

# Experiences in the youth group activity and effects on well-being – how to evaluate?

Inga Manzos

Sosionomi from Turku University of Applied Sciences. Bachelor of Social Degree programme.

FM. Master of Humanities from University of Turku. Faculty of Humanities.

This article is based on my bachelor's thesis *Art-based approaches in youth group activity and evaluation of effects on well-being* done in Social Services studies program in the Turku University of Applied Sciences. The objective of my work was to develop an evaluation form. This form was tested in the MOMU-project's youth groups in Finland and developed further using research data.

In this article, I will write about a development process of an evaluation form broadly bringing also my personal experiences. The form is based on the studies and researches as well as different existing feedback and evaluation forms. How to evaluate this group activity MOMU-project organized youth group activity? How does project organizers will know, what kind of experiences participants had in these groups? What went well and how activity should be developed?

The evaluation form I developed contains five fields: well-being, participation, empowerment, future and group activity. It focuses on the participants' experiences and subjective well-being. Questions worked well and results were quite positive, participants strongly experienced that they were accepted in the group and part of the group. Also, their opinion had been taken into account. The form can be used in all kind youth groups which focus on art-based approaches.

During development of the form, I reflected my own experiences I had in the youth groups and this reflection had an impact on the process. I participated in the multicultural youth activity organized by city of Turku for six years between from the 1990's to 2003. While I was reading about effects and impacts of the groups I couldn't help thinking about what kind of effects this multicultural group activity had on me? Has it made any change? If it has, what kind of change?

I moved to Finland with my family in the beginning of 1990's from Estonia. I was eight years old and went to school from the third grade. Somehow in the fifth grade I heard about multicultural activities for young people, probably from my school teachers. I really liked everything related to art and creative hobbies so I was eager to participate in these activities, since I heard that there is something related to art.

The very first activity I remember was shirt printing. We also started to gather in the youth centre nearby. I lived in the area where there was a lot of people with some other background than Finnish. In our groups, there was young people originally from Iraq, Iran, Vietnam, Ghana, Somalia and Russia. Sometimes there were Finnish youth too. We made some trips to youth centres in other cities, getting to know how things were there and getting to know people. We were doing different exercises, cooking and camps. There were several youth workers organizing activities. They also co-operated with our parents getting to know them and telling them about our activities.

For me the most interesting part were trips abroad. Youth workers came up with an idea to organize a trip where we could meet our peers. I was attending the first trip which was made to England. We stayed in the small place called Slough visiting youth centre and taking part of workshops there. We also had a chance to visit London and House of Parliament, where we had an appointment with a member of Parliament active with multicultural issues. I also attended similar trips to Norway and Italy.

During my participation period people changed in the groups, there were a lot of different activities and groups. I wouldn't speak of long-term group, however even if I didn't actively participate any group I had a feeling of continuity of activity. I had a feeling of belonging somewhere, that I was a part of some bigger multicultural youth group in Turku.

I consider five themes of evaluation form true in my case, group activity increased well-being factors, empowered in some level, offered something for my future and increased interaction with people. As I think now it helped me to trust other people and to believe that working together is possible even if there are people with other background as mine. I could say that I got some new friends there and got to know my friends better. I felt that my participation and opinion mattered I got more confident in myself.

Recently I noticed a brochure of Finnish association which offers activities for young people with multicultural background. Their aim is to instruct these young people to utilise the good sides of their background and to be proud of them. In addition, the objective is to strengthen self-confidence and identity and produce activity that helps young people to think in a positive way and integrate to Finnish society. I couldn't agree more about these aims were present in the multicultural activities I attended and had an impact on me.

In our activities, there was a lot of drama exercises, drawing together and all kind of creative exercises. Still, I wouldn't say that art-based approaches were strongly present. I would say that activities were more related to society and integration, which also contained strengthening identity and self-confidence. If I compare these two approaches, art-based activities are more related to see things from another point of view, to process thoughts, to feel joy, to play, to inspire and to relax. Similarities are related to the group process, there is a feeling of participation, interaction with others, getting to know people and become friends and get support.

However, it is almost impossible to say what kind of impact my participation had in the long term, now 15 years later. It is hard to separate these effects from other positive factors as school and friends. For example, my class teacher helped me a lot and encouraged me to attend different activities in the school as sports, choir and different group workshops. In all, I was very lucky to have a network of relatives, friends and teachers. I also wondered whether this group activity had any negative effects. The only thing that I can think of that I didn't always feel that I fit in or got to know other participants. I consider that it is essential in youth group activity that nobody would feel being left outside.

In the form, I didn't ask about the possible negative effects first. However, there were some differences in the answers between the groups, in some groups almost everybody seemed very satisfied with the activities, in other groups participants disagreed more or were unsure about the effects. The form itself doesn't explain what are the reasons behind this. Thus, it would be useful to ask did participants experience any negative effects and ask to describe them specifically.

While doing this Bachelor's thesis I started to doubt if it's good to use term marginalization of young people related to different youth activities. Nowadays I started to wonder whether I was seen in risk to marginalize. Better term would be social reinforcing, which can be applied to all young people not pointing them. In Finland, there were few cases where young people have even refused to attend the activities because they read that project's target group were youth in risk to marginalize.

The form focuses on the participants' experiences and subjective well-being. I would like to name the form as "the evaluation form of the participants' experiences" to show that the aim is to bring forth all kind of effects, both expected and unexpected. The term of participant's experiences is used by Minna Haapasalo, a lecturer of Turku Art Academy in Turku University of Applied Sciences. Haapasalo suggests that the useful question when planning the activities would be, what kind of experiences we would like to produce?

Additional questions to reflect could be: In what kind of activity participant is and how it does vary? How much there is active doing and how much passive receiving? How much participants repeat after the instructor and how much they produce themselves? When participant does act himself and when there is action in pairs, small groups or groups? Where the attention of participant wanted to be directed in the different stages of activity?

It has been presented that it would be useful to develop a totally new terminology to describe a value of arts. Researches could focus on bringing forth different experience participants have and monitor subjective experiences on well-being. I strongly agree with this statement. The evaluation form could be used together with different questionnaires used in the beginning of the group. Also, observation could be used to explain the experiences.