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# Esprit

## **Introduction: Education, young people and the modern way of life**

### **The modern way of life**

The way of life in Western Europe has seen many rapid developments in the last century. Industrialisation has led to considerable changes in work patterns providing increased wealth and standards of living for many and leading to urbanisation and rural depopulation in some areas. The quality of life has also seen many positive changes as a result with education for all, advances in health care, increased leisure time and the availability of consumer goods and services that would have been unimaginable only a few decades ago. Human rights have also benefited and democracy has become established and expanded.

The globalisation of this way of life promises similar benefits to many more people. However, this causes new problems for a global society. Production shifts to countries with cheaper and less regulated labour changing and sometimes threatening work opportunities in the west. Resource consumption and pollution threaten the existence of other species and the ecosystems on which we all depend. Political instability, corporate expansion and competition for key resources such as food, water and oil have led to a century of dispossession, violence and war in which many of the poorer people on the planet have lost the basis for making a living and suffer from poverty, malnutrition and disease.

For young people in Western Europe these rapid changes in society have had a major impact on their lives. The concept of youth, non-existent 100 years ago, now extends to young people under the age of 25. The age of financial independence from the family has shifted from 16 in 1950 to 25 in 2005. Schooling is compulsory for all until mid-teens. The transition to adulthood, in which establishing an adult identity is typically achieved through employment, home making, marriage and parenthood, has become more complex. A generation ago and earlier schools taught traditional subjects and set universal tests and examinations that channelled and filtered young people into established work or career paths typically reproducing the lifestyle and identity of the local community and the family. Some sociologists describe this route to adulthood as being like a train journey. The young person finds out from the school system which train to catch at which station, when it departs and where it goes to and the young person is like a passenger on the journey.

More recently the journey has been likened to a car journey. The student is taught to drive and sets off at a time of his or her choosing in a direction and at a pace to suit themselves and with no destination or arrival time necessarily in mind. Of course for some young people the pathway to adulthood remains as it used to be, especially for those who are academically gifted. Others may have a destination in mind but take a while to reach it or are tempted in a different direction after they have set off. Many,

however, do not know where to go and may lack the skills to navigate, explore or even to drive along the various and complex routes.

To put it another way employment opportunities are rapidly changing. It is suggested that 50% of the jobs that will be available for a young person of the age of 5 starting at school this year will not yet have been thought of. It is said that we have become a knowledge society in which the best work requires academic success. However, at the same time the service sector has expanded and many jobs for those not academically successful are low paid, part time, temporary and offer little status to a young adult identity.

At the same time education, rapidly expanding media and corporations eager for young people to consume have encouraged young people to hold high expectations of what is possible and to consume identities through fashion, music, by association with celebrities or allegiance to a club.

Family and community life has also been challenged by the increased social and geographical mobility, extra demands on both parents to work, access to electronic media and raised and often unsatisfied expectations.

### **Education and modern life**

Most educational systems in Europe are founded on a classical educational model with traditional subjects taught in a didactic fashion and students tested at key stages in order to channel them into certain academic or vocational pathways and filter them out into the work place or other educational routes at certain stages. This approach tends to be effective at reproducing the social order maintaining status and access to wealth to those who have traditionally held it. The aspiration for education to underpin a meritocracy has only in part been achieved. Despite the numbers of young people who have used their academic gifts to become socially mobile it is still considerably less likely that someone from a working class background will do well at school or attend university.

In some countries strong liberal traditions have also been successful to some degree in establishing strongly held cultural values, largely within the middle classes. This has underpinned the spread of human rights throughout Europe, and, in some cases, has supported new democracies or defended those that have been threatened. However, critics point out that schools can also be cut off from society and that the values espoused and adhered to within the school culture on behalf of society are forgotten or abandoned at the door when the young person enters that society. As such they do not have direct influence on the wider society in the way that some policy makers would hope.

### **The current situation**

In the current situation of a rapidly changing society in personal, social and work contexts the traditional approach of cultural reproduction is of little help to many young people, and especially to those least enfranchised by the educational system. It does little to prepare them for the unpredictable employment opportunities so that

students increasingly find education of little relevance. This leads to disaffection from school. At the same time stable work is often elusive and community support declining so that, from leaving school until their mid twenties young people find it hard to form an identity that is valued by them or their community. In its place youth culture has developed. In many cases this provides, for those with the confidence and skills to act in this new world, positive opportunities to explore identity, develop social networks and contribute to the community. At other times, for those less confident, less supported or disaffected, it contributes to the personal and social problems of our age, drug use, gangs, bullying, underage and early pregnancy, violence and crime.

Our societies have responded to this in mixed ways. Some sectors understand this as a problem of youth. The solution, they think, is to punish those who offend and to encourage those who do not to develop more autonomy in navigating to a successful life. Others think that this is a problem for youth. In this situation policy both encourages young people to become more autonomous at the same time as attempting to address the structural issues that are central to the context young people find themselves in. Sometimes policy seeks to restore old ways in the belief that traditional patterns of transition have degraded rather than that they are no longer fit for purpose. Other policies understand that the old approaches are not fit for purpose and that new systems are necessary if society is to support young people into the modern world.

### **Current educational responses**

Education, like other policy areas, has begun to respond to these conditions. In many cases the first response has been a conservative one of seeking to raise standards and prolong the educational experience of as many students as possible. More students go to university than ever before. This certainly helps reduce unemployment and feeds the knowledge industries with an educated work force.

Other responses have involved the development of new subjects especially those that are vocationally oriented to new work opportunities in areas such as tourism and sport.

In some countries and in certain schools the relationship between the teacher and the student has begun to change with more inter-active and student centred approaches engaging the student in managing their own learning and, in some cases, directing the learning to areas the student sees as relevant. Outdoor and experiential education have played a significant part in these developments in some countries. Outdoor activities and residential experiences have created opportunities to learn in new ways about activities that are fun, engaging, novel and focus on transferable knowledge and skills about the self and about relationships with others. Relationships with teachers and other adults are also experienced differently on these programmes.

Alongside the changes in schools and colleges the youth services of some countries are playing an increasing role in supporting young people especially those in school and disaffected or marginalised and those post school who are still in difficulty. Programmes have increasingly tackled employment problems and social issues such as health, housing and relationships. Some are providing remedial education with

literacy and numeracy courses. In some situations this has resulted in an interaction between non-formal educational approaches and the formal educational sector.

### **Outdoor Experiential Learning (OEL)**

Developing approaches that use the outdoors has been one way that experiential education has been introduced into schools. OEL is any form of education in, for or about the environment. It can occur on a school visit, after school or during school time lasting for a few minutes or many days. It can be delivered in wild and rural places or urban spaces and school grounds. The curriculum can be varied from formal subject content to personal and social development topics. The pedagogy is typically student centred using a discovery approach to learning. It also follows the learning cycle of planning an activity and its learning, doing it, reviewing the learning and applying it to the next activity or transferring it to another context. Typically the student is actively involved in all of these stages of learning.

Using the outdoors has many benefits for teachers:

- It makes many areas of the curriculum come to life e.g. biology and geography;
- It can be used to teach many other areas of the curriculum in a practical way that students find motivating and relevant to their lives;
- It provides a situation in which the student can learn to be an active learner;
- It provides new experiences that help develop the identity of a young person;
- Outdoor activities can raise self-esteem and so address many behavioural issues such as underachievement, bullying, eating disorders, truancy, etc.
- OEL provides opportunities for students to develop inter-personal skills such as communications, problem solving, teamwork, etc.

Many of these outcomes are not only of value to the school life of the student but are also valued by employers and transfer into leisure and community contexts as well. These include:

- Greater self awareness, raised confidence and self-esteem,
- An enhanced ability and interest in new experiences and the skills to learn from them,
- Situations in which young people can broaden their horizons or re-orientate their self image,
- Opportunities to develop new social skills with adults and peers,
- Increased social networks with adults and peers,
- Better relationships with teachers and new relationships with other adults in the community,
- Transferable personal and social skills of value in work and in community life,
- The possibility of approaching formal subject content in a different way,
- Possible leisure time interests and the skills to take advantage of them.

Limited resources mean that these new approaches are often directed at 'problem' groups. However, practitioners would claim that all young people would benefit from these programmes in the context of our rapidly changing modern world. The recent

research report from a UK government educational service confirms many of these claims. Called 'Learning Outside the Classroom: how far should we go?' it states that this approach to learning should, in the view of the government, be a core part of all childrens learning in school throughout their school careers.

### **Priorities for ESPRIT**

The cultures of schools are strong and necessarily so. They take time to change and can only change so far. As a result most non-formal educational programmes take place in times and spaces away from the school environment. Residential experiences have been a common solution to this as have various forms of community based provision. It is often easier to take a group away from school rather than disrupt timetables and challenge the social norms within the school.

Many programmes are one off as a result of the time and resources needed to organise such events. However, whilst recent findings in England suggest that these approaches are worth doing for their impact on the student even when they are badly and infrequently done, programmes that are most effective are those that are long term running alongside school over a year or more. Finding the right times and spaces for experiential approaches to take place and the right students to target will be important. Each school may find its own unique solution to this.

It is suggested that the greater the difference between the non-formal setting and approaches the greater the potential for learning but the harder it is to transfer the learning to other settings. Other findings suggest that this transfer takes place best at a time when the student is about to enter new situations in which old expectations of them do not exist. It will be important to identify strategies for transferring learning effectively at the right time and to the right aspect of the student's life.

The kinds of relationships that work in experiential education are quite different from those used by teachers in classrooms. Changing this way of relating is supported by practicing these programmes in new settings and with new content. However, some teachers respond better to these new ways than others or develop these new approaches more quickly. Another strategy is to use other adults, both professional and volunteer (and including parents perhaps), to work with the teachers to provide these new programmes. Good training, support, partnerships and networks can help teachers with these professional developments.

New programmes such as these can challenge school systems and other colleagues. It is helpful if colleagues understand and are in support of these strategies and are informed regularly of the benefits as they emerge. These might include reductions in truancy, bullying or other anti-social behaviours, increases in participation in school both in the classroom and elsewhere and improvements in test and exam results.

Another effective strategy with colleagues has been to understand them as beneficiaries of the intervention. By asking them what these interventions can do for their work, by developing certain skills and knowledge or supporting gifted or underachieving students for example, teachers can become indirectly involved in the new programmes. It may also be possible to ask for their help in developing certain skills and knowledge in order to support the programme.

## **Suggestions for the Province of Lecce**

The teachers involved in the Next project have already successfully initiated outdoor experiential learning (OEL) projects. The priority should be to continue and build on the success of these initiatives and to encourage others to duplicate these successes in their own schools and programmes.

Key areas that OEL programmes could be designed to address are:

- Tackling issues of socialisation in schools with the aims of integrating groups of students and reducing the incidence of unacceptable behaviour in and out of school;
- Helping underachieving pupils by raising self esteem, supporting positive identity construction and encouraging fluid social networks.
- Establishing constructive outdoor leisure provision.
- Supporting students in transition to further education, training and work to be flexible and confident.
- Developing interpersonal skills for leisure and work.
- Developing entrepreneurship and supporting small business start ups.

The potential exists for partnerships between schools and other education and training agencies and for developing professional development opportunities for teachers and the providers of outdoor activities.

## **Suggestions for the Province of Teramo**

Enthusiasm for developing new ways of working such as OEL should be fostered in this province. The main aim should be to work with enthusiastic teachers to help them to develop programmes that make a difference in their areas of work that are designed to tackle the issues that they consider to be important. Effective evaluation should also be a priority so that teachers can learn from their experiences and use the data to persuade others to support their work or to have a go themselves. It would be worth considering projects that encourage partnerships between the education and training sectors or that support students in the transition between the two.

## **Suggestions for the Province of Pescara**

The development of a strong tradition of extracurricular activities offers a ready structure into which OEL courses could be introduced. Clear educational targets are recognised such as health education, the prevention of drug addiction, sexual education, etc. OEL courses could be developed to address priorities in these areas. Effective evaluation could then demonstrate the value of this approach. This would support its continued and expanding application as an approach.

In addition, it would be a constructive challenge to attempt to set up programmes that operate within the school day and across all types of school including those that are more academically oriented. Any opportunities to develop programmes in this latter area could set out to achieve outcomes related to supporting underachieving pupils,

raising success rates or broadening the curriculum in the light of the trends in employment.

### **Suggestions for the Province of Potenza**

Enthusiasm for developing new ways of working such as OEL should be fostered in this province. The main aim should be to work with enthusiastic teachers to help them to develop programmes that make a difference in their areas of work that are designed to tackle the issues that they consider to be important. It would seem that opportunities exist to associate OEL programmes with a range of interventions aimed at social and educational issues in the schools of the province. Providing demonstratable outcomes for these interventions with an OEL approach would be an effective way of creating a positive environment within which the development of OEL programmes might flourish.

Effective evaluation should also be a priority so that teachers can learn from their experiences and use the data to persuade others to support their work or to have a go themselves. It would be worth considering projects that encourage partnerships between the education and training sectors or that support students in the transition between the two.

### **Suggestions for the Province of Matera**

Enthusiasm for developing new ways of working such as OEL should be fostered in this province. The main aim should be to work with enthusiastic teachers to help them to develop programmes that make a difference in their areas of work that are designed to tackle the issues that they consider to be important. It would seem that opportunities exist to associate OEL programmes with a range of interventions aimed at social and educational issues in the schools of the province. Providing demonstratable outcomes for these interventions with an OEL approach would be an effective way of creating a positive environment within which the development of OEL programmes might flourish.

Effective evaluation should also be a priority so that teachers can learn from their experiences and use the data to persuade others to support their work or to have a go themselves. It would be worth considering projects that encourage partnerships between the education and training sectors or that support students in the transition between the two.

### **Suggestions for the Municipality of Rietava**

The teachers involved in the Next project have already successfully initiated outdoor experiential learning (OEL) projects. The priority should be to continue and build on the success of these initiatives and to encourage others to duplicate these successes in their own schools and programmes.

Key areas that OEL programmes could be designed to address are:



- Tackling issues of socialisation in schools with the aims of integrating groups of students and reducing the incidence of unacceptable behaviour in and out of school;
- Helping underachieving pupils by raising self esteem, supporting positive identity construction and encouraging fluid social networks.
- Supporting students in transition to further education, training and work to be flexible and confident.
- Developing interpersonal skills for leisure and work.
- Developing programmes that integrate with as well as extend the curriculum.
- Developing intergenerational programmes.

The potential exists for partnerships between schools and other education and training agencies and for developing professional development opportunities for teachers and the providers of outdoor activities.

### **Conclusion**

Paddling a kayak in a straight line looks easy to the observer. However, when you try it out you find it is a complex skill that takes time to develop. As skill improves then new things become possible in the kayak. However, something is possible right from the start. Designing and running experiential education programmes is something like this. If you approach it willing to learn and prepared to try something small to start with it may grow into an advanced skill making a significant impact on the lives of students, the effectiveness of the school and the health of the community.