

UNVEILS KEY FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS ON YOUNG CARERS

Over the past few months, the NEXUS Project partnership dedicated itself to conducting focus groups and interviews with the aim of gathering suggestions and input for the design of the participatory research training curriculum for youth workers who works and interface with Young Carers. These efforts have provided valuable opportunities to discuss an issue and a population that is often invisible and overlooked in today's society, highlighting the need for concrete involvement and support.

We are pleased to announce the results of an important phase of the project aimed at improving the support for young carers (YC) and the training of those engaged in working with them. Through focus groups and personal interviews, the project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Establish a common definition of a YC.
- To identify the main difficulties and learning needs of professionals working with young people with care responsibilities.
- To gather input for a shared vision of functional tools to train those working with YCs.
- To explore, deepen and valorise ideas, opinions and suggestions of youth researchers and professionals (Italy and Greece) and EU policy makers (Belgium) to better support YCs.

The focus groups and interviews involved 10 youth workers – including social workers, teachers, psychologists and educators, researchers in both Italy and Greece, and five policy makers in Belgium. In some of the countries involved in the Project, difficulties were encountered in involving participants and this is an important and significant fact: the topic is still distant and unfamiliar to many people.

Main results achieved with policy makers and stakeholders

The main outcomes achieved with policy makers and stakeholders highlighted the crucial importance of the involvement of YCs in participatory research and policy making. Participants stressed that this involvement should be holistic and transparent, recognising the importance of individual perspectives. YCs need training to influence policy and identify research directions, while researchers need to be prepared to include YCs in their studies. Barriers to participatory research were identified, including lack of consideration, limited funding, stigma, lack of appropriate spaces for young people, organisational issues related to timetables, and insufficient knowledge and skills among policy makers. Several actions were suggested to improve cooperation between government, youth workers and organisations. These include raising general awareness of YCs at the public level, creating specific alliances and involving YCs directly in decision-making at the political level, setting clear objectives and adopting innovative tools to facilitate remote participation, and ensure inclusiveness at the organisational level. The relationship between YCs and social workers was seen as crucial for effective support and participation in research, requiring empathic and sensitive communication as well as interactive methods for effective engagement.

Main Results achieved with researchers and young workers

In Greece, YCs are primarily defined by their young age and their role as carers for an adult family member or as members of vulnerable groups. Although they often do not have a choice, they show a strong willingness to help. In Italy, YCs often come from families with socio-economic difficulties, single mothers

or migrant and refugee backgrounds. The cultural expectation of family care and the lack of social and sports activities, which are essential for a balanced development, are critical aspects of their profile.

The level of knowledge and awareness of YCs differs between Greece and Italy. In Greece, YCs are generally recognised, with strong family ties, including care for the elderly, although supportive practices are not widespread. In Italy, on the other hand, YC is a real but invisible phenomenon, often unrecognised except in contexts such as poverty and immigration. The lack of adequate support and promotion policies limits their participation in sport, research, education and the labour market.

Social workers and researchers face significant challenges due to a lack of experience and training, which hampers their ability to respond to the emotional needs of YCs and provide personalised support. Training needs identified include participatory research methods, decision-making and policy planning techniques, psychological and emotional support, and social and health care programmes. There is a strong interest among participants to receive training in these areas.

Barriers to involving YCs in participatory research include lack of information, lack of a specific training framework, difficulties in accessing policy forums, financial problems and emotional distress. Suggestions for overcoming these barriers include developing support and training programmes, involving YCs in policy making, organising teacher training courses and discussion groups, and using approaches such as the Family Group Conference and the Alzheimer Café to promote intergenerational dialogue.

In addition, in Italy there is limited familiarity with qualitative and participatory research techniques among teachers and service providers. Barriers include strict child protection regulations, difficulties in obtaining ethics committee approval, the need for parental consent, and a lack of knowledge and awareness. There is a need to create more opportunities for dialogue between professionals and to increase the motivation of young people to participate in research programmes.

Next steps of the Project

These significant results gathered suggestions and input for the next steps of the project: the design of the participatory research training curriculum for youth workers in Europe. The training course will focus on supporting the acquisition of those skills identified as most needed by youth workers to be able to contribute to evidence-based policies. In the planning and definition phase of the training course, young carers, who are the first protagonists of the topic, will also be consulted and involved, in a participative research perspective.

For more information on the project and to stay updated, please visit www.nexusproject.eu

INFORMATION FOR EDITORS

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