

## Focus on content: Why stay in school when you can leave it?

### Factors of early school leaving unveiled through community reporting and Forum Theatre



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What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of school? Be honest! I've been asking this question for a couple of days from friends, colleagues, relatives. A great majority would have associations that vary in their intensity but not their negativity: boredom, control, exams, prison. One out of six would talk about the pleasure of making friends. And one out of ten would talk about the wonders of learning. What would you talk about?

And what is the first thing you think of when you hear "early school leaver"? I admit I had a preconception. I imagined the "early school leaver" as a student victim of unlucky coincidences, of unsupportive social environment, one who is in lack of cultural capital and needs some extra intervention to 'fit in' or 'catch up'. Such a view reflects a 'deficit model' based on the idea that students suffer some shortfall that needs to be compensated for, and that the efforts to help should focus on them (make them change). But as we progressed in the project more and more I came to feel grateful for these students, ex-students for offering us such a privileged and accurate mirror on what our school actually is about. Students who are bright and privileged don't offer such an accurate mirror: they can thrive on whatever grounds, and hide the inherent problems of the system. Disadvantaged students make the underlying problems become visible. And as we were discovering these problems, more and more I was wondering, why would anyone stay in school when they could leave it?

In the Youth4Youth project a key objective was to learn how youngsters explain early school leaving, what factors lay behind such a choice or as a matter of fact is this really a choice. To get a deeper understanding, we invited youngsters to share their stories through Forum Theatre / Community Reporting workshops. This chapter starts with the stories we collected, offering a first view on the school from the youngsters' perspective. We then dig a bit deeper to look behind these representations and see what underlying problems they can highlight.

#### How did we proceed?

During the five workshops that were organized we asked facilitators to take notes of all elements that could be connected to reasons of early school leaving, that came up at any moment during the workshops as expressed by the

participants. Each partner was requested to collect these items into a unified file. Each partner was also requested to create categories of the items collected, through a process similar to open coding. Partners then together had a look at the categories



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collected and validated a final list, agreed on what type of items could be noted under each category. This work gave the basis of what we expose below under “stories told”.

However, during the process of analysis we also noticed that some seemingly important themes were

notoriously omitted, silenced. Hence we proposed facilitators to think of whether there were some elements that they did perceive as very important but that somehow were always left “implicit”. This is what we explore below in the section “stories untold”.

#### Stories told

We identified five broad categories of factors that appeared connected to schools: relationships to peers, teachers, personal factors, economic situation and representations of the school. Some of these categories appear to be more intrinsic to school life that have the potential

to propel young people outside of the school and some others are external factors that haul them away. We start by explaining what each factor means, offering some illustrations from the CR interviews and the Forum Plays that emerged from the workshops in the four countries.

	Factors to drive away from school	Factors to KEEP in school
Personal factors	Negative emotions (exhaustion, failure, tiredness, depression) Drugs	
Relationship to peers	Gossiping Stereotypes Racism Bullying Violence Disturbance in class Gender issues	Friendship Capacity to face the diversities and be acquainted with them
Relationship to teachers	Unfair teacher Punishment	It could help if teachers motivated
Family	Lack of support Family obligations Gender issues in the family	It could help if families were supportive
Economic situation	Rejection because of low economical status Need to work	Need to learn to get a job
What the school is (like)	Rhythm (starts too early, takes too long) Size (too big) Exams (too stressful)	It could help if classes were smaller

Table 1. Factors that keep students in school and that drive them away from school

#### Personal factors (emotions, health conditions)

We have coded the emotions and health-related issues together under “personal factors”. It is a somewhat biased category, as the Hungarian workshops were organised in collaboration with an association working with addiction. The theme of drugs hence came up much more

frequently than in the other countries. Other than that, very few mentions of health came up. They were more mentions of emotions, although it was still not the most important category in terms of frequency. Emotions are very interesting however, as they serve as indicators: they can signal



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when something important is happening, they point to dysfunctions and hidden problems. For this reason it is useful to take the harvested emotions under greater scrutiny. The emotions we collected are rather negative: "tiredness", "exhaustion", "laziness", "failure", "lack of motivation", "disheartened", "depressed", "stress" etc. What is more, all these emotions can be connected to learned helplessness, a

phenomena resulting in successful episodes of rejection and failure, resulting in a total lack of belief that the situation can be changed. Learned helplessness implies that one is so tired of trying to change a situation, that one simply gives up trying.

*Some examples: "People just give up because they believe they cannot do it" (UK)  
"I worry about exams, I always fail" (UK)*

#### "They can't take it"

"I think some people leave school early because either they can't take it, or they can't deal with all the stress. So they just think you might as well just go out of it instead of having to keep going through stress for something that you might not succeed with."

Participant in Manchester Workshop



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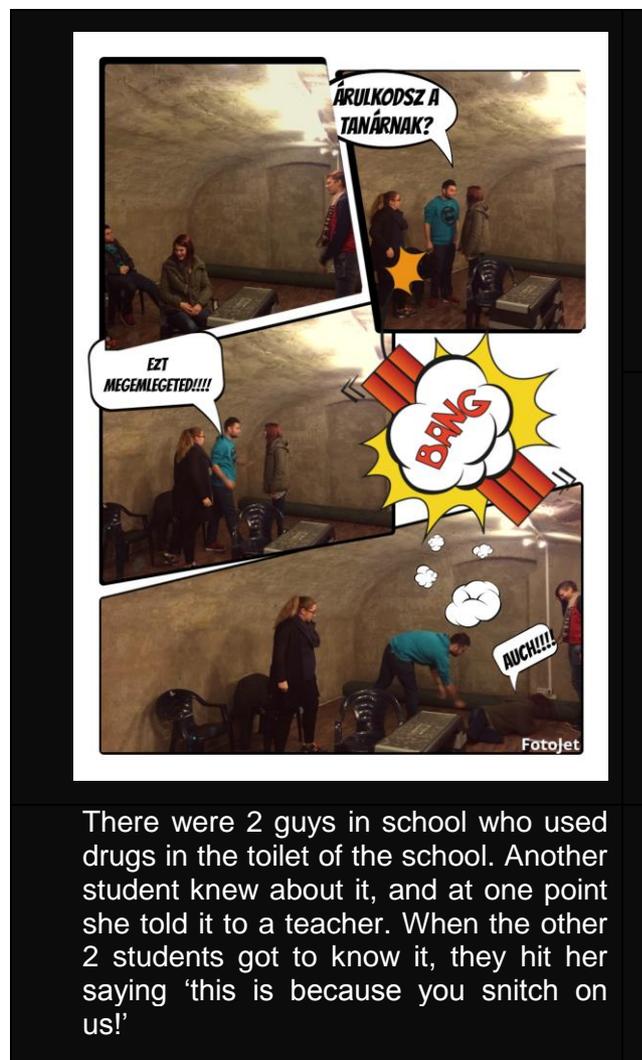
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## Relationship to peers

Issues of relating to the peers are by far more often cited than any other issues. Peers appear from three perspectives. First, as entities that interfere with the classes: “they do not listen but they scream and shout like mad” (HU) “I don’t like it when they interrupt lessons” (UK). And peers are not only a threat to the learning process, but also to one’s identities and integrity. Threats range from lighter acts, such as gossiping about the others (ES) to harsher forms of bullying: stereotyping, racism and physical violence (HU, ES, UK). New technologies offer a new space for hurting each other, in particular girls who are more recurrently victims of cyber bullying. Students can laugh at each other without any moderation coming from teachers (ES, see frame bellow), and the fear that the others would harass (HU) becomes part of self-monitoring.

At the same time peers seem to be the primary motivation for attending school. In fact all the positive comments refer to their connection with friends. Comments such as “I think school is hard at times but when you’re with your friends it can be really, really fun”, “school is ok because you get to be with your mates” (UK), “seeing friends is a motivation to go” (ES) testify the importance of this relational motivation.



There were 2 guys in school who used drugs in the toilet of the school. Another student knew about it, and at one point she told it to a teacher. When the other 2 students got to know it, they hit her saying ‘this is because you snitch on us!’

## “Selfie” Forum in Barcelona

A girl takes a provocative picture of herself and put it on her profile. She goes to meet with her friends. Two of them scold her for putting up that picture, and another friend tells her that she looks great in the picture and that if she wants to show her body she should not be afraid to do so.

The girl's brother shows up with his group of friends. One of the guys shows the brother the picture of his sister online and tells him "What's up with your sister? She's a total slut! Look at that picture!"

The brother gets really angry and starts yelling at his sister that she should have not posted that picture, that she has to behave because girls have to be well-behaved and covered up, and not putting up provocative pictures on Facebook. The girl argues with her brother, saying that she doesn't agree with the fact that they can post all sorts of pictures showing their bodies and no one says anything to them, but that when she does it is a huge scandal and everyone calls her a slut.

They start arguing, some friends are in favor, and some friends are against girls posting provocative pictures of themselves online.

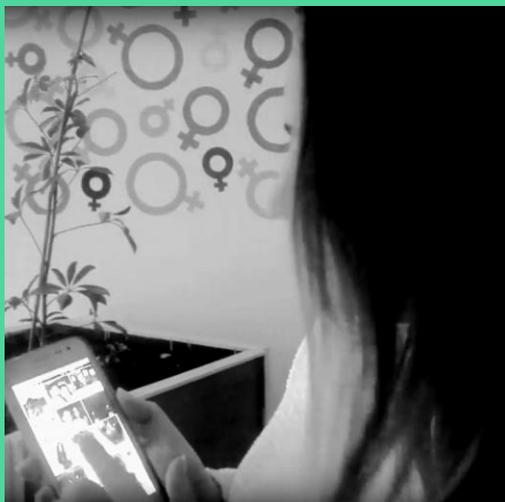


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We open up the question to the audience: Should girls have the freedom to express themselves and show themselves online as they wish? And if so, why is it not the same when girls do it then when boys do it?

The youngsters in the audience have mixed feelings about this. Some youngsters, specially some of the older girls argue in favor of being free to choose: "It's our bodies, we should be free to decide over them in every aspect possible." Others in the audience are not in favor: "If they post the picture, they can't complain about what they say in school about them." Others identify that its not OK to call her a slut just because she posted a provocative picture, but are not very convinced that girls should be totally free to decide over their bodies and the image they project of themselves online.

### Relationship to teachers

The image of teacher that we can draw based on our workshops is not the ideal figure for identification and inspiration. To the contrary, it is an image connected to unfair behaviour, alcoholism. A figure that does not recognise efforts, that cannot motivate, and cannot protect them from aggressive behaviour of others.

A particularly negative image emerges from a scene from Barcelona, in which some kids are laughing at other kids; meanwhile the teacher does not do anything. The teacher or the director is portrayed as a monster.

At the same time, participants often admitted that they thought their own behaviour triggered the conflict.



"Slap from the teacher" (Hungary)

There was an exam in a History class. The boy had not studied for the exam, and he didn't write anything on the paper. He wanted to leave the classroom, but the teacher told him everyone has to stay in the room until the end of the lesson. So the boy stayed and started to draw something. The teacher become so angry she slapped him on his face.

### Relationship to family

The family sometimes appears as a pull factor, by imposing domestic responsibilities, or by not letting the youngsters attend school. Sometimes they are a source of

emotional or physical pain: for example when parents divorce or worse, in cases of domestic abuse. The most recurrent mention however relates to "absentee parents", or



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parents who cannot fulfil their role of offering support to their children, to assist them in their studies, or to protect them from the hardships of bullying or unfair teachers.

#### “The perfect woman” Forum play Barcelona

The father of the family has been a year without work. His wife is working, and she is the only income-holding family member. He spends his wife's money drinking at the bar.

One day, the father is, like always, at the bar with a friend. He tells his friend that his wife doesn't do any work at home, that she is not doing her role as a wife and a woman. His friend advises him to put her in her place by showing her who is the man: "you can give her a couple of punches and that'll teach her". They keep drinking.

The father arrives at home at 7 in the morning, drunk. The wife is up, and she is fed-up with the situation. He starts pushing her around and screaming, but she has had enough and won't shy away. The child and the wife's brother is there in the room watching the fight, and try to intervene to help the mother, but the father pushes them away.

Violence escalates and the play stops to open up the question to the audience: What can we do in this situation?

The youngsters in the audience propose:

- They should split up
- The wife can look for support in family members and friends
- She should call the police
- She should kick him out of the house
- She should not let him back in the house
- She should change the lock to the door.
- The child should not try to do something because if he does than the father is going to hit him also.

### Economic situation

Economic situation can be a pull factor when the obligation to contribute to the family economy is imposed on young people, to earn money even if it leads to the detriment of school. Poverty of the parents can also become a push factor, as they assign the

children to a low status – without fashionable clothes and accessories. A visible low economic status – if not counteracted by the teachers – can become a reason for rejecting, discriminating and even bullying peers.

#### “Money for clothes” – report with a student in Barcelona

“It happened to a girl in my class, her parents didn't have money, they didn't buy clothes for her... so we somehow let her down, for not having clothes that to us would look all right, which of course were different from ours...and then we realized that the girl wasn't to blame for her parents not having money... and plus she not having friends to rely on would only make things worse. So we did get together with her and support her.”

### Representations of school

"School can be hard sometimes but sometimes it can be really fun. It's a great experience." (UK) This was one of the very few positive comments. School is seemingly not an ideal place to be. It is better to be in

the mall (ES), it starts too early, it is too much governed by rules, leaves room for too little fun. All in all, “school is like falling from a building and soon you hit the ground” and it is “kind of rubbish” (UK). Also, it is too



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academic, not enough practical or vocational (UK) which often goes in contradiction with the representation that a little schooling is necessary to get a job, but it is useless to invest too much in it, that it will not help to get a better job (ES).

There are however positive associations as well, though much less frequently than the negative ones, and all of them are connected to the relations with peers.



I think school is a bit bumhole



detention



School is bad but it's getting better



The play doh sculptures were produced in the Manchester workshop, instead of Forum Theater body images which were impossible to make due to the lack of space and the availability of the participants.

### Untold and half-told stories – what's behind young people's representations?

One of the striking features of the interviews and the forum plays was the lack of positive emotions connected to school. With rare exceptions (two UK interviews, and the art students of Perugia) youngsters don't seem to connect school with anything positive, and not even with learning. What's more, learning does not seem to be a value per se. This implies that not only there are many factors that seem to drive youngsters out of the school, but we saw very few subjective factors that invite them to stay. This discovery invited a closer look at



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what school is like today in our countries and explore what's behind the stories told and what are the stories that remained untold.

We tend to forget: schools as such have not always existed. It is not a “natural” phenomenon that necessarily appears in the path of human development. Indeed, the separation of children from the activities of the adult members of the community, and assigning them to specific institutions meant to prepare them for life is not so evident at all. Many cultures do not think that the best preparation for life in a community is ensured through a necessary separation from it. For many cultures, the development niche (the physical and social setting in which children develop and acquire the cultural repertoires needed for successful participation in society) implies that children actively observe and collaborate with the adults who go about their usual adult activities<sup>1</sup> (Rogoff 2003, Rogoff et al 2007).

Once we are released from the illusion of universality, and cultural neutrality we see that Western-style school system stems from a particular historical - cultural context: that of the European industrialisation, and for some authors, the spreading of Protestant religion. This context left its marks on school, by shaping its goals and procedures in its early years. According to Gray, the Protestant reformers imagined the school as a “correctional institution built on the assumption that children are natural sinners” (Gray 2013: 68). For Rogoff, western-style schooling is an example of the “Assembly-line instruction” paradigm to education, a model that was inspired from the organization of factories, imagining that experts can format children as raw material, inserting information into them and sorting them (Rogoff et al 2015: 481).

But can such a system really equip students today for participation in our culturally diverse technological societies? Learning the competences necessary to live in a culturally diverse environment does not necessarily take place in such institutions. In fact, it does not always take place, or not with all the students. In fact, according to some researchers it is precisely in such institutions that it is the most difficult for learning to take place (see Gray 2009).

### ***Is school about learning?***

“Suppose you are a student in a high school or college course and a magic fairy offers you the following choice: (1) You will learn the material in the course well, but will get a low grade (a D). Or (2) you will *not* learn the material at all, but will get a high grade (an A). Which would you choose? Be honest.”

(Gray, 2013)

Authors such as Gray argue that the school system built on control and exams cannot succeed in its mission of enhancing learning, rather, they seem to go against learning. The few bright and privileged students can thrive in such conditions, for them the exam is just a way to be recognised, but for a great majority the exams just provoke a loss of intrinsic motivation, the loss of the pleasure of learning.

The capacity to learn, the need to understand are powerful motives behind human behaviour. We're motivated to make sense of our environment, “to predict what is going to happen in case of uncertainties and to make sense of what does happen” (Fiske 2009: 18). Our study seems to suggest that young people have often trouble visioning the school as an institution that helps them understand the world. What's more, they have trouble getting the meaning of school or learning itself.

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<sup>1</sup> A model referred to as « Learning by Observing and Pitching In » or « intent community participation » by Rogoff. See Rogoff 2007



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### ***Does school teach creativity or does it kill it?***

One of the effects of the focus on exams and tests is putting “mistakes” in the centre of the school process. For Sir Ken Robinson, when we stigmatise mistakes, we make it seem that mistakes are the worst thing that could happen. Making mistakes is not the same as being creative, but “if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original”. Ultimately, what a system focusing on test and exams will do is to “educate people out of their creative capacities” (Sir Ken Robinson 2009)

School does not have a good track record in stimulating creativity: in a work based on interviews with successful creative people, Csikszentmihalyi (2009:179) finds that school has remarkably little impact on their development, besides threatening to dismount their curiosity and interest. At the same time creativity should not be considered as a secondary pedagogical goal. “It is as important as literacy and we should treat it with the same status” (Robinson 2009). Today it is not for industry that school should prepare children but to an economy centred on information and knowledge where innovation is a key factor. What’s more, creativity is what makes us distinctively human and creative activities have the strongest potential in giving us a sense of fulfilment (Csikszentmihalyi 2009:11). This is reflected also in our observations from the pilot sessions. Considering all the workshops, the most positive stories were collected from the Italian students attending an art school. Students also seemed to value the creative processes of reporting and theatre workshops they were invited to.

### ***Does school prepare students for being a member of a community?***

The need to belong is possibly the strongest social motive: to relate to each other, to create and to maintain relationships and cultivate membership in social groups. The fact that relationship to others is what youngsters talk the most about seems to fit well in the primacy of this basic social need. However, most stories we have collected are rather negative. They suggest that the relationships young people are involved with in school - either with peers or teachers – are sources of tensions, conflicts, and fears. All in all, what could be the strongest resource in the construction of youngsters seems to be the source of dealing with rejection, bullying and violence.

### ***Does school prepare students for diversity?***

According to the OECD<sup>2</sup>, interacting in heterogeneous groups is one of the three domains of key competencies, necessary for economic participation and personal fulfilment in our multicultural societies. School however does not seem to go in this direction: signs of prejudice, discrimination, and racism are not rare amongst students or on behalf of teachers. The integration of not only particular students but also of diversity as such in the learning process seems to be an exception.

### ***Does school prepare for autonomy? Freedom? Democracy?***

Several authors argue that freedom and autonomy are the best conditions for learning. Instead, schools are very much based on the lack of freedom in every sense: it is compulsory to go there, and once we’re there what we do is leave little room for choice under meticulous control. If we look closely, the institution that most resembles school is prison, except that adults go there when they commit a crime, and children go to school because of their age (Gray 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> “Definition and Selection of Key Competencies » 2003

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For the OECD's DESECO project, acting autonomously constitutes one of the three key competence domains. Can we expect schools to educate for autonomy when their main principles are based on the exact lack of it?

Autonomy is also strongly connected to a basic need for control over one's life. Control "encourages people to feel effective in dealing with their social environment and themselves. Control entails a relationship between what people do and what they get" (Fiske 2009:20). The image of school appearing in our workshops is one where students don't exert any control: it does not respect their rhythm, their interests, they are subjected to exams for which they do not receive the support they need. In the worst case we have also heard of school being compared to concentration camps, a harsh and exaggerated metaphor, but that testifies of a honest suffering.

So why don't schools embrace freedom? On the small scale "People who are frightened of the idea of freedom in learning usually believe that if you allow children freedom to choose what to learn, they will choose to learn nothing. This is exactly the opposite of what actually happens." (Gribble 2012). On a social scale there is a general mistrust towards what too much freedom may provoke, and a concern that school should focus on formatting obedient functional citizens. As usual with long standing cultural paradigms we rarely allow the luxury to question the veracity of its fundamental assumptions, and see whether the socio-historic context of its invention fits the needs of today. Instead, we pick the option that we know, and take for granted that it is ok to suffer school. But is it really necessary? For a compilation of the damages of authoritarian schooling see: <https://www.authoritarianschooling.co.uk/>

In the face of all the observations made, it may be that leaving school is an act of keeping or reaching some sense of freedom and control, by running away from an environment which notoriously seems to forbid all such feeling of control.



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## Conclusions – what is school for?

Western-style school is neither a universal nor a natural phenomenon. It is a paradigm based on the compulsory segregation of children into specialised institutions that are meant to prepare them for life, at the same time denying them opportunities to observe and take part in their community's actual mature life (Rogoff et al 2015:473). Today's school is a cultural product, rooted in the specific socio-historic context of industrialisation that left its mark on both the goals it sets and the procedures it cherishes.

We have taken the perspective offered by youngsters "at the risk of early school leaving" to observe this institution closely. Accepting, that early school leavers should not be seen as the kids who don't want to learn, but rather as the kids through whom we can learn. Through the stories they told and the stories they did not tell, we have mapped key issues of their experience in school.

We found that what occupies of youngsters' minds the most are their relationships to others. Relationships to peers are the strongest motivation to go to school (to meet their friends) and it is also the source of their deepest fears and sorrows (not being recognized, being bullied, hurt, etc.). It would also be a key domain of development, to prepare young people for what is considered one of the three key competences by the OECD: interacting in heterogeneous groups (OECD 2005). Yet schools rarely put an emphasis on developing the skills necessary for social interactions. We have discovered that parents and families do not offer the support that youngsters would need from them, but instead they become generators of new sorts of problems (become accomplices in bullying as opposed to protectors, imposing family responsibilities that make attending school difficult). Even though the capacity to act autonomously is the -second key competence (OECD 2005), schools do not educate for it. Most strikingly we found that there are very few positive associations to school and to learning. Inevitably, the stories of early school leavers raise the question of whether the school as it is today really prepares for a life outside, if not, they are right, it has no sense.

The students do not connect school with learning, as shocking as this statement can be. They do connect school with obligation, with tasks, with something important for the future to have a job, to pass exams, but not with learning per se.

To questions such as "How do you know what you like to do?" "How do you know what you are passionate for?" we got short and fuzzy answers. They explained that it is very difficult for them to identify in themselves, when they are enjoying any kind of activity, also it seemed that they don't face the question very often.

To continue we asked them "Do you think adults do a job they like?" there was a massive response of "Noooo". Their view of it is that they do their job also because they are obliged to, as for them is the school, and this is how life is. There is nothing that can be done. Their meaning for life was, family and relationships, "our parents are doing so for us, and we will do that for our children"

Our interpretation of it is that they accept a circle where everybody is obliged during certain hours of their life doing activities they are not passionate or like, instead, are compulsory.

Somehow, it sends an image of adults with a mild depression and youngsters with a mild depression. There is no motivation except obligation from a more or less clear system.

We could estimate that maybe adults do a work they do not like, and, they are not passionate for anything, because they never learned, as youngsters, to identify passion, curiosity, motivation, and to make it grow, to go for it, to search for it as a motivation for life. And this a cycle that continues, on and on, if we do not change how we understand what and how to learn in our schools.

Youngsters explain stories where they are not asked what they like or want, we just oblige them to do things, or at least that is their experience of it.

This is dangerous, because if they do not learn what they like, how will they be able to choose in their life, how to know what friends do you like, which friends are good for you.

Facilitators from the workshop in Barcelona

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