

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS THAT HINDER THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE FOR FULL AND MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to some misconceptions that modern society and its systems create among young people and how this affects their active and meaningful participation. The research interest was provoked by a series of observations while the author works with young people as a youth worker, researcher and lecturer in the field of youth policy. This experience outlined the mix use of certain notions that are indicative about confusions either at the level of the terminology or rather is a manifestation of deficit of knowledge of youth policies as public policies. The study takes active and meaningful youth participation as its object, and the various contemporary misconceptions of the mentioned below aspects and their respective impact as its subject of study. Its main goal is to clarify and harmonize the understanding of key issues that today's society constantly raises and to discuss how misconceptions directly affect and influence, most negatively, active and meaningful youth participation. This will improve the understanding of the role of the younger generation in various processes, as well as improve intergenerational dialogue and create a better environment for the development of teams, organizations and communities and their management.

Key words: youth participation, critical thinking, intergenerational dialogue, leadership.

INTRODUCTION

This article was inspired by a meeting with young people at the end of 2022 and my participation in a discussion panel where we had to comment on challenges to active and meaningful youth participation. As a youth worker, trainer, researcher and lecturer in the youth field, I have the opportunity to interact with many young people for the past 15 years. This article adds to my other observations during various meetings, both with young people and with older people, whether or not in professions working with young people. What struck me was the repeated for the past 5 years "nowadays knowledge is everywhere" not only at national but also at European level. In the same way, artificial intelligence is defined as intelligence, and so far, it is simply a machine for rapid data processing.

Paradoxical to this is the demand to simplify the language so that communication can flow more easily. If knowledge is everywhere, why simplify the conversation at all, even to the contrary. This sentence is often said when discussing the digital world and its possibilities of

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access. In my attempts to make a clarification that knowledge is something different from access to information, I did not meet much understanding. It is also interesting that my point of view and opinion as different is rather neglected than contributing to the creation of an objective reality. Even more worrying is that much more attention is paid to the opinion of the situational leader as objective truth, rather than seeking objective truth as such. It seemed to me necessary to discuss these issues by presenting different theoretical positions and questions that we can discuss in more depth.

The research uses methods such as desk research, observation, analysis, and inference to achieve the objectives it sets for itself. The study takes active and meaningful youth participation as its object, and the various contemporary misconceptions of the mentioned below aspects and their respective impact as its subject of study. Its main goal is to clarify and harmonize the understanding of key issues that today's society constantly raises and to discuss how misconceptions directly affect and influence, most negatively, active and meaningful youth participation. It provides answers to the following questions: a) what is information and what is knowledge, b) are there hierarchies in modern society, c) are all people good and why do we need other people, d) why do we not teach critical thinking in school, e) what exactly is leadership.

The importance of this article is essential in justifying the causes of some problems in public, organizational and interpersonal communication. It will also help to improve the understanding of the role of the younger generation in various processes, as well as improve intergenerational dialogue and create a better environment for the development of teams and communities.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE YOUTH PARTICIPATION

I will first introduce what is meant by active and meaningful youth participation. This article will not focus on youth political participation which can be understood as the active, voluntary engagement of young people from their citizen perspective in any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere (Barta, Boldt and Lavizzari, 2021). This is an aspect of youth participation. Also, I will not do a special theoretical review of the concepts on youth participation. For this purpose, we can refer to in-depth research on these issues by (Williamson, 1985, 2002, 2008, 2017; Kiilakoski 2020; Corney et al. 2020; Corney et al. 2021).

The Council of Europe Youth sector strategy 2030 resolves that the Council of Europe youth sector should aim at broadening youth participation, so that young people **participate meaningfully in decision-making**, on the basis of a broad social and political consensus in support of inclusion, participatory governance and accountability (COE, 2020). The definition of Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life says that “The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship are **about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and**

where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.” The meaningful participation of young people is possible in an environment in which young people **can freely assemble and form, join and be active in associations or political processes. It refers to their active involvement in decision-making processes, policy development and other activities linked to democratic citizenship** (Deželan, 2023). Participation is linked to concepts such as engagement, empowerment, inclusion, citizenship, voice or agency. When participation is talked about, debated and promoted, we are talking about the nature of democratic decision making (Kiilakoski, 2020). **Active and meaningful youth participation means having influence and being responsible for decisions made that affect the lives of young people, being empowered.** In this aspect, young people are not seen as an object of political process, but as a subject, they are not victims, but active agents, architects of their lives. They are equal participants at the decision-making table with the **appropriate level of experience, knowledge, capacity and potential.**

Active and meaningful youth participation can also be seen as a form of a youth-adult partnership. “Partnership is about doing things together. It is about listening to everyone’s voice and taking different ideas seriously” (Have your say, 2015). Active and meaningful youth participation, of course, has different forms, but also different levels. As this **hierarchy** can be both internal and external. What do I mean by that? As can be seen different levels of commitment and requirements for knowledge and experience both within an organization or participation mechanism, and in processes that go beyond the specified forms. For example, the participation of young people in the municipal youth council (president, member, administration) may be different for each of them depending on the role they play and the responsibilities associated with it. Just as the involvement and the competences of young people in a local, national or international initiative are different. A clear difference can be made in the direct access to a mayor in a small town and a minister in a capital and the relevant participation mechanisms that will be provided for participation that brings together young people from one city and young people from the whole country. This in turn creates differences in both the number of participants and the cultural background and views (one city vs. many cities), which will also imply different interaction skills. complexity progresses at the international level, where knowledge of a foreign language is also acquired.

When we talk about active and meaningful youth participation, often the first association is Hart's ladder. Kiilakoski referred to Roger Hart’s (1992) ladder model of participation as one of the most obvious points of reference. He noted that Hart’s typology was a modified version of Shelley Arnstein’s ladder model, which in 1969 was used to describe adult participation. It is the belief and experience of the author of this text that Hart’s model still fulfils its original purpose as a beginning typology which helps us to look at the different roles children and young people can have in the decision-making process. But in 2008 Hart noted that the ladder was simply offered as a schema to bring a critical perspective to a subject that at that time altogether lacked one. Hart insists that there is no intention for it to serve as any kind of comprehensive evaluative tool and he offers some corrections to how the ladder has been interpreted. He suggests that the model should be seen not **as climbing the ladder, but as**

degrees or forms of participation. And the most important, he continues “there are different degrees to which children are allowed, enabled, and supported to initiate their own projects and make decisions in carrying them out with others. While a child may not want at all times to be the one who initiates a project, they ought to know that they have the option, and to **feel that they have the confidence and competence** to do so on occasion. Adult facilitators of projects should not be made to feel that they must always support their child participants to operate on the ‘highest’ rungs of the ladder, but they must manage to communicate to children that they have the option to operate with these ‘higher’ degrees of engagement.” The fact that the ladder was developed to serve in individualistic societies, which means that does not take into account collectivistic ones, where **young people are raised to see themselves as members from an early age.** This suggests that the model should be used not mechanically, but with cultural context in mind. But it makes clear that there are degrees of participation and these need to be taken into account when assessing young people's knowledge and skills for meaningful and active participation in processes.

Additionally, it may be noted that in the context of youth work, young people themselves have the right to refuse to climb the stairs or to consciously walk back down. As can be seen, these different degrees/forms of engagement require appropriate confidence and competence. It's not just climbing. Based on that, if a young person, encouraged by the environment, by simple ambition or something else, find themselves at the “last step”, but feel that they are not yet ready, the best they can do is to return to the level, form where they feel in place, stable and confident.

Here comes the important question of empowerment and what exactly it means and how it is understood by different sides. Harry Shier (2001) has developed the model to discuss the issues of empowerment and he questions the willingness of adults to actually share their power and give room for children and the youth to make an impact. Youth empowerment can also be seen in partnership building and collaboration with various stakeholders (Lansdown et al. 2018). Youth empowerment is not just about securing a seat at the decision-making table, mechanical power sharing. It is a process of developing the appropriate knowledge and skills to participate at different levels, this process includes both access to quality information, skills to critically interpret information, discussion skills with other participants and climb the ladder of competence.

In the following lines, I will present some aspects of life misconceptions, based on theoretical and practical information, which, in my opinion, have a serious impact on the full participation of youth today.

WHAT COULD MISLEAD ACTIVE AND MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

- confusing access to information with access to knowledge

Some authors (Tang et al. 2016) give a concise and tidy presentation of the difference between data, information, knowledge and intelligence: data is **know-what**, information is **know-why**, knowledge is **know-how** and intelligence is **know-when**. The understanding about datum is as a raw fact that is accepted as true, or which has sufficient supporting evidence to legitimize

that specification as being correct. Datum is a syntactic unit, it is about a noun. Data is the plural of datum. Often, a set of datum appears together under an organizing principle and it could be seen in a document. This provides context to a datum.

Information requires additional intellectual capital on the data. Data needs to be placed in context so that meaning can be derived and attached to it, after that information could emerge. “Information is a distinction that makes a difference” (MacKay, 1969). Information is semantic and holds meaning, which requires interpretation of data. This will provoke high-order cognitive ability to comprehend and express the meaning.

“Knowledge is the capacity for effective action from the use of information” (Senge, 2000). Knowledge has properties. Knowledge is sticky (Von Hippel, 1994). Knowledge without action remains latent. Knowledge gives the individual the capacity, confidence and ability to act, he/she will use it to achieve goals and objectives and this is the practical side of the knowledge.

Intelligence is a socio-cognitive capacity and it positions the person as part of a community. Intelligence is the ability to consistently apply good judgments **based on acquired knowledge** for appropriate action. The use of knowledge is goal-oriented, namely for forecasting, decision-making, utilization of scarce resources, anticipation of risks, achievement of planned results, monitoring and evaluation, etc. The ability to know what, when, and why an action is likely to benefit the actor or the community and what the consequences would be is a sign of intelligence.

Why it is important to explain the difference between these terms, especially between information and knowledge? Because there is misconception, especially in nowadays digital world, the hierarchy is lost, hence the corresponding concepts are largely lost. In the public sphere, it is often heard that knowledge is everywhere, that a person can access it at any time and therefore does not have to bother to memorize information. As it becomes clear, in addition to memorization, information, in order to become knowledge, needs to be interpreted and logically connected with existing knowledge (upgrading). Access to information is neither knowledge nor intelligence. Can you imagine a doctor who, during an operation, use his/her phone to check what he/she needs to do? The accumulation of knowledge leads to the development of the personality and the corresponding increase of the competences. Hence to ability for active and meaningful participation at different levels.

- the failure to understand that levels of active and meaningful youth participation require different levels of competence

Natural question is how young people develop these competencies so that they are well equipped to exercise power, to advocate, and to assert opinion. How we empower young people? It is not just to give power to someone, but to ensure that she/he could absorb all the aspects of that power and could transfer it in positive results. Following on from the previous point, how do we provide an environment with access to objective data, quality information, how this information is processed and turned into knowledge, and how intelligence has evolved.

The true empowerment provides the young person with the knowledge and skills to manage their position in a particular situation and how they interact most effectively with their environment. Agency is that ability to act with confidence, with awareness and understanding of the situation. It is ensured that the young person can make decisions about what and when to say, act or not act based on the information available to them and the consequences the action will cause, to be able to assess the impact it will have on other stakeholders and to predict their needs, interests and reactions, etc.

Following the Charter's Ladder of Participation is an interesting process, for example, how young people can move from a situation where they are "appointed to act and are informed" to a situation where "adults and young people share decision-making". Let's look at the first situation, participation is rather passive from the point of view of decision-making, but from the point of view of achieving results it is active. Regardless of the fact that young people have not made the decision about the goals, the implementation and the expected results, they are included and informed. However, they need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to manage the implementation, as well as to develop the confidence that the result they achieve is the one that is expected. This is a significant experience. This experience is the basis for the development of both knowledge and intelligence. When you have already walked a certain path through mentorship and achieved a result, you gain a sense of accomplishment. This gives us reason to think again about how important it is to accumulate knowledge and develop intelligence through gradual practice and working with experienced adults. But there is a big BUT!

- some adults who offer opportunities to young people may actually only be pursuing their own agenda

An interesting question is how young people understand and distinguish which of the experienced adults are actually working for a shared environment of development and which of them use the potential of young people for their own progress and purposes. One of the great challenges of public governance is when private interests try to claim to be public. A possible solution (Dewey, 2000) is that private interests would be subjected to scrutiny by the "organized intelligence" of the community, their merits could be assessed through the lens of the common good. This interest must be formulated through open discussion and free debate, on which to base the solution of specific community problems. This is the spotlight of openness and transparency. But one of the most interesting and controversial aspects of Dewey's conception of the public interest as Marinov (2016) will note is "his conviction in the educational potential of reasoned democratic exchange of opinion, in the course of which citizens can not only achieve a broader horizon of their interests and sharpen their moral their sensitivity to large-scale public values, but also to improve their intellectual and communicative skills, necessary for constant effective participation in this process". Plato (1975) argues that a significant difference can be made by observing a philosophical soul, which is "just and gentle," and a non-philosophical soul, which is "unsociable and wild" from its youth. Kant (1974) believes that talents of the spirit such as *reason*, *wit*, *ability to judge*, or qualities of character such as *courage*, *determination*, and *constancy of intention* are in principle good, but can become "extremely evil and harmful" if the will that should drive

these qualities is not good. Overcoming the naivety that the world is as your family has explain it, for better or worse, is also part of youthful growth, development, and empowerment.

One of the big risks young people can take is to ask experienced participants to present things in a simplified way for them to understand. It is an automatic transfer and granting of power to the other experienced participant, relying on benevolence, integrity and conscience, qualities that not every participant automatically possesses. Active and meaningful youth participation apparently requires the accumulation of knowledge and skills in a specific area, advice from experienced adults, and the activation of critical thinking. Here another misconception arises.

WHAT COULD MISLEAD CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION?

- *'I disagree' is not equivalent of a critical thinking*

Everyone has the right to agree or disagree, as well as to remain neutral on a certain topic or position. The question is how this expression of position is perceived, what is understood in depth. Regardless of the topic being discussed, such a statement should be accompanied by an argument that demonstrates critical thinking. This is of particular importance when it is part of a discussion or decision-making process at a public level, whether it concerns a local youth organization or a national coordination mechanism.

What is it critical thinking? Facione (2015) starts with the explanation that “it means good thinking, almost the opposite of illogical, irrational, thinking”. But he admits when we start to test our understanding further, it raises more questions. He exposes a summary of the core of critical thinking including six cognitive skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of the six cognitive skills of critical thinking including

Cognitive skill	Explanation
Interpretation	is to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria. Interpretation includes the sub-skills of categorization, decoding significance, and clarifying meaning.
Analysis	is to identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions. Analysis includes examining ideas, detecting arguments, and analyzing arguments as sub-skills of analysis.
Evaluation	Is to assess the credibility of statements or other representations which are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion. Also to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statements, descriptions, questions or other forms of representation.
Inference	is to identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to

	reduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation. Inference includes as sub-skills also querying evidence, conjecturing alternatives, and drawing conclusions.
Explanation	Is to be able to present in a cogent and coherent way the results of one's reasoning. This means to be able to give someone a full look at the big picture: both "to state and to justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based; and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments. The sub-skills under explanation are describing methods and results, justifying procedures, proposing and defending with good reasons one's causal and conceptual explanations of events or points of view, and presenting full and well-reasoned, arguments in the context of seeking the best understandings possible.
Self-regulation	Is the ability self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, and evaluation to one's own inferential judgments with a view toward questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results. The two sub-skills are self-examination and self-correction.

Resource: Facione (2015)

It can be seen that a response of agreement or disagreement is not sufficient to establish that a process of making sense of the received information has taken place. Having a conversation between two parties requires an understanding of what the other is trying to say, not just a primal reaction of confirmation or rejection. Decision-making, especially in the public sphere, must necessarily include processes of critical consideration of the information provided, development of alternatives, and prediction of consequences, formulate some thoughts and decisions. And we have our reasons for the final decision. In today's dynamic world, decisions must be made quickly and sometimes intuitively, but this does not mean that they are not based on **experience and expertise**. Experienced teachers, athletes, pilots, doctors, etc. can make very quick and very good decisions based on accumulated knowledge, skills and practice.

Modern integrative models of man decision making suggest thinking processes of our species is not the best described as a conflicting duality, as in "intuitive vs. reflexive," but rather one integrative functioning of two mutual supporting systems "intuitive and reflective"(Facione, 2015). These two systems - System 1 and System 2², of thought are present in all of us and can act in parallel to the process cognitively the questions we are over solving.

When at school or during non-formal learning practicing critical thinking begins with the question "what does the author want to say" and a primary interpretation and progresses through all levels of skills to understanding the place of the newly received information in one's own thought system. The best way to get an objective picture is for multiple participants

² System 1 is more intuitive, reactive, quick and holistic. So as not to confuse things with the notions of thinking in popular culture, cognitive scientists often name this system. System 2 is more deliberative, reflective, computational and rule governed.

to answer this question simultaneously in a group and comment on the same topic. This will show where the overlap is and avoid misconception.

- Disregarding a different point of view is missing a possible alternative

As it is well known, making an objective decision must be a choice between at least two alternatives, one of which is the current state. The two alternatives must be accompanied by an analysis and evaluation of possible risks, results, strengths and weaknesses, etc. This applies both on a daily, individual and professional, public level. When it affects public policies and decision-making processes with an impact on a community, the process is necessarily complex, expert, relative to a specific situation and stakeholders. Public policy analysis is a professional, expert, not just a political choice. As a result of the analysis, if it is considered better not to make a change, then this is the good decision. It is true to the specific situation and in terms of the values that are brought into the analysis and that correspond to the vision of the organization for which the analysis is being done. Analysis is a process that follows certain steps (Table 2) because it is more focused on practice, on the specific situation, on the localized problem and on decision-making.

Table2. Public policy analysis steps

Steps	Action	Results
First	Identification of the problem	Proves that it is a group problem, formulated as a shortage or excess that cannot be overcome naturally.
Second	Formulation of goals and criteria for evaluating alternative solutions	Formulating practical goals (what we want to achieve) and formulating values-related goals with an idea of what kind of society or community we want to be (what principles the policy should conform to).
Third	Development of alternative measures and forecast of consequences of their introduction	It represents the compilation of a list of possible solutions to the identified problem, while formulating the alternatives, reflecting on their consequences. A forecast is being made.
Forth	Choice of solution	Rational choice requires comparing the fit between the consequences of alternatives and criteria for achieving goals, seeking optimality through methods such as cost/benefit analysis and cost/goal analysis.
Fifth	Monitoring its implementation	A plan for accompanying evaluation of the policy implementation process is being created, which means creating indicators and sources of information for them.

Resource: Braykova (2003)

Following the meaning of decision-making both on a personal and public level, it stands out that another point of view, another possible solution, another alternative for evaluating and predicting the consequences increases the probability of a positive, effective and efficient

outcome. The choice is always between at least two things, which must be made after analyzing and evaluating the possible consequences and results. Active and meaningful youth participation will require high levels of knowledge to make objective decisions, to analyze public policies, and to interact with other stakeholders at a competent level.

WHAT COULD MISLEAD THE FULL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERSONALITY?

- *there is a competency-based hierarchy between people*

People are equal from the point of view of (human) rights and obligations, but from the point of view of accumulated knowledge, skills and competence, they can end up in completely different positions. An example in this regard can be both professions related to the exact sciences and those related to the individual development. The fact is that it is much easier to measure a competency hierarchy in architecture, construction, medicine, etc. Intuitively, when we need medical help, we look for a more experienced and knowledgeable doctor. Likewise, when we have a public problem, we should seek experienced and knowledgeable experts. And for knowledge to develop and be transmitted in an environment, this requires respect for the bearers of knowledge and openness to learning and perception. At the individual level, there is a difference in competence level between doctors, architects, politicians themselves, regardless of whether they graduated from the same class, work in the same hospital, studio, parliament, etc.

As mentioned, active and meaningful participation (of young people) in different levels of decision-making processes requires relevant knowledge and skills. We can imagine an organization in which, for example, five young people participate, acting at the local level and created to solve local problems. To a large extent, their knowledge and skills will cover project management, organizing initiatives and campaigns, volunteer activities. To a very small extent, they will participate in a decision-making process together with the local municipality, either because it will be beyond their interest, or beyond their capacity, or because there is no such mechanism. On a completely different level is the participation of young people in a national youth council or a European umbrella organization, such as European Youth Forum. Ideally, these organizations have an administrative body, the secretariat, and participation in the executive board of the organization will require skills related to the implementation of strategy and the use of its accompanying tools (plans, reports), lobby and advocacy for positions and changes in regulations to national and European authorities, gathering internal support for elections, etc.

The hierarchy can be both vertical, between the young people themselves, and horizontal, when interacting with other age groups in the decision-making process. It depends on the levels of competence and experience that everyone brings to the table. In today's world, as we mentioned above, young people have access to information. In this sense, adults are not the only source of information as before, but the accumulation of knowledge is through efforts and requires time and practice, this may be an advantage for experienced participants. Facilitating the process of understanding and harmonized perception requires shared work, interaction between members of the society who are “new comers” and who are “hosts”. To

clarify and avoid the slightest misconception, we are equal in human rights, but we are not equal in terms of the knowledge we strive to acquire, the skills and experience we will develop.

- *adding perspective enriches the conversation*

In the past, most societies were strongly divided and had separate and independent internal social dynamics and cultural characteristics. One of the serious challenges in today's global society is to maintain respect and understanding of these differences. Although this is a major societal topic of discussion, it is largely accepted that certain societies are more democratically advanced and their models should be followed. Thus, unconsciously or consciously, different positions that provide different perspectives are ignored and diversity preserved. An example in this regard is the perception of the role of women in a society, which, if viewed only from the perspective of a Western European community, it can be concluded that women in the previous century have been in a second position and special efforts should be made to its inclusion both in the labor market and in public life. But, if the position of women is freely discussed, for example, in Eastern Europe, a completely different picture can be seen. It is extremely important to maintain an objective approach that leads to the description of a real and not a desired reality. The approach must be respectful and include all possible aspects of a situation, depending on its scale.

As Todorov (2013) emphasizes, subordinating the principle of national sovereignty to the principle of universal governance and hence uniform approaches and criteria is an act that in itself creates inequality. It claims that this is how the world is divided into two groups - the rulers and the ruled, active party and beneficiary. That is why Todorov reminds that the international community in other times preferred another principle - acceptance of pluralism and the sovereignty of states, rather than imposing the same good everywhere. This, he says, is "the only principle compatible with the idea of equality between the parties." Imposing good by force is dangerous and does not always lead to the subsequent improvement of society, as examples can be cited from the Crusades through Nazi and totalitarian regimes to the war in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.

The old lessons can still do a lot of good work today. If we consider that, from an institutional point of view, in modern political processes we rely on the distribution and independence of powers (judicial, executive, legislative). Checks and balances. At the level of society, however, the brakes on excessive ambitions must come **from the very complexity of society** in a democratic regime. This is found in the balance between many obligations and divergent interests that must be satisfied. The greatest enemy of democracy, as Todorov would say, is "**simplification, which reduces the pluralistic to a single thing and thus opens the door to the extreme.**" No subject, group can escape from the others, and so to escape from the general rule of limitation, this will lead to extremism. For example, the conversation about a certain social group should stay away from the possibility of segregation and extremism by separating it and bringing it into some special mode of existence, but remain in the whole of pluralism, respect and human relations between people. If we teach our young people to respect each other, to develop healthy and human relationships, trust, to understand that a

person is called to live in society, this will help much more understanding that people are different (in height, weight, beauty, by sexual preferences, etc.) and that in this difference and diversity we can discover the fullness of our own self. It becomes clear that simplifying the environment is the last thing young people should desire, and in fact, they should strive to develop the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience in constant interaction with other social groups, as well as avoid the temptation, which can lead to delusion, of imposing the idea of "more democratic".

- *each must govern himself/herself in a role and the place he/she occupies*

As Taneva (2005) explains leadership is about managing not others but yourself in a specific role. The peculiarity of today's time is that people are much more focused on manipulating people and situations rather than managing themselves. There are constant clichés (the sky is the limit, positive thinking, step out of your comfort zone, one learns from one's mistakes and etc) raining down to recreate a reality that is easy to conquer, you just have to learn the relevant rules - 10 ways to succeed in marriage, 7 habits of highly effective people, 5 ways to become the first in your career and etc. Trying to live life according to someone else's recipe for success is largely a misconception. In fact, the reality is much more complex and complicated. What can be seen is a gleeful refusal to develop competence, to show respect, integrity, critical thinking, optimism, yet infantile behavior is encouraged.

Last but not least, one of the biggest misconceptions is that leadership is about managing other people. The ability to master yourself in the various social roles you enter and exit in your daily life is essential for good leadership, but also good health and good social connections. For example, if you are a young person and you are elected president of a national or European youth organization, this will put you in a certain position. When you are in this position, you are the chairman, but when you are with your friends on a walk or party, you are the friend, not the chairman. Here, too, well-developed skills, respect to the others and good manners can help full development in both roles.

In fact, leadership is managing oneself in a role. This is not a desperate attempt to control people and the world through practical recipes that are constantly attacked by various media, "influencers", "opinion leaders", etc. We tell children's stories to children so that we can gradually introduce them to a complex and difficult world, in these stories there are two clear sides of good and evil, and at the end of the tale good wins. In normal human development, the young person should grow up and understand that this stage was an initial, entry level for real life, in which good and evil are not only external entities, but part of the inner world. The task of a person is to learn, to know, understand and develop their own potential, to work on their inclinations and their value compass, to go through their life without getting bitter and trying to be honorable.

Of course, leadership has its various manifestations, but good leadership is clear, it leaves behind a life - of an organization, of a community, of a country. Active and meaningful youth participation is a prerequisite for good leadership because it will constantly question its existence.

DISCUSSION

Let us now return to the relationship of these aspects to active and meaningful youth participation and how these misconceptions can affect the interaction between the various actors.

Nowadays, young people have constant access to information, or at least it is perceived to be information. A first challenge that can be highlighted, through the knowledge and skills of young people, is how to make sure that this information makes sense, that it is based on objective data and that it makes sense. The second challenge is the speed with which information can be replaced by information that is contradictory. Third, a given piece of information in a certain context may have meaning and relevance but have nothing to do with objective reality (For example: Cows are purple versus the cows on this chocolate bar are purple.)

Being young is not a sufficient condition for active and meaningful participation. It may be a matter of opportunity, it may be due to a lack of experienced participants, it may be because someone recommended someone, because we are favoring someone or encouraging the school's topper. There are many reasons for a young person to find themselves in a situation for which they are completely unprepared. He/she has not walked the path of his/her youth empowerment through the development of relevant competencies, but finds himself/herself in a situation that exceeds his/her capabilities. The consequences can be at least:

- first, strong frustration, because the other participants are not obliged to "train" or to "wait" for knowledge and skills to catch up;
- second, manipulation, because you do not have the necessary equipment to participate in the management of the situation;
- third, demotivation, because it will be difficult to achieve the overall set results.

But one of the most undesired outcomes of youth participation is the denial of such participation.

Let's delve more into the issue of a possible manipulation by more experienced participants. The participation of all stakeholders makes sense when all stakeholders deeply understand the topic under discussion, have something to contribute and do not hesitate to do so, i.e. they are not afraid of negative consequences. A stakeholder is not just a party that shows interest, it is a party that is interested because it possesses the relevant competence on the topic under discussion. As seen in the critical thinking section, interpretation is a matter of skills, but these skills are directly related to already acquired knowledge and experience. Therefore, every interpretation has a subjective beginning to a greater or lesser extent. When different people submit their interpretation, analysis, evaluation, conclusions, then the matrix accumulations can be seen. There are also general ideas about the discussed topic, which can be taken as objective. If a participant cannot fully represent his/her position, firstly, the picture will be distorted and a deficit will appear, secondly, a matrix accumulation will fall out. Metaphorically speaking, it is possible for the participant to voluntarily leave his field empty, which will at least be filled with the colors of the other participants. The more undesirable option is for the participant to be convinced that other people's colors are more beautiful and

essential to the picture instead of their own. Due to lack of knowledge and skills, out of shame of exposing themselves, out of insecurity due to lack of experience, etc., it is quite possible for them to agree. This position is clearly defined on Hart's ladder, but does not negate the responsibility that must be borne. **Participation is not just presence, participation is empowerment, empowerment is knowledge, skills and attitudes.**

Speaking of critical thinking and the skills it requires, I would like to draw attention to another misconception. Especially in Bulgaria, it is often heard that "critical thinking" is not taught in school. Due to the fact that this is a skill often mentioned as part of non-formal learning, it can lead to the confusion that the formal education system does not cover it. Yeah, not a separate subject titled "critical thinking" for sure. But the moment a literature teacher asks you "what does the author mean?" actually begins the exercise of one of the essential skills - interpretation. This can be any teacher who asks you, and you, what do you think is said in this text, how do you understand this statement, what do you think is behind this description, etc.

Furthermore, analysis skills are developed, which requires applying arguments and making connections between statements, concepts, experiences, grounds, etc. Assessing the credibility and relevant conclusions is also part of critical thinking skills. These skills are involved and practiced both in the formal education system and in non-formal learning. Youth participation, especially in decision-making processes that are preceded by writing down and accepting positions, by critical discussions, by projected assessments and conclusions, clearly requires and exercises critical thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

From what has been said so far, I think it is clear that in certain situations and at different points in time, participants in dynamic social (youth) processes develop and continue to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes. This also changes their position hierarchically. People are equal initially in their right to participate, but they are not equal in the "basket" they put on the table for that participation and what is in it. The other equality is in terms of respect, regard, trust, and this is reciprocally placed. Regardless of whether the topic is youth or other, both sides must step on a basic understanding of reciprocity and mutual interest.

To put it more clearly, young people are not important participants just because they are young, but because they are people and members of society and their opinion will contribute to a more complete and comprehensive picture. But the elderly are important, not only because they bring knowledge, experience and history, but also because they are a glimpse into the future. Every young person can look at his/her future through the eyes of other age groups. They will enjoy the same respect and acceptance that they themselves have given to older members of society. It takes good manners and self-confidence to treat those who know more with respect and start learning, rather than wondering how to stand out through vocal disrespect or rejection.

With the initial misconception I pointed out, that there is a perception that "knowledge" is everywhere through digital technology (and we don't need other people), we create a real possibility that it turns out to be "nowhere". We learn through reading, mentoring, sharing,

discussion, through communication, but most of all we learn in community because we apply what we learn in community. The human being is called to live with people, and intelligence makes sense in a human circle.

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