

Ten theses on the correlation between European youth work, intercultural learning and requirements for professionalism and quality in such contexts

Preliminary remarks

In 1990, a first version of the "Ten theses on the correlation of European youth encounters, intercultural learning and demands on full and part-time staff" was published in the reference book "Internationale Jugendarbeit. Interkulturelles Lernen"¹. Some further publications and reflections in English and French followed. Starting in 1997, a revised version was published in several languages by the Council of Europe / the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. That version of 17 remained unchanged for many years.

In November 2007, the Council of Europe held a seminar at the European Youth Centre in Budapest. The topic was "Intercultural Learning in European Youth Work: Which Ways Forward?". As the author of these theses, I was asked to speak about "The Role of Intercultural Learning in European Youth Work Today" and to challenge the 1997 theses by relating them to contemporary situations and developments (present in 2007). In 2009, the revised version was published by the Council of Europe / the European Youth Centre.²

The theses are more focused than other publications by IKAB e.V.; they reflect the development of the institute's views of intercultural political education since its foundation almost 50 years ago. They are also its most widely read publication. In the run-up to the institute's 50th anniversary and nearing the end of my professional career, I decided to revise these theses one last time in light of current challenges in social and educational policy.

The following paper is the result of an attempt to review the "old" theses of 2007/2009 against the backdrop of the developments that have taken place over the past almost 20 years and, without foregoing their character as theses, to change or reformulate them according to the demands I consider necessary today for high-quality professional intercultural political education / European youth work. Some of the thesis headings have been amended to reflect changes to the text. The original concluding thesis no. 10 has been replaced by one that better reflects this paper's content as a whole. The appendix contains a selection of publications that have influenced this revised paper.

¹ Oberste-Lehn, H., Wende, W., eds., Handbuch Internationale Jugendarbeit. Interkulturelles Lernen. Düsseldorf 1990

² Ramberg, Ingrid, (ed.), Intercultural Learning in European Youth Work – Which Ways Forward? Council of Europe Publishing 2009. A PDF of the 2009 version is available for download in English, French and German at: www.ikab.de.

Fundamental changes or conceptual developments of ideas are based primarily on my own publications originating in the context of the institute's work. Three of these publications played a particularly significant role.³

In the early days of European youth programmes, European youth work was strongly characterised by youth exchanges and influenced by post-war ideals such as reconciliation and mutual understanding. Today, it encompasses a wide range of activities within the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. Even sport is now considered part of European youth work.

The requirements for youth work have since been firmly embedded in the context that influences non-formal education. Expectations have grown. European youth work is supposed to be of clear additional benefit to the young people taking part, and there is increased demand for recognition of the insights they acquire during their experiences in non-formal learning settings. Depending on European policy priorities, the focus in the various programme phases has at times been on social integration and improved employability, at other times on fostering active European citizenship, and increasingly on promoting democracy and participation. In the context of the EU's "Lifelong Learning Strategy", European youth work was expected to make its mark and contribute to achieving the defined key competences within the strategy's goals.

All of this happened within a European political landscape that has constantly been changing, in some cases quite significantly: The European Union has enlarged to include member states with very different democratic traditions and, resulting from these, with different attitudes towards civil rights as well as democratic forms of government and participation that become manifest in the respective national concepts of youth policy and youth work. Re-nationalisation, de-solidarisation, and the absence of policies grounded in commonly agreed European values and legal standards are tell-tale signs of the social changes that have taken place. The increasing and ever more prominent dominance of far-right populist and right-wing extremist discourse in many European countries – including Germany – is now making it difficult to maintain a minimum democratic consensus within society. The content and tone of this discourse is diametrically opposed to human rights as a "morality based on reason" (Habermas) and to the legal framework governing coexistence in plural societies (Otten 2021).

In addition, there are far-reaching geopolitical changes, not least in relations with the US, Russia, and China, and the fact that war is once again raging in the heart of Europe. This is a situation that we have not even begun to address, let alone processed, in terms of youth and education policy – neither at national nor at European level. The key question is how we can develop new narratives within and

³ Ohana, Yael, Otten, Hendrik (eds.), *Where Do You Stand? Intercultural Learning and Political Education in Contemporary Europe*. VS Verlag Wiesbaden 2012;

OTTEN; Hendrik & Ohana, Yael, *Where do we stand – Where do we have to go? Does the European Youth Sector need a new intercultural learning concept?* Anniversary publication on the occasion of the colloquium marking the 35th anniversary of IKAB e.V. Bonn 2013;

Otten, Hendrik, *Zuversichtliche Skepsis. Gedanken zur Verständigung über die Evidenz des Politischen in der europäischen und internationalen Jugendarbeit*. In: *IJAB und Forschung und Praxis im Dialog*, (eds.), *Internationaler Jugendaustausch wirkt*. 3rd revised edition. Bonn 2021

in relation to Europe. This is a key question that must commit to the necessity of ongoing democratisation of democracy (Derrida) – primarily through the political participation of young people – and it is a question that remains entirely open and has not yet been the subject of any meaningful public discourse on intercultural political education.

Against this backdrop, it is not easy to rethink new strategies for youth and education policy applied to European youth work. However, giving up and abandoning the cause is not an option. Hence this attempt.

Thesis no. 1: Pluralism is today a more appropriate description of social reality in Europe than cultural diversity!

Today, all over Europe⁴ we are dealing with social structures that are characterised by culturally diverse manifestations: plural societies. Attempts to seal off national cultures have more or less failed, or led to further intra-social conflicts; public debates on whether a country is a country of immigration or not, are now overwhelmingly the preserve of right-with populist and extreme-right discourse – not only in Germany, France or Italy. Conservative and neoliberal discourse from the so-called centre generally only plays a role when economic policy interests are at stake.

There is no sign of any serious, sustained communication guided by human rights as a concept of social justice that deals constructively with the wide range of reasons for migration and immigration – including the reasons why people flee their homes – in a manner appropriate to subject and context. Consequently, there is an increasing trend towards emotionally charged discussions about the loss of cultural identity and the classification of ethnic groups, with the concept of race being reused. The AfD's contributions in Germany's parliament, the Bundestag, are a prime example of this.

I concede that the social manifestations of pluralism in everyday life have become increasingly complex and partly inconsistent in our different European societies. Yet, it seems to me that the fact that "culture" refers to a dynamic process is still being ignored systematically, while it ought to be the subject of public political discourse on a concept of justice for the cooperative shaping of social life in society. Indeed, this way of seeing culture still needs to be adequately defined and applied in the public sphere. Neglecting this has consequences: It has always been and still is counterproductive and wrong to differentiate between majority and minority cultures or to promote intercultural learning as a way of counterbalancing social inequalities through education, in the way that has been attempted by "well-intentioned" models of integration.

This idea has failed because, in the past, there was neither a systematic link between education and politics nor any communication regarding the resulting consequences. There are plenty of examples of former "model states" in Europe (for instance in Scandinavia) which have attempted, initially with a sense of resignation and later with a radical *raison d'état*, to fix the shambles caused by one-dimensional demands for integration – a process that is still ongoing.

⁴ Europe understood in geographical terms within the context of the European Union and the Council of Europe

Taking inspiration from the proposals of the original first thesis, today we need to find different answers to the following question: How will we handle the value of pluralism (including the pluralism of religious practices) present in our day-to-day lives so that a concept of justice is applied that serves as an organising principle for the whole (multicultural) society and at the same time guarantees the rights of the individual? In this context, it is worth recalling Hannah Arendt, who stated that there is only one human right, namely the right to have rights. Even today, political and social realities remain far removed from the realisation of this legal principle.

A second, and even more difficult question is: How can we convey this necessity through education and training in such a way that critical and empathic thinking and acting – rather than injustice, inequality, discrimination and other forms of violence – characterise the way we deal with conflicts?

Applied value pluralism comprises a multitude of potential conflicts and requires the acceptance of compromises that are often unsatisfactory, also for the individual. Having to deal with such unsatisfactory outcomes calls for mental mobility and the ability to engage in intercultural discourse⁵. Under certain circumstances, European youth work can contribute to the acquisition of the necessary competences for this discursive ability and create action-oriented awareness of human rights. A key focus of attention must be on the re-politicisation of this youth work as it is an indispensable prerequisite. These theses intend to provide some suggestions on how this can be achieved.

Thesis no. 2: Intercultural learning must define itself as critical political education and deal with everyday social and political realities in Europe!

Objectively, the manifold opportunities for contact between people of different origins, with different ways of life, patterns of perception and attitudes, ways of thinking and modes of faith that have characterised recent European history, have not led to a substantially more just understanding or increased social and personal interaction between different people without discrimination or exclusion. At the same time, it has become obvious that people feel evidently overtaxed initially by the increasing presence of the plural cultural reality and fail to interpret and classify this reality adequately with regard to subject, object, and situation. This was already stipulated in the previous versions of the theses, and if we accept this as true, we need to consider in a more targeted way than in the past how critical intercultural political education can overcome existing shortfalls in education and training: "Education must provide practice for integrating into society while also immunising against it where it attempts to force people to follow stereotypes of thought and action instead of critical insight"⁶. Labelling intercultural political education as **critical** is intended to highlight the fact that it must be self-reflective with regard to its intentions, their implementation, and their effects on both the individual and their social environment.

⁵ See thesis 6 for more explanation.

⁶ Alexander Mitscherlich, Die dialektische Funktion, die Erziehung erfüllen sollte. In: H. Haase, ed., Alexander Mitscherlich, Gesammelte Schriften. Volume III: Sozialpsychologie I. p. 33 Frankfurt:1983

Since problems of stereotypical thinking and action are most visible in day-to-day life, it is necessary to look at that level to find intercultural approaches for solving them systematically. Such approaches do not lie in ostentatious or simplistic political slogans like those propagated by the German AfD party but in educational concepts and corresponding educational practice that have finally transcended the national cultural horizon and, as a fundamental reference point, are guided by the concept of "Critical European citizenship" as a minimum, with "human dignity and rights" as its cornerstones. Europe, in this sense, is a framework of values (the defined values of the European Union as well as the Council of Europe) and a regulatory framework linked to many existing legal principles and norms structuring the communities that live on the continent. In view of the growing threats to democracy, this makes the long-standing demand that intercultural learning must take place in everyday life – and that intercultural political education must therefore address and utilise everyday situations – even more urgent than in the past.

In Europe, we observe many more conflicts within societies and across borders today than 20 years ago⁷: "The promise of perestroika was followed by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Soviet empire dissolved, the multinational Yugoslav state collapsed, but from its ruins crawled the dark energies of supposed ethnic identities and ancient territorial claims. The honeymoon of a post-ideological globalisation in universal freedom soon yielded to disillusionment at the sight of conflict types thought long gone. War was waged again in Europe, minorities expelled, and the continent stood helplessly and watched what was happening"⁸.

This description can also be applied to the present situation for we are now further than ever from a "post-World War II" situation, in which the creation of understanding and reconciliation were the primary concerns and intercultural learning processes were geared towards them. Instead, here in Europe we find ourselves in something like increasingly evident "pre-war situations within society", because a minimum consensus on those norms and values that democratically govern the relationship between individual freedom and social justice – a relationship that, in principle, harbours the potential for conflict – has largely disappeared, and right-wing populist nationalisms are increasingly dominating the public discourse.

Added to this is the reality of war, with its geopolitical implications and their resulting negative impact on public discourse within society, as overarching social goals such as social justice and social inclusion are given less and less consideration and are more and more being disregarded⁹.

⁷ In this context this publication is worth reading: Lettre international, N° 81: So leben wir jetzt. Künstler, Dichter, Denker zur Lage der Welt. Berlin: 2008.

⁸ Frank Berberich, Gruss an die Leser. In: Remark 7, page 13

⁹ In this context, a far-reaching deficit should be mentioned: The fact that discussions on intercultural learning in the past have not looked systematically and sufficiently enough at Islam as a culturally different world-view which nevertheless offers points of contact although it is meanwhile shaping and partly also thoroughly changing situations of everyday life in almost all European countries. The primarily isolated examination of individual aspects or the focussing on fundamentalist activities have contributed to reducing Islam to an unjust system that deserves political retribution and to letting the great cultural achievements Islam has given to humanity sink into oblivion instead of embracing the opportunity to emphasise them as linking elements for common agreements on a concept of justice (on that topic see also: Hendrik Otten, Multikulturelle Gesellschaften und interkulturelle Bildung und

To counteract this, we need a new understanding of intercultural political education: We need processes of learning that convey and reflect the connection between cognition, moral standards, political awareness, and political action¹⁰.

Thesis 3: Mobility is only likely to lead to behavioural change if the perception of differences is addressed in political education processes as being part of everyday life, with the aim of fostering understanding and a willingness to reinterpret perceptions and, consequently, to change behaviour!

The original thesis contemplated how greater mobility (essentially, travelling abroad) could contribute to changing attitudes and behaviour towards other cultures and events. Let us remember that in 1990 the first Youth programme of the then European Community had just come into being. It had partly been developed with this idea in mind and was designed to make cultural proximity possible through encounters in the context of a different culture. As such it was intended to contribute to behavioural change. Some member states regarded mobility first and foremost in the physical sense, but in its objectives and actions this first programme already assumed that mental mobility had to be developed and fostered for a successful mobility experience, and hence, that something needed to be learned about oneself and the others to make the most of mobility encounters.

Nowadays, there is broad consensus that cultural proximity alone neither automatically creates an understanding for being different nor prevents ethnocentrism. Nor does travel in itself trigger change; otherwise, given the scale of mass tourism today, we would be living in a better world. Instead, socio-scientific findings from the 1970s and early 1980s on attitudinal change through tourism still hold true for many people:

Visits abroad for tourism usually do not bring about lasting changes in attitudes. On the contrary, they tend to reinforce negative prejudices since the only references tourists have for interpreting the otherness of the cultures they visit are those that define difference in their "home" environment.

This is why new learning processes are necessary – in principle including intercultural ones – and these must be ongoing and lifelong. Thence the demand for anchoring intercultural learning in everyday life put forward in thesis no. 2. If we make progress in this respect, we will be able to use the potential doubtlessly provided by exercised mobility, i. e., in a more effective way.

Erziehung – Plädoyer für einen Perspektivenwechsel. In: Hendrik Otten, Peter Lauritzen, eds., Jugendarbeit und Jugendpolitik in Europa. p. 18 ff. Wiesbaden: 2004) This observation does not contradict the author's stance: the strict separation of politics and religion.

¹⁰ On that topic see also: Hendrik Otten, Menschenrechte. Grundwerte und Menschenrechte als normativer Rahmen politischer Bildung. (Human Rights: Fundamental Values and Human Rights as Normative Structures for Political Education.) In: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. (ed.), Grundlagen unserer Demokratie (Fundamental Aspects of our Democracy). Bonn: 1988

Thesis no. 4: European youth work has developed far beyond youth exchanges and, therefore, requires other and new competences of its facilitators!

Following this line of argumentation, the original fourth thesis referred to exchange schemes with young people from different countries as an educationally reasonable alternative to tourist activities as long as certain conditions are guaranteed so that the international encounter has a lasting impact on the young person's day-to-day life. If these conditions are not present, it is extremely likely that the results of such youth encounters will not extend beyond the superficial harmony produced by its social dimension. Again, at first a reminder of the historical context: European youth encounters, especially multilateral ones and encounters funded by European programmes, were uncharted territory in the late 1980s and early 1990s – both in terms of educational requirements and fundamental aspects of European policy such as the principle of subsidiarity. As a result, every single sentence of the rules for implementation of the different actions of the *Youth for Europe* programme was fought over. The first office established by the Commission for this programme was simply called *European Community Youth Exchange Bureau*¹¹. At that time, youth encounters and corresponding initial and further training for those who facilitated them were regarded as the most important priorities for the development of European youth work¹².

European youth work today is comprised of far more than youth exchanges, even if these still constitute one important action within the current EU Erasmus+ Youth programme, especially in relation to the participation of young people with special educational needs, the new member states, and relations with the rest of the world. It therefore remains sensible to continue to still give this form of European youth work special attention.

The preliminary remarks already mentioned some elements characteristic of today's demands on European youth work. A few additional ideas require attention here. The most important change of the past 20 years is that through the heightened value placed on and recognition of the importance of non-formal and informal education, the field of European youth work (in the EU context) is now also viewed within a political context. The White Paper process at the time significantly contributed to this¹³, and the Youth Work Convention continues to promote this process positively today. The work of the Council of Europe and the work done in the context of the partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission regarding the recognition and validation of non-formal education has been equally influential. As a result, we meanwhile have at our disposal a common

¹¹ The author of these theses served on the governing bodies of this and its successor institutions in Brussels for around 10 years from 1987 onwards, mainly being responsible for the educational quality of the programmes, including training and further education, as well as evaluation issues.

¹² However, this was only the view of those who considered a European orientation in youth work to be important and necessary, which was by no means a given in educational, political or youth association circles.

¹³ White paper by the European Commission: A new impetus for European youth. 2001

value-oriented, consensus-based catalogue of objectives for non-formal education¹⁴, which is gradually being applied in European youth work, a field increasingly understood as political education.

Summarising these developments in youth policy over recent years, the expectations of European youth work extend far beyond selective educational and isolated youth policy action. European youth work is meant to be subject-oriented, to be efficient, to promote equal opportunities and eliminate inequality; it is also meant to encourage dialogue between cultures, to enable personal growth whilst recognising the otherness of others, to foster social integration by creating the capacity for a change of perspective and empathy, to inspire active engagement within Europe and a commitment to living by the values of solidarity and shared responsibility. In short: European youth work is a means of supporting self-directed learning and action, as non-formal critical political education, with the dual perspective of making a positive contribution to individual socialisation and to actively shaping the societal process of democratising democracy.

If practice is to come anywhere near meeting these expectations, it must undergo a massive transformation and be carried out professionally and to a high standard of qualification. This will have far-reaching consequences for existing routines and assumptions – extending to questions such as: Who will be able to work in this field under which conditions in the future; what is funded for which reason; who controls process and output quality according to what standards¹⁵. Thesis no. 9 will further address these aspects.

Thesis 5: Intercultural learning, as understood within the framework of critical political education, includes the obligation to be intolerant of violations of human rights!

In earlier versions, this thesis focused primarily on the phenomenon of “prejudice” in the context of European and international youth work.

In this context, even from my current perspective, the topic of “dealing with prejudice” remains relevant in practice. However, since youth work is understood as a form of political education that is sensitive to discrimination and self-reflective, it goes well beyond the context described before, as will be shown.

Here are the key arguments from the original version: “Breaking down prejudices is one of the things called for most in the context of European and international youth work. One result of this is that many people hasten to assure that they do not have any prejudices. Where we discover other people have some, we take pleasure in reproaching them. International youth work must set new emphases with regard to the problem of “prejudices”. In particular, it must contribute towards moving away

¹⁴ Keywords for this are for instance: democratic active citizenship / participation; anti-racist thinking and acting; human rights orientation in everyday life, awareness of diversity, thinking and acting in a way that challenges discrimination etc.

¹⁵ For more details see the following study: Helmut Fennes and Hendrik Otten, Quality in non-formal education and training in the field of European youth work (2008). The English download version is no longer available on the new YOUTH for Europe website, nor is the German version, which was published at the time as Document No. 10.

from moralising lectures: "There are no people without prejudices and when somebody claims not to have any prejudices, this contention is no doubt the biggest prejudice."¹⁶

We are aware that we will never know everything and will therefore always have prejudices in the sense of preliminary judgements. We even need these to a certain extent in order to achieve environmental stabilisation and behavioural confidence. They are, to a certain degree, necessary in "psycho-economic" terms for establishing one's own identity through dissociating oneself from others¹⁷. This is not, however, a plea for people to come to terms with their prejudices. When encountering other people, even those from one's own cultural group, such prejudices are liable to possible change. Whether and to what extent negative prejudices, for example, can be turned into "more objective" judgements also depends on the conditions under which the encounters take place.

Added to this is the need for individuals to acquire particular qualifications if intercultural learning is to be effective in everyday life and within the context of European and international youth work: We must study our own perception habits, stereotyped patterns of interpretation and schematic rules of interaction. We must, above all, become aware of the significance of selective perception: If we have a prejudice regarding a certain type of behaviour, we will, initially, observe only this behaviour again and again.

The problem for intercultural political education lies in the fact that it is almost impossible to remove such prejudices through purely rational argument, rather they need to be reappraised in new specific situations, i. e. changing negative prejudices through new experience reflected in plural everyday situations or in a different cultural context. This does not happen by chance or of its own accord, but requires intention and planning. Democracy cannot be "taught"; it can only be understood through action and lived practice.

The set of problems addressed here has recently become more acute. Looking at the increasing complexity of multicultural societies and growing demands on individuals and their sociopolitical environment, we have fewer and fewer opportunities to develop well-reasoned and justified judgements on all aspects of social development. We can and should, as a matter of principle, always make an effort but whether we like it or not, we will have to live with an increasing number of first impressions and initial judgements. The key challenge of this is to avoid discriminatory or excluding effects on others and on being different.

In my view, the presence of intercultural competence alongside personal and social skills – and complementary to key competences, for instance in the context of lifelong learning – is a way of addressing ambivalence-related insecurity and fear,

¹⁶ John Dewey, quoted from R. Bergler, Vorurteile und Stereotypen. In: A. Heigel-Evers, ed., Sozialpsychologie. Volume I: Die Erforschung der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen. p. 238. Weinheim / Basel: 1984

¹⁷ Developed in: G. W. Allport, The nature of prejudice. Cologne: 1971

and of countering discrimination, racism and any other form of exclusion and violence.

One more aspect is important in this regard: We need a new understanding of the concept of tolerance that is both relevant in terms of content and applicable to everyday life, because the notion of tolerance is less and less frequently understood in concrete and action-oriented terms. Instead, it is generally used in conversation in a neutral or even indifferent manner.

To put it clearly: to be indifferent does not mean to be tolerant, because in being indifferent no position is taken and something is allowed to simply happen even if it contradicts ethical principles and human rights. Instead, we must adopt a stance, live by it ourselves, and express it publicly in ways that can be heard and seen. This is why it is high time for an **"obligation to be intolerant"**, for active intervention when the dignity of human beings or individual and collective human rights – as set out in the concept of human rights as the ethical-political identity of an interpretation of justice rooted in European history – are disregarded.

This call for clearly recognisable intolerance when ethical principles (humanism) and human rights are disregarded, will likely not meet with universal approval. Hence, a few explanatory thoughts on this matter, not least because this thesis appears to abandon a long-standing minimal consensus on the foundations and objectives of political education. I am referring to the so-called Beutelsbach consensus, which came into being in 1976 and was essentially based on three pillars: 1. it is prohibited to overwhelm the pupil, meaning that indoctrination must not take place, 2. matters which are controversial in intellectual and political affairs must also be taught as controversial in educational instruction, and 3. political education is to put pupils into a position to analyse a political situation and to assess how their own personal interests are affected. To properly understand the Beutelsbach consensus, the historical context of 50 years ago must be taken into account¹⁸.

Today, there is broad consensus that political education can never be neutral, because, by its very nature, it is committed to promoting democracy.

That is why this applies unreservedly to European and international youth work as understood within the framework of critical intercultural political education. As already explained, it comprises far more than merely imparting cognitive knowledge. It addresses people's attitudes and feelings; it must be proactive and create new opportunities for participation; it must reach young people's living environments and support them in recognising anti-democratic narratives and fake news and standing up against them. It means empowerment, it challenges us to take a stand and take action, and, therefore, this space can never be a space free of politics.

Every form of education has an impact on society, and every society needs a vision and a set of principles regarding what it ought to be and aspires to be like, and on how education and youth work can contribute in order to realise these visions of a good (democratic) society, and under what conditions. That is why it is structurally

¹⁸ Thomas Krüger, former president of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education), wrote a highly recommended article on this subject: Beutelsbach 2.0 – zehn Thesen zur politischen Bildung. In: Gudrun Hentges (ed.), *Krise der Demokratie. Demokratie in der Krise?* Wochenschau Wissenschaft. Frankfurt 2020. In light of the 50th anniversary of Beutelsbach, there are numerous contributions which, however, do not advance our discussion in any significant way.

important to take into account the reciprocal relationship between youth work and youth policy. Thesis 8 addresses this point more specifically.

Thesis no. 6: Intercultural learning is always political!

In 1990, my introduction to this thesis read as follows: "Intercultural learning is the collective term for the conscious pedagogical planning and realisation of European youth encounters (the major part of international youth work in quantitative terms) which endeavour to prepare the individual in an appropriate and positive manner for the living and working conditions prevailing in a multicultural society." Towards the end, I wrote: "The content of intercultural learning always includes, irrespective of other subject matter, the behavioural patterns stemming from individual national traditions, whereby young people have to examine the problems arising from the clashing of such different types of behaviour in specific encounter situations and reflect on these with regard to underlying culture-specific habits of thinking and perception." Until now, this definition has not encountered any serious content-related opposition¹⁹. It is no longer, however, able to do justice to the diversity of non-formal learning and educational situations relevant for intercultural learning processes in a (multicultural) socio-political context²⁰.

Therefore, in my understanding, intercultural learning has always been and remains political learning, specifically within the normative context of education towards respect for, application of, and defence of (commitment to) human rights as a prerequisite for realising the need for the ongoing democratisation of democracy, as outlined in these theses.

Hence the postulate that intercultural learning in the context of European youth work must be understood as critical intercultural political education.

This goes beyond what some of us have recently been calling for in terms of taking the political dimension of European youth work seriously and putting it into practice, and has implications for a (new) interpretation of concepts relating to intercultural learning and their implementation. Intercultural learning as political learning has to contribute to the formation of a crucial minimum consensus on human rights as a concept of justice that protects and ensures individual and social rights and obligations in a multicultural European civil society. Only then can intercultural learning be defined as a necessary prerequisite and as an educational approach for establishing the capacity for intercultural dialogue²¹. While both are inextricably linked intercultural dialogue must not be abused as an alternative or replacement for intercultural learning.

¹⁹ Teresa Cunha and Rui Gomes wrote an article worth reading on the development of the term "intercultural learning", titled: Against the waste of experiences in intercultural learning. In: Coyote N° 13. Strasbourg: 2008

²⁰ The 1990/1997 version of the 10 theses explicitly focused on European youth encounters, hence the respective wording, but I myself have always understood the term in a broader sense and, in retrospect, I feel I have been right in doing so. Hendrik Otten, Intentionen politischer Pädagogik im interkulturellen Bereich (1985) Interkulturelles Lernen als politische Bildung in der europäischen Zivilgesellschaft (2003). In: G.J. Friesenhahn, A. Thimmel, eds., Schlüsseltexte. Engagement und Kompetenz in der internationalen Jugendarbeit. P. 158 ff. Schwalbach/Ts: 2005

²¹ See remark 18

Intercultural learning as political learning (critical citizenship education) must therefore also address power and patterns of dominance with regard to structural inequalities and injustices, and their implications for the application of the concept of justice grounded in human rights. Intercultural dialogue without a concrete reference to the concept of justice outlined above cannot initiate learning processes and does not lead to change in society.

For the sake of clarity and its association with political education, I continue to prefer the term *intercultural discourse* and interpret it in the context of Habermas's discourse ethics²². On the one hand it establishes what I consider to be the necessary link between ethical and moral aspects (tending towards the emotional) and cognitive and political ones, while on the other hand, it addresses all facets of intercultural learning - the pedagogical (tending towards the individual), but above all the social and politically oriented ones²³.

The following are my preliminary conclusions, regarding attributes of a concept for intercultural learning as political learning that requires further development:

Intercultural learning contributes to realising the vision of a learning, multicultural society, because these learning processes, on the one hand, aim to foster active democratic citizenship (primarily relevant at an individual level), on the other hand, they also foster the ability to behave and act in ways that are critical of discrimination towards the attitudes and lived realities of others, i. e. take the respective social context into account in a manner that is adequate with regard to subject and situation (more relevant at a social level).

Intercultural learning creates the conditions for enabling people to tolerate the integrity and equality of all cultural ways of life as a matter of principle within the limits set out in thesis no. 5 serving as a normative framework – that is, the fundamental recognition of others in their otherness and in the self, and the accompanying fundamental recognition of equality. Debate and dissent regarding this postulate must be conducted through procedures that are both democratically legitimated and politically just (human dignity and human rights).

Intercultural learning is a lifelong educational process aimed at the development and stabilisation of all individuals' willingness and ability to acculturate;

Intercultural learning is always part of the individual and political socialisation process of European civil society²⁴.

Before proceeding to thesis no. 7, let me remark on the following. In the 1997 version, theses no. 7 to 10 dealt with the following aspects: intercultural learning as social learning; relevance of intercultural learning to the practice of youth work and its reach; the importance of role distance, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity in

²² Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen (The Inclusion of the Other)*. Studien zur politischen Theorie. 5th edition. Frankfurt: 2003

²³ For more details see: Hendrik Otten in remark 9, p. 23 ff

²⁴ Ibid., p. 26

intercultural learning, and lastly some thoughts about initial and further training of staff engaged in international youth work.

Revising the document provides me with the opportunity to opt for a slightly different structure and clearer emphasis.

Below, I present the original discussion of the notions of role distance, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity – largely unchanged, as they remain central to my understanding of intercultural political education. Although frequently used, they are often understood or interpreted differently. Furthermore, I now consider them to be key to developing and strengthening young people's ability to build resilience, particularly during a phase of socialisation and self-discovery characterised by an overload of sometimes contradictory influences and stimuli, including social media.

Thesis no. 8 follows with some remarks on the context of European youth work and European youth policy. Theses no. 9 and 10 will then conclude by addressing professionalism, quality and competences for, as well as validation and recognition of, non-formal intercultural education and training.

Thesis no. 7: Empathy, role distance and tolerance of ambiguity are needed more than ever in the context of intercultural political education and the democratic development of society!

Our everyday lives mostly consist of situations of interaction. Each interaction – understood as an action-related communicative act – is regulated by role relationships. If nothing unusual happens, we do not have to question our roles: they have been internalised and we act accordingly. The more complex role adoption is, as a result of unconscious processes of socialisation, the more secure we feel (ego stability as a strength and confidence with regard to our own personal and social identity) and the more we believe that we are behaving in a manner appropriate to the respective interactive situation. We do not reflect on the fact that this process of role adoption is not completed once and for all at a specific moment in time. We do not think about the fact that roles always exist in varying degrees of consistency and concreteness and are subject to change as a result of intervening events and situations.

Without this basic possibility for change in role adoption (social ego identity) there would hardly be any chance for intercultural learning to succeed, as our interactions increasingly take place in a plural social environment where the usual role behaviour is less and less successful in achieving the intended effect. The need for minor and major role changes, in the sense of role taking and role making, is thus increasing. In order to learn new roles and to be able to accept others, role distance is necessary. This refers to the individual ability to see and put into perspective one's own attitudes, perception habits and patterns of thought against the background of the norms of one's own culture. This ability is so important because, without this relativisation, stimuli from a different culture will not be accepted as positive learning stimuli. Instead, they will rather result in a strengthening of existing prejudice structures and a fixation on existing role patterns. Role distance is, therefore, an essential prerequisite for intercultural learning.

New understanding of an old or as yet unfamiliar role presupposes the ability to place oneself in new situations. Without empathy, perception remains confined to one's own respective cultural context and, as such, general everyday practice is also not reflected upon. Empathy is thus an important condition for developing the ability to interact and competence to act – both important characteristics of the ability to take on intercultural discourse as described below. It is also a central prerequisite for solidarity, without which social change, in the sense of democratising democracy, is not possible.

Intercultural discourse is aimed at establishing extensive agreement between the content and relationship aspect of communication and agreement between the interacting partners at the relationship level.

Without empathy, without putting oneself in someone else's place and situation, this cannot succeed. A situation new to all those involved requires a common interpretation of what is perceived to be the reality of that situation, in order to develop new competence for action.

Looking at the complexity of everyday situations where cultures overlap, empathy also implies the anticipated review of what can be communicated or conveyed to others as experience through action.

This addresses tolerance of ambiguity: the ability to react to different interests, expectations and needs in a manner that is adequate to subject and object (within the limits described in thesis no. 5) and to make allowances for them in situations of interaction. Apart from that, tolerance of ambiguity describes the degree to which a person can endure not being able to implement his or her own ideas and expectations. Intercultural learning can help prevent people from resorting to competing stereotypes as a means of maintaining and asserting their own position. Unfortunately, we still witness this kind of behaviour far too often at the political level.

In the context of European youth work this behaviour should have largely been outgrown because tolerance of ambiguity, usually in combination with role distance and empathy, is understood as a crucial basic qualification of social action in a European civil society²⁵.

²⁵ This correlation was first presented in detail in: Hendrik Otten, *Zur politischen Didaktik interkulturellen Lernens*. Opladen: 1985. The chapter *Kommunikative Didaktik als methodisches Prinzip* (p. 40 ff), in particular, explains the interplay of role distance, empathy and ambiguity tolerance with a view to the development of personal and social ego identity, the ability for intercultural interaction and competence to act. From today's point of view, I think this publication is still appropriate regarding general definitions of objectives for intercultural learning, the political legitimacy thereof, and epistemological foundations; the didactic implementation would of course be different today, in line with the requirements described for European youth work and have a stronger focus on the political dimension.

Thesis no. 8: European youth work needs political endorsement at a national and European level within a coherent European youth policy development strategy!

European youth work is the most important field of non-formal education in Europe, in quantitative terms and increasingly also in qualitative terms. It is also the driving force behind the development of a sense of European citizenship (at least in the EU political context) and it is the motor of reflection on how a functioning, democratic European civil society can emerge and what characteristics it should have. The field of European youth work today is basically defined by the programmes, actions and funding schemes of the European Union and the Council of Europe. From the early YOUTH programmes right through to today's Erasmus+ Youth, European Solidarity Corps and sport programmes, the view has gained acceptance at EU level that European youth work cannot be an isolated, stand-alone initiative, but must be integrated into a coordinated European youth policy framework²⁶. To this day, not all member states fully share this view without reservation.

Instruments such as the *open method of coordination* (OMC) or the *structured dialogue*²⁷ were important steps towards this realisation and have led to a better quality of information at the European level.

Nevertheless, it must be noted critically that with the launch of the Lisbon Process (2000) and its ambitious goal to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, youth policy was reinterpreted and placed more or less exclusively under the primacy of employment and social integration. Thus, any ambitions were largely abandoned at first to develop youth policy in such a way that as many aspects of "youth as a life stage" as possible would be of common interest at European level, leading to the creation of specific youth-related projects and programmes.

This was, and remains in my view today, fundamentally wrong given the great demand for guidance and support that young people – especially those with special needs for support and assistance – have always had, and have even more so today, with regard to preparation for and transitions into adult life. Their number is not declining. That is why European youth work needs a new concerted action to systematically utilise all kinds of non-formal learning situations, educational situations and life situations offered by European programmes. A new narrative is needed with clear youth policy objectives, as the interest and trust of many young people has been lost in recent years and must be regained. However, such an extended mandate needs to be politically desired (political priorities and funding) and made possible in administrative terms (access and procedures). Erasmus+ Youth, together with the ESC, currently offers significantly more and better opportunities compared to the past.

²⁶ Also see remark 3

²⁷ The structured dialogue was one instrument of the open method of coordination (OMC) in the youth sector. Also see remark 13.

In the field of youth policy, there are a number of new framework conditions in place that need to be further developed and consolidated: The European Youth Work Convention and the European Youth Work Agenda, which could drive the “spirit of the self-image of Critical European Youth Work” into new practices in European youth work. The time is ripe for a new self-image, as already addressed in the previous theses. But what kind of Europe can and should we offer young people today so that they, too, can feel and identify as Europeans? I fear this question was once easier to answer than it is at present.

Thesis no. 9: There is no alternative to further professionalisation of European youth work!

European programmes express at least recognition of the importance non-formal and informal education have for young people growing up. Experiences, insights, knowledge, abilities and skills obtained and acquired are recognised as being of complementary value to what can be acquired in formal education. This recognition can only be implemented sustainably and, above all, effectively if European youth work can present a clear professional profile.

This profile includes the ability to demonstrate, in a manner relevant to practice, the specific opportunities and effects of non-formal political education and youth work in terms of impact, verifiable outcomes and efficiency, in comparison to formal education. Since 2008, RAY has been able to contribute important findings on the aspect of impact²⁸.

Apart from adequate financial resources and organisational conditions, qualified staff are essential. The professional demands on individuals who take on responsibility in the context of European youth work will continue to increase in a dual perspective.

Firstly, they are expected to possess the relevant qualifications and competences so that the programme-specific objectives (both EU and Council of Europe) can be systematically pursued and the educational mandate can be implemented as comprehensively as possible. It is hardly possible to acquire these qualifications and competences to a sufficient degree by merely occasionally or “on the side” helping to facilitate a European youth exchange or by attending a training course once. By no means should this commitment, which is very often voluntary, be belittled – but it is not enough.

Secondly, in the coming years, there will be an increasing focus on agreeing to pan-European standards regarding a professional profile for the respective actors in European youth work which ensure social security and future employment – standards that define a profession and treat European youth work and political education as socially relevant work. Although European youth work has been developing steadily, albeit slowly, towards such a professional profile in recent years, this trend is not yet reflected in a correspondingly relevant manner in youth policy

²⁸ RAY stands for Research-based analysis of European youth programmes and is a European network of National Agencies and their research partners dedicated to gathering knowledge- and evidence-based data to evaluate the implementation and impact of European programmes in the youth sector. The author of these theses was a research partner of the German National Agency JUGEND for many years.

and, above all, in fiscal policy. The general budget increases for Erasmus+ Youth alone are not yet an indicator.

In view of the current and latent crises at EU level and within the member states, as well as the requirements and expectations set out by policymakers (both structural and individual: promoting democracy, fostering European awareness, taking action against right-wing populism and right-wing extremism, etc.), I see a need to decisively create further and better professional structures. This means: A professional environment, i. e. being embedded in an organisation or affiliated with a structure; a certain degree of permanence and continuity; financial and social security; structured professional development and peer discourse, etc. It goes without saying that professional standards must also be in place for planning, organisation, implementation, and administration.

The call for increased and greater professionalisation not only relates to the field of work itself, but also to the profile of those active in European youth work / intercultural political education.

In my view, this includes (specialist) academic training relevant to the role and personal intercultural / European field experience: This naturally does not exclude career changers with equivalent backgrounds acquired through other routes, as work in and with EU youth programmes has brought many committed and qualified youth workers on board in the last few years.

Recent public discussions, at both national and European level, on quality in European / international youth work, on youth work as political education, and regarding training and further education in the context of this youth work, represent an important and politically sound step, as support is provided by both the European Commission (SALTO) and the Council of Europe (Youth Partnership)²⁹. The discussions on the successor programme to Erasmus+ Youth are going to show where the road will lead.

Thesis no. 10: Understanding European youth work as critical intercultural political education – a possible approach in the essential process of ongoing democratisation of democracy!

The theses formulated so far are intended to illustrate why, in my view, European and international youth work have been at a dead end for several years now. In summary, I believe the main reasons are as follows:

1. The advanced depoliticisation of youth work must be mentioned first. It began many years ago when, as a rule and with few exceptions, pedagogical thinking and practice dispensed with political justifications. Consequently, intercultural learning was conceived and implemented in theory and practice almost exclusively from an pedagogical perspective.

²⁹ See remark 15. In the first section and in two annexes the study explains about quality standards in great detail, in the second section it addresses necessary elements of competence for such a profile.

2. European youth work has been complacent with the positive effects it has been shown to have on young people's individual learning, whilst losing sight of the corresponding effects that are equally necessary from a political perspective and with regard to essential democratic social developments.

3. European youth work has neglected the "European project", even though the ongoing re-nationalisation of political decision-making has been evident for years. It has not least become visible in the disengagement of many young people from European politics and, regrettably, in some cases also in the policy framework of the European Commission. The call for increased promotion of a European awareness and for greater youth participation also largely lacks political justification; it mostly remains stuck at the level of a pedagogical aspiration.

Practical conclusions for European youth work should be drawn from this; these have been set out in greater detail in the individual theses above.

The most important one, in my view, is this: We need a new understanding of intercultural learning as political learning – in other words, a new self-conceptualisation of European youth work as critical intercultural political education – so that it can once again become a form of critical pedagogy supporting the necessary ongoing democratisation of democracy.

This revised version of the theses ends with the same central concluding questions as the 2009 version, because we constantly need new answers to certain guiding questions that remain the same: "What are the radical changes we are facing today? Do we still love our lives? Are we still able to have a good idea of what is going on? What should we work on? What are the important issues? What attitude, what ethics, what knowledge do we need?"³⁰

© Hendrik Otten
Summer 2026

³⁰ Frank Berberich in: Remark 7

Bibliography (titles not yet mentioned in footnotes)

Sabine Achour, Thomas Gill, (eds.), Partizipation und politische Teilhabe mit allen: Auftrag politischer Bildung. Vom Klassenrat zum zivilen Ungehorsam. Wochenschau Verlag. Politik und Bildung. Frankfurt 2023

Wolfgang Beutel, Markus Glohe, (eds.), Jahrbuch Demokratiepädagogik. Demokratiebildung 2024/25: Konflikte. Gesellschaft und Politik demokratisch gestalten. debus Pädagogik. Wochenschau Verlag. Frankfurt 2024

Wolfgang Beutel, Matthias Busch, Cristiane Ruberg, (eds.), Jahrbuch Demokratiepädagogik. Demokratiebildung 2025/26: Krisenmodus verlassen – Transformation gestalten. debus Pädagogik. Wochenschau Verlag. Frankfurt 2025

Chehata / Eis / Lösch / Schäfer / Schmitt / Thimmel / Trumann / Wohnig, (eds.), Handbuch Kritische Politische Bildung. Wochenschau Verlag. Frankfurt 2024

Demokratie Gegen Menschenfeindlichkeit. Issue 1/2019: Shrinking Spaces and Issue 2/2025: Einfache Erzählungen in Komplexen Zeiten. Both published by Wochenschau Verlag Frankfurt

Steve Kenner, Dirk Lange, (eds.), Citizenship Education. Konzepte, Anregungen und Ideen zur Demokratiebildung. Wochenschau Verlag. Politik und Bildung. Frankfurt 2018

Christiane Ruberg, Markus Gloe, Matthias Busch, (eds.), Jahrbuch Demokratiepädagogik & Demokratiebildung 2026/27. Debus Pädagogik. Wochenschau Verlag. Frankfurt 2026

Wolfgang Sander, Zwischen Mündigkeit, Kritik und Identität. Perspektiven politischer Bildung. Wochenschau Verlag. Frankfurt 2023

Stefan Schäfer, Internationale Jugendarbeit und politische Theorie. Diskurse und Perspektiven. Wochenschau Verlag Non-Formale Politische Bildung. Frankfurt 2021

Politische Bildung. Journal für Politische Bildung. Issue 1/26: Gesellschaftsdiagnosen. Start New Society. Wochenschau Verlag Frankfurt