

”Feel like family”

-Why do they have so many immigrant girls in Underground?

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Youth Work and Youth Research

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Introduction

This research is the result of my practical training. I study the Master’s program in Youth Work and Youth Research at the University of Tampere in Finland. I did my practical training in Underground in Jönköping in Sweden. The theme of the practical training was immigrant girls and the research question is ‘Why do they have so many immigrant girls in Underground?’

Underground programmes

Underground is a youth center that co-operates with the city of Jönköping and is organized under Råslätt's Community Fellowship Church. Underground is located in Råslätt, which is one of Jönköping's suburbs. Many immigrants live there, consisting of 60 ethnicities and several religious groups. UG has been successful with integration, girls' free time, network building etc.

In every program the goal is that young people get support from adults in a positive way and develop free time activities. In the past year, 50% or more of the youth have been girls, which is quite unique in immigrant neighborhoods.

The research question was "why girls are involved in Drop in?" But also their other programs like the Driving School, the Leadership School etc are all meant especially for the girls. So the better research question is why do they have so many immigrant girls in the Underground? So the research of the immigrant girls was needed.

I was three months in Jönköping and during this time I interviewed 30 immigrant background girls from Underground. I used half-structured interviews and the method of analysis I used was thematic analysis. By immigrant girls I mean girls who are thirteen to twenty-two years old who are first or second generation immigrants, in this research

Underground

There are many kind of programs in Underground. "We are involved in recreational and social programs in various areas. Our aim is to build relationships between young people and adults. We have very few scheduled activities, because our young people want to be free on weekends, but we offer many different programs (for example Drop in center, girls activities, music, employability help, counselling). These programs have developed from the needs and initiatives of young people and give us a number of opportunities to increase the positive effects of our work."

Underground Drop In is open on every Saturday and Sunday evening.

The first of our side programs is support with homework, school and school contacts. We meet teens in person to help, but sometimes through social media also. And then we go with them to meet schools etc if it is needed.

The second program is counseling support. We have experienced, dedicated and skilled workers, who are also neighbors and part of Råslätt. Thus, it is less shameful to ask for help. In addition, we have a large cultural know-how and connections to families and agencies, which means that we can support holistically to different parts of life.

The third is a private Driving School for those who do not have anyone to help them with this (especially immigrant girls). Many young people, especially girls, do not have the opportunity to get a driver's license if we do not help them through our non-commercial driving training. During driving lessons we also get a chance to talk about school, life, work, future, and personal issues.

The fourth, one of the most important programs, is the Leadership School for teenagers who are good role models and have a positive impact on others. Those who already have a good influence on

others, can apply to our Leadership School, which has seven half day seminars on leadership, child and youth welfare, building self-esteem, boundaries, etc. The course is a 3-year training for young people aged 16-25. More and more the young people take responsibility for different parts of our programs or develop new or existing programs. Young people in the Leadership School make up a large part of the activities that are organized through Underground and they take a lot of responsibility. They collect ideas and thoughts from other young people and act as a steering group for all work. As young people and as role models, they can influence and get a lot more accomplished than most of the other volunteers. Part of this program is to study and do internship trips to other countries where we work accordingly. The Leadership School run a program called "Bright Future", teaching how to influence the society and how to get into the job market, how to make a good CV, how to perform in a job interview and much, much more like that. The Leadership School participants are then helping others in the same area.

All programs create deep relationships with young people who, in their turn, build a stronger, bigger network and are motivated to help others. The programs respond to the needs that exist among young people, and give many ways of interacting with the young people and the possibility of building closer relationships with great respect for the youth. Again they give special focus to the girls as they so often are neglected in our society. Young people in the leadership school influence and connect with many whom adults cannot touch as deeply. And they then can bring these young people to a professional adult.

Based on the core values Forgiveness, Responsibility, Respect (defined as giving value to oneself and others) Thankfulness – makes the word FART (speed) in Swedish, they have a clear pedagogy in all activities though it is not always easy in the open activities that exist just to meet the need of non-organized free time. In order to have a positive influence through the programs, they need adults who focus on building relationships with young people. They also need other adults who can focus on the more practical work, freeing the key leaders to the pedagogical work. At the same time they involve young people in their practical work. They monitor and continuously reflect on their guidelines for the protection of children and young people in all activities.

They also aim to help young people to build support networks outside of their direct connections, as that can help in many areas of life, such as summer jobs and permanent work, driving school, School support etc

Counseling and Leadership programs are side programs and these have grown out of the pedagogical strategy and the suggestions and needs expressed from the youth. They make it possible for them to reach their goal even more effectively as they get so much time with many individuals.

Alijevski remarks that the clear pedagogical guidelines effect in a positive way, because girls need something more than only hang out. And it is good that you not only think about your own work, you need co-operations with schools etc.

Focus on the girls

Underground invest a lot in girls in different ways. They constantly strive to improve the environment and atmosphere, listen to the girls' suggestions and try new things with them. They are developing the girls' rooms for those who want that place, but they want to make sure that the girls are safe in the common areas also. While they focus on the girls, they are aware of the fact that they do not do it at the expense of boys. They want to create equal conditions for activities, in which everyone is a

winner! Male leaders, who themselves are parents, are encouraged to act as father figures for the girls and to treat them with respect and give a lot of encouragement and affirmation. A father figure role is also making it easier for parents to trust Underground as they know their girls are protected and guaranteed respect. Girls who get to see how a man should treat them, become less vulnerable in many ways and will also get a better self-esteem. In order to make all this happen they have a clear guideline for protection of minors and a cultural education for all staff. Normally male and female leaders work together. As the female leaders also work with boys, they see many positive effects as they teach the boys to respect women and girls.

In the society and in the family there is often a lower priority on girls. That is why they are doing the opposite in Underground. They also realize that girls, in their turn, may have a positive effect on the boys. Girls and, as it happens, even some boys often need to look after their younger siblings, and therefore Underground allow them to come to the center, rather than hanging on the streets and they allocate a special room for youth with small siblings. This will help some girls who may need the center most as they can come to the center too, and they also support them as they are forced to take adult responsibilities. At the same time they teach them that younger children must be protected from being stirred up and from being treated roughly by other teenagers or be under any destructive influence.

As they are focusing so much on so many things, and specially that girls should be and feel safe, and as they have so many years of trust building within the local communities, not least because of their faith and value based work, they have reached the point where girls are allowed to take part in what they do and they and their parents are not to lose honor before their communities. Girls who are confident that there are adults in whom they can really trust, and who know that they are supported all the time, will become self-confident and strong. Underground suggests that we must help our societies to stop automatically looking at girls from the Middle East and North Africa as always being victims of honor related pressure and violence. They have established an honor security that does not limit the issues of the girls' rights to the rights of their sexuality but rather look at the whole person, belonging to a family and a community. This person has rights and needs in many areas of life, including security and family.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

There are many reasons why immigrant girls come to Underground. **Main reasons are social things, activities and the fact that Underground is a very safe place.** Social things and activities come up from many different theme answers. Social things includes **friends, leaders and atmosphere.**

Activities of course include different kind of activities which they have there, but also **the fact that girls can do many things, almost whatever they want to** and they have something to do all the time. This means that Underground is a social meeting place where you can do something at the same time while meeting your friends. **Almost every girl wants to organize some activities for the others.** So it is very good that they have the **Leadership School**, because many girls are interested or eager to lead others. Through the Leadership School they can learn how to do that in the right way. This means that **girls have a good opportunity to learn important things that they need for example in work life in the future.**

All girls feel safe in Underground, because there are their **friends, good leaders and it is part of the community of Råslätt.** This is a very important point. It means that the girls can be part of a larger

group and be approved as Rieppo said. Underground want to be a safe place, according to their website, so **this research confirms that it is really safe place!**

Almost all the girls have heard about Underground from a friend, Peter or other people. Only two girls referred to Facebook and one had seen some posters, but she heard from a friend also. This means that the bush telegraph works well in Råslätt. And it is more powerful if you heard things from reliable people than read about it somewhere.

All of the girl's parents know Peter and/or other leaders so they trust them and allow their girls to come. This reasserts Underground's position also.

Immigrant girls have some same answers than all young people generally have, to why they were involved in the youth center's activities. They can be self-imposed, involved in activities, meet boys, girls and new friends and they can relax as Jönköping's municipality research say. But immigrant girls need relationships, many activities and opportunities to take responsibility also. **They want to use their skills, but also learn new things. And they have a need to feel safe there where they are.** Alijevski and Hederos confirm relationships, activities and safety also. And the **The Leadership School has a significant and important role in Underground's work.** I suggest that **Underground has a big part in the girls' lives.** Girls choose the Driving School option with Peter because they have heard that Peter is a good teacher or they know him already before the Driving School. And every girl said that this Driving School is cheaper than a normal driving school. Many girls have not got a chance to get a driving license without this option. So this Driving School has an important role among young girls.

I am interested in knowing how the youth work with immigrants, especially with girls, has been organized in Finland. I know very well now how good it is and how it works in the Underground, but how is it in Finland? Can I get the same answers from immigrant girls in Finland in Tampere? So the further study topic could be how the youth work with immigrant girls is organized in Finland? Or why immigrant girls are involved in some youth center's activities in Tampere? I think that it could be interesting to compare these Swedish girls' answers with answers from Finnish girls in similar situations. Can we learn something from Sweden, especially from Underground youth center? But I am interested in safety also, how the other themes describe girl's safety. I want to know how common as safe youth centers are

Full research available:

http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/96079/feel_like_family.pdf?sequence=1