

Summary

The anthology *Wicked problems and young people: Co-creative teaching for the social professions* is a key output from a collaborative European project (funded through the Erasmus+ Lifelong Learning programme) that operated from 2013 to 2016. The project was entitled *HEI Inter-Professional module – co-created by marginalised youth, practitioners and students* (with the short title ‘HIP’) and involved partners from five European countries: Denmark (the project coordinator), Ireland, Romania, Spain and the Netherlands.

HIP developed from an earlier EU-funded project and had as its aim the bringing together of university-level educators of those entering social professions such as social work, social education, social pedagogy and social care practice; students of those social professions; social professionals in governmental and non-governmental organisations; and marginalised young people themselves. The objective was to collaborate to co-create learning materials that would provide a better platform for higher education practice in this field, with multinational and multidisciplinary exchanges that were complex, yet fruitful, challenging and valuable.

This anthology is a key output of this multinational collaboration: others include a descriptor for a module that can be adapted to different programmes; a publicly accessible project website (hip.via.dk); a special edition of the Romania-based academic journal *Protectia sociala a copilului/Social protection of child* (Anul XVII 1(56) 2015); and a number of presentations at both international and the individual country level to professional associations, conferences, industry groups and students.

It is hoped that the anthology, standing by itself or in conjunction with the module descriptor, will be of interest to many people: educators, students, social professionals and young people themselves. It can be read as an exploration of recent research and ideas about wicked problems and young people; as a set of approaches to teaching and learning; and as a collection of stories about the work of practitioners and organisations in this field.

The anthology is divided into three parts.

Part 1 presents relevant theories and methods for working with marginalised youth. The challenges of marginalised youth can be referred to as wicked problems, adopting terminology originally developed by the American writers Rittel and Webber in 1993. A wicked problem is one that is, in effect, impossible to solve. Many, if not all, complex social phenomena can be thought of in this way. In response, social professionals who work alongside young people need to adopt flexible, innovative and dynamic approaches, as do researchers who are investigating the outcomes of practice. These issues are explored in a number of chapters in Part 1.

Mark Taylor, based at Goldsmiths at the University of London (and at the Institute of Technology, Sligo, Ireland for the duration of the HIP project) discusses how wicked problems affect the role of social workers and the professional competencies that are required. Taylor argues that while the concept of wicked competencies is attractive as a response to wicked problems, it is not easy to define what such competencies might look like and the terminology can be inconsistent. Taylor outlines a hypothetical case study and examines the key features of wicked problems in light of this; he concludes with a consideration of the key elements of competence that social professional students or practitioners need to acquire to address wicked problems.

Almudena Navas of the University of Valencia, Spain, further explores the concept of wicked problems in relation to marginalised youth. From a sociological perspective that pays attention to issues of power, she addresses how a collaborative approach can improve the learning outputs of students and improve their consciousness of the complexity of the lives of marginalised young people. This is examined through an analysis of the partnership that developed between the University of Valencia and the locally-based NGO, Iniciatives Solidàries. The issue of communication between all participants was identified as a key challenge and the chapter describes the use of clown workshops to successfully address this.

Gordon Vincenti of VIA University College, Denmark, builds on the challenges of wicked problems and adds to the theoretical perspectives presented by Navas and Taylor by arguing that boundary spanning, involving a multi-disciplinary approach, can be a practical way to deal with the problems facing youth. Boundary spanning as the term suggests, involves the creation of connections across organisations that are, for whatever reason, separated. It may be a valid strategy to help practitioners and organisations to address the challenges of wicked problems.

Martin Stam of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, addresses research strategies that might reflect the reality of wicked problems. Stam introduces the action research method known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory [CHAT], originally developed by the Finnish researcher and consultant Yrjö Engeström and now used in a variety of settings across the world to assist organisations (often those in the field of human services) to respond to the complex wicked problems of the contemporary world. Drawing on concepts of 'cold' and 'warm' research, Stam outlines how CHAT can aid in the analysis of innovative teaching practices. This is achieved largely through the construction of a 'learning history' that involves structured and contextualised reflection on the teaching and learning processes in the social professions.

Part 2 of the anthology contains a number of chapters that specifically discuss the challenges of working professionally with marginalised youth. **Martin Stam** and **Simona Gaarhuis** of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands analyse how innovative outreach social work can democratise work with vulnerable youth. They build on the theoretical framework of the previous chapter to outline a process of practice-based research conducted with partner organisations. The aim is to create a 'jointly told tale' that reflects the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in collaborative work.

Fernando Marhuenda-Fluixá of the University of Valencia, Spain discusses the role of the educator and how reflective consciousness about ethics and values can improve the educational practice and relationship with marginalised youth. It locates this role within the contemporary context of 'toxic capitalism' and the dominance of neoliberal policies on education and social services. The chapter argues that the 'hidden curriculum' of education for disadvantaged young people is a crucial factor, and that practitioners need to engage actively with the moral and ideological bases of educative practice. Authenticity, especially in relation to assessment, is important.

Jesper Kjær Jensen of the organisation ASV, Denmark, moves the perspective from the educator to the student. Jensen's chapter links theoretical perspectives and empirical findings on how it is possible to work with students' personal strengths and weaknesses when including physical activities and a bodily or kinetic perspective in the teaching of professional conduct. The chapter is highly reflexive, with a focus on Jensen's own perspectives as well as those of students who have participated in a movement-based workshop.

Part 3 of the anthology presents a number of case studies from the five European countries involved in the HIP project. These offer an introduction to institutions or approaches to social work or social care practice with young people in each country, presented by practitioners working in the field of marginalised youth. The cases thus originate from the practice field and give a unique perspective on

the diversity in the types of organisations where work with marginalised youth takes place. The case studies vary in length, content and perspective, to reflect the variety in the practice of working with young people.

Jesper Kjær Jensen outlines the work of the Special Education Department of ASV, based in the town of Horsens in Mid-Jutland in Denmark. The focus is on the role of collaborative relationships, both within ASV between educators and young people, and between ASV and other organisations. Good relationships are shown to contribute to good practice.

Caroline Costello of North Connacht Youth Services, based in Sligo in Ireland outlines the Garda (police) youth diversion programme located in the town; she also stresses the importance of relationships. Active engagement in meaningful activity is also identified as a key to effective practice with the marginalised young people in this context.

Oana Roman of the Directorate for Social Services, Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania addresses the issue of volunteering in Romania, specifically in relation to an EU funded programme called *Make them smile!* She outlines the multiple benefits of volunteering, for the volunteers themselves, for the state agency involved, and for the marginalised young people with whom it works.

Laura Mollá Cambra and Olaia Sánchez Rosell focuses on the Valencia-based NGO Iniciatives Solidàries. It offers learning-teaching spaces throughout life to facilitate integration, literacy and professional qualification to young people, adults, young prison inmates and former prison inmates. The case study outlines the key pedagogical principles of the organisation, which includes flexibility in adapting interventions to the needs of the individual, while taking an overview of the needs of the group.

Anouk Smeenk outlines some of the features of MyCoach, an aspect of the work of BOOT, the organisation she works for in Amsterdam. BOOT is a co-creation between the city councils of Amsterdam, the University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam, and a number of local housing associations. The case study outlines the coaching process engaged in by BOOT with vocational education students and identifies the features of a successful coach.

In her introduction to the anthology, **Lene Mosegaard Søjberg** of VIA University College, argues that to address wicked problems may mean gently pushing students, professionals and indeed young people out of their comfort zones. Through its events and workshops the HIP project sought to do this in a very practical way. This anthology, and the related teaching and learning resources generated by the project, provides some of the tools and supports that educators and learners might use to help them to move outside these familiar places and practices into areas that are more challenging and innovative. We hope that a broad variety of readers will find it useful.

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