Young people are exhausted, what do we do about it?

CONCLUSIONS OF THE PROJECT WE ARE YOUNG. WHAT'S UP WITH US?

Our conclusions are what we learned from agile work with young people in 2021. This summary is the result of our observations, not of sociological research, although some of our findings are reflected in the official sources.

Authors: Karolina Wysocka, Anna Kuliberda, Michał Szeląg and Alicja Peszkowska.

Translation from Polish: Marta Kuczewska

You can find an online version of these conclusions and videos with project participants at:
https://www.humansnotrobots.net/youth2021report

For more information on the School with Class Foundation please, check:
https://www.szkolazklasa.org.pl/about-us-2/

Photo by: Agnieszka Wanat. In the photo: Alicja Miernik (18y/o), Wojciech Szumiło (17 y/o), Lena Sadowska (17 y/o), Aleksandra Langa (17 y/o), Sonia Brożek (17 y/o)

Here are the five things we understood about everyday life of teenagers and five principles of our work that made it more meaningful to work with young people. These are the conclusions of the project "We are young. What's up with us?". Each stands for reflections and experiences that are briefly presented here. We hope that this report will contribute to further deliberations and discussions and, above all, will be an introduction to the necessary changes in work with young people.

The aim of the project "We are young. What's up with us?" was to empower young people to be heard on matters that are important to them. We wanted to develop their sense of agency and social competences. The project involved 24 people, aged 15-19, from large cities (Szczecin, Tri-City, Bielsko-Biała) and small towns (Brzozów, Otwock) from various parts of Poland. As part of the project activities, we provided the participants with mentoring support, co-financing of their initiatives and a training program tailor-made for their needs. But most of all, we ensured a safe space to be oneself, openness to authenticity and communication without the pressure of tasks to be performed.

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT DAILY LIFE OF TEENS?

The real heroes and protagonists of the project were the young people: their ills, needs, interests, challenges they face. And for us, all this was important and interesting from the very beginning.

Young people feel they don't matter

During the recruitment for the project, the participants constantly underestimated the importance of their feelings, needs and experiences. They preferred to focus on proposing abstract solutions to systemic problems rather than diagnosing and understanding their own needs. Our experience shows that there is no space in which young people are taken "seriously" as they are.

Young people are first and foremost people who experience difficulties here and now, gather experiences and shape their attitude towards the world. Unfortunately, adults often treat them as vessels to be filled with knowledge, not sentient human beings. We are certain that building the belief that the opinions and experiences of young people are relevant enough and worth talking about is crucial for their development.

Young people are exhausted

People participating in the project had great difficulty in finding time to participate in project activities. They met with mentors very early in the morning or late in the evening – only then they were not busy with school, numerous extracurricular activities, apprenticeships, or paid work. The compulsion to achieve an above average grade in school and/or earn a living leaves no room for teenagers to regenerate and self-reflect. On the contrary, it is a source of chronic stress and a source of mental health problems. *We are young. What's up with us?* proved that many young people simply cannot "afford" to participate.

The young people also openly spoke about the fact that most of the programs addressed to them are focused on working with above-average competent individuals with high achievements. "If you are a teenager, you are expected to be a genius of great talent, so that adults would at least consider taking you seriously." – one of the participants wrote in her application. We believe that the compulsion to be the best prevents young people from developing autonomously, and thus from speaking out..

Ghosting – communication issues of young people

One of the biggest challenges in the project turned out to be the cooperation between the participants. We have found out that in the modern, pandemic world, young people function primarily individually and asynchronously. Additionally, they lack the skills and tools needed to name their emotions, accept difficulties and failures, and set boundaries to others. They treat ghosting as a way to defuse a difficult situation.

The basis of constructive teamwork is the ability to talk about problems, those related to the tasks as well as members of the group. Teenagers do not witness such conversations; they are not invited to them; nor do they need them to perform the tasks that school sets for them daily. We believe that being able to admit when you are wrong or to not knowing something is an absolute key factor in establishing healthy relationships with other people, and we want social projects to support young people in acquiring these skills.

Ghosting – communication issues of young people

It's high time to take care of mental health

One of our design assumptions was to create a safe, supportive space for participants and build an atmosphere of trust. Perhaps that is why the young people we worked with openly spoke to us about mental disorders, both they and their peers deal with. At the same time, they drew our attention to the fact that for the adults around them, it is often a taboo subject that evokes embarrassment or even remorse.

Young people see the need to strengthen teachers and parents in talking about emotions, dealing with them, and talking about topics related to mental health. We believe it is the carers' responsibility to listen to young people and to show them support and genuine interest. If the topics discussed by young people are a challenge for us, we should learn to ask for help and support from specialists.

It's high time to take care of mental health

Learning is a process

In our work with teenagers, we focused on strengthening competences that we consider crucial in the process of building a civic society. We focused on developing a sense of agency and solidarity between participants, devoting less attention to the so-called project results, i.e., the quantifiable results of their activities. Initially, project participants were suspicious of our open and flexible work structure, but over time, they really appreciated that we gave them the opportunity to be themselves and find authentic, individual motivations and preferred ways of working with others.

Learning is a process

When planning and running the project, we tried to provide participants with the opportunity to act freely following their own needs, the right to withdraw at every stage of the project and no pressure to achieve top-down

results. We believe that the essence of engaged participation and civic activity is subjectivity, empowerment and the resulting voluntariness, i.e., the constant possibility of making decisions about oneself and one's involvement.

HOW TO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

At each stage, we tried to approach the project assumptions, severely shaken by the pandemic, carefully and with an open mind.

Values count, not just indicators

We want to measure the effectiveness of a social project in relation to the professed values, and not only the quantitative results achieved. During the evaluation, one of the project participants told us that she felt the results "in my head and in my heart". That's what it was about! In a neoliberal world, we are used to measuring progress and change in terms of quantity and growth. This regularity also translates into social work. Meanwhile, we know that change does not occur linearly, especially if it concerns complex human systems (people by themselves, in the peer group, in society). We believe that the success of social activities should be assessed both in terms of the initial assumptions and results, and the values they strengthen.

We are young. What's up with us? project focused on diversity, empowerment, and curiosity – values that led us like a compass through the various stages of the project, from planning to evaluation. What did diversity mean for us? For example, recruiting people who we believed could grow through the project, not only "deliver results". Empowerment? Since the involved participation and the possibility of making decisions about oneself are assumed voluntarily, we allowed, e.g., the possibility of withdrawing from joint work at every stage of the project. So, we risked the quantitative results for the sake of integrity, quality, and fairness of the project. Special thanks are due to the donors, the EEA Funds and the grant operator, the Shipyard Foundation, whose awareness of the complexity of social systems translates into effective support for the non-governmental sector. We appeal to funders and grant operators to leave social organizations a substantive margin for changes and shifts in indicators, tasks, budget categories and deadlines.

Being effective means being open to change

Working with people brings many surprises and is not fully predictable; only in this version does it make sense and can respond to real needs. To take risks, allow ourselves to be curious and spontaneous, we also need a sense of security. Where to get them since traditional focal points such as products and the list of expenses in an Agile project are subject to change? Our experience (and professional literature) shows that in running agile, social projects, a real investment in participants also means a real, careful investment in the leading team. Trust resulting from consent to project values, self-

awareness, and good communication in the team (e.g., readiness to admit to difficulties and openness to changes) is essential!

Young people are people, too

We believe that the most effective practice to empower others is to respect them. Our belief applies to young people. When working with teenagers, especially when it is to encourage them to participate in social life, what matters most to us is to emphasize their subjectivity. In the project, we learned that in the maze of different models proposed to young people by society, there is rarely room for them: their feelings and needs, based on which they could form their own opinions and motivate themselves to act accordingly. So, patiently and using all the tools available to us, we tried to show that their presence and voice are important to us. Talking to young people about the goals of the project, we left space for silence, reflection, and run-up. We did not impose a plan and methods of action; we did not overwhelm them with the knowledge of our experts. We tried to feed their curiosity and courage by asking questions for which there is no clear answer. We accompanied them on their path of development, and we made room for their reflections and doubts.

No relationship no results

In process-oriented projects, the soft skills of mentors are very important. *We are young. What's up with us?* was a process-oriented activity. When working with young people, we followed an open, interdisciplinary approach, supporting individual and collective changes. During the evaluation of the project and conversations with mentors, we realized that the coaching competences that work best in this type of work include skill of lifelong learning, communication skills (including online) and group conflict resolution skills. The ability to work with people who struggle with various types of mental problems also turned out to be extremely important. In process-oriented activities, the failure to achieve the previously defined goals is treated as feedback, not a problem. If something does not work, it is important to stop and seek support rather than putting more and more pressure on the participants. The ability to withstand periods of uncertainty and communication difficulties requires high self-awareness, agility, humility, and high interpersonal predispositions. Sometimes it is better to use scissors instead of hammering harder!

A meaningful project accomplishes goals, not tasks

The only way to work meaningfully, in an environment where many factors change or are uncertain (e.g., motivation, needs and availability of participants), is through so-called agile work. It is a method based on regularly verifying whether the undertaken activities achieve the goal of the project, and what could be changed in one's work style so that its effect is more consistent with the intended goal. In such work, the results become the product of the resources available, the existing circumstances and the values practiced. Basically, plans and tasks are only defined to be more effective in responding to the need to change them.

Such work is more difficult than the traditional implementation of a top-down plan. To sensibly implement social projects, i.e., to constantly adapt working methods to changing needs and circumstances, the need for people with high managerial competences – not only tough related to budgets and settlements, but also relational (to work with various stakeholders in activities), sensitivity, empathy, and openness. An organizational culture based on trust in the team, freedom to take risks and openness to learning from mistakes is also essential. It is worth investing in such personnel!

A meaningful project *accomplishes goals,* not tasks