes. They were all recorded and transcribed.

2. Summary of conclusions

Combining the results of the quantitative and qualitative studies, the following conclusions on learning, learning settings, competence development and effects of Youth in Action projects on project participants and project leaders can be drawn:

- Project participants declared to have developed most the following competences: cooperation in a team, communication in foreign languages and negotiating skills;
- Project leaders, asked about the participants' skills/competence development (especially in Action 1.1) said they observed a significant change in what they referred to as the combination of three skills: foreign language competence combined with self confidence and team cooperation;
- Project leaders, apart from the competence development (cooperation in a team, foreign language skills) claimed to have learned to deal with stress and to act under the pressure of time;
- Discussions and individual/group reflections were the most commonly used activities/methods during the examined Youth in Action projects;
- The project leaders, asked about the methods used while implementing Youth in Action projects in most of the cases (75%) claimed to have used exercises they got to know through youth projects;
- 67,5% of project leaders indicated that they used a certain method for the first time. This may mean that Youth in Action projects might be an optimal opportunity for testing new methods and approaches and that project leaders are not afraid to try them out in their activities;
- The role of unintentional learning was stressed. In project leaders' opinion such unintentional learning is effective because it is effortless and only during the reflection time after the project do participants realise what progress they have made. Therefore, the time of reflection is crucial in non-formal education;
- In project leaders' opinion, the learning process of project participants occurs most often in three situations: when taking part in the organisation of the project, when reflecting/talking about the experiences during of after the project and during the informal experiences with other people in/around the project;
- The role of informal situations during the project was stressed by project participants. Such situations are perceived by them to be a good opportunity to learn foreign languages;
- For project leaders, it is justified to state that the learning process occurs mostly during the preparation and implementation phase.

3. Effects from the perspective of participants and project leaders

This section will focus on skills/competence development among project participants and project leaders. The quantitative data are presented in the tables and are deepened by the results of the qualitative study.

3.1. Effects on project participants

In their self-assessment, project participants declared to have learned the most to cooperate in a team. Furthermore, in the case of Actions requiring international cooperation, projects contributed strongly also to the development of foreign language competence. Finally, the respondents largely learned to negotiate joint solutions when there are different viewpoints and to achieve something in the interest of the community or society. Participation in the project has hardly affected their ability to produce media content.

What project participants stressed most during the focus groups discussions, was the ability to cooperate in a team (especially in Action 1.1, 1.2 and 3.1 Youth Exchanges). In their opinion they have made a significant progress in this field, comparing the day 1 of the project and the end of it. They claimed to have learned to express their thoughts in a more clear and concise way, to reflect on what they really have in mind and to reformulate their thoughts so that they could be understood by others.

Furthermore, the participants of the Action 2 focus group claimed that they learned to defend their own opinions and to give and develop arguments to support their views. Thus, all the members of this focus group unanimously agreed that after their EVS project they became more self-confident and that this particular skill has not only affected their professional life, but also changed for better the relations with their friends and family. Even though right after the project, some of the participants of this focus group felt somehow lost and could not find an appropriate place for themselves.

Project leaders, asked about the participants' skills/competence development in Action 1.1 focus group said they observed a significant change in what they referred to as the combination of three skills: foreign language competence combined with self confidence and team cooperation. They gave an example of two participants who, shy and not talkative at the project preparation stage, after the arrival of the foreign group, became more open, curious and got involved to a much greater extent in project activities. Moreover, even though their abilities to communicate in English were relatively weak, they were not ashamed to make mistakes and they persisted in using English throughout the project, even though they knew they made mistakes. They then explained to the project leader: *At school we are ashamed of the teacher and of other pupils who speak better English. But here, during the project, the atmosphere is nothing like in the classroom. We all make mistakes and by making them, we learn. And the most important thing during the project is to be understood, to get your message across. If people from other countries understand what I want to say even though I make mistakes, the goal is achieved.*

As far as participants' competence development (as observed by project leaders) is concerned, regardless of the Action, the project participants learned to cooperate in the team (97,5% of project leaders agree with such statement), to say what they think with conviction in discussions (92,5%) and to negotiate joint solutions when there are different view points (92,5%). The above is confirmed by project participants' self-evaluation, as presented in the table 1 below:

Through my participation in this project I learned better...	Action 1.1.	Action 1.2.	Action 1.3.	Action 2.	Action 3.1.	Action 4.3.	Action 4.9.	Action 5.1.	Total average
... to say what I think with conviction in discussions.	3,2	3,3	3,3	3,1	3,2	3,3	2,5	3,3	3,2 (n=1721)
... to communicate with people who speak another language.	3,7	2,5	3,2	3,8	3,7	3,7	3,0	2,5	3,5 (n=1718)
... to cooperate in a team.	3,6	3,8	3,7	3,4	3,6	3,6	3,0	3,6	3,6 (n=1716)
... to produce media content on my own (printed, audiovisual, electronic).	2,8	3,2	2,9	2,7	2,9	2,6	2,5	3,0	2,8 (n=1717)
... to develop a good idea and put it into practice.	3,3	3,6	3,4	3,2	3,4	3,3	3,3	3,5	3,3 (n=1718)
... to negotiate joint solutions when there are different viewpoints.	3,4	3,6	3,3	3,3	3,5	3,5	3,3	3,5	3,4 (n=1719)
... to achieve something in the interest of the community or society.	3,4	3,6	3,4	3,4	3,5	3,4	3,3	3,5	3,4 (n=1721)

Table 1. Project participants' responses – by Action. Scale: 1-4 (1 – not at all, 2 – not so much, 3 – to some extent, 4 – definitely). N=1724.

The qualitative study did not confirm some of the results described in the table 2. In general, project participants did not see the connection between the project they had implemented and the ability to identify better their personal and professional future. Only one participant (Action 2 focus group) claimed that the project influenced the shift in her educational life, which then affected (for better) her career prospects. On the other hand, all project leaders agreed that the competences developed in Youth in Action projects increase the participants' chances on the labour market.

Through my participation in this project I learned better...	Action 1.1.	Action 1.2.	Action 1.3.	Action 2.	Action 3.1.	Action 4.3.	Action 4.9.	Action 5.1.	Total average
... to think logically and draw conclusions.	3,1	3,2	3,1	3,0	3,1	3,1	2,3	3,3	3,1 (n=1718)
... to identify opportunities for my personal or professional future.	3,1	3,1	3,1	3,3	3,1	3,1	2,8	3,1	3,1 (n=1714)
... to improve my learning or to have more fun when learning.	3,2	3,0	2,9	3,1	3,1	3,3	3,0	2,8	3,1 (n=1720)
... to discuss political topics seriously.	2,6	2,3	2,7	2,6	2,7	2,9	2,0	3,0	2,6 (n=1720)
... to plan and carry out my learning independently.	2,9	2,8	2,9	3,0	2,9	3,0	2,5	2,9	2,9 (n=1714)
... to express myself creatively or artistically.	3,3	3,4	3,3	3,1	3,4	3,1	3,3	3,3	3,3 (n=1717)
... to get along with people who have a different cultural background.	3,8	2,9	3,3	3,7	3,8	3,7	3,5	3,0	3,6 (n=1718)

Table 2. Project participants' responses – by Action. Scale: 1-4 (1 – not at all, 2 – not so much, 3 – to some extent, 4 – definitely). N=1724.

3.2. Effects on project leaders

The table 3 represents the results of the quantitative study. Its results have been enriched by the qualitative study which gave an interesting point of view on project leaders' learning.

The learning of project leaders in Youth in Action programme can be compared to building a house (to take the exact wording from one of the interviews). *I am an experienced project leader, I have implemented more than 20 different projects and I must say, that each of them is a few bricks to the house I feel I am building. If you ask me if I developed all the skills from the list in the last project, I'd have to say no, I did not. But if you ask me if with every project I get better and I learn more – well then I must say yes, I do. Each project is different, every participant and volunteer is different, so taking into consideration my entire experience, I must say that Youth in Action contributed greatly to my learning and skills development.*

Some less experienced project leaders (Action 1.3 and 3.1) claimed to have strongly developed negotiation skills (especially negotiation in a foreign language – Action 3.1). They also claimed that the stress level in the first project helped them to become better prepared for their professional life. They learned to deal with stress and to work under pressure of time. *Thanks to the project I got to know what real stress was. I had to co-ordinate the arrivals of a group of 20 people from 5 different airports. I learned how to think clear in difficult situations. If I managed this, I can manage a lot more in the future!*

Which of the following skills could you yourself develop through your involvement in the project? I learned better ...	Action 1.1	Action 1.2	Action 1.3	Action 2	Action 3.1	Action 4.3	Action 5.1	Total average
... to say what I think with conviction in discussions.	3,5	3,6	3,1	3,2	3,6	3,4	3,5	3,4 (n=314)
... to communicate with people who speak another language.	3,7	2,1	3,4	3,4	3,7	3,5	1,2	3,0 (n=314)
... to cooperate in a team.	3,7	3,7	3,3	3,3	3,7	3,5	3,6	3,5 (n=312)
... to produce media content on my own (printed, audiovisual, electronic).	3,2	3,6	3,1	3,1	3,3	3,0	3,6	3,3 (n=312)
... to develop a good idea and put it into practice.	3,5	3,6	3,6	3,4	3,7	3,4	3,8	3,6 (n=311)
... to negotiate joint solutions when there are different viewpoints.	3,6	3,4	3,3	3,3	3,8	3,5	3,7	3,5 (n=314)
... to achieve something in the interest of the community or society.	3,5	3,5	3,4	3,2	3,5	3,3	3,6	3,4 (n=312)

Table 3. Project leaders' responses - by Action. Scale: 1-4 (1 – not at all, 2 – not so much, 3 – to some extent, 4 – definitely). N=315.

4. Project designs

This section describes how the Youth in Action projects are designed, what methods, educational approaches are used. The section presents mainly the project leaders' point of view, since in most of the cases, it was mainly them who were responsible for the project design and for the choice of methods applied.

According to the quantitative analysis, the discussions and individual/group reflections were the most commonly used activities/methods. During the interviews, all project leaders stated that they tried to adapt the learner-oriented approach.

The following activities, exercises, games and methods were part of the programme of this project:	Action 1.1	Action 1.2	Action 1.3	Action 2	Action 3.1	Action 4.3	Action 5.1	Total average
Presentations/input by experts/project leaders	76,8%	54,5%	71,4%	50,7%	71,8%	90,6%	92,9%	72,7%
Presentations/input by participants	91,1%	61,4%	85,7%	76,1%	94,9%	87,5%	92,9%	84,2%
Discussions	88,4%	88,6%	100,0%	89,6%	94,9%	96,9%	100,0%	94,0%
Individual reflection or reflection in a group	82,1%	72,7%	85,7%	76,1%	87,2%	100,0%	85,7%	84,2%

Table 4. Project leaders' responses - by Action. N=315.

The above is confirmed by the results of the quantitative study. In a vast majority of projects the most common activities were: Involvement of participants in the preparation or organisation of the project, activities and exercises with participants which were part of the project programme, participants reflecting/talking about the project experiences during or after the project and participants using/applying during or after the project what they had experienced/learned through the project.

The following activities or situations occurred as part of this project:	Action 1.1	Action 1.2	Action 1.3	Action 2	Action 3.1	Action 4.3	Action 5.1	Total average
Involvement of participants in the preparation or organisation of the project	92,9%	95,5%	100,0%	77,6%	92,3%	90,6%	100,0%	92,7%
Activities and exercises with participants which were part of the project programme (for EVS participants: including EVS trainings/meetings before, during and after the voluntary service abroad; including language courses, if applicable)	92,9%	95,5%	100,0%	77,6%	97,4%	84,4%	100,0%	92,5%
Participants listening to presentations or input (e.g. given by experts, members of the project team etc.)	81,3%	63,6%	100,0%	58,2%	79,5%	90,6%	100,0%	81,9%
Informal time/experiences of participants with each other or with people in the project environment	90,2%	88,6%	100,0%	89,6%	84,6%	81,3%	85,7%	88,6%
Free time for individual activities of participants during the project	85,7%	52,3%	71,4%	80,6%	79,5%	93,8%	50,0%	73,3%
Participants reflecting/talking about the project experiences during or after the project	92,0%	72,7%	85,7%	85,1%	87,2%	93,8%	100,0%	88,1%
Participants using/applying during or after the project what they had experienced/learned through the project	82,1%	93,2%	100,0%	73,1%	79,5%	75,0%	85,7%	84,1%

Table 5. Project leaders' responses - by Action. N=315.

The project leaders, asked about the methods used while implementing Youth in Action projects in most of the cases (75%) claimed to have used exercises they got to know through youth projects. A similar percentage of project leaders declared that they used the methods they already knew well how to use. Quite an important number of responses (67,5%) indicated that project leaders used a certain method for the first time. This may mean that Youth in Action projects might be an optimal opportunity for testing new methods and approaches and that project leaders are not afraid to try them out in their activities.

The above was confirmed by the qualitative study. Most of project leaders try to apply a variety of methods and to adapt them to the needs of particular groups. Two project leaders (Action 2 and 4.3) stressed the role of unintentional learning: *It was only at the end of the project that the participants stated: we learned so much and we do not even know when!* In their opinion such unintentional learning is so effective because it is effortless and only during the reflection time after the project do participants realise what progress they have made.

During the project exercises, games and methods were applied that ...	Action 1.1	Action 1.2	Action 1.3	Action 2	Action 3.1	Action 4.3	Action 5.1	Total average
... I used for the first time.	2,8	2,7	2,6	2,4	2,8	2,6	2,8	2,7 (n=291)
... I had used once or twice before.	3,0	2,8	3,2	2,7	2,8	2,8	2,1	2,8 (n=292)
... I had used more often before.	2,7	2,6	3,2	2,9	2,7	2,5	1,7	2,6 (n=279)
... I already knew well how to implement.	3,1	2,9	3,0	3,0	3,0	2,9	2,4	2,9 (n=290)
... I got to know through youth projects.	3,3	2,9	3,3	3,0	3,2	3,0	2,2	3,0 (n=303)
... I got to know through youth work training.	2,9	2,7	3,0	3,0	2,8	3,1	2,4	2,8 (n=291)

Table 6. Project leaders' responses - by Action. Scale of answers: 1 – not at all true, 2 – not very true, 3 – somewhat true, 4 – very true. N=315.

In project leaders' opinion most of the time in the project was allocated to planned activities that were part of the project programme (64,1% of time). 10,1% of time on the other hand was allocated to activities which were not part of the project programme, which may lead to the conclusion that despite the programme being very of ten carefully planned, there is still room for improvisation and spontaneous activities involving project participants and project leaders.

To sum up, a vast majority of project activities directly involve the participants and makes them participate actively in the project and interact with other participants. It is also worth to point out that presentations and inputs by participants were indicated to occur more often than the ones by project leaders.

5. Learning of participants in YiA projects

In this section the learning contexts in Youth in Action projects are described. The situations in which the learning process occurs and is the most effective are identified. The section presents the points of view of both project participants and project leaders.

The results of the quantitative study indicate that according to project leaders, in general the learning process of project participants occurs most often in three situations: when taking part in the organisation of the project, when reflecting/talking about the experiences during or after the project and during the informal experiences with other people in/around the project.

These findings are to a great extent confirmed in the qualitative study by both project participants and project leaders. Project participants declared that they learned how to cooperate in a team mostly during the preparation phase of the project rather than during the project itself. Furthermore, they stressed the role of group reflection – some of them only then realised what they had really learned. The latter was confirmed by project leaders: group reflection helped to give a clear picture of the learning process, which was very often unintended. It is crucial, that in such cases the reflection takes place in order to show the participants the progress they have made.

The participants also underlined that they learned to communicate in a foreign language mostly during informal situations (mostly Action 1.1 and Action 2 focus groups). They said they felt good in a friendly atmosphere and that the language barrier was not a big problem in informal contacts shortly after the beginning of the project (Action 1.1 focus group) and a few weeks after the beginning of the project (Action 2 focus group).

The participants learned best ...	When taking part in the organisation of the project	During informal experiences with other people in/ around the project	During voluntary work in Another country	In activities and exercises within the project programme	When reflecting/ talking about the experiences during or after the project	When getting advice from a Project team member	During free time for individual activities	When listening to presentations or inputs	When applying what they had learned in the project
... to say what they think with conviction in discussions.	50,0%	55,6%	15,6%	65,6%	58,9%	27,8%	22,2%	21,1%	38,9%
... to communicate with people who speak another language.	50,0%	55,6%	26,7%	58,9%	46,7%	24,4%	46,7%	37,8%	35,6%
... to cooperate in a team.	60,0%	48,9%	27,8%	77,8%	41,1%	26,7%	23,3%	21,1%	50,0%
... to produce media content on their own (printed, audio-visual, electronic).	58,9%	14,4%	17,8%	44,4%	13,3%	13,3%	13,3%	13,3%	28,9%
... to develop a good idea and put it into practice.	57,8%	37,8%	22,2%	63,3%	36,7%	28,9%	22,2%	22,2%	37,8%
... to negotiate joint solutions when there are different viewpoints.	54,4%	54,4%	18,9%	55,6%	51,1%	35,6%	25,6%	23,3%	34,4%
... to achieve something in the interest of the community or society.	51,1%	27,8%	23,3%	40,0%	24,4%	23,3%	14,4%	16,7%	37,8%

Table 7. Project leaders' responses, learning of participants, percentage of positive answers. N=315, n=305.

Project leaders underlined that the participants learned to plan their activities, to anticipate and to predict consequences while preparing the project design. During the project activities they learned more how to react efficiently to what is happening, how to find solutions to unexpected situations and how to deal with stress. Finally, during the project the participants learned the most about other cultures, other types of behaviors and approaches, other points of view. The multicultural learning occurs thus during the project activities and during the informal situations(Action 1.1, 2 and 3.1).

6. Learning of project leaders in YiA projects

In this section the learning contexts of project leaders of Youth in Action projects are described. The situations in which their learning process occurs and is the most effective are identified. The section presents the points of project leaders only.

In order to have a full look on learning of project leaders, it is important to give background information on project leaders' educational attainment and the ways they had obtained their qualifications. 88% of respondents claim to have obtained qualification for youth work through formal education and 96,4% through non-formal education. This may lead to a conclusion that project leaders implementing Youth in Action project have both theoretical knowledge on youth work and combine it with practical experiences obtained in non-formal learning projects. Having stated that, it is justified to say that project leaders consciously combined both types of education: formal and non-formal, in order to be prepared to implement youth projects. It is also important to stress that more than 50% of respondents claim to have obtained qualification from youth work through other means of education.

Did you obtain any qualification for youth work, social work or educational/pedagogical work ...	
... through formal education (e.g. upper vocational school, polytechnic, university etc.)?	88,0%
... through non-formal education (e.g. seminars, workshops, training courses etc.)?	96,4%
... through other means of education?	50,5%

Table 8. Project leaders' responses, education. The percentages do not sum up to 100% since this was a multiple choice question. N=315, n=315.

In general, basing on the interviews with project leaders, it is justified to state that the learning process occurs mostly during the preparation and implementation phase. Unlike the project participants, they do not learn during the informal moments during the project, as quite often, they are not present then. Finally, most project leaders declared that they also learn after the project: *Once the project has ended, I need to reflect what went fine and what went wrong. I need to draw conclusions for the future, to decide which patterns to follow and which not. This reflection and self evaluation after the project is very important for the project leader.*