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Guidelines for Youth Workers

LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Youth Exchanges.

Project YW-MED

"Youth Workers Across the Mediterranean Sea"

2024-1-IT03-KA220-YOU-000243233

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YW-MED
Youth Workers Network across the Mediterranean Sea

Objectives:

YW-MED aims to improve the quality of youth work across the Mediterranean region by fostering the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ young people in Erasmus+ youth exchanges, particularly in contexts where the recognition and protection of LGBTQIA+ rights remain challenging. The project supports youth workers in developing awareness, competencies, and practical tools to create safer, more inclusive, and empowering learning environments.

Implementation:

The project involved two international mobility activities bringing together 24 Youth Workers from across the Mediterranean. Through a participatory design approach, participants engaged in desk-based and field research, shared experiences and good practices, and collaboratively reflected on challenges and opportunities for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in youth exchanges. Country profiles and comparative findings were developed for Italy, Greece, Spain, Albania, Malta, Jordan, and Turkey, providing key insights that directly informed the development of these Guidelines.

About the Guidelines:

These Guidelines are the result of a collaborative and experiential learning process.
They are designed as a practical tool for Youth Workers to support the planning, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive Erasmus+ youth exchanges for LGBTQIA+ young people.

Evaluation Indicators:

- Clear reference to the three key areas addressed in group-based youth activities and youth exchanges: language, environment, and group dynamics.
- For each area, systematic integration of the six inclusion dimensions: fears, prejudices, challenges, support, assistance, and empowerment.
- Level of satisfaction with the final deliverable expressed by the 24 youth workers involved in the workshops, equal to or above 70%, as measured through evaluation questionnaires.
- Achievement of the approval process for the output, based on feedback collected from at least 20 LGBTQIA+ young people from partner countries, with a satisfaction level of at least 70% for each section of the Guidelines.

Participatory Contributions and Co-creation Process:

The development of these Guidelines was grounded in a participatory and collaborative process involving all partner organisations. During the project activities, youth workers contributed proposals, reflections, and practical recommendations collected through group work, thematic sessions, and shared worksheets.

These contributions played a key role in shaping the content of the Guidelines, ensuring that the proposed approaches are rooted in real practices, diverse national contexts, and the lived experiences of youth workers operating across the Mediterranean region. The inclusion of partner inputs strengthens the relevance, applicability, and transferability of the Guidelines.

Partner Contributions – Summary of Proposed Practices:

The following practices were proposed by partner organisations during collaborative workshops and group activities. They represent the collective input that informed the development of these Guidelines.

Environment

- Careful selection of participants and partners.
- Preparatory online meetings.
- Inclusive, safe spaces for all, including introverted participants.
- Mixed-nationality working groups.
- Gender-neutral toilets and accessible facilities.
- Inclusive design of training, accommodation, and dining spaces.
- Daily reflection moments and emotional check-ins.
- Safe-space rules and subtle LGBTQIA+ symbols.
- Inclusive food respecting allergies and dietary needs.
- Staff support for safety, guidance, and privacy.

Group Dynamics

- Balanced group mixing and equal participation.
- Support for participants with limited language skills.
- Respect for different identities, opinions, and experiences.
- Use of energisers and team-building activities.
- Shared responsibilities and clear group rules.
- Prevention of stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour.
- Daily reflection and feedback moments.

Language

- Avoid assumptions about gender and pronouns.
- Clear, simple, and accessible communication.
- Active listening and non-interruption.
- Trainers model inclusive and respectful language.
- Avoid slurs or offensive expressions.
- Ask consent before giving feedback.
- Address discrimination and promote inclusion.

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Guidelines for Youth Workers – LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Youth Exchanges

Introduction

Theseguidelines are a theoretical and operational tool developed as part of Work Package 3 of the Erasmus+ project and are designed to support youth workers, trainers, and facilitators in planning and implementing inclusive and 100% LGBTQIA+-friendly youth exchanges. The document stems from the need to provide concrete and contextualized tools to address the structural challenges that LGBTQIA+ people continue to face in non-formal educational settings, particularly in relation to discrimination, invisibilization, social exclusion, and the lack of safe spaces. Although the guidelines were developed primarily based on the needs and experiences of the countries involved in the partnership, their theoretical and practical framework makes them applicable in a variety of geographical and soHow can we help more introverted people fully express their skillscial contexts, especially where the rights, recognition, and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people are limited or uneven. The approach adopted recognizes the central role of youth work as a tool for empowerment, active participation, and the promotion of human rights, in line with the founding values of the Erasmus+ program. The guidelines are structured around three key areas that significantly influence the quality and level of inclusion of a youth exchange: the environment, understood as a physical, organizational, and symbolic space; group dynamics, which regulate interactions, roles, and power relations among participants; and inclusive language, considered both as a communication tool and as a social and political practice. These three areas are interconnected and jointly contribute to the creation of safe, participatory, and respectful environments. For each area, the guidelines address six key areas for building inclusion: Fears, Prejudices, Challenges, Support, Encouragement, and Valorization. This structure allows for a systematic analysis of the main critical issues that may emerge during a youth exchange and the provision of practical and adaptable responses. The proposed structure allows youth workers to intervene both in the planning phase and during the management of activities, promoting a preventative and transformative approach to the dynamics of exclusion. To ensure the relevance and quality of the materials produced, specific evaluation indicators were defined. Specifically, the satisfaction level with the deliverables produced by the 24 workshop participants was equal to or greater than 70%, as measured by a questionnaire. Furthermore, to verify the achievement of Outcome 2 of Work Package 3, "Output Approval," an evaluation questionnaire was administered to 20 young people from the LGBTQIA+ community in the partnership countries. They reported a satisfaction level of at least 70% for each section of the guidelines. These data confirm that the content produced meets the needs of young people from the LGBTQIA+ community and offers practical guidance applicable to inclusive, safe, and participatory youth work contexts.

Section 1 – Environment

The physical and social environment in which a youth exchange takes place is a crucial factor in the safety, well-being, and inclusion of participants. This section provides practical guidance for addressing fears, prejudices, and challenges, and for supporting, advocating for, and valuing all participants, with particular attention to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Fears

Participants may feel insecure or fearful of being judged, excluded, or discriminated against because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. To address these fears, it is essential to:

Create physical and virtual safe spaces where participants can freely express their thoughts, emotions, and concerns. Queer safe spaces are designed to meet the need for protection and support of LGBTQIA+ people, ensuring physical, emotional, social, and symbolic safety. These spaces aim to reduce the impact of violence, patriarchal norms, and heteronormativity, which often affect daily life and relationships in public and private contexts1. They can be physical, virtual, educational, or community-based, and while they cannot completely eliminate all risks, they offer an environment where people feel freer to express themselves, engage in dialogue, and build identities. Safe spaces support activism and social change, creating opportunities for exchange, listening, and collaboration.

Design flexible rooms that take into account participants' individual needs and preferences, creating environments that can adapt to different comfort levels and modes of interaction. Flexible rooms are more than just physical spaces; they function as practical tools to foster inclusion, well-being, and emotional safety. This means providing shared options for those who want to socialize, work together, or feel part of a group, promoting positive interactions and cooperation among participants. Or offering isolation options for those who need moments of privacy or rejuvenation, while respecting the need for quiet and private spaces. Plan rooms so they can be easily adapted throughout the day: by rearranging tables, creating separate corners, or creating multifunctional common areas. Take into account different cultural and gender identity needs, including separate beds, accessible or flexible bathrooms, and safe zones for the LGBTQIA+ community. Encourage everyone's active participation, ensuring that no participant feels excluded or forced to share spaces when they don't want to. Introduce daily reflection moments

[1] Yossi David, Gilly Hartal and Brandon William Epstein, Queer Safe Spaces and Communicationlocked, Lital Pascar, Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 2022

where participants can share personal experiences or seek support. Ensure privacy in communications and photos: images shared in online groups should not be published without consent. Create an environment that fosters inclusion even for the most introverted participants. In youth exchange groups, the way activities are structured and managed can determine how truly included each participant feels. Introverts can easily feel overwhelmed in highly dynamic or noisy group settings, such as intensive workshops, large activities, or unstructured group sessions. This can reduce their participation and sense of belonging. How can we help more introverted people fully express their skills and perspectives, thus contributing to the enrichment of the group as a whole?2 An effective strategy is to provide spaces dedicated to individual reflection, as well as moments of discussion in small groups or pairs, and to facilitate inclusive discussions where participation does not require imposing oneself or competing for the floor. In this sense, it becomes essential to balance different modes of interaction and design activities flexibly, recognizing and valuing the multiple relational styles present within the group.

The inclusion of more introverted participants requires specific attention during free time and mealtimes, i.e., unstructured social moments where spontaneous social dynamics often emerge. These moments can be difficult or cause stress for introverts if not carefully managed. Some strategies include: creating moments and spaces where it's not necessary to speak or "stand out" to be part of the group, because introverts often perform best when they have the opportunity to observe and reflect before speaking; using facilitation techniques that value listening and reflection. Many educational and facilitation contexts suggest including speaking circles, speaking shifts, asynchronous brainstorming, or writing sessions before speaking. These approaches allow those less inclined to speak spontaneously to contribute meaningfully; and promoting a culture of respect for different socialization modes. Trainers and facilitators must recognize that participation doesn't necessarily mean "talking a lot," but also listening, reflecting, observing, and contributing in different ways. Valuing these forms of participation reduces social anxiety and increases the sense of inclusion of those who process internally before expressing themselves.

Prejudices

Within international youth exchanges, prejudice can manifest itself in various forms: cultural stereotypes, unconscious attitudes, unintentional body language, or misunderstandings related to national, cultural, gender, and sexual orientation differences. In an LGBTQIA+-friendly context, such prejudices can negatively impact participants' sense of security and belonging, impacting relational dynamics and the quality of the overall experience. To address and reduce the impact of prejudice, it is essential to intervene in the design of the environment and activities.

[2] Martina Francesca, *Manuale di facilitazione per persone introverse,* Martina Francesca - Facilitatrice, 2018

An effective first strategy is to intentionally mix participants during activities and in work groups, avoiding the formation of subgroups based on nationality, language, or pre-existing affinities. This approach fosters positive interactions, intercultural exchange, and greater mutual understanding, helping to deconstruct stereotypes and generalizations.

Another important element concerns the visibility of inclusion. Displaying inclusive symbols, such as flags, stickers, pins, or small visual elements related to the LGBTQIA+ community, can help clearly communicate that the space is safe and welcoming. It is important, however, that this visibility be discreet and non-imposing, avoiding pressure or excessive emphasis, so as to respect the varying comfort levels of participants.

An interesting study conducted in Ireland in 2023 in the healthcare sector highlighted the significant role of badges and activist symbols as tools of inclusion and nonverbal communication. The study aimed to analyze healthcare workers' experiences using the Health Service Executive (HSE) rainbow badge (a pin), considered a symbol of inclusionand support for LGBTQIA+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender identities), within a pediatric hospital setting. The study employed a multicenter, cross-sectional observational design. Participants were engaged through an anonymous online questionnaire, structured with open-ended and closed-ended questions, designed to explore staff and patient reactions to the badge, the experience and impact of using the badge, and any need for further training. All staff, both clinical and non-clinical, who had signed up to the HSE Rainbow Badge initiative were eligible to participate in the study. A total of 151 eligible participants from various disciplines participated in the study, including 29 (19.2%) from the LGBTQIA+ community. Over half of respondents (58.9%, n=89) reported learning new information from the initiative-related meetings, particularly about barriers to care for LGBTQIA+ youth. Staff generally reported positive responses to the badge, while a minority reported mixed or negative reactions: 5.1% from colleagues, 4.5% from young people, and 3.7% from families. The open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework, which identified five main themes: pride, a symbol of safety and inclusion, impact on organizational culture, awareness of LGBTQIA+ issues, and additional interventions to implement for LGBTQIA+ patients. The study demonstrated how these symbols are perceived by LGBTQIA+ people as immediate signals of welcome, support, and safety within care settings.

Preventing prejudice also involves establishing shared rules of mutual respect, which must be clearly communicated from the beginning of the interaction. These include the prohibition of non-consensual physical contact, respect for individual time, personal space, and different sensitivities. Establishing and reiterating these rules helps create a predictable and safe environment, reducing the risk of invasive or discriminatory behavior

[3] Claire O'Dwyer, Anne Kehoe, Dee Shanahan, Warren O'Brien, Dani Hall,Staff experiences of wearing the Rainbow Badge in a paediatric hospital setting: a mixed-methods survey, National Library of Medicine, 2024

Finally, even seemingly informal elements, such as the use of music and "positive vibes" during activities, can play a significant role in countering prejudice. Music, energizers, and creative activities help create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, facilitating emotional openness, connection between participants, and the building of relationships based on mutual respect and trust.

Challenges

Environmental challenges in LGBTQIA+-friendly youth exchanges can involve a variety of aspects, from logistics and accessibility to meal management and safety, impacting the quality of participants' experience and their sense of inclusion. Addressing these challenges requires careful planning and concrete operational strategies that ensure welcoming, safe, and functional spaces. One of the main challenges concerns restroom management. To foster an inclusive environment, it is advisable to provide gender-neutral or gender-unmarked restrooms wherever possible, thus reducing discomfort for non-binary or transgender people and helping to create a space perceived as safe by all participants. Studies on the provision of restrooms in queer spaces highlight that the implementation of gender-neutral restrooms serves a dual role, both practical and symbolic. From a practical standpoint, these services improve accessibility and inclusion for transgender, non-binary, and anyone who does not identify with binary gender categories. Symbolically and culturally, the presence of gender-neutral bathrooms challenges prevailing cis-normative and heteronormative norms in society, promoting the visibility and recognition of gender diversity. A 2020 qualitative study conducted in the West Midlands region of England highlighted4, through 12 semi-structured interviews, that even in contexts deemed "inclusive," implicit practices and rules persist that can exclude certain people, while the adoption of gender-neutral bathrooms offers a clear signal of openness and support. The interviews were part of a broader research project, which also included direct observations conducted by the two project leaders over a three-month period in four locations within LGBTQIA+ community gathering places. The overall aim of the project was to explore experiences of inclusion and exclusion within these queer spaces, analyzing how normative identities are constructed and maintained. While queer spaces can take many forms, this research focused specifically on spaces associated with the nightlife economy, such as bars, pubs, and clubs in the West Midlands known to be "LGBTQ" spaces. While acknowledging that the nightlife economy can also include non-alcohol-related leisure venues (Shaw, 2014), the LGBTQIA+ spaces studied are strongly associated with alcohol consumption. These spaces are identified as "LGBTQIA+" both through community interaction and access, and through their promotion as inclusive spaces. Participants were asked to share their experiences of frequenting and using these spaces, with particular attention to their identity and issues related to access, inclusion, and exclusion. Although the availability of toilets was not an initially anticipated topic, it

[4] Colliver, B., Duffus, Queer Space: Toilet Provision, Access and Inclusion in the West Midlands, 2021

emerged as a central issue in participants' narratives about their experiences within these environments. The testimonies collected reinforce this point: Charley, a non-binary person, emphasized the personal importance of providing gender-neutral restrooms, highlighting how these spaces impact her comfort level and access to public spaces. Similarly, Billy, also non-binary, explained: "I find it really difficult to go to some public spaces, especially straight ones, because it's really hard to go to the bathroom; that's why I like to find a queer space with gender-neutral restrooms and know I won't feel the same discomfort when I need the bathroom." Public restrooms have long been a central theme in various disciplines, including gender studies, sociology, and geography, as they are considered highly sexually segregated spaces and therefore play a key role in discussions about gender norms. Recent research highlights how gender-neutral restrooms can provide a sense of inclusivity and safety, particularly for non-binary people, and symbolically represent a liminal suspension of gender within these spaces. Qualitative studies also demonstrate that even spaces often considered "inclusive" can operate within exclusionary frameworks, with implicit rules and informal practices that favor some identities (e.g., white gay men and cisgender men) over others. In this context, the implementation of gender-neutral restrooms emerges as a strategic intervention that not only improves practical accessibility and reduces minority stress, but also has strong symbolic value, helping to challenge cis-normative and heteronormative norms and promote more equitable and inclusive environments.

Another significant challenge is food management, which must take into account participants' allergies, intolerances, cultural needs, and dietary preferences. Careful meal planning not only prevents involuntary exclusions but also helps create an environment where each participant feels valued and welcomed. It's important to provide clear information about ingredients, offer alternatives for those with special diets, and respect individual dietary choices, without creating feelings of embarrassment or isolation.

The cleanliness and orderliness of common areas and rooms are essential to ensuring a safe and welcoming environment. Well-organized spaces that are maintained daily not only promote physical well-being, preventing accidents and hygiene issues, but also contribute to a sense of security and mutual respect among participants. Tidy environments communicate attention to detail and care for others, reinforcing the perception of an inclusive environment where each participant is valued and respected.

The support of the team leader is equally crucial in addressing challenges related to navigating the physical environment. Leaders can provide guidance on safe places, common areas, and activities, supporting participants who may feel unsafe or need practical information. Their presence and availability reduces anxiety, facilitates orientation within the facility, and allows for prompt intervention in the event of logistical difficulties or unexpected situations.

Finally, secure and private communication is a growing challenge in international contexts. Using secure messaging platforms like Telegram, rather than more popular but

less secure apps like WhatsApp, helps protect personal data and create a trusted digital environment where participants can interact, share information, and feel free to express themselves. Ensuring privacy in communications also helps reduce potential anxiety related to sharing personal experiences or the participation of young people from less inclusive backgrounds.

Support

Providing concrete support within the environment means preparing participants for the exchange with clear information, appropriate tools, and accessible reference points. To this end, it's helpful to organize preliminary online meetings with partners and participants to clarify expectations, objectives, and specific needs. Considering individual preferences, including cultural, linguistic, and accessibility needs, allows for a more inclusive and personalized environment. Within the physical space, it's important to create dedicated listening spaces where participants can express thoughts, doubts, or concerns without feeling judged. Providing facilitating tools and materials—such as worksheets, notes, visual materials, or secure online platforms—allows even the most introverted participants to actively contribute, making participation more equitable and meaningful for everyone.

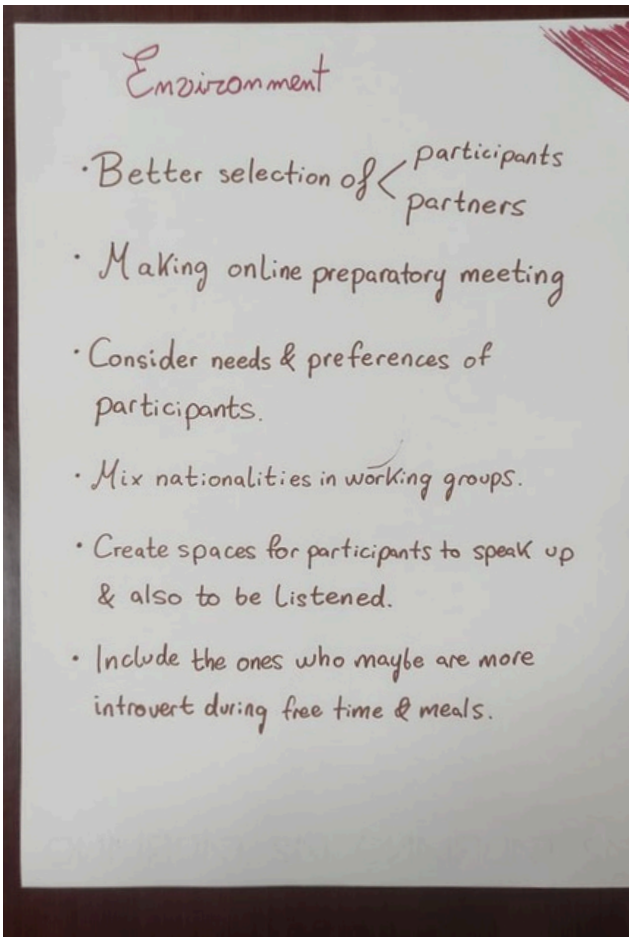
Encouragement

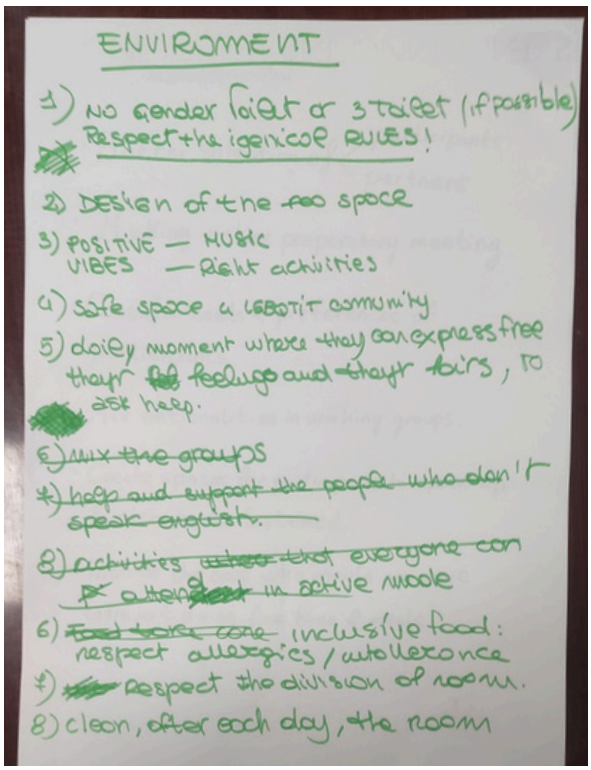
Active support during the exchange involves ensuring that the environment fosters the emotional and relational well-being of participants. A first step is to establish safe space rules that are shared and respected by all, creating a clear framework for inclusive and respectful behavior. In the event of conflict or misunderstanding, prompt and discreet counseling or mediation should be offered so that situations do not become sources of exclusion or discomfort. Constantly monitoring participants' emotional well-being, for example through daily check-ins or brief guided reflections, allows for prompt intervention in the event of difficulties. Furthermore, fostering the creation of peer support communities by encouraging positive and cooperative relationships among participants strengthens the exchange's internal network and increases a sense of security and belonging.

Valorization

Valuing means recognizing and highlighting the skills, experiences, and contributions of each participant, transforming the environment into a positive, inclusive, and motivating

space. Diversity can be celebrated through targeted activities, visual materials, sharing, and storytelling, which make each participant's contribution tangible. It's important to make the contributions made visible, for example by displaying posters, brainstorming results, or multimedia creations, to reinforce the value of each intervention. Creating a positive and inclusive climate that encourages respectful behavior and everyone's active participation helps transform the environment into a context where each participant feels heard, recognized, and motivated to contribute.





Section 2 – Group Dynamics

Group dynamics refer to the processes through which groupmembersinteract, communicate, and influence each other's behaviors, attitudes,andrelationships. Understanding group dynamics means recognizing that eachgroupisnotmerelythe sum of its members, but a complex system in which individualbehaviors,roles,implicit norms, leadership, and communication are continuously intertwined.Inayouth exchange context, these dynamics become particularly important,astheyinfluence active participation, the inclusion of all participants, and theiremotionalwell-being.

Within youth exchanges, group dynamics develop significantly throughinformaland unstructured activities, which play a key role in building trust, breakingdownbarriers, and encouraging everyone's participation. Activities such as ice-breaking,brainstorming, participatory workshops, and evaluation exercises are essential toolsforfacilitating socialization and stimulating interaction among participants from theearlystagesofthe exchange. Ice-breaking activities, in particular, help participants gradually gettoknoweachother, reduce initial anxiety, and create a climate of greater openness. Throughplay, movement, and informal sharing, these activities help build relationships,fosteringan environment where people feel more comfortable participating, expressingthemselves, and collaborating. This is particularly important in international andinterculturalgroups, where linguistic, cultural, or personal differences can initially hindercommunication. Activities such as brainstorming and participatory workshops alloweveryone's contribution to be valued, offering diverse modes of expression beyondwords.Visual tools, writing, small group work, or moments of individual reflectionalloweventhemost introverted participants to actively participate, reducing competitiveorunbalanced dynamics. A significant example of an assessment and interaction activityistheCrosstheLine exercise, which combines a physical and cognitive dimensionandencourages participants to reflect on personal experiences, perceptions,andsocialpositioning.This type of activity creates a shared space for listening and recognition,givingvisibilityto diverse experiences and fostering empathy within the group.Theopportunitytoactively participate, even without necessarily having to speak, helpsmaketheexperiencemore inclusive and accessible. Taken together, informal activities are essential tools for supportingpositive,inclusive, and participatory group dynamics. Consciously integrating themintotheexchange program helps create a more productive, safe, and welcomingenvironment,whereeach participant feels recognized, respected, and an active part ofthegroup.

Fears

Participants may feel insecure or fearful of being judged, excluded, or rejected because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or personal opinions. To address these fears,

it's important to mix groups during activities, encouraging interaction between people of different nationalities, experiences, and orientations. Getting-to-know-you and ice-breaking activities help facilitate integration and a sense of belonging, while work in pairs or small groups, combined with time for personal reflection, allows introverted participants to express themselves without feeling pressured. Individual time and space must be respected, with no pressure or obligation to speak or share publicly if they don't wish to do so, and their involvement must be respectfully encouraged.

Prejudices

Within group dynamics, prejudices can emerge explicitly or implicitly and relate to cultural, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation, or behavioral differences. Often, these preconceptions are not expressed openly, but manifest themselves through subtle exclusions, stereotypes, jokes, aloofness, or imbalances in participation. In youth exchange contexts, these dynamics risk undermining the climate of trust and limiting the active involvement of some people. Addressing prejudice requires creating open and safe spaces for discussion, where people can collectively reflect on their own perceptions and the power dynamics at work within the group. Collaborative activities and diverse group work foster the encounter between differences and allow people to overcome stereotypical views through direct experience. It is essential that facilitators and team leaders intervene promptly in the presence of discriminatory or exclusionary behavior, adopting an educational and dialogic approach aimed at promoting awareness rather than blaming. In this way, the group can become a space for mutual learning and the transformation of prejudicial dynamics.

Challenges

Group dynamics in youth exchanges present numerous challenges, particularly related to communication, linguistic and cultural differences, and participants' varying levels of confidence and comfort. In international groups, the target language can be a significant barrier, generating frustration, isolation, or unequal participation between those with greater and lesser language skills. These difficulties are compounded by differences in ways of expressing oneself, cultural norms, and levels of familiarity with group work. To address these challenges, it is necessary to design inclusive and flexible activities that take into account different skills and participation methods. Linguistic support, informal peer translation, and the use of nonverbal or visual tools help make communication more accessible. At the same time, it is important to plan team-building sessions and small-group work that ensure equal opportunities for expression and visibility, preventing any one voice from dominating the group. Recognizing and

embracing difficulties as an integral part of the group process allows challenges to betransformed into opportunities for learning and collective growth.

Support

Active participant support requires the constant presence of team leaders and facilitators capable of observing, intervening if necessary, and maintaining balance among group members. Promoting peer support allows participants to support one another during activities and in their free time. Practical tools such as brainstorming walls, cards for expressing feelings, anonymous feedback boxes, and secure communication platforms foster effective and protected interaction, offering everyone the opportunity to share opinions and reflections.

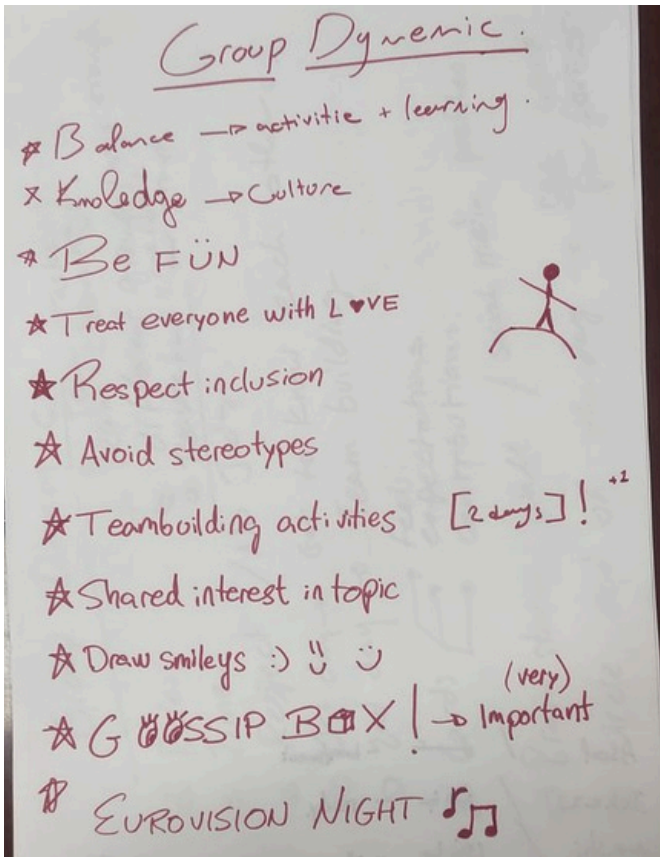
Encouragement

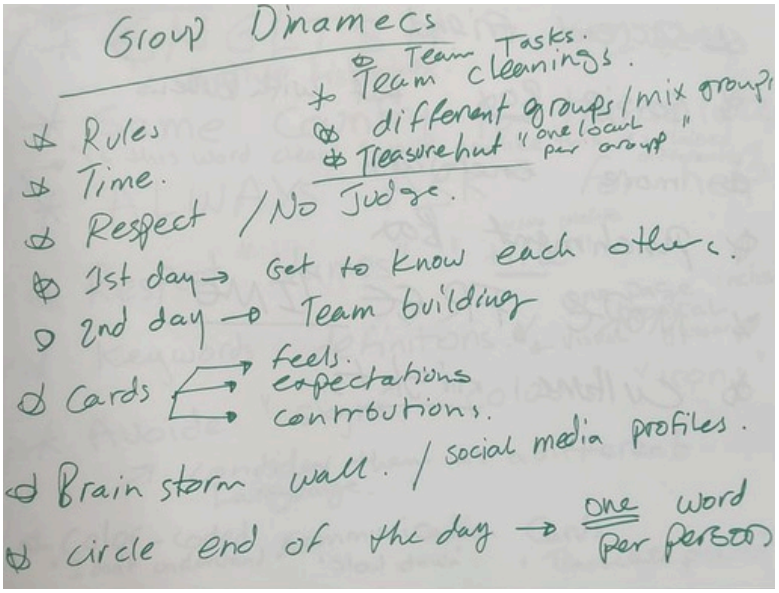
Supporting group dynamics translates into building a structured yet welcoming environment, based on clear rules of mutual respect, listening, and non-judgment. Establishing shared norms from the outset, such as respecting speaking times, respecting others' opinions, and respecting personal boundaries, helps prevent conflict and strengthen trust among participants. Daily moments of reflection and sharing, such as end-of-day circles or guided discussions, offer a space to process emotions, difficulties, and successes, allowing the group to monitor its well-being and address any tensions constructively. At the same time, fun and informal activities, such as energizers, group games, and themed evenings, play a fundamental role in supporting cohesion and a positive atmosphere. Shared fun and informal experiences strengthen bonds, foster a sense of community, and help make the group a safe, inclusive, and participatory space.

Valorization

Participant valorization occurs through recognition of individual and collective successes and contributions, both during structured activities and informal moments of group life. Making the results and ideas emerging during the exchange visible, for example through posters, brainstorming walls, or collections of materials produced by participants, allows the value of each contribution to be recognized and strengthens the sense of belonging to the group. Offering opportunities to express creativity, interests, and personal talents encourages active and informed participation, emphasizing how each individual experience contributes to enriching the collective experience.

Valorization also takes shape through practical activities that foster collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual recognition. Initiatives such as team cleaning, in which participants jointly take care of common spaces, promote cooperation and a sense of responsibility; treasure hunts, with the presence of at least one local person per group, facilitate teamwork and understanding of the host context; the use of cards to express feelings, visual tools, and sharing spaces such as brainstorming walls allow emotions, expectations, and ideas to be expressed; Meanwhile, the end-of-day circles, where each participant can express their experiences, even with just a single word, foster listening and recognition. Fun and creative activities, such as drawing smileys, themed evenings, or managing safe spaces for sharing on social media, help consolidate the group, strengthen inclusion, and enhance different ways of participating.





Section 3 – Inclusive Language

Language is not a mere descriptive tool, but a social practice that interprets and constructs cultural and identity meanings. As Zimman[5] emphasizes in his analysis of linguistic practices related to the construction of gender identities, language is a territory in which social norms can include or exclude.

It represents a central tool in building a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment within a youth exchange. Words are never neutral: through language, we can reinforce stereotypes and exclusions, but also create trust, recognition, and a sense of belonging. A conscious and attentive use of language is particularly relevant in everyday contexts.

Language cannot be understood exclusively as a set of words and grammatical rules used in everyday life, but should be considered as a process through which both the manifestations of reality, already existing in the world, and the phenomena we process at a cognitive and symbolic level, take shape[6]. It is therefore not simply a matter of learning or adopting labels or neologisms to respond to external demands, but rather of creating and maintaining spaces for thought, speech, action, and, above all, listening, capable of embracing a plurality of experiences and identities. Indeed, language not only serves an informative function, but also contributes to building and strengthening a social order and its associated hierarchies. Through its daily use, people are socially identified, while ideologies, stereotypes, and expectations related to roles, genders, and social norms are continually reproduced and legitimized. Language, as a dynamic and historically situated system, is by its very nature subject to continuous processes of transformation. The linguistic evolutions observed today are not isolated or purely formal phenomena, but represent the direct consequence of profound social, cultural, and political shifts. In this context, the growing focus on inclusivity and gender equality cannot help but be reflected in linguistic practices, making language one of the primary arenas of symbolic negotiation and social change in the contemporary world.

Deeply rooted in the foundation of every culture and social structure, language does not simply describe reality, but actively contributes to constructing it and making it intelligible. Through its daily use, it gradually but persistently influences the way people perceive themselves, others, and the power relations that pervade society. In this sense, language functions as a tool of normalization: what is named acquires legitimacy, while what remains invisible or unspeakable risks being excluded from the realm of social recognition.

A strongly androcentric language like Italian tends to reproduce and reinforce a worldview in which the masculine is assumed to be neutral and universal, relegating to the margins all subjectivities that do not fit within it. This linguistic approach contributes to consolidating gender stereotypes and symbolic hierarchies that marginalize women, non-

[5] Zimman, L. (2018). Transgender Voices: A Critical Perspective on Voice and Gender.

[6] Order of Psychologists of Lombardy, *LGBTQIA+ Individuals and Inclusive Language: Theoretical and Practical Reflections for the Psychology Profession,* edited by Claudio Baggini, Cristina Vacchini, Paolo Antonelli, and Daniela Invernizzi, 2023

binary people—those who do not identify with the male/female dichotomy—transgender people, whose gender identity or gender expression does not match the sex assigned at birth, and intersex people, born with chromosomal, anatomical, and/or hormonal characteristics that cannot be rigidly classified as exclusively male or female.
The linguistic absence or marginalization of these subjectivities is not without consequences: on the contrary, it contributes to reinforcing dynamics of exclusion, discrimination, and invisibilization, also impacting access to rights, services, and spaces for participation. Intervening on language, therefore, does not simply mean introducing new formulas or terminological adaptations, but rather challenging consolidated symbolic structures and opening spaces for recognition for historically marginalized experiences and identities.
In this sense, the debate over the use of inclusive language cannot be reduced to a question of formal correctness or a normative imposition, but must be understood as part of a broader process of cultural transformation. Rethinking language means questioning who is named, who is excluded, and what worldviews are legitimized through the words we use daily. It is precisely in this capacity to impact symbolically that language reveals its political potential, becoming a fundamental tool for promoting inclusion, equity, and social justice.

Fears

Within youth exchanges, language can become a source of insecurity and fear, especially when discussing topics related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and cultural differences. One of the most common fears is the fear of using the wrong terminology, inadvertently offending someone, or not fully understanding the meaning of words and concepts related to the LGBTQIA+ community. This insecurity can lead some people to avoid discussion, limit their participation, or remain silent for fear of being judged.

Another common fear is related to group judgment: language is often perceived as a skill that "one should already have," and this can generate anxiety, especially in international contexts where not everyone shares the same level of linguistic or cultural knowledge. The fear of asking questions deemed "naive" or inappropriate can prevent participants from clarifying important doubts, reinforcing misunderstandings and distance rather than dialogue.
To address these fears, it is essential to normalize the idea that inclusive language is a continuous learning process and not a set of rigid rules to be applied perfectly. Creating a space where it is legitimate to make mistakes, ask for explanations, and question oneself reduces individual pressure and fosters more authentic participation. In this sense, the introduction of a shared glossary of LGBTQIA+ terms, accessible and adapted to the group context, can represent a concrete support tool, useful both as a

practical reference and as a sign of attention and care. One example is the Glaad Media Reference Guide7. Finally, addressing language-related fears also means recognizing the differences in participants' personal journeys. Not everyone has had the same educational opportunities or exposure to inclusive issues: making this explicit helps reduce feelings of inadequacy and foster a more empathetic and collective approach to the use of language. In this way, language becomes not only a tool for communication, but also a means of building more informed, respectful, and inclusive relationships.

Prejudices

Prejudice can manifest itself through offensive, stereotypical, or exclusionary language, often unconsciously. Language, in fact, is not neutral: it reflects internalized social representations, dominant cultural norms, and power relations that are reproduced in everyday interactions. In youth exchange contexts, characterized by cultural, linguistic, and identity diversity, these dynamics can emerge with particular intensity, generating misunderstandings, discomfort, or exclusion. Addressing linguistic prejudices means first and foremost working to raise awareness of the impact of words, recognizing that even expressions considered "normal" or "joking" can convey microaggressions and reinforce stereotypes related to gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. It is therefore essential to promote awareness-raising opportunities for the use of respectful and inclusive language, offering concrete examples of alternative communication and encouraging collective reflection on everyday linguistic practices.

Open and guided discussions are a key tool for challenging preconceptions, encouraging mutual listening, and creating a space where participants can engage without fear of judgment. When offensive, stereotypical, or discriminatory expressions emerge, prompt and clear intervention is essential, adopting an educational rather than punitive approach. Language correction must be accompanied by contextualized explanations that help understand why a given expression may be problematic and what inclusive alternatives can be adopted. In this process, the role of facilitators and team leaders is central: they are called upon to mediate more complex conversations, model respectful language practices, and create a climate in which mistakes are considered part of a shared learning journey. In this way, language becomes a tool for transformation, capable not only of preventing discrimination but also of promoting awareness, responsibility, and inclusion within the group.

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[7] Glaad Media Reference Guide, 2019. *Media Reference Guide – LGBTQ Terms.*

Challenges

The use of inclusive language presents several challenges, especially in international contexts characterized by the linguistic and cultural diversity typical of Erasmus+ youth exchanges.
Linguistic and cultural diversity can complicate the understanding of specific terms related to gender identities and sexual orientations, as well as the translation of inclusive concepts into languages or contexts in which these categories are not historically or socially recognized. International organizations such as UNESCO[8] and the Council of Europe[9] have highlighted how language is profoundly influenced by cultural and normative contexts, and how inclusive linguistic practices must be adapted, rather than simply transferred, from one context to another.

One of the main challenges concerns the lack of direct linguistic equivalents for some LGBTQIA+ terms in certain languages, or the presence of words that are stigmatizing or obsolete. As sociolinguistic and queer linguistic studies (Zimman,[10] Borba[11]) emphasize, language does not simply describe reality, but contributes to its construction: when words are missing, symbolic spaces of recognition are often also missing. In this sense, the use of inclusive language requires cultural mediation and shared explanation, rather than the imposition of standardized terminology.
To meet these challenges, it is essential to provide multilingual support materials, such as glossaries, quick guides, or explanatory sheets, which offer clear and contextualized definitions of the most commonly used terms. These tools are also recommended by ILGA Europe and the Council of Europe Youth Department, which emphasize the importance of making inclusive language accessible to people with different levels of linguistic proficiency.
In addition to written materials, it is helpful to plan moments of guided explanations and group discussion, where participants can ask questions, clarify doubts, and share different perspectives in a non-judgmental environment.
Adapting communication to participants' linguistic skills also means using clear language, avoiding unnecessary technical jargon, and favoring simple and inclusive explanations. This approach helps reduce the risk of misunderstandings, prevent involuntary exclusion, and strengthen everyone's active participation. In this way, inclusive language becomes a tool for accessibility and equity, capable of responding to the complexity of international contexts without losing its transformative function.

Support

Support for the use of inclusive language relies on clear, coherent, and accessible communication models that can guide participants and reduce anxiety related to the fear

[8] UNESCO, *Educationand respect for diversity / Inclusive education and language*, (2016; 2023)
[9] Council of Europe – *Youth Department – Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*, 2015
[10] Zimman, L. (2017) – *Gender as stylistic practice*
[11] Borba, R. (2019). Gendered politics of enmity: Language ideologies and social polarisation in Brazil. Gender and Language, 13(4), 423–448.

of making mistakes. Offering practical examples of inclusive communication, guiding phrases, and best practices allows language to become a concrete tool for participation, rather than a source of uncertainty. Numerous international guidelines on inclusive youth work emphasize that language learning occurs primarily through the observation and reproduction of positive communication behaviors (Council of Europe Youth Department, 2017). In this process, the role of facilitators and team leaders is central. They must be adequately trained to recognize potentially exclusionary expressions and to intervene in a respectful and contextualized manner, explaining the reasons for corrections and offering inclusive alternatives. Inclusive language cannot be imposed normatively; rather, it must be supported through educational practices that foster understanding, dialogue, and a gradual approach. Actively promoting the use of respectful language during both structured and informal activities helps build a shared culture of respect, where linguistic inclusion becomes an integral part of the group experience.

Encouragement

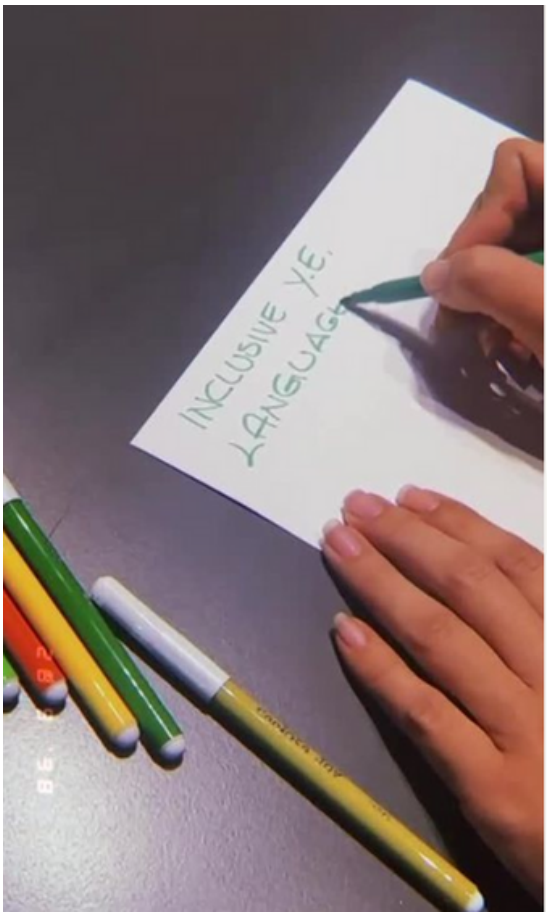
Alongside operational support, it is essential to ensure ongoing support for participants throughout the exchange. This involves creating a relational climate in which the use of inclusive language is positively reinforced and where feedback is perceived as a tool for growth, not judgment. Studies on inclusive education and transformative learning highlight how emotionally safe environments foster greater openness to change and critical reflection on one's own communication practices (Mezirow, 2000).
Promoting a culture of constructive feedback means encouraging participants to respectfully report any linguistic errors or concerns, recognizing that mistakes are an integral part of the learning process. In this sense, support also involves legitimizing doubt and questioning: no participant should feel inadequate or blamed for not knowing a term or using a non-inclusive expression. Providing this type of support helps strengthen mutual trust and foster more active, informed, and responsible participation.

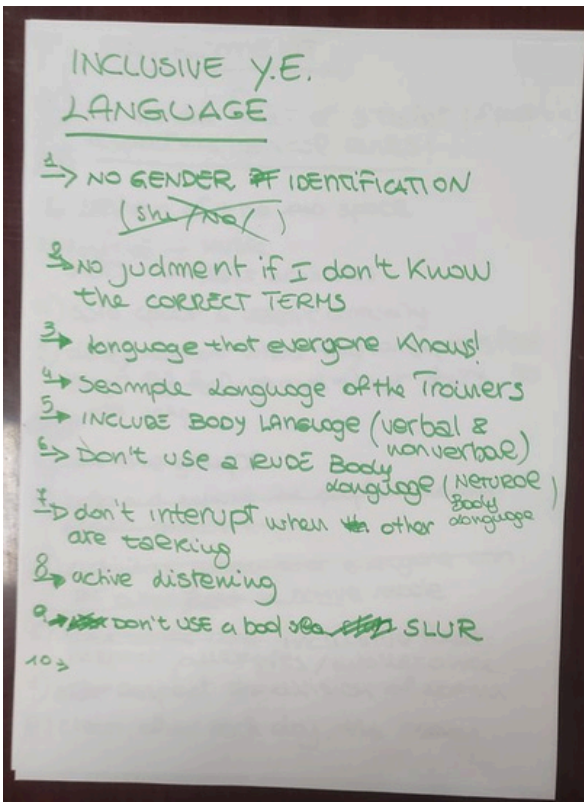
Valorization

Promoting inclusive language is a fundamental step in strengthening community and a sense of belonging within a youth exchange. Recognizing and making respectful linguistic behavior visible affirms that the way we speak and address others has political, educational, and relational value. As critical sociolinguistics and queer linguistics studies emphasize, language not only reflects identities, but actively contributes to legitimizing them in the social space.

[12] Mezirow, J. (2000) – *Learning as Transformation*

Celebrating positive examples, documenting good practices emerging during activities, and integrating inclusive language into the project's final materials helps consolidate a shared approach to inclusion. In this way, language becomes a tool of empowerment, capable of strengthening participants' self-esteem and fostering relationships based on respect for differences, mutual trust, and the recognition of the multiple identities present within the group. Promoting inclusive language ultimately means recognizing it as a fundamental transversal skill in youth work and a key resource for building truly inclusive educational environments.





Conclusions and Resources

These guidelines aim to provide **Youth Workers** with both theoretical knowledge and practical tools to design and facilitate youth exchanges that are **inclusive and LGBTQIA+ friendly**. The process undertaken to develop these guidelines allowed us to identify, systematize, and organize effective practices, strategies, and tools across three fundamental areas: the environment, group dynamics, and inclusive language. Each of these areas has been carefully analyzed through the lenses of Fears, Prejudices, Challenges, Support, Assistance, and Empowerment, offering concrete guidance to address potential difficulties, prevent exclusion, and highlight the value of diversity among participants. This approach fosters authentic, participatory, and transformative learning experiences.

The methodology adopted recognizes youth work as a powerful tool for empowerment and active participation, capable of creating safe, inclusive, and transformative spaces. Flexible and secure environments, positive and inclusive group dynamics, and the conscious use of language are all key levers for reducing fears, challenging prejudices, and managing the everyday challenges of international youth exchanges. Simultaneously, focusing on support, assistance, and recognition of participants' contributions helps build trust, a sense of belonging, and self-efficacy among young people.

By applying these guidelines, Youth Workers can:

- Create safe and welcoming environments, both physical and virtual, where all young people feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment.
- Promote balanced and inclusive group dynamics, preventing exclusion and prejudice, while valuing cultural, gender, and sexual diversity.
- Encourage the use of inclusive language, strengthening mutual respect, active listening, and understanding.
- Support participants during moments of difficulty, through practical tools, peer support, and staff mediation.
- Recognize and celebrate individual and collective contributions, fostering a sense of belonging and active participation.

Practical Resources and Tools

To deepen understanding and effectively implement these guidelines, Youth Workers can refer to a range of resources, including:

- Erasmus+ materials and guides focused on youth inclusion and participation

- LGBTQIA+ glossaries and language guides
- Digital tools for secure and confidential activities, such as private communication platforms
- Feedback and best practices collected directly from participants during workshops

Follow-up and Continuous Improvement

- These guidelines are a living tool, meant to be updated periodically based on participant feedback and real-life experiences in diverse contexts.
- Post-activity evaluations and the collection of data regarding inclusion and participant satisfaction are highly recommended, as they allow for the continuous refinement and improvement of practical approaches.

In summary, these guidelines are designed as a dynamic and adaptable instrument, intended to be contextualized, updated, and reused across a variety of youth work scenarios. They provide not only operational guidance but also a broader educational and cultural perspective, promoting inclusion, equity, and recognition of diversity. Ultimately, they contribute to building spaces where every young person feels welcomed, heard, and valued.

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