

***Intercultural youth Exchanges:  
opportunities for young people to prevent and de-learn  
violence and experience rays of hope***

by

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C.-Berta Kimmich

## **Intercultural youth Exchanges: opportunities for young people to prevent and de-learn violence and experience rays of hope**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

As we are used to a bit more interactive and playful methods may I invite you to join in for a little energizer...

Before I am going to tell you about International Youth Exchanges, please allow me to read a comment

*On violence  
The headlong stream is termed violent  
But the river bed  
hemming it in  
is termed violent by no one*

*Bertolt Brecht*

I am happy to share a handful of thoughts with you. My contribution has 5 parts:

1. Our young people know violence
2. Prevention comes late anyway ...
3. Anti-violence is not enough
4. International Youth exchanges could be a viable access
5. Recommendations and outlook

### **1. Our young people know violence**

Our (and I mean this not in a *possessive* but *related* way) – our young people know violence. Their *violent riverbeds* are Tavola Tonda in Palermo, an orphanage in Bucharest, on the North West of Medellín, Chelas in Lisbon, Recife, La Trinidad in Málaga, (West-)Belfast, Hamburg St. Pauli, Ein el Hilweh in Saida, Kopčany in Bratislava, ... in areas, *bairros*, *Vierteln*, camps, which are known as socially, culturally, politically and economically deprived communities... areas, where *one* is not supposed to live.

And most of them – if not all – are familiar with what the experts call *structural*, *personal*, *domestic* and *street violence*. They might not know these expressions, but they know how violence sounds, how it feels, how it hurts, how it looks. Living on the wrong side of the peace walls or in the streets, being refugee, Roma, black, looking Arabic, infected with HIV, ... they know violence not just from the TV, they know community fights, stabbings, shootings, police harassment, they know how *social ex-*

*clusion* hurts in many and varied ways. They know violence, because they have been and are *victims, witnesses*<sup>1</sup> AND often *perpetrators* themselves.

Tiago, a 17 year old black boy – his family from Angola - living in Chelas in Lisbon told Diogo, who was wearing dental braces: “You would not keep them long at our school – they rob anything, even your aparelhos – your braces!” (The Flamengo community school is not the only one which needs police to guard the school.)

Considering your and our collective knowledge about youth violence here in this room, I’ll skip the theories about the reasons, ways of appearance of violence and manifestations of risks young people are confronted with.

## **2. Prevention comes late anyway...**

So facing their background, you will not be surprised, when I say: we cannot *pre-vent* violence in the sense of *pre-venire* – coming before. In the lives of our young people violence always came first!

We don’t really want to have our work labelled as *prevention work* – just as we don’t want our young people to be stigmatised as potential violent criminals. Neither peace nor violence comes automatically!

Don’t worry, this is not yet the end of my paper. I suppose I have been invited because somebody here remembers that we do something about youth violence – whether we call it *pre-vention*, or rather running *after* it, trying to catch, to confine, to protect, to soothe, to resolve, to transform ... being well aware that we all have reasons to be modest, facing the enormous dimension of violence and the little we can do.

## **3. Anti-violence is not enough**

Before I share what we can do, I have to make another limiting remark: The enormous impact of war, conflict, and violence on the lives of young people can not be met by enormous campaigns, strategies, and methods of intervention.

I suppose you can guess looking at my grey hair, that I got a touch of the famous seventies, which means that we – my colleagues and I – as young practitioners felt a mission to be *anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-war* in our work with young people. The shock of being confronted with kids who showed nasty, brutal, inhuman, behaviour was profound and left us confused, feeling disillusioned and helpless. After all the young people did not seem to understand, let alone appreciate that we wanted to help them!

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<sup>1</sup> 39 of 60 young participants in our last International Youth Exchanges stated in our little questionnaire on their social situation that they or someone close to them had experienced domestic violence, and 28 they had had trouble with the police

I will not bore you with details of the quite painful process following this. It took a while until we learnt, that whatever we wanted to do, however we wanted to “educate” these “difficult” young people: Introducing *non-violence* to them, could *not* be taught and passed on the same way, as violence had been taught to them.

Erich Fried, an Austrian poet who had to flee the Nazis to Britain wrote:

*A fascist who is a fascist is just a fascist,  
but an anti-fascist who is just an anti-fascist  
is NOT an anti-fascist.*

It was with this daring insight that we were looking for what could be beyond this *anti...* Knowing the theme of my contribution you will not be surprised what we found: International Youth exchanges could be a viable access...

#### **4. International Youth exchanges could be a viable access...**

My main work is on a playing field called *e.p.a.* – european play work association <sup>2</sup> –an International Non-Government Youth Organisation with a network of partners in about 40 countries.

In 1986 we started the first multilateral International youth exchange, a pilot project supported by the newly founded Task Force for Human Resources of the EU in Brussels, followed by many of these involving just groups from Europe. 7 years later we *celebrated* (as you say in Spanish) the first Euro-South-American youth exchange with young people from street kids projects and *barrios populares* and in between the first European cleaning women’s exchange with some of the mothers of the young people. Since then many of these *encounters* have taken place involving in the meantime some thousand young people and their communities.

Some of you might frown - so what? Haven’t the Scouts, the Socialist and Christian Students organised International exchange programmes all through the last century? Yes they did, but hardly ever reached or invited young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. <sup>3</sup>

How can / do International youth exchanges work?

Given the fact that more than 60 young people come together during these youth exchanges from many different countries, one, two or three continents, from difficult vi-

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<sup>2</sup> [www.go-epa.org](http://www.go-epa.org)

<sup>3</sup> There has been some research done on the long term effects of the participation in International youth exchanges, for instance by Thomas/Chang/Abt published under the title „Experiences that change!“. But the young people participating were 96% pupils from grammar schools. With our exchanges these figures are the opposite. (Thomas/Chang/Abt, *Erlebnisse die verändern, Langzeitwirkungen der Teilnahme an Internationalen Jugendbegegnungen*, Göttingen 2007)

olent backgrounds, broken families with enormous experience of being disrespected, excluded, maltreated, abused ... the potential for insurmountable tensions and violent conflicts is enormous. And we did indeed experience youth violence as a challenge to our International cooperation!

Let Barbaba from Belfast tell you how International Youth exchanges work. She wrote to the EU:

“I want you to know that these exchanges are very important to me and all my friends from Belfast, because during the wee time we are together I feel so much love and safe from all the violence... I have lived in a world of violence for all my life and it was only when I was on these exchanges I realised that there could be a world without violence and exclusion and that is the kind of life I would like to wish for... that is only for two or three weeks, but I know we all have to start somewhere” (1999)

In many places where young people are suffering from violence and become violent themselves there are people taking initiatives: often local mothers, active citizens (sometimes even priests) and in Northern Europe sometimes paid and trained professionals, crazy enough to work so that violence may not become total.

International youth exchanges offer opportunities for *groups* of young people – aged 13 to 25 from such initiatives and partners in 4-12 different countries to meet and learn about each other’s cultures. The groups plan together their programme, activities and workshops around a theme of mutual interest. The actual meeting – for two to three weeks – is a highlight in a year-long process of preparing, organising, looking forward, celebrating, evaluating and valorising. The Young people are actively involved on an individual, group and community level.

The e.p.a. *tool box of intervention* contains an array of methods for intercultural and non formal learning: learning with “discrepancies”, using contrasts and methods of de-learning, tools to encourage intercultural understanding, the full participation of young people and to create the conditions for their empowerment. There is the e.p.a. *hug game* with lots of varieties of embraces under the motto: *Hugs my favourite drugs*. Or the e.p.a. *Sexopoly*: a game to reflect and discuss friendship, love and sexuality. One of the basic tools is *dialectics*, for example the concept of *all different – all equal*, a campaign launched by the Council of Europe, Strasbourg. This is based on equality, justice on the one side, diversity and tolerance on the other. And they only work together!

Intercultural youth exchanges developed by e.p.a. over the past twenty years are creative and caring especially for the needs of young people from deprived areas.

### *The five Ps*

Following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, intercultural youth exchanges offer the 5 Ps. **P**rotection, **P**rovision and **P**articipation – the three basic ones – as well as **P**lay and **P**erspectives. You'll probably be familiar with the first three basic Ps. Let me just add some little remarks...

About **Protection**: People like us here (who have the privilege to travel round the world) will hardly be able to understand what it means for young people to *get the hell out* – out of Medellín, Palermo, Câmara de Lobos ... and to feel in a safe place. Protection against immediate violence, which usually forces the young people to defend, re-act, hide or counter attack is probably a precondition to be able to re-reflect on what violence does to them and others.

Between protection and provision a little story of Helder (a 15 year old boy from Lisbon and before Angola). After the last International youth exchange in Lisbon, three of the six groups had left already, the two from Málaga and Palermo were at the airport about to leave and there were lots of hugs, smiles and tears. The security people asked what was going on and it was Helder who informed them: “Temos saudade, foi um encontro da paz!” (“We feel sad, it was an exchange of peace!”)

**Provision**: means a bed for each of them – and I am talking about Europe! A breakfast and two warm meals a day are unknown for many of the young people. An International youth exchange provides also a temporary experience of justice and equality, including pocket money. No one is excluded because of lack of financial resources.

Talking about provision: we care for a special *social climate*. I started my studies with a then very famous book that promoted professionalism in the social science of education: “Love is not enough” by Bruno Bettelheim.

If I read the *strategy papers* about *policies for social inclusion* I get the impression the professionals in youth work get closer to military interventions than to the needs and dreams of young people at risk. Is it time now to write a second volume: Professionalism is not enough!?

Anyway I did not mean to talk about others. e.p.a. works according the motto: *All young people need love, especially those who do not deserve it!*

Young people, who through their own experience of violence have become violent, are not usually nice to be with. And they are *street wise* – they have knowledge to defend and attack, understand more of human behaviour than we like to think. They have seen through me and my motives in no time.

And yet, as they often feel lonely and unloved, they need to hide their feelings behind a rough exterior. Maybe it is only our knowledge, empathy and the wish that these

young people may experience *a wee bit of justice* as one of the Belfast young people put it ... to provide a second chance... a chance to be heard, to be translated, to be understood! With young people who have suffered violence, are violent or pretty close to becoming violent, our professionalism needs to come in a professional spirit of love – or we may as well forget about it.

**Participation:** a big word and so much used, that we sometimes forget what it can mean to young people. During our youth exchanges this is not a method, but a pre-condition and a basic right. Whether the young people are hosts or guests – they are involved in the preparation of the programme. They are *protagonistas* – a word used in South America may be translated as “they have the say”. To have a say means also: space for expressions, their voices to be heard – not just in discussions, but performing their raps. We had mind blowing sessions with raps, with sharp words criticising politics combined with hip hop from Skopje, Palermo and Medellín. The young people themselves decide on the topic of their workshops and they run the workshops. By the way: the motto of our last exchange in Portugal was “Chances 4 tod@s e ser feliz” (“Opportunities for all and to be happy”). Within this motto three groups had chosen violence for their workshop (bullying at school, in the streets and hassle by the police).

**Play:** Olga, a Russian colleague once gave us the shortest evaluation we ever heard: She concluded: *Play works!* But how and why?

May I ask – maybe three volunteers – to open the wooden puzzle without violence as a little test? ... It’s an idea to invite young people playfully to try other ways than force and to start a reflection.

Play works in many ways. Play encourages people to come to different conclusions by *playing around* – trying something unusual and experiencing *swing* to change. One of my favourite German words is *Spielraum* (not to be translated as elbow room!) which means literally a room to play, and in the philosophical sense: space for options, playing with contradictions. The way we play during the youth exchanges is *non competitive*, has nothing to do with gambling (this is for the translation into German), but means creativity, fun, social interaction and provokes many smiles. Play means trying to communicate in surprising ways and discovering a different understanding, as Andy from Bratislava said: “to me the youth exchange helped, because it gives me the opportunity to feel how others feel!”

We know from research that play can have a healing effect for children who have suffered war, conflict and violence. When we play with young people and they play with local children during play activities, these caring, soothing and healing effects also take place. They are obvious in the smiles and often reflected in a different body language. “Play is part of the social fabric of a community and involves a dynamic

learning and developmental exchange between the child and the world they inhabit. In a very real sense, play can return to the children of conflict their lost childhoods.”<sup>4</sup>

And once they have arrived there, the youth exchange can work like starting a *leap frog* – jumping over the normal barriers in their own behaviour and giving the swing to look for options to live their lives differently.

The 5<sup>th</sup> P stands for **Perspectives**: On the little evaluation questionnaire which we ask the young people to fill in after the exchange Valerio from Palermo answered the question “What did you learn?”: “Usare la mia testa!” (“I learnt to use my head!”)

Would you like to know why we have chosen *P* for Perspectives and not *social inclusion*? Yes of course it wouldn’t rhyme... We strongly believe that young people who have suffered the violence of social exclusion do not need *in*-clusion, closing ... But opening, opening access, opening windows and doors, ... and need to be encouraged to use other means of communication than fists and feet in boots, need conditions for self awareness and confidence – or in the words of Rosa from Recife: “Os encontros dão ao joven ... a certeza de que não se deve baixar a cabeça...” (“Exchanges give young people ... the certainty that they do not have to bow their head...”). And indeed, might I add: but to look up and beyond!

Looking beyond: The comments by young people themselves often reflect the amazing impact these Intercultural youth exchanges have on their lives. They come from areas where the streets are often “cul-de-sacs” (easier to control by police or paramilitary), they feel like their backs are against the wall and then they experience new outlooks. They have often used the words: *Cambio de via – junctions*, where they discovered there was more than one option, where they found ways out of the vicious circles of violence, where they felt encouraged to cope with problems in non-violent ways, changing themselves, as well as their communities and where they found reasons to enjoy their lives. Young people find it has been an experience that has changed their lives and *they did it themselves!*

## 5. Recommendations and outlook

For politicians: European and International politics should be persuaded to offer more reliable accessible funding for these youth exchange projects. They should not just be used as accompanying intercultural measures by multinationals. They have proven both to have sustainable effects in not just preventing and dealing with youth violence, but also promoting active citizenship.

Towards researchers: May be someone would like to study the long term effects and accompany our International youth exchanges?

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<sup>4</sup> Hyder, Tina (2005): War, Conflict and Play, London, p. 101

Towards professionals – my colleagues here: Meticulous preparation, long years of cooperation, encouragement to participate, a carefully planned thrilling programme, enough space for spontaneity, a wide range of playful methods... all can contribute to a successful youth exchange. Nevertheless whatever moves in the brains and hearts of the young people, their group behaviour and their courage to get involved for their rights cannot be *produced* ... it will always be a miracle, a real miracle!

What to do to make such miracles become reality? I have translated a famous phrase by Saint-Exupéry for our theme:

*“If you want young people to become interested in non violent action and prevent violence, don't drum them up to train and to coach them, don't assign them tasks and projects. But rather make it possible for them to do a “leap frog” - meet with other young people from other countries. These experiences can wake and nourish their wish “a ser feliz” – to be happy – and their longings for justice, peace and dignity.”*

Thank you for your attention.

*e.p.a* • C.-Berta Kimmich • 03.06.2008

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