

Between crisis intervention and complementary services provided by youth care? The main points of the Outreach concept - Mobile Youth Work in Berlin

Mobile and social space orientated youth work is a concept which links up different types of approaches and methods used in youth work. It has therefore contributed to a new and autonomous approach within youth work. For 4 years this has been carried out by the organisation Outreach under the umbrella of the Verband für sozial-kulturelle Arbeit e.V., Landesgruppe Berlin.

Mobile youth work means primarily being present and working in places in which young people spend time, such as parks and streets or generally speaking: the public sphere. Social space orientation in youth work is about focusing on the close environment that surrounds young people i.e. their residential area, their neighbourhood and their district. The organisation Outreach exists currently in 9 Berlin districts.

From divided city to split city?

Local contexts and target groups

More than 80% of the young people we are dealing with, at least in the Western part of the city, have a migrant background. The vast majority of young people in the Eastern part of the city are Germans. Yet again, young people of German-Russian descent represent the only and significant exception as they do have a German passport, and at the same time experience of migration.

Beside this rather general distinction, it is important to take into account the different living situations in the city. Indeed, in terms of the living circumstances, there is a process of dispersion in Berlin, which currently seems to grow rapidly.

Young people are particularly affected by this kind of development. It is difficult for the ones who live in social spaces, which are regarded as problematic, to build up a positive perspective. This is hardly surprising, since the objective circumstances surrounding them are deteriorating constantly: such as opportunities in the education system or in the job market.

Neither false promises nor banalisation are helpful if youth work is to contribute to changing the difficult living circumstances in those social spaces.

But what youth work actually can do is to create structures, in which, in a collective as well as in an individual sense, it is possible to gather new and positive experiences, and therefore to build up coping mechanisms and skills for solving problems.

By taking into account the variations of local contexts that appear in the different social spaces, there are consequently different shapes of approach.

'Help yourself, otherwise a social worker will help you' - Moving away from paternalistic strings towards participation

It is still the case that the landscape of Berlin's youth work is predominated by the fact that the ones who need help tend to go to the services on their own initiative. Those structures have their legitimacy provided that they unite energies and resources. By doing so, they ought to develop qualitatively good services. However, one may note that focusing only on that paradigm may also lead to a risk of exclusion.

In general, one can observe that not only **does** the number of young people **increase** who have no access to those services offered by youth work, but also that they do not, or cannot use any other kinds of services. Therefore the challenge of youth work is to make services accessible to the ever-growing groups of young people.

Parallel to this aspect, one notices that within youth projects there have been for a long time tendencies of social dispersion, which has developed rapidly during the last 10 years. In the light of that process youth projects have more and more taken up the mission to help the most socially excluded ones. Although this tendency is more strongly developed in the western part of the city, it also comes clearly into play in the eastern districts.

It is still the case that the majority of young people stay in their residential area. They usually meet in places such as parks, shopping malls, streets, generally speaking 'the public sphere'. Outreach turns to those young people by accepting their ways of life, as well as their chosen meeting structures.

We use street work as an adequate method to reach the young people. In a literal as well as in a figurative sense, we move on together with them. It is important for us that we do not work 'without boundaries', but rather that we direct ourselves to their living environment, their social spaces or districts. Not only do we

want to approach the young people, but it is also essential for us to encourage them in participating in the processes which concern them and which take place in their own districts.

We observe that in almost every district in which we work, there is a growing need for spaces. Mobile youth work responds to that in a particular manner: New spaces being used and experienced by young people are per se an improvement for the infrastructure of the district. However, it is only of educational value if the young people actually have the possibilities of using those spaces fully. Therefore it is not only about acquiring new resources, but also rather about linking these with models, which ought to contribute to creating a sense of responsibility, autonomy and emancipation for the young people.

The combining of mobile and stationary services has proven to be a useful concept. In particular, in order to reach young people, who spend much time in the public sphere, and to develop with them some strategies to acquire and use spaces according to their own interests.

The resources that are to be acquired do not always have to be our own and/or new projects. In fact, also already existing institutions (like youth projects) can offer "spaces of experience" to young people from the public sphere.

From case to field - Reflecting upon methods

In order to reach the goals mentioned before there is a need for a broad repertoire of methods. However, 'broad' should not be mistaken for random use. The methods are to be seen in a holistic manner, and that is based on the awareness that a dogmatic view on methods does not reflect the complex situations of the young people.

However, one can determine accurately the individual methods. The approach of mobile youth work distinguishes, for example, between individual case counselling and mentoring, group and project work, street work and community work. It is important to see to what extent the methods are in relation to each other. This is determined by the holistic use of methods, which is then a dynamic response to the challenges that exist on the spot. Moreover, our aim is to use the methods in order to gradually enable the target groups to develop more autonomy. This is more likely to succeed by taking the field variables in an individual district into account.

Conflict management

There are often conflicts whenever young people express and assert their own interests in the individual districts. Accordingly, youth work with the approach of mobile and social space orientation has to deal with conflicts that might occur.

We regard conflict management as a way of helping youth groups to address their interests in the district. One may define that as advocacy moderation. This means that we contribute to creating a mutual dialogue between the different groups in the district, while putting the youth groups' interests to the fore. Yet again, this does not mean that we try to carry them through on their behalf.

We had positive experiences with employing mediation techniques when it came down to handling conflicting interests between the young people. By employing these means, it has been possible for us to achieve peaceful agreements between the groups. It is particularly useful in this context that Outreach is generally in contact with all conflicting parties being involved. If there is the need to negotiate fairly over the use of scarce resources and structures, Outreach is able to take up the role of an intermediate in order to find adequate solutions together with all groups concerned.

Outreach therefore stands out by neither adopting the concept of dogmatic partiality on the one hand, nor those moderation approaches, which focus only on achieving agreements devoid of any interests.

In this respect, our conflict-orientated work is complementary to the practice of the approach. Therefore, there is no such thing as crisis intervention being opposed to complementary services of youth care. Thus, although Outreach is not a 'social space fire brigade', it does deal openly with conflicts, which occur at given time.

