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Youth participation is something that has been discussed regularly within Caravan Circus Network. The subject has been brought up both in the General Assembly of Caravan and in the Caravan board meetings. Developing youth participation is in fact one of the goals in Caravan’s strategy. Involving young people in matters affecting them can be seen an important value for a network whose member organisations mainly work with young people, often coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The objective of this report is to paint a picture of the current state of youth participation within Caravan Circus Network. The idea to conduct this report came from discussions in a working group in the General Assembly of Caravan, organised in Prague 14th to 15th of February 2019. The group discussing youth involvement pointed out that there is no information available on what activities the member organisations are already doing regarding youth participation, and what their attitudes are towards it. Also, the group concluded that it would be important to look the theoretical part of youth participation and think about why and how Caravan wants to develop youth participation within the network. To answer to this need, I conducted this report as part of my Erasmus internship in Caravan between April and May 2019.

The report is based on a questionnaire sent to all the members of Caravan Circus Network and interviews that were conducted with both young people and adult organisers, relating to the theme of youth participation. The questionnaire and methodology are described in more detail later.

In the first part of this report, I present a brief overview of the key concepts and models of youth participation. In the next part, I will introduce the analysis of the questionnaire and the interviews conducted within the network. In the third part, I will present two examples of good practices in youth participation, found in the youth circus field. The report concludes with future project ideas for Caravan.

-Sohvi Silius

Youth Participation Mapping Report 2019
KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

Defining Young People

In the context of Caravan Circus Network, we are mainly talking about young people’s participation. However, a great part of the literature talks about children and young people’s participation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines children as all “human beings below the age of eighteen years”. However, for defining “youth” there are various definitions depending on the country or the context. For example, in Finland a young person is anyone under 29 years old, in France anyone between 4 to 24 years old and in Greece anyone between the ages of 15 and 35. The United Nations defines the term “youth” to include all persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

For the sake of clarity, we are using the definition of EU Youth Strategy, where “youth” includes teenagers and young adults aged between 13 and 30 years. Most of the possible funding options for the youth participation projects we are planning come from the European Union, so using this definition is the most relevant option. International projects are more complicated to do with children under the age of 13, because of language barriers and the need for more supervision while traveling. However, we still think that improving children’s participation in youth circuses is important, and many of the models and theories in this report are about children’s participation. Also, these two categories often overlap, because a 13-year-old is seen both as a child as a young person, depending on the definition.

In the context of Caravan, it’s useful to distinguish two categories of young people within the age range of 13 and 30. One category ‘young circus members’ usually between the ages of 13 and 20. They go to youth circus classes regularly and perform, but for them circus is mainly just a hobby. Another category is ‘young circus workers’ who are between the ages of 18 and 30. They are part of the organisation as assistant trainers, volunteers, trainers or administrative staff. They are taking responsibility of different areas in the circus school, even though they might be still training and going to classes themselves. The profiles of these groups are very different, so youth participation means different things to both of them. However, in this document we just talk about “young people” in general, because in the questionnaire that we conducted, we haven’t yet distinguished these two different groups.

What does children and young people’s participation mean?

To start off, we need to define what we mean by participation. A useful definition is given by Chawla (2001), based on a symposium “Children’s Participation in Community Settings” where experts on childhood research and community development gathered together. The symposium’s definition of participation is as follows:

**Participation is a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions. Participants interact in ways that respect each other’s dignity, with the intention of achieving a shared goal. In the process, the child experiences itself as playing a useful role in the community. Formal processes of participation deliberately create structures for children's engagement in constructing meaning and sharing decision making. (Chawla 2001)**

A critical point is that the child or the young person should feel that they are being useful and that their input is being taken into account. If a young person decides to participate by giving their time and effort, it should be used in a proper manner and the results of the participation should be clearly communicated to the young person.

The conversation on children and young people’s participation has been for the most part based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC (1989) covers all aspects of a child’s life, stating that children, meaning any person under the age of 18, are independent subjects who have rights. The UNCRC has been signed by 196 countries, which makes it the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history.

In regard of youth participation, the most important parts of the UNCRC are Article 12 and Article 13. Article 12 states that:

**States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.**

Article 13 emphasises children’s right to express themselves:

**The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.**

What the UNCRC is implying is that every child has rights, whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status. Essentially, the Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC pose pressure on both governments and smaller organisations to listen to children and young people’s opinions and to take them seriously.

It is important to consider the educational and developmental perspective of participation. Children and young people should be given the chance to participate and take responsibility from early on. Hart (1992, 5) states that it’s unrealistic to expect that young people will suddenly become responsible adult citizens if they have never been given the chance to try out these skills. The understanding of democratic participation and the self-confidence to participate are learned through practice, not by learning about it on an abstract level.
A lot of positive outcomes can be expected from involving children and young people in decisions affecting them. The children and young people themselves learn a lot. However, it’s not only youth that benefit from participation. The organisation and community can get valuable insights and improved quality of their services. Chawla (2001) has listed some of the expected outcomes of children’s participation, agreed by the symposium of leading experts in this field. You can find Chawla’s listing below.

Expected outcomes of children’s participation (direct quoting from Chawla, 2001):

For children themselves
- More positive sense of self
- Increased sense of competence
- Greater sensitivity to the perspectives and needs of others
- Greater tolerance and sense of fairness
- Increased understanding of democratic values and behaviours
- Preparation for a lifelong pattern of participation
- New social networks
- New skills
- Enjoyment

For the organisations that serve children
- Programme and policy development that is sensitive to children’s priorities
- The establishment of processes for participation
- Increased commitment to children’s rights
- Innovation

For children’s communities
- Public education regarding children’s rights
- More positive public attitudes and relationships to children
- Increased social capital
- Improved quality of life. (Chawla 2001, 5.)

Youth participation has grown to be a key value in the European Union as well. In the new EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027), youth participation is something that is given a lot of importance. One of the goals of the strategy is to “Engage”, which means that the strategy “aims towards a meaningful civic, economic, social, cultural and political participation of young people”.

Some of the more specific goals speak directly about involving young people in the decisions affecting their lives: “Encourage and promote inclusive democratic participation of all young people in society and democratic processes” and “Support and develop opportunities for ‘learning to participate’, raising interest in participatory actions and helping young people to prepare for participation”. Since the EU is probably the most important funder for youth mobility, the emphasis on youth participation in their strategy should be taken into account when planning international youth projects.
What does children and young people’s participation mean?

One of the most well-known models of children’s participation is Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation. It’s based on Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, which is a general model for adult participation in society. Hart borrowed the metaphor of ladders and developed some new categories better suited for children’s participation.

Models of non-participation:

1. **Manipulation.** Using children to advocate for adults’ agenda that the children don’t understand and pretending that this comes from the children. Consulting children but not giving them any feedback at all about how the information is being used. Conducting opinion polls where children don’t understand the meanings or the purpose of the instrument.

2. **Decoration.** Using children to raise awareness about a cause, for example by giving them t-shirts related to some cause or putting them to perform at an event, without them having any idea about what they are advocating for. This differs from manipulation in that adults don’t pretend that the cause is inspired by children, they just use them in an indirect way.

3. **Tokenism.** Children are given a voice, but in fact they can’t decide the subject or the style of communicating it. They participate within a frame already set by adults. Tokenism is more common than genuine forms of children’s participation in projects. Hart is giving the example of using children in conference panels. In some conferences, articulate children selected by adults participate on a panel with little preparation and often no consultation with the other children they are supposed to represent.

Models of genuine participation:

4. **Assigned but informed.** The project is adult-led and children are asked to participate. Children understand the intentions of the project, they know who made the decisions to involve them and why, they have a meaningful role and they volunteer to participate after the project was explained to them.

5. **Consulted and informed.** The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are taken seriously. The children are consulted about a matter and then informed of the results of their input.

6. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children.** Adults are the ones initiating the project, but young people are involved in the decision-making as equals.

7. **Child-initiated and directed.** Children plan and carry out projects on their own.

8. **Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults.** Children or young people design and manage projects and then incorporate adults to support them in the process.

Hart points out that it is not necessary that children always operate on the highest rungs of the ladder. Different children prefer being involved in different levels of responsibility and participation. The most important principle is having a choice about how to participate. According to Hart, “programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability” (Hart 1992, 11). Lansdown (2009, 14) points out that improving youth participation needs actions on many levels. Organisations should have formal guidelines about youth participation and different mechanisms to help young people participate. At the same time, it’s important to share knowledge about participation to children and young people themselves and to the professionals working with them.

Hart’s model has been widely used, but it has also received some criticism. It has been criticized for presenting participation as happening in one precise moment, that the types of participation are in hierarchical order and that projects initiated by children would always be the highest type of participation (Malong & Hartung 2009, 27-28). However, it remains the most used model for children’s participation and it is still useful for understanding the challenges with involving young people in decisions concerning them.

The biggest barrier to involving children and young people in decision making is usually adults’ attitudes. Often adults don’t think that young people are capable of participating, so they don’t offer a possibility to do it. One problem is that when children or young people are being involved, they need more support than adults would need. This puts them in a situation where they can be easily manipulated to follow adults’ agenda. (Lansdown 2009, 16.) However, there are many great examples of involving children and young people in managing projects or making decisions. According to Hart (1992, 5), the key thing is to make young people feel ownership of the project. Young people should be part of designing the goals of the project to motivate them to show their full potential. I feel like the same applies to adults as well: people rarely want to give their time and effort to something that doesn’t interest them. Youth participation should begin with the motivations of the young people involved.
To know what is already being done on the matter of youth participation, I conducted some research within the network. The data consists of a questionnaire, and interviews on Skype.

The questionnaire was sent to the directors of all 30 member organisations by email. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, including multiple-choice questions and open questions. A total of 20 answers was received, representing 18 member organisations. This means that 60 % of the member organisations replied, which can be seen a very good answer rate. The respondents were clearly interested in the subject and some of them wrote long answers to open questions.

In this section, I will present the analysis of the questionnaire results. We wanted to find out the attitudes towards youth participation in the circus schools within the network, and what types of activities the organisations are already doing. In general, they seemed to see youth participation as something important, although the level of current actions was varying.

Youth participation is something we discuss a lot in our organisation

Chart 2 shows that the amount of discussion about youth participation varies a lot within the network. A total of 60 % of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement “Youth participation is something we discuss a lot in our organisation”. A fifth of the respondents neither agree or disagree, and another fifth disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement. It seems that there are organisations where youth participation is a bigger part of their daily activities and conversations than in some others. Some of Caravan’s members discuss it a lot, some not. However, the organisations that disagreed didn’t necessarily think that youth participation wasn’t important. As we can see in Chart 1, the attitudes towards young people’s participation are very positive in general.
Chart 3 might give an explanation to the difference between the answers to the first and the second question. The respondents were asked if there are other more important issues than youth participation in their organisation. Over half of the respondents agreed, and only one respondent disagreed with the statement. We could interpret that youth and social circus organisations think that youth participation is important, but other issues take too much of their time. This was echoed also in questions regarding youth exchanges (which will not be presented in detail in this report).

Almost all the member organisations expressed that they are interested in participating in a youth exchange, but organising one was seen something more complicated. When asked about the reasons why organising a youth exchange is not possible, they mentioned time and budget constraints. In general, circus schools seem to be lacking the time and resources to do all the activities that they find important, including improving youth participation.

In Chart 4 we can see that young people are moderately involved in planning the activities in Caravan’s member organisations. In one third of the organisations young people are actively involved in the planning, in one fifth they are not so much. Half of the organisations neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

As you can see in Chart 5, when asked in what degree young people can have an impact on the decisions concerning them, 65 % of the respondents agree or strongly agree that young people can have an impact. 15 % neither agreed or disagreed, and 20 % disagreed. There is quite a lot of difference between Chart 4 and Chart 5: according to the respondents, young people are not taking that much part in the planning, but they are still perceived to be participating. One interpretation to this could be that young people are not participating in the actual planning of activities, but young people are still being involved in other ways, for example by being consulted in matters affecting them. In the next chart we can see the different forms of participation in circus schools.

Chart 6 gathers the responses to a statement “In our organisation, young people are participating by...”, which was a multiple-choice question with the possibility of choosing many answers. The most common way of participating was giving feedback directly to trainers. This was present in almost all the organisations. Also, participating in the creating process of shows, volunteering as an assistant trainers and volunteering during shows and events were very common forms of youth participation in the organisations. Youth participation in higher forms of the participation ladder is not as common.

In roughly half of the organisations, young people are participating in meetings, creating their own events or shows, participating in the planning of the events or answering to questionnaires about matters concerning them. Formal representation was even more rare: only three circus schools had a young member or members in the board, and one organisation had a youth advisory board or a youth forum. Two respondents answered that in their organisation, young people don’t really participate in other ways than attending circus classes.
We asked about the interest of developing youth participation with a statement “We are not really interested in developing youth participation at the moment”. The results visualised in Chart 7 show that majority of the respondents disagree with the statement, which means that the interest in developing youth participation is very high. One respondent expressed not being interested, and four responses fall in between. This shows that there is a big interest in the theme of youth participation within the network. However, not all the organisations have a strong motivation to develop youth participation strategies.

Chart 8 shows that 85% of the respondents think their organisation would be likely to use an info pack or other resources about youth participation, if Caravan was to provide it. This can be seen as an encouragement for Caravan to start planning more projects related to youth participation.

In conclusion of the questionnaire responses, there seems to be an interest in developing youth participation. Some circus schools are already active in engaging young people on every level, but not all the organisations are currently involving young people in the planning of their activities. Attitudes towards youth participation seem to be favourable, but many organisations don’t have the time or the resources to develop youth participation to the direction they would want to. Most of the time, youth participation means that young people can participate in activities planned by the adults. It seems to be more uncommon that young people would be managing their own projects or being involved in decision making processes.

There are some limitations to the questionnaire results. It should be taken into account that the 18 organisations that answered the questionnaire are likely the ones who are already interested in the subject of youth participation. The results don’t necessarily reflect the views of all the member organisations of Caravan Circus Network. Also, the respondents were mainly directors of circus schools. They might have one vision of youth participation, but somebody else’s perception of the same organisation might be completely different. However, since 60% of the organisations answered the questionnaire, it’s possible to say that it represents the network’s opinions quite well.
**INTERVIEW RESULTS**

In addition to the questionnaire, 11 interviews were conducted on Skype. All the member organisations answering to the questionnaire were asked if they want to talk more about the subject on Skype. Many expressed an interest, and in the end, I conducted 4 interviews with staff members.

We wanted to include young people in the mapping research but conducting a separate questionnaire for them was not possible in the time frame that we had. Young people’s participation was ensured through Skype interviews. I contacted directly some young people that I knew had done a youth exchange, an EVS or had some experience of youth participation on an international level. In total I interviewed seven young people who represented six different circus schools. Table 1 presents all the interview participants.

**TABLE 1. Interview participants.**

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<tr>
<th>Type of interviewee</th>
<th>Number of people interviewed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Director or a staff member in a circus school</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth exchange participant</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVS volunteer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young person involved in an international youth forum</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total amount</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
</tr>
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After the interviews, I analysed my notes and transcriptions by qualitative coding, i.e. arranging the data to different themes and categories. The next sections present the findings from the interviews, arranged to four themes. It also includes analysis of the open questions of the questionnaire.
Experiences of EVS and Youth Exchanges

The young people that I interviewed were former Youth Exchange participants and/or had done or are currently doing a European Voluntary Service (EVS) in a youth circus. Youth Exchanges are international camps where young people from various youth circuses around Europe gather together for a week to do circus and have fun. In European Voluntary Service, now after a program change “European Solidarity Corps”, is a European Union funded program which creates opportunities for young people to volunteer for up to 12 months in another European country.

The youth exchange had been an overwhelmingly positive experience for all the young people interviewed that had taken part in one or more youth exchanges. In general, they all said that it was “a lot of fun” to participate. The most important thing about the youth exchange was meeting new people from different countries. The interviewees also described that the youth exchange made it possible to “see different realities of doing circus” and to “put own experience into perspective”. For many, it was the first time communicating with a foreign language outside school, so the week was also about learning languages. The interviewees wished that there were more youth exchanges so that more young people could participate in them.

One of the interviewees had participated in various youth exchanges and other international projects. He wished that the youth exchanges would be “more longer lasting and more persevering, that they would have some kind of a goal”. He pointed out that older youngsters would like to learn something in addition to just having fun and getting to know new people. He was interested in learning more about teaching circus or social circus, and would have wanted to have a youth exchange with this theme.

Doing the European Voluntary Service had been a great experience for the three people that I interviewed. They described it as a great possibility to live abroad, learn languages and get new experiences without having to pay a lot of money. During the EVS, the interviewees learned (more) about teaching circus and gained self-confidence. For two of the interviewees, EVS helped them to find a career in circus. However, it was not always easy to settle to another country. One interviewee mentioned feeling “left aside” and not getting all the support they would have needed. Another one was struggling with the language and adapting to a new environment. In general, they reported having learned a lot during the EVS and saw it as a positive experience.

As all the interviewees had really enjoyed their international mobility experiences, it would be important to offer the possibility to participate for more young people in the future. However, organising a youth exchange seems difficult for many youth circuses. In the questionnaire, all the 18 organisations saw youth exchanges as something important, but for many, organising one is not easy because of funding problems and lack of human resources or training facilities. It would be important to consider how organising youth exchanges and becoming a host organisation for the European Solidarity Corps volunteers could be made easier within Caravan Circus Network. Some organisations expressed a need for support from Caravan, for example by being reminded of funding application deadlines, helping with writing applications or searching for potential partners.

Forms of Youth Participation

The forms of youth participation mentioned in the interviews were mainly the same ones already presented in Chart 6 in the previous section of this report. In many of the organisations young people volunteered or worked as assistant teachers. They also volunteered in other activities, for example organising shows or open stages. In Belfast Community Circus, there had been a peer-education program in the past, where young people teach each other in certain disciplines. They also have an editorial group, consisting of young people who write a newsletter to other youngsters training in the different venues of the circus school.

It’s more uncommon to have young people involved in the decision making. A few organisations have a youth forum or a youth advisory board that helps to bring the voice of young people into decision making. In two organisations that were represented in the interviews, Circusplaneet and Roundhouse, there were young members in the board. In Roundhouse this is organised through a formal system, which is described in detail in the section “Examples of good practice in youth participation”.

Many of the organisations expressed an interest in developing youth participation further. Offering more opportunities for young people to be assistant trainers or trainers and participating in youth exchanges were seen important things. Two organisations mentioned that they are currently working on a youth participation strategy for their organisation, and other two were planning to set up a youth forum or a student committee. Some said that they don’t have concrete plans to develop youth participation, but that they are interested in the subject.
In the interviews, young people and the staff of youth circuses were asked about what qualities an organisation needs so that it allows young people to participate. The summary of their answers is below, presented as “Best practices in youth participation”.

Best practices in youth participation
Qualities of an ideal atmosphere for youth participation
• Safety, trust, openness
• Transparency
• Feeling important
• Feeling supported
• Open to change
• Informal and relaxed atmosphere
• Ready to give away power to young people
• An attitude of doing it together

During the process of youth participation
• Start slowly, step by step
• Give young people all the necessary information and tools that they need
• Give training about more difficult things, like finance
• Make sure that young people have real agency
• Do something useful with the contributions that you get, or help young people put into practice their own ideas
• Ensure that you do a follow-up - tell young people what you have done with their wishes and ideas
• Listen to feedback
• If somebody decides to leave, do an exit interview with them
• Do constant reflection about your practices

Interviewees, especially the staff members who had already experience with organising youth participation activities, were also asked about the difficulties they have come across in youth participation. First, some challenges were related to the organisation itself. The biggest challenges were time and resources. As mentioned earlier in this report, organisations often don’t have enough financial or human resources to put into practice all their ideas. Also, it’s hard to be participative from the start until the end, because this often slows down processes. If the organisation wants to include young people in decision making, it will take more time than if one person in the administration would make the decision by themselves. The organisation should have clear policies of youth participation, so that it doesn’t get forgotten in the busy reality of running a youth circus. Another organisational challenge identified was balancing freedom and realism: young people should have a clear idea of what is possible to accomplish within the limits of the organisation, otherwise they might suggest ideas that are not realistic. Creating unrealistic expectations will lead to disappointment, which doesn’t encourage them to participate in the future.

Some challenges were related to youth as a special phase of life, characterised by a certain degree of spontaneity. Young people don’t usually want to plan things too much in advance, so organisations have to find a balance between not doing things too early or too late. Young people are also very busy with school, friends and other hobbies, so it can be hard for them to make a commitment. Interviewees identified that often people were enthusiastic to promise things and be involved, but they didn’t always follow through. With young people’s groups, attendance can vary from week to week, which makes it harder to plan things together. Another problem is related to communication: different people use different communication channels, so it can be challenging to get the information to everybody.

Maybe the biggest challenge that the interviewees found was related to the attitudes of adults working in the organisation. Some adults don’t believe that young people have the skills or interest to participate. If the organisation hasn’t been very participative in the past, even young people themselves might think that way. However, it is possible to change people’s attitudes and teach children and young people to participate from early on. It is important to consider that participation should be about including everybody, not just those who are already being active. It’s a challenge for organisations to get diversity in their participatory practices.
Youth Participation in the Caravan Context

In the interviews, young people were asked to tell what their impression on Caravan is. Most of the young interviewees didn’t have a clear picture of what Caravan is doing. During the youth exchange, most of them hadn’t received any information on how Caravan is related to the exchange. Some of them knew that Caravan took part in organising it but didn’t have an idea of what other things Caravan is doing. For them, Caravan seemed “distant” and “abstract”. Even the EVS volunteers didn’t always know about Caravan if it wasn’t directly related to their work. If Caravan wants to develop youth participation in its own activities, the first thing to do would be to share more information about what Caravan is and what they are doing.

According to the interviewees, the best way would be to have more exchanges and meetings for young people. Youth exchanges were seen an important way to get to know Caravan, and all the interviewees wished that there would be more of them. In addition, young people should get more information on Caravan during the exchange.

One idea that was brought up various times during the data collecting process was organising a youth exchange with the theme of youth participation. This interested many of the former youth exchange participants. However, one young interviewee pointed out that it is problematic to talk about youth participation with a group of young people, if the environments where they do circus are not part of the conversation.

“The important part of it would be to make the exchange for young people, but also for the people leading the circus and who are making decisions in the circus. They are the ones deciding how much young people can take part. The circus first needs to create an environment where the young people can later help. If the circus doesn’t give an opportunity to take part in how the circus works, then it’s much harder to engage.

If the environment is not friendly to be involved, it’s super hard to be involved. I think it’s important to do part of the exchange for people who run the circuses. How to create opportunities for young people. And THEN create the exchange for young people on how to take part, to motivate them. A very important part of it would be to make it more continuous, that it would continue even after the physical exchange itself. To motivate the students to do things continuously in their local circuses, so that it has an effect. A longer project could be the best option in my opinion.”

The first step to develop youth participation within Caravan Circus Network could be creating a common framework or guidelines on youth participation, in a group consisting of both adults and young people from different Caravan member organisations. Later, these guidelines would be distributed to the whole network through workshops or a longer training. A youth exchange with youth participation theme could be organised after this, when the organisations are more trained to support youth participation on a local level.

Participating in Caravan’s decision making didn’t interest the three youth exchange participants that I interviewed, at least not without reservations. They pointed out that Caravan is very distant for them, so they would not like to be in a youth forum or a board of an organisation they don’t know well.

“To participate internationally, I would first need to be part of Caravan more, and then I would see if I want to take part in it in this way, in the decision making, after being involved in other things before. I think I might want to be in the decision making, but I would need some time in the organisation before, to know how it works, to know the people etc. If suddenly someone would ask me if I want to help in the decision making of Caravan… I wouldn’t say yes, because I don’t even know what they do. If I’m not part of it then I don’t have the motivation to help.”

One step towards getting young people have a say in Caravan’s decisions could be to engage them more during the youth exchanges, for example by giving information about Caravan and consulting them about specific issues. Youngsters might not be interested in committing for a long period of time, but this way they could still express their opinions.

“In an organisation like Caravan, it would be important to have people you can contact, so that it wouldn’t be just an organisation somewhere far away. The information should go from “human to human”. What happens there should be transparent, not just meetings behind closed doors, where they make decisions on something and nobody even knows what they talk about in the meetings.”

One thing that the interviewees found very important was transparency. To be able to participate, they should know who makes decisions and on what.

In conclusion, young people are interested in participating, but only if the environment is welcoming and they have enough information about the things they are engaging in.
Examples of Youth Participation Projects

Roundhouse

Roundhouse is a cultural organisation in London that offers a year-round schedule of creative projects in media, music and creative arts for 11-25-year-olds. One of these projects, Roundhouse Street Circus Collective, is focused on youth circus. Youth participation is at the heart of Roundhouse’s activities, and they have had a Youth Advisory Board for over ten years already. Roundhouse is a great example of how young people are being involved in every level of the organisation’s management and decision making.

I interviewed one former young trustee to ask about his experiences. This is how he explained the youth participation system of Roundhouse:

“The Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board (RYAB) is formed of young people who participate in different projects at Roundhouse. They meet once a month to talk about things that they would like the Roundhouse to be doing, and every month different person from the staff or from the board comes in to explain what they are doing in the organisation.

From the Youth Advisory Board, two people get selected to the role of young trustee, which means that they are part of the board. The board meets once a month, and they run projects, review finances and safety matters, discuss youth participation etc. Young trustees share the feedback that they’ve heard in the Youth Advisory Board, and the board makes decisions on the actions to be taken. Each post for the young trustee is for a year. There are always two posts, so it’s nice that you’re not alone.

Overall being a young trustee was a great experience! In everyday life it does not happen so often that young people are making decisions with adults. In Roundhouse young people are really listened to, they are a priority there. In the Roundhouse board actions were taken if young people brought something up. The structure with a Youth Advisory Board and young trustees who are in the board is a really good way to get information from young people and to get things done. It’s a win-win situation, because young people get to have a say and the board will get information to support their decisions.

What is needed for a Youth Advisory Board to work? In my opinion, it should be informal. In the end they are asking young people to be there in their free time, so it shouldn’t be like a work meeting. In Roundhouse there was free pizza, which was nice. The group was open for anyone. It was an opportunity to get involved, to express themselves. The setting was in the common room and it was just an informal chat, nothing too serious. However, it was important that young people had real agency. If they gave feedback, actions were taken, and the board always reported back on what had been done.”

To read more about youth participation in Roundhouse, read their publication “Guided by young voices - How to include young people in your board and in your decision making processes” (link found in bibliography).

ABCirk (2016-2018)

ABCirk, a Junior Leader Scheme in Youth Circus, was an Erasmus+ strategic partnership of Galway Community Circus (IE), CIRQUEON (CZ) and Cirkus LeGrando (CZ) realised in 2016 - 2018. The project consisted of three international learning modules for fifteen young people (15-19 years) led by six experienced circus tutors guiding them. The aim of the project was to teach the young participants the basics of circus pedagogy and give them experiences of working as assistant trainers in circus lessons. The learning process was documented through video by the participating young people. The partnership was considered a great success by the participating young people, tutors and their organisations. Below, you can read one participant’s experiences of the project.

“ABCirk project was great, I really enjoyed it. It was focused on circus pedagogy. The great thing about it was that it lasted for a longer time. The project consisted of 3 one-week modules over two years, and we were in contact between the exchange weeks. The contacts actually stayed after the project, which I didn’t really experience before in other youth exchanges that I participated in. During those two years we became really friends. I learned a lot about teaching circus, which was great. The training was very theoretical but also practical. In between when there wasn’t an exchange, we got to teach and put the things into practice. We were helping the teachers teach the lesson and I got to utilise the knowledge I got during the exchange weeks.”
In the questionnaire and interviews, many good project ideas were expressed. These ideas can be a starting point in developing youth participation further within Caravan Circus Network.

**Creating a common framework / guidelines of youth participation in the context of youth and social circus.** A group consisting of a few member organisations would create a common understanding of what youth participation means in the context of youth circus, in different levels. The framework should be adaptable enough to work in different types of organisations, but still have some common core values, principles and practices.

**Creating a youth participation training for staff and young people of member organisations.** There seems to be a need to have more training and tools on youth participation in the field of youth circus. Caravan could organise a training or a seminar for staff and young people of member organisations about this subject.

**Annual Young Caravan days or a Caravan Youth Forum.** Young people from member organisations would gather together to discuss themes important to them and to give ideas for Caravan’s activities. This could start for example with former CTF trainees.

**Youth exchange with the focus on youth participation.** It would be organised the same way as any other youth exchange, but the theme would be youth participation. It would include workshops about the theory and best practices of youth participation, sharing experiences and motivating young people to be involved.

**Study visits for young circus trainers.** The circus trainers participating could see how another circus school works. There could be a scheme, like the EVS but for a shorter term, for people who maybe don’t want to go abroad for a full year or who are just starting to teach. Caravan could offer them a chance to visit a circus school for a week or two to see how circus is being taught in the other places.

**Individual youth exchange weeks.** A few young people could go to some circus school for a week to visit. Circus would be the thing connecting the young people, but it would be also about school, the culture etc. The young person would go to the family of another youngster for a week or two, and they would go to circus lessons together.

**Trainer exchanges.** A trainer would go to work for another circus school for a week or two. It would benefit everyone, both the trainers and the children. This could also promote the exchange of good practices of youth participation.

**Job shadowing program for youth.** Youth participants of 15-18 years old who are interested in assisting could go to another circus school for one week and shadow one specific person in their job, observing and talking. They could shadow trainers or for example a light technician, if that’s what interests them. They would also meet the young people in the circus school. There would be a person in circus school who is responsible for this job shadowing and who would be leading the young person. The participants could be hosted in a family.

**Exchanges in summer camps.** A few young people from another circus would come for one week of summer camp to another circus school.

**Promoting mobility and funding opportunities that are available.** Making people understand better what is possible in Europe. For example, distributing information about the EVS, the EU funding options for youth groups etc.

**A blog, a vlog or other social media platform between youth participants in different Caravan member organisations.** A bit platform where every circus has a space and they share things. Youngsters could exchange information and promote the circuses. Volunteers posting stuff.
CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the data that I collected shows that youth participation is a theme that is seen as very important by many youth and social circus organisations. Many of them are already doing a lot in regards to youth participation, some have a longer way to go. The youth and social circus field seems to be lacking knowledge and training related youth participation, so hopefully Caravan can answer this need in the future.

This report is the first step to developing a Youth Participation Strategy for Caravan Circus Network. The mapping research shows that young people don’t know Caravan well enough to participate in its decision making. This means that the youth participation strategy needs to focus on making Caravan more visible and understandable for young people. Another important factor is to develop common youth participation guidelines for the network, so that later these can be distributed to all members. Caravan’s role is to be a support and a resource for members to start implementing participatory practices. Youth participation in Caravan’s level is not yet realistic, but after a few years of groundwork it could be possible. When young people have already experience of participation on a local level and when they know Caravan better, they can be included directly in Caravan’s decision making.

Youth participation should not be rushed in any organisation. Academic literature, various guidebooks and experiences from the field show that participation is something that should be considered in all the activities of youth organisations. Changing people’s attitudes and establishing policies and structures for youth participation takes time, but with careful planning any organisation can turn into more inclusive and participative environment. We’re hoping to see many Caravan’s member organisations on board in this journey!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Academic articles

Guidebooks and other resources