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How to empower disadvantaged people

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Abstract

Neither citizenship nor citizenship education is exclusive, but opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes are not distributed equally. Disadvantaged people need particular learning opportunities. This paper describes activities with the social aim of empowerment. Whether people like or dislike how the social category they belong to is represented, whatever can be the opportunity to 'enter the media': people who are marginalised and discriminated, who are discouraged and powerless, who need to get control over their life, who are able and willing to master their life – those people can be empowered, for instance, by presenting themselves by producing a video film.

Citizenship is not exclusive, nor is citizenship education. The chances to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes which are the prerequisites of participation, are not distributed equally. Hence disadvantaged people have to be provided with particular learning opportunities.

A pilot project has been initiated to figure out:

- Under which conditions marginalised groups can present themselves,
- Whether video production can be an instrument of self-representation and hence empowerment.

To be represented:

In a first step we addressed various underprivileged or discriminated groups and asked them whether they like how they are presented in the media.

As mainstream people get their knowledge about marginalised groups almost exclusively by mainstream media, it is an important question as to how the media 'construct' vulnerable groups. Who can judge better whether these presentations are close to or far from (their) reality than the members of those groups (categories)? Concerning the living conditions of homeless people for instance: homeless people are the experts of their own life.

Under auspices of qualitative research 75 interviews have been performed. Beside those people who are concerned indirectly or professionally (public servants, journalists), three quarters of the interviewees have been:

- Kurd refugees (asylum seekers, insecure status),
- Jews from former Soviet Union (acknowledged as refugees for humanitarian reasons),

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- Former drug addicted people, partly those who are in substitution programmes,
- Youth and young adults in prison, mostly with drug experience.

In general the interviewees did dislike the way the media (newspapers and TV, particularly TV news and TV series/films) describe their conditions of life or individual situation. Partly the picture is much more dramatic than the reality, i.e. there are good examples of good integration; partly the description over generalises the problem, neglecting individual characteristics and also achievements; partly the presentation is only a moral statement. The Jewish group, especially the old generation, has little access to TV (language barrier) and is totally ignored by the media as subjects.

The picture designed by the media sometimes does accomplish and confirm what experiences and institutions have already set up: the protagonists take over and accept the 'heterostereotype' as auto (hetero) stereotype: young delinquents and drug users have deficits, are not able to act, not responsible not reliable, not curable...

Matter-of-factly there is no presentation these protagonists can identify themselves with. Hence, as the interviews intended to be somehow activating, the protagonists developed the wish to be better represented in the mainstream media.

However, to get access to media is not that easy. Reports, also self reports, have to fulfil formal and aesthetic criteria. Journalists would be happy to use authentic material, but it has to be usable.

Present yourself

To provide the media with authentic and differentiating material about marginalised groups is just one aspect. The main aspect, however, is a social one, empowerment. Whether people like or dislike how the social category they belong to is represented, whatever can be the opportunity to 'enter the media': people who are marginalised and discriminated, who are discouraged and powerless, people who need to get control over their life (including the opinion other people have with regard to them), people who are able and willing to master their life – those people can be empowered, for instance, by presenting themselves, by completing a presentation, by producing a video film. This is the leading idea of the project.

The groups we addressed (see above) responded positively. Those who had been interviewed expressed their interest in presenting themselves as the real experts of their lives. We offered them the opportunity to design an alternative presentation.

However for various reasons most of the protagonists did not manage to realise this offer.

Though there were intensive talks and numerous meetings with a group of ex-junkies the production of a video film had to cope with lots of difficulties. As the protagonists had to take care of their medical treatment and fulfil their duties towards the labour office (training courses etc.), but could not afford (financially) the transport to the meeting point etc, the group work did not proceed. At last, two ex-drug addict young adults agreed to cooperate with two students who shot a video portrait with, i.e. about them. It

is, however, this group of young people who are most reluctant to present (or be presented) publicly, as it would be a kind of outing; some of them would not like to be exposed to moral judgements or reminded of their former life.

As far as the immigrants from the former USSR were concerned, the barriers have been definitely too high: They could not be convinced to make a script and start shooting pictures, to tell 'their stories' themselves.

One group, however, started to work: six young adults (20-23 years old) in prison decided to produce a video film about themselves. Of course the authorities had to agree first. This was no problem due to the fact that an integrative project (prisoners and students spend free time together) was quite successful. Hence two students were allowed to support the prisoners, i.e. motivate and animate them, teach them how to cope with the technical equipment etc. The director of this institution as well as the young people were highly interested in that pursuit as there is a lack of attractive leisure time activities and social training (cooperation, teamwork).

After four months the six young adults, supported by two students and the project officer, have completed the product: a DVD of 32 minutes, 'Between delinquency and drug addiction – Living behind the walls'.

The protagonists present themselves including the crimes they have committed. They talk about their daily life in prison, how they suffered during the process of getting clean, their guilt and their hopes.

Power

The official vernissage (inside the prison, selected guests – including parents and staff!) was obviously (and according to their statements) an important event in the protagonists' life: 'It is me, Marcel, Tino... I have together with my mates completed this work!'. 'It is me who is talking about me, not the authorities, the judge', 'We express our opinions and feelings, we determine what is going on'. This film has remarkably increased the self-esteem of the protagonists.

The seven young men, however, are not in the same situation. Three or four have still to 'sit' (stay) another three or four years. One man, however, expected to leave the prison after some months and did so in the meantime. He is looking for a job now, and has still in mind to make 'something with media'.

Though the film gives a description of daily life in the institution, the protagonists refrain from almost any critical comment. Informally they conceded not to have told the whole truth. They anticipated disadvantages, realistically or not. Insofar it is not easy to smuggle citizenship through the walls.

Citizenship

Citizenship education is presumed to enable people to become active; to participate and interfere in one's own affairs. Images (knowledge of others about us) can be of concern.

Citizenship education must not strengthen the powerful, but the powerless. Disadvantages include the lack of access to media and public representation. Hence, to overcome this lack, a type of contra public sphere is to be established.

Citizenship education needs to build on the experiences of success (impact): be it the production and the product in a materialistic sense, be it the message and its reception in the public.