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„Mentoring NEETs. Innowacyjna forma doradztwa wspierająca aktywizację edukacyjną i zawodową młodzieży NEET” (UDA-POWR.04.03.00-00-0029/18-00)

SUMMARY REPORT FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS (FGI CONSULTATIONS) WITH PERSONS WORKING WITH NEET YOUNG, AS PART OF THE PROJECT „MENTORING NEETs. GENERATIONAL INTELLIGENT MENTORING OF NEET YOUNG”

Author:

Małgorzata Krywult – Albańska, PhD
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Pedagogical University of Cracow
Email: mkrywult@up.krakow.pl

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Introduction

The report presents a summary of conclusions from focus group interviews (FOCUS – FGI consultations) carried out as part of the project *Mentoring for NEETs. Innovative form of personal advising supporting educational and employment activation of NEET youth* no. POWR.04.03.00-00-0029/18. The project is implemented by the company BD Center Ltd. in partnership with the Pedagogical University of Cracow, the Agency of Regional Development Inc. in Rzeszów and Kaakkois – Suomen Ammattikorkeakoulu as part of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2014-2020, Priority Axis IV Social Innovations and Transnational Cooperation, Measure 4.3. Transnational Cooperation, co-financed by the European Union as part of the European Social Fund.

Mentoring NEETs project's objectives

The *Mentoring NEETs* project will be carried out between 01.01.2019 and 31.08.2021. The project's objective over the 32 months is to create, and then to test and modify in a transnational public-private consortium new tools supporting inclusion and development of social competences useful (among others) on the labor market among Polish NEET youth (young people not in education, employment nor training) and the implementation thereof by a minimum of 16 subjects working for NEET youth in Poland.

The following tools and instruments will be produced and implemented within the project:

- a model of individual and group NEET mentoring, based on solutions adopted in Finland, including materials for mentors (framework scenarios, training materials, etc.);
- the first in Poland platform on mentoring NEETs containing digital products from the project;
- e-learning online NEET mentors courses for users;
- e-learning online courses for NEET mentors;
- tools for examining the effectiveness of NEET mentors among NEET young.

The stage of the project reported herein consisted in organizing of consultations with 70 persons working with youth (*project's users*), including NEET youth, in various institutions and organizations (both public and private, in non-governmental organizations, support groups etc.), including prospective NEET mentors, who will be able to employ the project's products in their work with young people. Consultations took the form of focus group interviews (FOCUS – FGI) and were held to learn about participants opinions about the solutions adopted in Finland, allowing for possible modifications while implementing them in Poland, so as to adapt them to users' needs and possibilities.

Target group for the project's outcomes

The target group for the project's outcomes are people 15-29 years old, not in employment, education, nor training (NEET) for a minimum of four weeks before joining the project (60

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persons, including 36 women and 24 men). It will be possible to use the model of (individual and group) mentoring NEETs elaborated throughout the project both independently during work with young people belonging to the NEET group or as an instrument supporting programs of NEET youth educational and/or labor market inclusion, as a means of encouraging participation in the process of educational and/or labor market inclusion. The purpose on the early stage of the process of inclusion is to show that the process will be adapted to their needs and abilities and may present an interesting “adventure”. Mentoring may also be used during the process of educational/labor market inclusion, possibly parallel to other programs for youth, so as to motivate young people to complete these programs and prevent them from dropping out.

FGI participants

Participants of focus group interviews (FGI) were 70 people (35 from the podkarpackie and 35 from the małopolskie voivodeship), 18 years old and older, working with youth, including NEET, in various organizations, including prospective NEET mentors. In each voivodeship 6 FGIs were carried out with groups of 5-6 persons, in Cracow and Rzeszów in April and May 2019. The purpose was to explore participants opinions about *Mentoring NEETs* assumptions and possibility to implement the project in Poland.

Due to FGI participants’ diversity (in terms of their basic socio-economic characteristics such as age, sex, professional background and place of residence, and in terms of the organization they represented and the length of work with the target group) it was possible to obtain a variety of perspectives on the *Mentoring NEETs* project. The most often represented were the following groups, each with different experiences and outlook on young people’s problems:

- teachers and employees of educational institutions (including administrative staff);
- employees of (both public and private) employment and training agencies;
- educators (employees of non-governmental organizations and foundations);
- street-workers (working with both children and young adults, formally employed by both NGOs and public institutions).

Perceptions of the project

Consultations (FGIs) reveal that the institutional and social contexts in which the NEET youth functions are in many respects similar in Poland and in Finland, justifying thereby efforts to implement *Mentoring NEETs* project in Poland.

The *Mentoring NEETs* project seems also to be a suitable response to the problems of young people, as diagnosed by participants of the FGI consultations. According to the project’s assumptions, mentoring brings about the following effects with respect to the NEET youth: being able to talk about oneself more efficiently; augmented self-presentation; improved self-esteem; improved competences to work with the group and with mentor. These effects would

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be desirable considering the main barriers to employment of the NEET youth identified by participants of focus group interviews, including the following:

- lack of motivation to participate in education and employment
- inability to set oneself goals for the future
- low self-esteem
- inability to assess one's strengths and weaknesses
- sometimes also discrepancy between expectations concerning prospective job (including financial ones) and the opportunities on the labor market.

Most FGI participants expressed their strong approval of the project's assumptions. The following section lists those positive aspects that participants pointed to most often:

- 1) voluntary participation in mentoring and lack of control of young people; FGI participant pointed to the fact that being under compulsion to take part in something often triggers rejection on the part of young people (the same problem was identified in Finland);
- 2) lack of formalities, no requirement to get registered; anonymity of mentoring's participants;
- 3) using games and digital tools; as they are inherent in young people's lives, using them means being close to their lives;
- 4) the role of the NEET mentor; according to FGIs participants, young people lack role models, people who would be inspiring for them.

Apart from positive aspects, FGI participants also pointed to some possible problems with implementing the *Mentoring NEETs* project in Poland. These problems include the following:

- 1) reaching the NEET youth: as the FGIs participants noted, young people not in employment, education nor training live “beyond the system”, outside of the reach of most institutions;
- 2) recruiting of NEET mentors: people working with youth are equipped mostly with “soft” qualities which are sometimes difficult to define (such as “charisma”). It is difficult to verify whether a given person has such traits, therefore, some FGI participants expressed their concern that NEET mentors will be difficult to recruit;
- 3) even if NEET mentors can be found, they will face a great challenge fulfilling their role: according to FGI participants', one of the most difficult tasks for them is to build NEET youth's motivation (which is low or nonexistent in them) and to inspire them (how to inspire while not imposing anything and, on the other hand, nor discouraging with examples and experiences too distant from the realities of young people lives).

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Modifications of the project suggested by FGI participants

According to FGI participants, some aspects of the *Mentoring NEETs* project should be reconsidered, and special emphasis should be put on other. Based on the views expressed by participants during focus group interviews, the following postulates can be put forward:

- 1) there should be no rigid profiles of NEET mentors, with strictly pre-defined characteristics. Such rigid profiles go against the idea of individualized approach towards young people and the idea of flexibility. In particular, age (according to the projects assumptions 30 and older) and having a personal experience of the NEET status in the past should not be preconditions for being a NEET mentor, as they do not automatically entail the ability to start an inspiring relationship (young mentors might be able to do it as well), nor predispose anyone for fulfilling the role. The important thing is to match individual mentors with individual young people, according to their particular needs. Mentors, therefore, should differ in terms of age, sex, personality traits. Although age should be allowed for if it goes along with experience, people younger than 30 should also be considered as prospective mentors.
- 2) The main assets of the *Mentoring NEETs* project are flexibility, lack of control, individual approach and equality between mentors and participants, therefore, the same as in Finland, the project's implementation in Poland should take place beyond formal educational and professional institutions.
- 3) As seen by FGI participants, the aforementioned institutions might, however, serve as venues in which Mentoring NEETs might be “marketed”, spreading information about possibilities of getting help in the future, should the need arise (should young people be unemployed and beyond the reach of educational institutions).
- 4) Both individual mentoring and group mentoring should be promoted. The first one, in which one mentor works with one young person, makes the latter feel important, makes her/him feel worthy of attention. Group mentoring, on the other hand, takes advantage of the effects of group impact.
- 5) Considering specific traits of youth belonging to the NEET category, it is important to learn about their background, to learn where they come from, to establish a good relationship and work on motivation, before they are offered any kind of training or other forms of support. Therefore, building of self-esteem and making young people aware of their talents and abilities is one of the fundamental goals which NEET mentor should pursue.

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Institutional and social context for the lives of NEET young in Poland and in Finland

The section above provides a summary of opinions on the *Mentoring NEETs* project, as expressed by participants of the focus group interviews. Moreover, further conclusions were reached, based on the methodology of social sciences (participants' opinions are treated as indicators of particular opinions and attitudes) and referring to the social and institutional context in which NEET youth in Poland and in Finland lives. The aforementioned context is similar in many respects in both countries. The context consists of: discrepancies between the mode of functioning of institutions working towards youth's social inclusion, and the needs and abilities of young people; a tendency to classify and/or to stereotype young people.

- **Discrepancies** between the mode of functioning of institutions working towards youth's social inclusion (designated as a “normative linear model” in Finnish studies), which are focused on fast transition from education to employment, and the needs and abilities of young people. Such conclusions were reached by Sanna Toiviainen from the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, based on research carried out among NEET youth, the same conclusions can be drawn from the FGI consultations reported herein. FGI participants representing institutions and companies working towards labor market inclusion of youth seemed determined to reach this goal as fast as possible, immediately upon young people's graduation (a goal which is typical for these kinds of institutions). They stressed the fact that young people are not familiar with available occupations, indecisive, unable to set goals for themselves on their own and to choose a professional career. They pointed to the fact that young people often simply follow their peers when choosing a school or a job. They seemed to ignore (or unaware of) complex histories of young people, for example the fact emphasized by educators and employees of non-governmental organizations (whose work with youth is more multi-dimensional) that young people's choices are strongly influenced by their social environment which often determines their (professional) lives. This fact may stem from the very mode of functioning of the institutions themselves, represented by participants, from limited flexibility of the forms and schedules of support which they offer. An example of this lack of flexibility was provided by one FGI participant: young people are offered a reimbursement of the costs of travel to training workshops, even though they are unable to cover the costs of tickets to make use of the reimbursement.
- **Tendency to classify:** dividing students into talented and “loafers” (lazy); young people either come from “troublesome environments”, environments which at least partly account for the attitudes typical for this group, or from rich families which provide everything for them with no effort on their part; a dichotomy us-them (with an underlying assumption that “we” used to be in a more difficult position when we were of the same age, while for “them” everything is easier, but they do not feel like doing anything).

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- **Stereotyping** of young people. Similarly to the tendency to classify, among the FGI participants this kind of an attitude was expressed mostly by representatives of educational institutions (teachers) and employees of work agencies and similar institutions (organizing training, coaching, etc.)¹. When asked about the most salient problems of young people, they frequently mentioned their own problems with which they come across in their work: lack of goals and motivation, which prevent teachers and coaches from quickly reaching their objectives of educating and integrating young people into the labor market (the aforementioned “normative linear model”).

Summing up, similarity of the institutional and social context of young people’s lives in Poland and in Finland supports the goal of implementing the *Mentoring NEETs* project in Poland.

Final conclusion

Based on focus group interviews, the following recommendation can be put forward: the tools of mentoring NEETs should use the experience and practice of street-working and Programs of Local Activity, both of which provide space in which young people are provided with multiple, comprehensive form of support (similarly to *One Stop Guidance Centers – one place, many possibilities*). These experiences and practice comprise the following:

- 1) initial encounters with young people should take place “in the field”, in those places where they stay a lot and spend the most time (housing estates, football pitches, squares and other public spaces);
- 2) contact with young people is not limited to one context (e.g. educational one, or one connected with job training), on the contrary, it covers many spheres of life: providing support with peer or family relations, informal psychological counseling, help with decisions concerning education and/or taking up of a job and putting these decisions into practice;
- 3) the primary goal is to learn about young people’s social background as much as possible, to become familiar with their social environment. This goal is achieved while going out together to sports events, cultural events, etc. during which a relationship is established;
- 4) providing of any kind of “practical” support is preceded by (often long-term) building of trust, by attempts to establish good relationship with young people. Being together during free time and trying to organize this time for young people in a creative manner, so as to make young people aware of their talents and abilities, are the kinds of activities that work with youth consists in for the most part (e.g. climbing together as a means of discovering one’s predisposition to work at heights).

¹ It should be emphasized that focus group interviews are not representative, therefore, these conclusions should not be generalized on all teachers and job counselors. On the other hand, not all teachers and job counselors in this study displayed such attitudes.