The Theoretical Basis for the Youth-Centered Approach: The Background, Concept, and Its Impact in Estonia

Andu Rämmer, Anne Kivimäe, Maria Žuravljova, Kaur Kötsi

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INTRODUCTION

"Youth-centeredness" as an approach does not have one single definition in the context of the Estonian youth work. However, international research literature and the research it is based on has considered youth-centeredness in different contexts, including the spheres of youth work, health, education, etc.

The aim of development of the present concept is the research-based interpretation of the notion of the "youth-centered approach" which means understanding of the essence and meaning of this concept in the context of Estonia. The existence of the concept is the prerequisite for development and implementation of the youth-centered approach. Formulating of the concept is based logic of the present project where the starting point is the awareness of the need for the youth-centered approach and the outcome is the model which is implemented in the work with young people (Figure 1).

increasing the quality and impact of public services / activities provided to young people

the concept of youth-centredness

describing the content of the approach through a science-based identification of components and key elements

a description of the process required for the implementation of the concept, its measures and activities

the need for a youth-centred approach
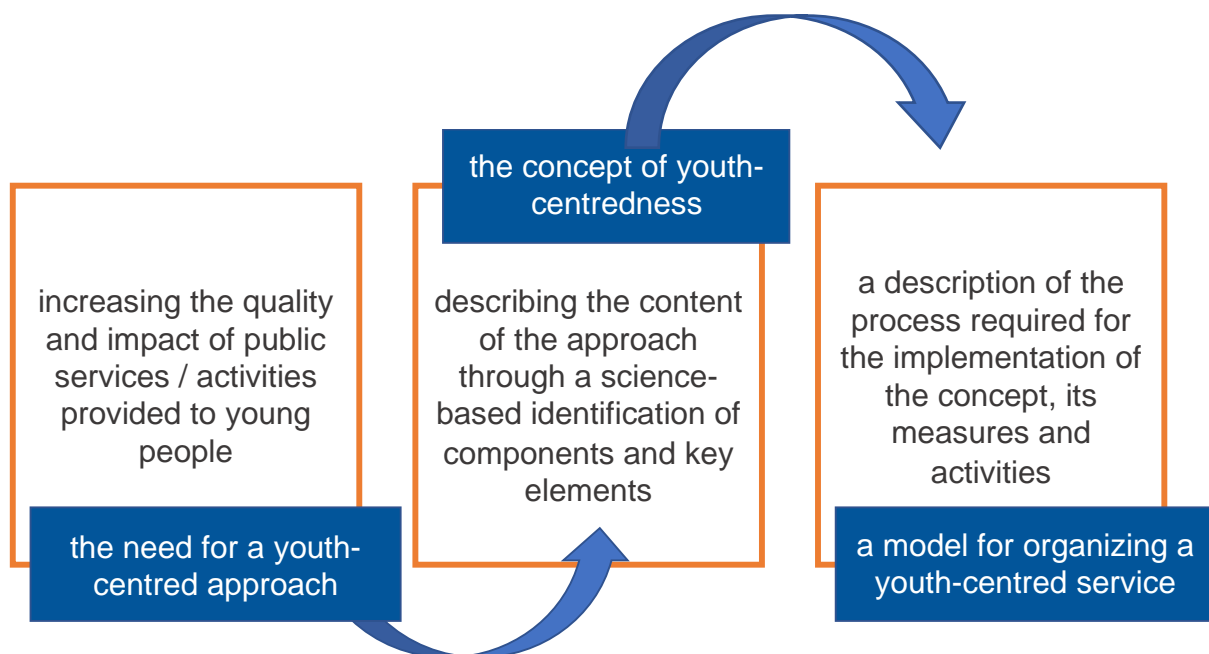
a model for organizing a youth-centred service

Figure 1. The Process Logic of Development of the Youth-Centered Approach

ASPECTS OF YOUTH-CENTREDNESS: REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The starting point of the youth-centered approach: the young person's right to be a respected personality and a change agent

Helve, Leccardi, and Kovacheva who have studied the development of youth research in Eastern Europe (2020/2005) point out that after the liberalization which began in socialist countries after the 1950s, young people were pictured in the role of the leading constructor of communism as they were believed to have been less spoiled by the experience of living in the capitalist society compared to older generations. Taru et al. (2015) specify that the Soviet ideology treated youth not as independent subjects, but as objects to be used for a political goal, with the attitude implemented starting from early childhood. After the Soviet period ended, the communist ideology weakened, and the new goal was to shape young people into active members of society who can make informed and rational decisions.

The downfalls of this approach are constantly revealed at the international level. The view on young people as citizens, members of society sometime *in the future* (once they become adults) and the focus on their "developing", "shaping" causes a negative view on young people (as if there is something missing about them, for example, they are not valued fully). It focuses attention on shortcomings and ignores the youth agency – the view on young people as on essential creators, developers, and change agents in their own and society's life (Corney, 2014: 27). Numerous researchers have analyzed the increase of young people's personal confidence, independent coping and valuing of their life; they have also studied the way in which this support has impacted young people's feeling of being able to direct their lives in a self-aware way as well as how it has impacted their wellbeing and mental health (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Collura et al. 2019; Lorimer, Knight & Shoeveller 2020; Muukkonen & Tulensalo 2004; Williamson, 2018). Focusing on unemployed youth, Williamson (2018) has vividly formulated the modern approach which suits all young people, "*Unemployed young people are not empty boats that need to be equipped with skills and competences to create "professional competitiveness" (sometimes in a strange way for vacancies that do not exist). They are agents that call for changes in their lives who have unused potential, abilities that need development, motivators that need to be started and pursuits that presuppose an individual approach.*"

Bamber et al. (2014) and Ord et al. (2021) emphasize that the core of youth work is the young person, their personality, the recognition of the young person as the key personality. The same principle is also highlighted in the constructivist approach to learning: the role of the teacher is to be a mentor who encourages, directs, and supports the learner in the process of searching for the meaning. The teacher is not the only source of knowledge, and they do not possess the whole knowledge, but the teacher learns and develops together with learners (Virkus, Lepik et al. 2017: 621). From the future point of view, the teacher's role is increasingly the one of the learner, supporter, and mentor. The teacher also teaches values, which means that they consciously shape learner's attitudes and support development of a self-regulating learner (Ministry of Education and Research 2021: 18).

Treating a child as an active subject is important both in child welfare and custodial care (D'Cruz & Stagnitti 2008, Toros et al. 2013, Davidson-Arad & Kaznelson 2010 et al.). UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the essential principle is to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration. Reinomägi et al. (2014) describe the wellbeing of a child as a dynamic process which is a consequence of child's own inner, interpersonal, social, and cultural processes (Figure 2).
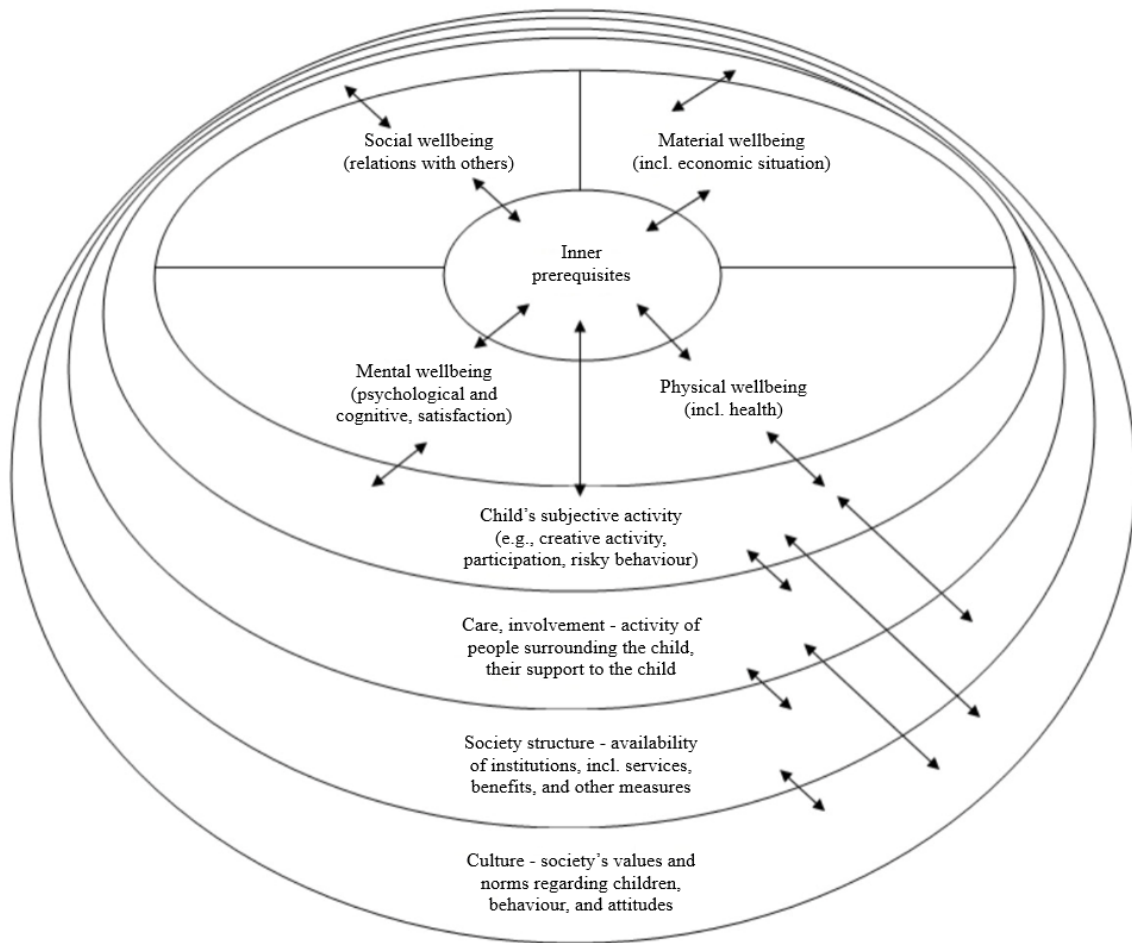
Figure 2. Structural Model of Child's Wellbeing. Reference: Reinomägi et al. (2014: 7)

The model of child's wellbeing depicted on Figure 2, which is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, emphasizes the child's own subjective role in perceiving and influencing the surrounding world. The model follows the principles of numerous other authors and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The authors of the model believe that different approaches consider the individual as a physical, mental, and social being who is surrounded by material, social and institutional relations in specific cultural room. All these together make an impact on the child's wellbeing, as their wellbeing is the outcome of diverse interconnected processes (Reinomägi et al.: 2014).

In brief, it can be concluded that attitude to a young person as to a personality and to a change agent in their life from an early age creates a basis for the youth-centered approach.

Youth Participation and Empowerment

A lot of research and other research-based references describing youth-centeredness consider young people's consistent and content-rich real participation to be an essential part of youth-centeredness (Bamber O'Brien-Olinger, & O'Brien 2014; Erulkar, Onoka, & Phiri 2005; Heinzea & Jozefowicz 2009; Larson & Walker 2010; LeBlanc 2009; McLaughlin 2000; Walker & Larson 2012; Waltz 2012).

LeBlanc (2009: 3-8) studies youth-centeredness based on the meaning accepted in youth health promotion: youth-centeredness means that young people are involved in a content-rich manner, they take part in all aspects. The most used terms that the author points out include youth-friendly, youth-focused, and youth-centered, which can be viewed as a continuum. Placing youth in the center supports participating youth's right to accomplish their goals through this participation, to act together with other young people and adults, to openly share their opinions and express themselves (Bamber et al. 2014: 9). McLaughin (2000: 9-100) highlighted the importance of giving youth the leading role and voice: in youth-centered organizations young people have the central role in planning events and developing formal and informal rules for members' activity.

Collura et al. (2019) use the conceptual framework of youth empowerment as a basis for defining the structures and processes which are necessary for creating changes for young people. They point out that the change efforts of the youth-led community have an impact on three levels: individual, group, and on a wider community level. On the individual level youth's participation in such efforts facilitates their positive development, including development of critical thinking skills, psychological empowerment as well as social and political development in a broader sense. While young people are working together with their group members on making changes, they are learning to fulfil tasks and becoming critically aware of the way in which changes get implemented in their local communities. For young people to be efficient change agents, adults should offer them instrumental support and supervision. Researchers have also pointed out that the organizers of youth-led programs (i.e., adult supporters) need constant support and supervision in their efforts to create central scaffolding structures and to support youth's feeling of ownership and leadership.

Christens and Peterson (2012) have made the conclusion that when young people are confident that they can influence socio-political systems of which they are a part it can change their perception of wellbeing and behavior patterns. To a certain extent, the advancement of perceived trust and control in socio-political issues depends on the support which a young person receives in the family, school, neighborhood, and in other social circumstances. The authors use the term *development cascade* to name the connections between supporting environmental conditions, empowering, and positive development results. In their opinion, when looked at from the development cascade perspective, a chain reaction is produced for socio-political development from strategies which are focused both on improving the quality of supporting environment in youth's life and on involving youth in processes of community development.

Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro (2010) describe empowering as essential in increasing the positive impact of actions/services, highlight the perception of belonging, relations with workers and efficiency support as components of the so-called empowering index, as well as reveal a strong correlation between these components.

Value-basedness and capability

According to Amartya Sen's capability approach, wellbeing and the quality of life express a person's actual capability to achieve the life that they have the reason to consider worthy. Actual freedoms of choice and the actual capability to use them create the basis for that. Researchers in Estonia have also revealed that those valuations and norms which support personal autonomy, freedom of choice, and, on the other hand, trustful relations in the society need development (Sutrop 2019).

Knowing about the development of youth's valuations helps to understand orientations of the society, as the predominant opinion among researchers is that valuations develop at the young age and remain relatively permanent as the person's life goes on (Rämmer et al. 2019: 7). Different researchers of values (Hofstede 2001, Inglehart & Baker 2000, Rezsohazy 2001) have discovered that values develop during socialization at the young age. The basis of young people's confidence is the existence of certain identity and strong values. As values refer to desired goals and the ways to achieve them (Rokeach 1973), then they can be divided into

two types. Terminal values refer to aims achieving which is the final goal for young people. Such values include, for instance, self-respect, happiness, social recognition, freedom, exciting life. Instrumental values represent desired ways of behavior while moving towards one's wish. Such values are, for example, politeness, responsibility, bravery, independence, self-management, honesty. Thus, instrumental values determine our rules of behavior while also defining the ways of achieving terminal values.

Young people's self-image is essential in their development. In addition to their uniqueness, it also reflects young people's belonging to others. According to Tajfel's (1982) theory of social identity, in addition to knowledge about one's belonging to social groups, the self-image is also shaped based on the value attached to this belonging and on the emotional meaning. According to Marcia (1966), who did thorough research on identity development at the young age, a person of this age wants to live through different experiences and looks for essential roles and values for oneself in various spheres of life (for instance, relations with other people, gender roles, study, work).

Living conditions which are reflected in youth's valuations become clear in polarization between coping or survival values and self-expression values (Inglehart 2018). Young people who emphasize coping values have a high need for security, they value material confidence, they do not consider themselves to be happy, they have rigid gender roles, and they treat strangers with suspicion. Young people who emphasize self-expression values appreciate freedom of choice, gender equality and environment-friendly lifestyle, they organize themselves for protection of their interests, trust other people and tolerate differences. The results of the decades-long research conducted by Inglehart and Baker (2000) reveal that young people cherish self-expression values more than material coping and security. This has resulted in young people's preferences shifting towards self-expression, subjective wellbeing, and valuing of the quality of life.

A good overview of youth's valuations and their changes is provided in World Values Survey conducted by Inglehart for decades. The survey results provide the basis for comparing young people's valuations with preferences of older population groups starting from 1990 (Inglehart 2018, Realo 2019:21, Rämmer 2019). According to Inglehart's theory which analyses values

change, there was a cultural shift in Western countries with a higher standard of living in the post-war decades. Brought about by the increase of financial wealth, the shift constituted a value shift from materialist values towards the post-materialist direction when young generations replaced older ones whose values which had been shaped during their youth had been affected by more harsh material conditions. As financial security and wellbeing increased, each successive generation replaced orientation towards material and physical security with emphasis on self-expression values. Similar orientation has also been revealed among younger generations in Estonia. The results of this research show that during the period from 1990 to 2018 all young people in Estonia under 26 years of age valued both independence and imaginativeness in upbringing of children more than older generations did. The results also show that Russian-speaking young people have always considered supporting of acquiring independence as an especially important aspect of family upbringing. No systematic ethnic differences had been previously revealed regarding the support to developing imaginativeness, but in 2018 it was more important for the Estonian-speaking youth than for Russian-speaking young people. Thus, it can be said that over the years young people have cherished creating possibilities for development within their own environment of upbringing. As young people feel that family upbringing does not support the development of independence or imaginativeness to the extend which complies with their needs, then here youth-centered services have a possibility to develop in young people the features which they desire to have (*ibid*.).

Young people's greater awareness of their own values and their capability to analyze their value world in a balanced way as well as to make connections with the surrounding world creates prerequisites for comprehending what is "reasonable to consider valuable" and for understanding what obstacles there are on the way to realization of one's capability.

Focusing on strengths and valuing differences

As the key-element of the youth-centered approach, LeBlanc (2009: 9-12) points out that it is essential to rely on the action-based practice, taking into consideration such youth resources as skills, talents, communicative skills, support of family and peers, mentality, experiences gained from failures, personal hopes, and dreams. An important key element is valuing

differences. By these LeBlanc means, first and foremost, the age, culture, gender, sexual orientation, as well as physical and mental abilities. The place of living, religion, and family values also play an important role. An organization that values differences makes sure that everybody is involved in services and programs that it provides. In this context LeBlanc considers it important for people who work with youth to understand the impact of groups that dominate in the society on young people from non-dominant groups because services and programs mostly express the opinions and values of dominant groups, and the providers of services are mostly members of dominant groups who proceed from the standpoint of their group. Such an approach creates serious obstacles for members of non-dominant groups. Thus, based on LeBlanc's approach, it is important for the youth-centered approach to recognize differences among young people, to pay active attention to inequality rooted in being different from the dominant group, and to pay attention to raising awareness about them (*ibid.*).

McLaughlin (2000: 9-10), who point outs elements of the youth-centered approach, mentions that efficient community-based organizations offer activities to young people of different levels of capability and with different skills and interests. McLaughlin supports LeBlanc's ideas of strength-based practice by emphasizing that youth-centered organizations do not deal with correcting of young people's earlier mistakes and faults, but their role is to support your people and develop their strengths. Young people are cared for; their needs and values are accepted. Youth-centered organizations connect actions with young people's interests and strengths.

Importance of context and staff

Waltz (2012) focuses on youth-centeredness as on an activity based on shared values. When describing the youth-centered approach, the researcher highlights the following components:

- services are provided in places where young people can participate;
- young people are encouraged to view their own experiences and the surrounding world critically;
- young people are assisted in making conscious choices about their individual duties in their community;

- young people are encouraged to achieve and develop their potential in cooperation with the education obtained in school and university;

- in cooperation with other institutions the society is encouraged to react to young people's needs.

Erulkar et al. (2005) have conducted a closer analysis of youth-centeredness in health services. Youth-centered health service is a combination of high-quality services that are appropriate for young people, available, attractive, affordable, and acceptable. Applying WHO standpoints' interpretation by Erulkar et al. (2005) to youth work, it can be said that youth-centered services are characterized by the following aspects of service providers, facilities, and the content of services:

- workers who can notice youth's needs;

- workers who respect privacy and confidentiality of provided services;

- workers who dedicate sufficient time to a young person;

- institutions where peer-trainers are available for young people;

- separate rooms and time slots are available for young people;

- time slots that are convenient for young people;

- services are provided in convenient locations;

- young people are involved in services;

- short waiting time;

- affordable or free-of-charge services; and

- a wide range of services.

Sanders and Munford (2014) who researched practices offering possibilities for positive development have discovered that if young people are actively connected to services provision, experience respectful treatment in service provision, are able to create positive relations with employers, and if they are given an opportunity to intervene and make corresponding decisions about programs, then the programs will also achieve better results. The results were better for vulnerable young people when services were provided in a respectful and empowering way. In their opinion, consistently positive experiences can have a more long-term impact on young people's development and psychological resilience than specific interventions. Research results simultaneously refer to permanent connections

between the nature of the different services provision (e.g., respectful treatment, adaptation to young people's circumstances, empowerment, creating action possibilities for young people's activities) and coping as well as capability of vulnerable youth. Sanders and Munford (2014) highlight two aspects which are characteristic of the nature and quality of a youth-centered service:

- supporting young people's autonomous coping and their capability through service organization and provision, which is working with young people in the way that empowers and respects them, while considering their cultural identity, family circumstances and values as well as encouraging young people's active role and involvement;

- striving for effectiveness or achievement of the best possible results, which is characterized by young people's involvement in offering of a service, young people's experiencing of services as worthy of respect, creation of positive relations with service providers and by possibilities to make decisions and have a say in decision-making regarding interventions and programs.

Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro (2010) also highlight the importance of positive relations between young people participating in activities/services/programs and the staff. Good relations create young people's perception that they are accepted which, in its own turn, inspires them to participate and develop. Youth's activeness, in turn, strengthens relations with the staff, which is why the influence is mutual and synergetic.

According to LeBlanc (2010: 16-18), the main obstacles to the youth-centered approach are also the reasons based on attitudes and organization of work. The former includes negation of young people's equality, treating young people as troublemakers, power relations, tokenism, stereotypic treatment of young people's enthusiasm and placing unrealistic expectations on youth. The limitations related to the organization of work are logistical and organizational barriers. LeBlanc points out convenient time slots, support on behalf of the organization, limitation of means of transport, adults' falling behind in using modern means of communication.

Conclusions

The youth-centered approach does not have a single definition, although based on the international research literature it can be highlighted that the approach is based on the perception that a young person is a personality from a young age. As a personality, a young person has their own rights, and they are the so-called change agents in their life that is a party who actively influences decisions. Such treatment of young people can be found in domains of youth work, education, and social work. Youth empowerment and participation enables young people to act as change agents: to acquire confidence, possibilities, and capability to take part in decision-making and to influence their life. This also results in the increase of the effect of services and activities as well as the expansion of their outreach. The support of young people's self-definition and value space enables a young person to develop confidence and self-trust to comprehend those aspects of their life which are important, and which are worthy of development, i.e., the ones which a young person has the reason to consider valuable. The context of the services provided to young people and of the activities offered to them as well as the capability of the staff have significant influence on implementation of the youth-centered approach.

Based on the analysis of the research literature we can conclude that the consistent and systematic youth-centered approach in organization of services results in greater effectiveness of services, especially to young people in difficult situations. It also results in youth's more consistent and content-rich participation in services; the influence of community, including on young people who do not participate in services directly; as well as in the increase of youth's confidence as personalities and their valuing of own life thus supporting young people's perception of them being conscious influencers of their lives.

CONCEPT OF THE YOUTH-CENTRED APPROACH: DEFINITION, COMPONENTS, AND KEY ELEMENTS

The concept of the youth-centered approach that was developed based on the research literature analysis consists of the approach definition and the determination of the approach components and their key elements.

The description of the components and their key elements also takes into consideration the need to create the model which supports organizing public services, including youth work, for young people in the youth-centered way. This need is the basis for conceptualizing youth-centeredness as a wholesome approach. The need to create the model also results in the choice to determine the components and their key elements taking into consideration the criteria of practical applicability. It is essential for the conceptual approach to be "interpretable" in development of practically applicable measures and activities.

Definition of youth-centered approach

The youth-centered approach is placing the development of young people's personality and their wellbeing to the midpoint of the content, organization, and development of services/activities with the aim to achieve the best result for young people.
It means that making of choices regarding goals, forms, methods, and organization of work must be based on the perception of a young person as a self-aware personality, must support the achievement of a young person's mental and physical wellbeing on the whole and to strive for corresponding effectiveness of activities/services.

Youth-centered approach: components and their key elements

The components of the youth-centered approach are the list of the main foundations which support the development of activities/services and the process of their provision or organization into youth-centered (Figure 2). The essential foundations for acting are grouped as components based on their aim while the main parts of a specific component, i.e., key elements, have an explanatory and specifying role.
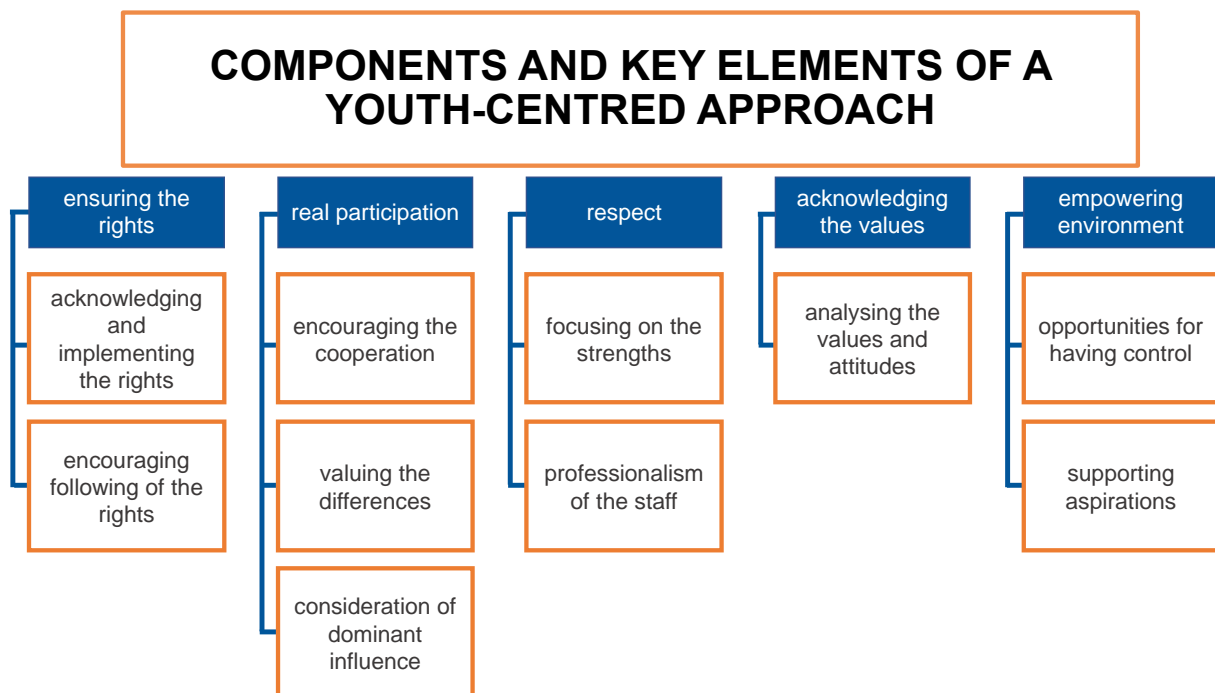
COMPONENTS AND KEY ELEMENTS OF A YOUTH-CENTRED APPROACH

ensuring the rights	real participation	respect	acknowledging the values	empowering environment
acknowledging and implementing the rights	encouraging the cooperation	focusing on the strengths	analysing the values and attitudes	opportunities for having control
encouraging following of the rights	valuing the differences	professionalism of the staff		supporting aspirations
	consideration of dominant influence			

Figure 2. 5 components of the youth-centered approach and their key elements. Reference: Rämmer et al. (2023:26)

Ensuring the rights

Young people are subjects of human rights, and this applies not to the future when they become adults, but to them already at the young age. Regulations dealing with children's rights and human rights on the while guarantee inalienable rights to each young person. The recognition and valuing of these rights should also be expressed in activities and services which are offered to young people and in which young people take part. Ignoring young people's rights, including denying youth's equality, treating young people as troublemakers, tokenism, stereotypic treatment of young people's activeness and passiveness and so on results in obstacles in implementation of the youth-centered approach. The constant consideration of young people's rights in organization of activities and services creates prerequisites for development of the practice in which valuing of rights develops into the cooperation atmosphere necessary for participation, self-development, and results. Rights have the following key elements:

- Acknowledging and implementing young people's rights

Young people's rights should be included in the knowledge base of specialists working with youth. Different behavior and action guidelines, professional ethics codes, etc. could offer support for following these rights in everyday work;

- Encouraging following of the rights

  In cooperation with different spheres and parties in young people's lives, specialists that organize activities and services for young people can pay more attention to youth rights and encourage the parties to consider and follow them.

Real participation

Young people's participation is the component of youth-centered approach that has gained the most attention so far. Young people's real participation means here youth's possibility to participate (i.e., first and foremost, receive information, be counselled, express opinion, be heard and receive feedback to one's opinion) in decisions concerning their own life, including decision-making processes regarding goals, realization, organization, and assessment of an activity/service. To really use the possibility for participation, it is necessary to increase young people's trust by valuing their opinion at different stages of the process as well as by supporting their interest and motivation to develop and express their opinions. It is also essential to provide young people with consistent and reasoned feedback on taking their opinions into consideration.

The key elements of ensuring real participation are as follows:

- encouraging the cooperation

  Encouraging cooperation among young people enables young people to achieve a greater outreach of their voice (opinions) thus empowering participation and creating possibilities for greater involvement of different young people in the participation process. The cooperation among young people can also develop into more extensive cooperation on the community level and thus influence those young people who are not directly involved in an activity or service. In addition to encouraging cooperation among young people, cooperation between youth and adults is also essential. It is the cooperation that is based on the partnership principle and creates the basis for development of the trustful relationship between the adults involved in the organization of a service/activity and the young people that participate in it.

- Valuing the differences

  Young people are personalities of different ages, with basic differences related to culture, nationality, gender, health, etc. Valuing differences in ensuring participation means that real participation of each young person is possible and supported. Young people's diverse opinions enrich the content and efficiency of an activity/service. In addition to valuing differences, it is also necessary to take into consideration the influence of the mindset that is dominant in the society. Opinions of the majority often become dominant, and the young people who express these opinions are most seen and heard. To ensure real participation of young people it is essential to understand and take into consideration the fact that the opinions expressed by few young people are as important as the ones that are dominant in the society. Paying attention to non-dominant opinions reduces obstacles to participation of all young people, minimizes the risk of unequal treatment and ignorance as well as allows to discover the create potential of all young people.

Respect

The extent to which young people who participate in an activity/service feel that their dignity is respected by the specialists working with youth has significant influence on young people's participation, remaining involved and efficiency of activities/services. Mutual trust, reasoned exchanges of thoughts, information exchange, specialists' respectful attitude that takes into consideration young people's background circumstances and values create the basis for increase of young people's confidence, self-definition. Also, for development of the readiness to take responsibility for positive development of oneself and one's surroundings. Respectful communication has especially great influence in work with young people who have run into trouble.

The key elements of the component are:
- focusing on the strengths

  The practice that is based on strengths supports treating each young person as a valuable and creative personality who has experience, talents, skills, capability, and other resources that can be focused on to create a positive basis for development. Linking activities/services with a young persons' strengths supports young person's

valuing of their own life and development. If our starting points is the shortcomings, such as little skills, little knowledge, experience, etc., then already at the start correcting the faults makes the young person take on a passive role, which does not support the effectiveness of activities/services. Encouraging a young person to critically view their own experience enables them to notice their own needs for development.

- professionalism of the staff

    Positive relations between young people participating in activities/services and specialists who organize them influence the efficiency and effectiveness of services. Good relations ensure confidence and allow a young person to feel accepted thus increasing their involvement in activities. The professionalism of the staff is the basis for that. Young people's needs can be notices by workers who dedicate sufficient time to young people and who show respectful attitude towards young people's self-image, values, skills, experience, etc. Such workers can inspire a young person to deal with their challengers, thus inspiring their self-management, and they support young people's agency. Consistent positive experiences have more extensive influence on a young person that a specific activity/service, extending to other spheres and levels. Specialists' professionalism is also expressed through respect of youth's privacy and confidentiality and through ensuring them in the working processes.

Acknowledging the values

The capability-based approach emphasizes the actual capability to the life that can reasonably be considered valuable. Supporting a young person in becoming aware of their self-image and identity and in analyzing their values helps the young person to comprehend the valuable aspects of their life. It also increases their understanding of which faults there are in present possibilities and of the capability to use these possibilities to strive for changes in life, of what can be considered valuable. Goal setting through understanding of valuations and the belief in possibilities to shape one's life in a desired direction empower a young person. Strengthening of self-expression values enables a young person to see perspectives and needs for development. The key element of the "acknowledging the values" component is:

- analyzing the values and attitudes

Acknowledging of one's own and other's valuations can be supported through systematic activity. Activities/service must facilitate such an analysis as well as provide the time and place for conducting a critical analysis of one's own values, values of others and society and linking them with everyday life in trustful atmosphere.

Empowering environment

Supportive environment and empowering of young people increase the influence of service/activities. The context, environment, and way of organization of services and activities offered to a young person can shape and increase a young person's trust, belief in oneself and thus influence the quality of services and their duration. Different only from the approach focusing on the development of individual knowledge-skills, the view that concentrates on empowering includes a young person's multi-layered involvement in achieving of a change and development into an implementor of changes on the level of the society, community and on the level of young person's own personality. The connections among the supportive environment, empowering and positive results influence form a unique development cascade which can be achieved by paying attention to the quality of the supporting environment and empowering.

The key elements of this component are:

- opportunities for having control

  A young person's belief and confidence that they have the possibility to have and implement control in the society around them, including in the spheres related to the activities/services offered to them, increases the influence that the activities/services of these spheres have on the young person's perception of their wellbeing and on their behavior patterns. The perception of having control and the capability to implement it as well as the possibility to take the leading role are the prerequisites of empowerment. Supporting them is, in turn, an essential means for achieving influence.

- supporting aspirations

  It is essential for a young person to receive a real experience of participation in an activity/service. Each participant finds out for themselves through direct experience whether there is a gap between rhetoric and practice in provision of activities/services

and what kind of gap it is. Supportive environment must be expressed through actual work and its organization in such a way that a young person who takes part in a service would feel that their circumstances are taken into consideration, their personality is respected, and their aspirations are empowered. The practice must strive for effectiveness and efficiency in such a way that a young person would perceive it as an empowering experience.

RESPONSE TO COMPONENTS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE YOUTH-CENTRED APPROACH IN THE ESTONIAN CONTEXT

Research of evaluations of Estonian experts

In-depth interviews with Estonian youth experts and focus group interviews in the field of open youth work were conducted to estimate relevance of the theoretical approach (Rämmer et al 2023). The aim of the research was to evaluate the theoretical concept of the youth-centered approach that was composed based on the analysis of research literature, including previous research. The aim was also to evaluate the meaningfulness and relevance of the components of the concept in the Estonian context.

By experts the research meant employees of state institutions and umbrella organizations functioning in the sphere of Estonian youth work that have long experience of planning and organization of offering services to young people. Such a criterium for the sample selection was based on the need to compose a more wholesome picture of the services that are offered to young people through involving evaluations based on diverse experiences and perceptions. This would allow to analyze the response to the components of the composed concept in Estonia. During the period of 19.-30.03.2021 there were conducted semi-structured interviews with seven experts (employees of state institutions and umbrella organizations functioning in the sphere of Estonian youth work that have long experience of planning and organization of offering services to young people). Individual interviews were conducted in the Zoom environment and transcribed. The method of qualitative content analysis was used for analyzing the collected data.

Meaning and importance of the youth-centered approach

Youth-centeredness is generally perceived as important, but, according to respondents' evaluations, acting based on this perception in the everyday practice is not sufficient. The data analyzed during the survey confirmed that the notion "youth-centeredness" has a meaning in Estonia despite the absence of the corresponding legal definition. It is linked, first and foremost, with proceeding from the actual needs and circumstances of a young person as the principle of youth work and from the principle of acting together with a young person. Both

these principles have been important in the youth sphere in Estonia for a long time. In this way it is perceived that youth-centeredness as a principle is typical or even primary in construction of the youth sphere, it is connected to the foundations of youth work and youth policy in Estonia. Proceeding from a young person and their needs has been the basis of the development of the modern youth sphere since the 1990s, and documents also reflect this principle. At the same time, it is necessary to distinguish between the importance of the principle of proceeding from a young person and their actual needs or youth-centeredness in Estonia "on paper" and in practice. As estimated by the participants of the research, reaching of principles to practice has been sporadic, and the "*picture is more diverse*" in the everyday work than it is in the documents on the declarations level. It can be linked just to elementariness youth-centered approach as a principle in the way the youth sphere is treated in modern Estonia: the principle is rhetorically very comprehendible and familiar, but at times sufficient attention is not paid to the implementation of the principle in the actual work.

Response to the five components in Estonia

The suitability of the theoretical concept of the youth-centred approach in the youth field was analysed through 8 focus group interviews (specialists organising youth work in local authorities, youth centre staff and young people visiting youth centres) in the field of open youth work. The five main components of youth-centeredness that are defined in the theoretical concept are relevant in Estonia and considerable in organization of practical work and filling it with content. The research of experts' evaluation of the content of the five components has shown the perception of their importance in working with young people and in planning of activities focusing on young people. There was no component whose content was perceived as irrelevant or unimportant. At the same time the experts did not find that anything significant was missing, but they rather highlighted one component, acknowledging the values, by pointing out that its diversity and the little amount of attention it had been receiving so far.

During the interviews, the experts spoke on the topic of **young people's rights** and pointed out that essential ethical principles are written down in the code of ethics for youth workers and the aspects related to rights are included in the professional standard:

"*who else but the youth worker takes young people's rights into consideration and places them in the foreground*".

The experts pointed out that children's rights are often the starting point because they are formulated as a whole. At the same time, the situation with young adults is more complicated: they are partially treated as adults and partially, e.g., when problems arise, as minors. Speaking about access to services as about a young person's right, interviewees pointed out that, for instance, in Estonian youth work the rights to some services can be regulated by specific strategic documents that are developed by the government. When the validity period of a document ends, politicians have a possibility to alter the package of services, i.e., the rights, according to their vision. A lot of aspects in youth work depend on local municipality; in this context the access (for instance, the distance to the youth center) is not equal for everybody. The extent to which people who are in direct contact with young people are aware of youth's rights and of linking the rights to specific practice can be an obstacle in taking young people's rights into consideration.

When discussing young people's **real participation**, interviewees highlighted the problems of tokenism and doing everything by oneself which pushes a young person to take on the role where no real participation takes places. The voice of those young people who are not interested in the so-called traditional forms of participation cannot be heard, although the participation right is one of the most important also in the context of traditional forms, including elections. Realization of youth's participation often requires cooperation with an adult, which is why in this context the partnership between a young person and the specialist working with them is an essential condition for real participation, because adults mostly just want to thrust young people into the frames of adult world. A problem also arises when both sides treat the dialogue between perceptions of young people and adults in a serious way. Sometimes it can be said that we are dealing with a clash of different cultures. Cooperation among young people inspires; and it is essential to bring together young people who, most probably, would not meet otherwise. It was found that cooperation among young people needs further development. In case of ensuring equal possibilities the question mostly lies in needs of a specific target group or a certain young person. For instance, young people with special needs have limited possibilities; it is also challenging to establish cooperation between

Estonian and Russian young people. The communication skills of the specialist working with a young person are very important in promoting of participation.

The topic of communication skills together with the importance of noticing young people's wishes and needs develops into the topic more generally titled as the component **respect**. The interviewees perceived that in youth work noticing of young people's strengths and relying on them is a prerequisite to fulfil the task which was set for youth work. Youth work is a very good sphere for testing and developing oneself; and the more diverse the package of services is offered to young people, the more probable it is that young people of very different opinions will find possibilities for self-development from there. A young person themselves should have a possibility to make decisions about their self-realization and -development. Adults should trust young people here. If a young person does not find their potential, the danger is that they can be taken advantage of, for instance, radicalized. This is where a youth worker takes responsibility, they direct a young person and must make sure that a young person receives help and is taken care of. The interviewees also referred to the time (and money) resource which, to a great extent, determines how much time a person who works with a young person can use for discovering the young person's strengths, learning about their development needs, for individual work with the young person, etc.

Describing their perception of **acknowledging the values** as the component of the youth-centered approach, the respondents pointed out its importance in modern practice but mentioned that it had received little attention so far. Youth is the age when people criticize the values that are dominant in the society and put them to the test. This is neither good, nor bad, because in this process certain values get tested and the society becomes more open and flexible. Without knowing young people's values, it is impossible to develop or direct the youth sphere. At the same time, it is not possible to direct a person towards a different mindset or different values unless the young person themselves is ready for that. The interviewees pointed out that value education is one of the most powerful potentials of youth work. Here it is very important to know how young people think, what they value and what their worldview is. It is essential that next to the young person there would be such adults who would help them comprehend what is important for them. It is important for young people to

be aware of their values so that value education could not impose on them principles which dominate in the society. It is also important to understand differences between generations.

The interviewees considered youth empowerment to be positive potential. They found that the establishing of secure communication with youth is an essential principle which strengthens young people's confidence and feeling of participation. It encourages young people to act, try, express opinions, and ask questions. According to the respondents, an essential bottleneck in creating of empowering environment was establishing a trustful contact with a young person. In the context of encouraging, it is also necessary to consider cultural factors. Obstacles are focusing on "average" young people and disregarding those young people who do not belong to this group. Already from the purely demographic point of view, each young person is valuable, "as valuable as gold".

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