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Principles of Everybody Goes to School -working model and what enables it to be so powerful

The following material is based on the Finnish description of Everybody Goes to School working model <http://kaikkikaykoulua.fi/toimintamalli/> published by the City of Helsinki/Culture and Leisure Sector/Youth Services, written by Päivi Anunti, who is the Planning Officer of Youth Affairs and Paula Määttä, the trainer for the model. The English version is a shortened and updated version of the original, composed by senior researcher Anu Gretschel at the Finnish Youth Research Network.

‘Everybody Goes to School’ (EGS) is as a working model developed by the Helsinki City youth department in 2009 in cooperation with the departments of Education and Social Welfare. The model has its basis in analysing the strengths and benefits of different professions and their teamwork possibilities when building a low-threshold youth culture friendly support system, called *growth groups*, as girls’ group or boys’ groups, set up in schools. The model has since been adopted by several towns in Finland.

In growth groups, young people are helped to recognise their resources and strengths, as well as identify the problems they encounter in school or in their lives in general. It is about finding alternative ways to make progress together.

Growth as an object at the individual, group and community levels

The aims of the growth groups are to support school attendance and graduation, to find a place in further studies, and also – and most importantly – to experience growth in their wellbeing, the ability to cope, resilience, life management and to acquire social skills in a safe and trusted environment while also making the school and interaction with adults more comfortable. Change or growth is not only sought for young people: adults and the school community, too, need to become more skilled in, for example, treating young people as equals.

Young people take part in planning the group’s activities. Sensitivity and the ability to listen to young people are core skills for the instructors to have. Instructors can choose the themes most important to their specific group and allocate them a time to be dealt with within the schedule. What is aimed at within one growth group turns into a more precise step-by-step process, and thus each growth group is different with its own kind of culture created by the participants and their instructors.

Based on the evaluation study (Gretschel & Hästbacka 2016) young people have received many different kinds of benefits from the growth groups:

1. The ability to cope, resilience and persistence (see Rimpelä 2015¹)
2. An expansion of networks and roles in communities
3. Building trust in themselves and others
4. Gaining concrete help in solving a variety of problems
5. Recognising different kinds of opportunities
6. A better feeling – even if not everything can be healed, then at least they get help with the pain.

The growth groups are part of the school schedule

The *Everybody Goes to School* groups, referred to as *growth groups*, are part of the official school schedule, which is an innovative form of cooperation between youth work and schools in Finland, see Kiilakoski 2015; 2017). ‘Growth group’ is an elective subject offered in 8th and 9th grade, each weekly session lasting about 90 minutes. Although it’s part of the formal school schedule, the delivery of the sessions includes a lot of aspects from non-formal education, whereby for example, groups will often gather in the “laid-back” atmosphere of a nearby youth centre, as opposed to on the school premises. Moreover, the content of meetings stems first and foremost from the participants and their current situations.

Being part of the official school programme makes taking part in supportive processes easier for young people – there is not as much risk of becoming stigmatised. It also offers support as part of the basic services: support is given in schools by professionals working in schools, youth centres and the general area. There is also the advantage of young people not needing to go anywhere else. On-site support is offered as a part of the everyday routine in schools instead of inviting young people to some separate supportive environment. Moreover, it seems that when support is given to young people within the school, their guardians (no matter which culture they are from) find it more acceptable, than when help is offered in another way.

Box 1. More about Finnish School System: As described in [Eurydice/Finland database](#) of European Commission: "compulsory schooling begins at the age of 7 and lasts for 9 years. It is provided in a single structure system called ‘basic education’. Nearly all children subject to compulsory education complete their basic education. Only about 200 young people drop out or leave basic education without completing the annual studies. At all levels of education every pupil and student has the right to educational support.”

¹ Rimpelä wants to stress that he sees these qualities not solely as a need for development of individual capability of one person but as something which can be supported by communities: to have these qualities is possible and can be in a solution directed way be supported through well working interaction with the environment and inside of communities. (Personal exchange with Matti Rimpelä 6.1.2018).

Everybody goes to school/Growth groups” is one of those preventive support mechanisms developed to increase the wellbeing of young people while limiting dropouts from school². It is targeted at 8th and 9th grade students, meaning at students in their last two years of basic education. There also exist pilot-projects for starting this kind of peer-support earlier.

It is always about one school – both the young people and adult instructors come from the same school, social or youth work area. Building a group is based on the observation that more support is needed for certain young people. At the same time, the entrance requirements for the groups need to be kept low since distress at school or in life in general, such as problems with or losses of family relations or friends, loneliness or hopelessness, being a bully or being bullied are not always noticeable from the outside. Prevention is also a key aspect: one of the aims of the groups is to gain more problem-solving skills, resilience and ability to cope.

Peers – that’s the key into the world of young people

Growth group is first of all a peer group, consisting of 10-12 young people. To have separate groups for girls and boys has its basis in gender-sensitivity, meaning sensitivity towards sexual and gender minorities. Once the group and the instructors are together, the idea is that the group’s composition remains the same, or changes as little as possible. The support process is a long-term engagement: 1-2 years. A growth group process follows an outline for positive recognition: Getting to be known, acknowledged, supported.... as well as supporting others in the group. Such a deep process takes time. Also, the types of problems experienced by the participants have likely developed over a long time. There are no quick solutions.

The needs and wishes of growth groups’ participants are carefully taken into account when the group activity is being planned: unlike other clubs, each session is always aimful and planned. Peer groups can be a powerful environment for the empowerment of its individual members (I’m not the only one, I am not alone – but we are together sharing and understanding, I am supported by the others), but effort needs to be applied so that positive group dynamics are achieved, and so that the common rules of the process are set together. A group or crowd is a natural way of being for many young people, although the significance of such groups/crowds is not always understood or used positively by young people – or adults. To generate such a support-community needs endorsement and acceptance from adults so that it can continue to exist and function effectively. Experience has shown that these groups have become one of the most or even the most important community for many of the participants. While this is, of course, not the main aim of the process, it does however suggest a lack of other supportive peer groups available to the participants.

Establishment of the growth group is multi-professional from the beginning

The instructors of the groups consist of a teacher and a youth worker, and, in some cases, a social care worker, a school welfare officer or a psychologist might join the group as a

² About preventive support mechanism and about youth work in schools, see Youth Wiki -database/Finland “Education and training: <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/youthwiki/6-education-and-training-finland>

third instructor. The instructors' team is always multi-professional, there is no other way of working, or else it would be another kind of group work altogether. Instructors must work together in a cross-sectoral fashion and maintain a healthy collaboration, which requires strong commitment and volition also from all levels of administration.

An instructor's job description comprises the following: instruction of the groups, planning of the meetings, participation in training sessions and anything else that might fall within his/her duties as an instructor; all of which is paid work. In other words, the municipal government's subdivisions (e.g. Education, Youth, Social Welfare) have to assign one of their workers to each growth group. Also the other costs related to the function of growth groups, such as funds for food, excursions and materials, are shared by different municipal sectors, like education and youth services.

Different kinds of professional skills, knowledge and ways of seeing of the multi-professional instructor team of the groups enriches the leadership with its flow of diverse knowledge, concepts and ideas. Time is taken to plan every group meeting. The idea is also that the instructors are given enough scope so that they can realise their work as most suitable for their team. Learning from other professionals benefits not only the individuals working in an instructors' team, but also their respective professional communities since the exchange and sharing of knowledge generated within the instructors' team then gets channeled back into the broader discussions of each profession's working community – for example, on how young people can better recognise their agency in their lives. The more groups there are in one school, the greater the learning possibilities there are for adults at the school level. Both freedom of scope and regularity in multi-professionalism allow for opportunities in developing cooperation, which is otherwise significantly less effective when the cooperation is more limited and occasional.

When establishing the growth groups, decisions need to be made at the school principal's level. Growth groups should be counted as modules in the school curriculum, and a place is needed for the groups to hold their meetings – often they are organised in the youth centre, near the school. The instructors' team needs training and the school personnel need to be informed so that they can recommend the participation of certain young people and their parents. Awareness of the groups is important among the whole school personnel so that they all can support the expected growth in taking place, when working with the same young people in their own work.

What is needed when working as a multi-professional group instructor team?

- Time for planning how to work together: agreeing about the structures and principles of working
- A shared language (pupil, young people, client) and jointly understanding of the concepts (what is a group, professional guidance, group dynamic, action based etc.)
- Agreement – and this can be reached only by a mutual discussion process – on what young people need, what are the most important themes to work with.
- The knowhow of each instructor needs to be taken into account and utilised; a teacher tailors support related to concrete schooling, a youth worker has special knowledge about dialogical relationship with young people and about out of school life, while both bodies can offer support in finding hope and trust in the future, starting with the courage to hope for something in the future.

- There can be vagueness and challenges, which need to be acknowledged when finding and settling down into new roles. This process entails having to step beyond one's own comfort zone, to have courage to see young people in a new light. It really pays off when you notice that young people are coping!

Theoretical principles: positive recognition, participation, gender and culture sensitivity

The ideas that lay at the heart of *Everybody Goes to School* and its growth groups are organised according to and have been inspired by several theories. Although the model was developed in a collaborative effort between developers of existing models from the Education, Social Welfare and Youth departments of Helsinki City, the strongest element for developing this model was taken from youth work itself. Youth work is first of all centred around encountering young people, a process like (Ord 2016) and youth work offers, as described by Fusco (2017): “space, co-creative possibilities – opportunities to reach potential”, while youth work also: “opens up doors into growth experiences, takes along and allows to settle in the society” (Junttila-Vitikka, Puuronen & Gretschesel 2016, 201). The *Everybody Goes to School* ideology includes all these elements, but has also taken them to a deeper level by adapting also the theories of recognition and the principles of supporting young people in having opportunities to participate in decision-making and having an impact.

Positive Recognition

The way in which the growth groups are organised resonates a lot with theory of positive recognition (see the Box 2). *Getting to know* young people already begins when young people are asked to join a group. Group meetings consist of a lot of free time to allow for discussion by eating breakfast together for example, and participants take turns in talking about their feelings, which also supports the process of getting to know each other. *Acknowledging and showing appreciation* is enabled already at a structural level. The young people themselves, their interests but also their diversity are respected from an individual level to the collective level, while the core idea is that the content discussed within the group is negotiated by the participants as equals. The multi-professional background of the instructors' team also helps; they have different kinds of abilities which help in finding new ways of seeing, talking and working with young people. Getting to know each other and being acknowledged helps the process of receiving help, even asking for it – and giving it to others, too, as a peer. One idea of positive recognition is that young people are supported to take different kinds of roles in their life and their communities, by being offered again and again a variety of comfortable opportunities.

Box 2. The basis for positive recognition: According to Häkli (et al. 2015), Kallio (2017) and Korkiamäki (2015; et al. 2016) positive recognition includes the following aspects:

- 1) Getting to know young people as individuals who have different kinds of affections, life situations, interests and about the communalities they prefer.
- 2) Acknowledging the everyday practices through which it is possible to actively and also tactfully show a young person appreciation for matters that are valued and meaningful to her/him.
- 3) Supporting young people...
 - a) In taking a role in the groups and communities they consider to be important,
 - b) In handling problems, when they arise, in a positive way, so that the connections they have to youth life are maintained,
 - c) In trying to always find the elements in which positive recognition can be built on, even in the most challenging situations and
 - d) At the same time, help them to not reject the responsibilities and the moral consideration the adult is obliged to make.

Häkli (et al. 2015, 228) has described: “As an operational principle, positive recognition sets out to strengthen dignity and inclusion in people’s everyday environments. Drawing from theories of recognition, it acknowledges that care and respect in personal relationships, participatory inclusion in everyday communities and respect for equality and difference in society are imperative to the development of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect. The human capacities to care, respect and give acceptance provide for meaningful active agency that may unfold in different contexts of private and public life. Positive Recognition can hence be considered one of the important drivers of democracy.”

Participation and factual possibilities of making an impact

In *Everybody Goes to School*, several kinds of procedures have been developed so that the participation and impact-making opportunities for young people are made real and put into practice both in life, during the course of the growth groups, and also in the further development of the model. All participants continuously take part in planning the programme of their group. The group process is communally evaluated, the content of the meetings are redefined and redirected based on the needs and wishes arising from the group. Over the years, several evaluations have been conducted to measure the quality and impact of the Everybody Goes to School -model, for which the data has been collected by the young people (themselves), for example, through interviews, proven to be an important methodological tool. The newest evaluation suggests moreover that young people could also have roles as evaluators in the future, meaning that they could take on more agencies also in the evaluation process as well as in discussions about how the model should be developed further.

Regarding the implicit content of a group’s programme relating to participation and making an impact, every group has a project called “video opinions” in which the young people discuss needs for development in their school with the school principal. The participants are offered different kinds of voluntary duties, such as visiting educational fairs to further

inform others about how growth groups work, or taking part in organising school events. The idea is that those who may have been stigmatised for not taking on enough responsibility have then been acknowledged positively by the school community thanks to their new roles.

Box 3. More information on participation from a legal perspective: the Finnish Youth Act has since 2006 pointed out how important it is for young people to be heard in matters that concern them and for them to have opportunities to participate in decision-making and have an impact. The Constitution, as well as the Basic Education Act and the Local Government Act highlight these principles, as does the European Youth Strategy, and of course the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the city of Helsinki level strategies of the youth department and the city. For more information on Youth Participation in Finland, please see Youth Wiki -database of European Commission <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/youthwiki/5-participation-finland>

Gender and culture sensitivity and diversity

As described in the *Everybody Goes to School's Handbook* (Määttä, Levamo & Anunti 2017) the gender sensitive girl and boy work framework for growth groups was already developed in the early 2000s by Mari Uusitalo-Herttua, the director of the Girls' House® of Kalliola Settlement, and Päivi Anunti, the Planning Officer for Youth Affairs in City of Helsinki's Culture and Leisure Sector/Youth Services.

More recently, in the same vein of highlighting the importance of gender and culture sensitivity, which nowadays increasingly includes gender diversity, has been described in English by Santalainen & Mulari (2016) in a PowerPoint presentation published by the Finnish Federation of Settlement Houses:

*“The sensitive **youth work** recognises the significance of gender and gender-based expectations in growing up and active citizenship. Among various alternatives, the youngster is encouraged to find the kind of identity and way of being that suits him/her the most. Gender sensitivity is manifested through **values** and **practices**. As an example, in open youth work subjects of discussion come from the participants. However, youth leaders can present questions and gently direct the discussion with their gender sensitive knowledge.*

Recognizing gender diversity, the youngster is encouraged to question expectations related to gender. Unlike what our culture widely suggests, people cannot be biologically, psychologically and socially divided into two sexes: male and female. Rather than two opposite sexes, it is more realistic to talk about gender diversity.

Culture Sensitivity refers to an ability to take into account special attributes related to different cultures. In addition, it recognizes differences between people representing the same culture.”

One of the main purposes of growth groups is to offer a peaceful space that allows for growth. Gender and culture sensitiveness is to respect different kinds of backgrounds and

cultures (not only ethnic and religious, but also youth cultural, lifestyles or those related to societal participation, for example) and the fact that everyone is important and unique. It is about being interested, open, valuing and devoted to the aim of learning about the world. Often, groups consist of participants from different backgrounds in the group, so any work to bring awareness to equality takes place in a natural setting. The peaceful growth entails possibilities to also think about one's own individual sexual and cultural standpoint and the diversity one associates with oneself, for example – who am I or who might I be? For the instructors of the group, the standard of sensitivity requires recognising and reflecting upon their own values and commonly held 'norms', and refraining from reinforcing stereotypes, among other things.

Box 4. The current discussion on gender diversity in Finland; News from the Finnish Public Service Broadcasting Company YLE 24.8.2017: "Finland's National Agency for Education is prodding schools to abandon teaching that emphasises traditional gender roles and to embrace gender diversity concepts in their lessons. The new guidelines mean that since students went out to school in August, teachers should have been paying greater attention to gender diversity (by including the topic more) in classroom discussions and lesson plans. Finland's main LGBT rights organisation Seta, has distributed a manual about gender diversity and is hoping that teachers will use it in their work..."
https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finnish_officials_push_schools_to_improve_gender_diversity_teaching_leave_behind_traditional_gender_roles/9795303

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