

Title:**Two-Dimensional Co-Production of Knowledge and Inclusive Education with Disadvantaged Communities across Europe**

The purpose of this presentation is to introduce the YOUROPE project as an innovative approach to democratizing education and strengthening civic participation through Community-Led Research and Action (Woensdregt et al. 2023). The presentation aims to demonstrate how disadvantaged communities can become equal partners in the co-production of knowledge, highlight the two dimensions of co-production (vertical and horizontal), and present key cognitive, political, and educational outcomes. Additionally, it seeks to open a critical discussion on the risks of tokenism and the broader implications of “empowerment” in light of contemporary theoretical perspectives on governance.

Research Overview (50 words)

The YOUROPE: Youth for Europe project, funded by Horizon Europe, engages 630 communities in seven countries (Poland, United Kingdom, Turkey, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany) in co-producing knowledge on civic participation and democratizing educational spaces, including higher education. Yourope involves 14 partners across 11 European countries, with participatory action research conducted in seven national contexts.

Purpose of Study

Despite sustained efforts, disadvantaged communities in Europe are still rarely recognized as key actors in civil society (Granosik, 2024). Formal education remains dominated by middle-class discourses of individual civic engagement, typically limited to (geo)political knowledge and narrowly defined participation in policymaking (e.g., voting or engagement with global issues). Broader understandings of citizenship—as everyday practices of community co-creation—are largely absent from practical education, even though such forms of engagement characterize many disadvantaged communities.

This study pursues three main objectives:

1. To empower disadvantaged communities to become equal partners in co-creating educational practices, including knowledge and methodologies;
2. To establish Learning Communities that integrate marginalized groups both vertically—through Learning Community Meetings (LCM)—and horizontally—via Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL);
3. To develop pathways for democratizing educational spaces, including embedding co-creation methods into curricula and opening decision-making processes to broader participation, including policymakers.

The YOUROPE project aims to transform European citizenship and democracy by strengthening youth engagement in societal co-creation along two dimensions. The vertical dimension emphasizes collaboration across social and class hierarchies, while the horizontal dimension focuses on intercultural cooperation within and across national contexts.

Research Methods

The primary methodological approach is Community-Led Research and Action (CLRA), originally developed in Kenya to empower disadvantaged youth by opening access to educational spaces and later adapted to European contexts. CLRA shifts the center of research governance from academia to communities themselves. Student-researchers work to empower their communities to reinterpret their social positions and communicate this knowledge more openly within broader social structures.

As a form of participatory action research, CLRA is based on two key principles: first, all research activities are conducted collaboratively with communities and coordinated by their representatives; second, knowledge production is directly linked to action at local, national, or European levels. These actions aim to transform social—

especially educational—spaces by democratizing them, incorporating disadvantaged perspectives, and including lived-experience experts, as well as engaging policymakers in decision-making processes.

Grounded in a strengths-based approach to community development, CLRA highlights the capacities and civic agency of disadvantaged groups. It conceptualizes democracy as “ecologies of relations” —dynamic, interconnected systems sustained by reciprocity, care, and shared responsibility. CLRA operates as a relational practice embedded in everyday interactions among individuals, communities, and environments, taking place both within formal educational curricula and across community contexts.

Research outcomes are integrated through Community Learning methods, particularly COIL, which enables students worldwide to participate in co-taught, multicultural online and blended learning environments that emphasize experiential collaboration.

Results and Discussion

The project generates outcomes across three main domains:

1. **Cognitive:** Comparative analyses of autoethnographies from disadvantaged communities (target: 630 across seven countries) reveal both significant differences and shared patterns of action, such as mental health peer support and the co-creation of “third places.”
2. **Political:** The project identifies and expands pathways for democratizing social—especially educational—spaces. Youth and their communities actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute to recognition-oriented policies for disadvantaged groups.
3. **Educational:** Curricula are enriched through student-led research on their own communities, fostering research-based participatory education. The inclusion of diverse community representatives in LCM and COIL environments enhances critical thinking and reflexivity by exposing participants to multiple perspectives.

A key risk is tokenism, potentially reinforced by weak representation of disadvantaged communities or limited institutional readiness to democratize educational spaces. Additionally, the project’s assumptions may be critically examined through post-structural perspectives on governmentality, such as those of Michel Foucault (Foucault et al. 1993) and Nikolas Rose, which suggest that “empowerment” may function as a subtle form of governance rather than genuine emancipation (Rose, 1999; Rose-Redwood, 2006; Miller and Rose, 2006).

References

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