



DIDACTIC CONCEPT

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1. Didactic Concept

1.1 The project

The "A B.A.G. of inclusion" project aims to equip youth workers with the necessary knowledge, tools, and methodologies to support queer young people in navigating the topics of Body, Agency, and Gender (B.A.G.). However, this project is not only for those working with queer youth but also serves as an educational resource for all young people. It is crucial that both youth workers and young people themselves gain awareness of queer identities, as they may be in the same class or interact as friends. Increasing awareness among the broader youth community can help foster understanding, reduce stigma, and encourage solidarity. This project, and the Didactic Concept in particular, can contribute to helping young people understand their queer peers more deeply in their everyday lives.

By addressing these essential themes, the project contributes to the creation of more inclusive and supportive environments where queer youth can explore their identities and experiences freely and safely. Specifically, this Didactic Concept serves as a structured guide for youth workers, providing key insights into best practices, methodologies, and approaches when working with queer young people. It explores essential aspects such as bodily autonomy, personal agency, and gender diversity, offering practical strategies for fostering empowerment and inclusivity.

We invite readers to utilize this material in a wide range of educational contexts and to share and disseminate information about the project results, which will be available on the project website <https://abagofinclusion.com/>. All project outputs — including this Didactic Concept, the Online Digital Course, the Educational Handbook, and the Podcast Series — will be openly accessible for at least five years after the end of the project to maximize their impact and reach. This material is available in English and can be translated into other languages or adapted to various educational settings beyond youth work. Further use of this material is permitted with proper reference to the source. "A B.A.G. of inclusion" was co-funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ Program, Key Action 2 - Strategic Partnerships in the Youth Sector, code 2024-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000248059.

To conclude, through extensive research and development of this Didactic Concept, we emphasize the importance of designing learning units that follow inclusive and participatory methodologies, ensuring that queer young people feel acknowledged and respected. Each learning unit will incorporate the following key principles:

- The use of inclusive language, avoiding stereotypical constructs and ensuring representation of diverse gender identities and expressions.
- Visibility and representation of diverse queer experiences to provide relatable role models and narratives.

- Interactive and experiential learning approaches, allowing youth workers to engage queer young people in meaningful discussions and activities.
- Empowerment-based strategies, aimed at increasing self-confidence, self-awareness, and resilience among queer young people.
- The importance of safe spaces, where queer youth can freely explore their identities and experiences without fear of discrimination or exclusion.

By implementing these principles, the Didactic Concept ensures that youth workers are well-prepared to address the needs of queer young people in an informed, respectful, and impactful manner.

1.2 The partners

The success of the "A B.A.G. of inclusion" project is made possible through the collaboration of four dedicated partner organizations, all operating in fields related to youth work, inclusion, and education. These organizations joined forces to pursue a common goal: to enhance the capacity of youth workers in addressing Body, Agency, and Gender topics with queer young people. Below is a brief introduction to each partner organization.

1.2.1 Jonathan Cooperativa Sociale (Italy)

Jonathan Cooperativa Sociale is a non-profit organisation born in 2009 in Piazzola sul Brenta, Province of Padua, Italy. Jonathan is the leading organization on the "A B.A.G. of inclusion" project.

The organization's goal is to promote the society well-being through the people's self-empowerment and self-development with an important role of active citizenship and intercultural dialogue. The African proverb "it takes a whole village to raise a child" perfectly represents Jonathan's mission. According to the vision of the organization, any individual and any group can consciously contribute to the community development and growth, in a sustainable and human rights oriented way.

The human and professional resources of the organization are varied, and the activities address different areas: education, training, social development, cultural promotion, environmental protection, human rights, inclusion, gender studies and equal opportunities.

In the educational and training sectors, Jonathan's direct beneficiaries are particularly young people, to whom they address their projects so that they can live their lives as protagonists.

In the areas of planning, gender policies, social inclusion and cultural promotion Jonathan also turn to public, private and social enterprises to jointly build partnerships able to better meet community's needs and interests.

Jonathan has built over time a reliable and solid social network. They work alongside families, schools, universities, local health authorities, social services, associations and local governments, providing their expertise and passion, promoting young people and community welfare, trying to get closer to the territory and its actors.

1.2.2 Azbuki (Serbia)

Azbuki is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Nis and founded in 2011 with the mission of promoting democratic values, culture, and tradition, with a particular focus on health and well-being. Their work is driven by key objectives such as fostering youth development, enhancing young people's knowledge, skills, and creativity, and advocating for human rights, dignity, and equal opportunities. Additionally, they actively support intercultural dialogue, environmental protection, sports, and European integration.

Azbuki has established a strong collaboration with the **Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Serbia**, which has funded several of their projects. Among them are:

- **E-Volunteers (2013)** – A program training young people to support elderly individuals and young people with special needs in using the internet safely and effectively.
- **Ecological Project (2015)** – Aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and environmental awareness among young people with disabilities and young people without parental care.
- **Want to Live in Serbia (2016)** – Focused on fostering youth engagement and social inclusion.

Recognized and accredited for their work in youth policy, Azbuki is a full member of the **NAPOR and KOMS** national youth umbrella organizations. Their accreditation attests to their commitment to youth inclusion, participatory decision-making, cross-sectoral cooperation, and voluntary youth engagement. They have also produced the television series "Turn on Live", which highlights issues faced by vulnerable youth groups, including **LGBTQ+ youth, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, and young people with disabilities**.

Azbuki's activities are highly inclusive, ensuring broad community participation. They collaborate with **schools, universities, local governments, the Regional Chamber of Commerce, the National Employment Service, and other institutions** at local, national, and international levels. Through their engagement in trainings, conferences, and policy discussions, they provide young members and

volunteers with opportunities to develop personal and professional skills while strengthening the organization and the local community.

1.2.3 Hope European Projects (Spain)

HOPE is a recently established small and medium enterprise (SME), founded in 2023 in Gijón (Spain) with the mission of promoting gender equality and empowering young individuals through innovative projects. Their commitment is to create a lasting and positive impact on young people's lives, fostering personal growth, leadership development, and meaningful contributions to society. The core values of the organization are the following:

- **Youth Leadership:** HOPE believes in the transformative power of young people. They are not just beneficiaries but **active change-makers**. The organization is dedicated to equipping them with the tools and knowledge needed to lead change, make informed decisions, and shape their personal and professional futures.
- **Equal Opportunities:** Their work goes beyond inclusion, ensuring that all individuals—regardless of gender, background, or socio-economic circumstances—have **equal access to opportunities**. Gender equality is a fundamental principle embedded in all their projects and initiatives.
- **Creativity and Adaptability:** HOPE embraces **innovation** to address the challenges faced by young people and to promote gender equality. They continuously seek new approaches and methodologies to create meaningful, long-lasting change.

HOPE envisions itself as a **driving force for change** in European projects focused on **youth and gender equality**. They aim to be recognized for the **impact of their programs**, the tangible social transformation they create, and their ability to inspire others to join the movement for equality and empowerment.

To promote its values, HOPE engages in **education and training, participation in democratic life, innovative training methodologies, and awareness-raising initiatives**. In fact, through youth mobility programs and social media campaigns, the organization promotes the acquisition of intercultural, entrepreneurial, and leadership competencies among young people, always by adopting interactive methodologies and a gender perspective.

1.2.4 Instytut Współpracy Regionalnej (Poland)

The Instytut Współpracy Regionalnej (in English: Foundation Institute for Regional Cooperation) was established in 2011 in Gdynia (Poland). It is a non-profit organization that brings together experts, youth workers, and young people to implement projects

promoting inter-regional and transnational cooperation for sustainable socio-economic development.

Their priority is to design **engaging and impactful initiatives** that actively involve the **local community** in civic life through collaborative projects.

IWR's objectives focus on:

- **Supporting the personal and professional development of young people** through educational and training opportunities.
- **Promoting sports and healthy lifestyles** to enhance individual and community well-being.
- **Encouraging and supporting local initiatives** that drive positive social change.
- **Developing youth projects** focused on sustainable development and democratic participation.
- **Delivering training programs**, particularly in **creativity and entrepreneurship**, to equip young people with essential skills for the future.

IWR primarily focuses on the implementation of projects funded by the European Union and other sources, in both formal and non-formal education. Additionally, they develop and carry out their own initiatives in these fields. Their activities are free of charge and are promoted mainly in rural areas and smaller towns, where access to development opportunities is often limited. To ensure inclusivity, IWR offers mentorship support and adapts activities to be accessible to individuals with disabilities.

2. Introduction

2.1 Purpose of the guide

This guide focuses on assisting youth workers and other professionals who work with queer, neurodivergent and disabled young people. Differences should not only be acknowledged or heard in advocacy, but also embraced in a true sense of inclusion where these young people are free to not simply exist but flourish and thrive. This youth work needs to embrace the realities of young people's multiple identities, their social and cultural lived substrate and their overlapping assets, barriers and contributions as a full set of values.

2.2 Intended audience

This guide focuses on assisting youth workers and other professionals who work with young people in formal or informal settings.

- **Youth workers:** professionals within community services who focus on supporting young people in their growth, identity and empowerment processes.
- **Educators:** teachers and out-of-school professionals who teach in a school, after-school or informal education context and guide young people in the educational process.
- **Volunteers:** individuals who offer a voluntary mentoring or supervisory role in different contexts, ranging from local youth organisations to community development programmes.
- **Mental health professionals:** counselling, psychology and social work practitioners who provide care and support to young people facing challenging identity issues.
- **Parents and caregivers:** those who want to better understand and support their young people who are queer, neurodivergent, or disabled.
- **Young people:** As young people are an integral part of any educational environment, it is essential that they also develop a better understanding of themselves and others, including their queer, neurodivergent, or disabled peers. Including youth as a target audience allows them to gain awareness and understanding of diverse identities and experiences within their communities. Not only youth workers, but also young people themselves should be equipped with the tools to engage in tolerant and inclusive relationships, contributing to the creation of inclusive spaces where everyone can feel seen, respected, and supported.

2.3 Educational methodology

The methodology underpinning the tools and activities presented in this guide is rooted in **non-formal education (NFE)**. This approach places the learner at the center of the educational process, valuing their lived experiences, promoting active participation, and creating safe spaces for self-expression and critical thinking. Unlike formal education, which is often curriculum-based and hierarchical, non-formal education is flexible, inclusive, and participatory, making it particularly effective when working with diverse groups of young people — especially those from queer communities.

We have chosen this approach because it reflects the real-life contexts in which youth workers operate, fostering learning that is experiential, reflective, and empowering. It allows for open dialogue, creative expression, peer learning, and the co-construction of knowledge — all essential elements when exploring complex and sensitive topics such as body, agency, and gender.

This methodology is also fully aligned with the philosophy of the **Erasmus+ Programme**, which promotes inclusion, active citizenship, intercultural learning, and personal development. Erasmus+ recognizes non-formal learning as a key tool in strengthening youth work and enabling young people to become agents of change in their communities.

Moreover, all the activities suggested in this guide — as well as the broader framework of the "A B.A.G. of Inclusion" project — are designed according to the **knowledge—skills—attitude (KSA)** model. This model follows a logical and impactful learning sequence:

- First, it is necessary to build **knowledge** of the key themes and understand the needs and realities of queer young people;
- Then, this knowledge supports the development of practical **skills** to work with them effectively and sensitively;
- Finally, it nurtures a shift in **attitudes**, cultivating empathy, awareness, and a deeper commitment to inclusive and transformative youth work.

This structure enables youth workers to transform awareness into action, equipping them with the competence and confidence to engage with queer young people in authentic, inclusive, and impactful ways.

2.4 Why the intersectionality approach matters

Intersectionality is a crucial framework for understanding the experiences of marginalized young people. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, it highlights how social identities—such as race, gender, disability, and sexuality—intersect to shape privilege and oppression. For instance, a Black neurodivergent youth may face both ableism and

racism, experiencing challenges distinct from a white neurodivergent peer. Overlooking these intersections can have serious consequences. A transgender autistic youth undergoing gender affirmation may struggle with sensory overload in medical settings, worsening dysphoria if their needs are ignored. In the classroom, a queer neurodivergent student facing bullying may feel further isolated if forced into neurotypical social norms, such as maintaining eye contact.

Recognizing intersectionality is essential to fully understanding and supporting young people. By acknowledging the complexity of their identities, we can foster more inclusive and affirming environments where they feel seen and valued.

Both intersectional feminism and homophobia emphasize the fact that oppression does not occur in a vacuum. A white gay man does not face the same issues as a black trans woman; a middle-class white woman does not experience the same gender discrimination as a disabled Latina. When movements erase these differences, they run the risk of re-establishing the very hierarchies they seek to eliminate.

Socio-economic status is one of the most pervasive and often overlooked axes of inequality. Poverty exacerbates the effects of discrimination by creating additional barriers to healthcare, education, and safety. For example, low-income LGBTQIA+ youth are significantly more likely to experience homelessness, food insecurity, and poor mental health outcomes. According to **UNICEF's report** *"Every child has an equitable chance in life"* (2020), the compounded effects of socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination multiply the risks for marginalized youth, leading to intergenerational cycles of exclusion.

Similarly, the **American Psychological Association (APA)** reports that racialized people and LGBTQIA+ individuals from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to face stigma in mental health services, less access to diagnosis and care, and lower rates of adequate treatment.

Economic marginalization also intersects with disability: the **World Health Organization** highlights that disabled people are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, and lack access to healthcare — a trend that deepens among those who also belong to other oppressed groups.

In psychology and medicine, this is particularly acute. While women and minorities are underdiagnosed in autism and ADHD due to racial and gender bias in research, queer and trans people are also neglected by medicine. It has been proven that:

- Autistic and ADHD patients are overrepresented as queer and trans, but are diagnosed according to models created for cis, heterosexual men (George R & Stokes MA, 2018, Petrides, K.V., & Mandy, W., 2020)
- Women and non-binary people are diagnosed (or misdiagnosed) later with conditions like autism, ADHD and heart disease because medical studies focus

on male symptoms (Anila M D'Mello, Isabelle R Frosch, Cindy E Li, Annie L Cardinaux, John DE Gabrieli, 2022, Nussbaum, Nancy L., 2012)

- Black and indigenous peoples have higher maternal mortality rates, higher rates of misdiagnosis, and lower rates of pain management in medicine (Brian D. Smedley, Adrienne Y. Stith, Alan R. Nelson, 2003)

It's not an intellectual exercise to recognize these patterns — it's a matter of survival. A queer and feminist liberation movement that does not include disability, ethnicity, class and gender identity is not a complete movement. It is the dismantling/deconstruction of systems that hit the most marginalized first to rebuild more inclusive ones.

3. Key concepts and foundations

This chapter introduces essential terms and concepts that are fundamental for understanding and working effectively with queer and gender-diverse youth. It provides a glossary of key terminology to ensure that youth workers and others involved in supporting young people can communicate respectfully and inclusively. Understanding these terms is crucial for creating an environment that acknowledges and affirms the identities and experiences of queer youth, fostering a space where they feel valued and understood.

3.1 Glossary of terms

The following are some of the key terms to be aware of when working with these young people. Remember that's important to ask individuals how they identify and respect their preferred terms:

- **Queer:** once used pejoratively, *queer* has been reclaimed by the LGBTQIA+ community to describe a range of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. It is now used by many as a way to challenge and subvert rigid gender and sexual norms.
- **Gender identity:** a person's internal sense of their own gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Identities can include male, female, non-binary, agender, and many others.
- **Gender expression:** how a person outwardly expresses their gender, through clothing, behavior, voice, or hairstyle. Gender expression may not conform to traditional gender roles or stereotypes.
- **Sexual orientation:** refers to whom a person is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to. This can include lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and other orientations.
- **Transgender:** a broad term describing people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes binary trans men and trans women, as well as non-binary, genderqueer, agender, and gender non-conforming individuals, who may not identify within the male/female binary at all.
- **Pronouns:** words used to refer to someone in place of their name, such as *he/him*, *she/her*, or *they/them*. Respecting someone's pronouns is a basic form of recognition. *They/them* is often used by people who identify outside the gender binary. For a clear and inclusive explanation, see: [ShoutOut.ie – Pronouns](https://shoutout.ie/pronouns)
- **Cis-heteronormativity:** the assumption that everyone is cisgender and heterosexual, and that these are the "normal" or default identities. This norm

invisibilizes and marginalizes LGBTQIA+ people and shapes institutions, language, and social expectations.

- **Stereotypes:** oversimplified and widely held beliefs about a group of people. These can reinforce discrimination and stigma, particularly when applied to race, gender, sexuality, disability or body size.
- **Prejudice:** preconceived opinions not based on actual experience or reason, often directed at individuals due to their social identity. Prejudice underpins systemic discrimination.
- **Gender roles:** social expectations about how individuals should behave based on their perceived gender. These roles limit expression and often reinforce sexism and queerphobia.
- **Beauty standards:** socially constructed ideals of physical appearance that often favor thin, white, cisgender, able-bodied people. These standards can perpetuate fatphobia, racism, ableism and sexism.
- **Fatphobia:** the discrimination, stigma and prejudice directed at people in larger bodies. Fatphobia intersects with other systems of oppression and is reinforced by health discourse, fashion, media, and beauty standards.
- **Sexism:** systemic discrimination based on gender, usually directed against women, non-binary and gender-diverse people. It includes both overt and subtle forms, and it intersects with other systems of oppression such as racism and ableism.
- **Neurodivergent:** not just a descriptive term for individuals whose neurological functioning differs from neurotypical norms, but also a political identity rooted in resistance to deficit models. The term was coined by autistic advocate Kassiane Asasumasu, affirming the validity and dignity of neurodivergent minds.
- **Disability:** not an inherent flaw in the individual but the result of societal structures that exclude and marginalize. The social model of disability demands that society adapt to different bodies and minds, not the other way around.
- **Ableism:** discrimination and bias against disabled people. This can manifest as physical inaccessibility, lack of inclusive education or employment, or assumptions about competence.
- **Homobobitansphobia:** institutional and social oppression directed at LGBTQIA+ people, which affects people differently depending on their specific identity (e.g., a lesbian may face different challenges than a non-binary person). The term calls for recognizing the diversity within the queer community.
- **Intersectional feminism:** a framework that understands oppression as interconnected — not simply additive — across axes like gender, race, class, disability, and sexuality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality pushes for a feminism that leaves no one behind.

3.2 Understanding queer, neurodivergent, and disabled identities

Each of these identities — disabled, neurodivergent and queer— has its own implications, but insofar as they overlap, they are expressions of deeply nuanced and complex life experiences. Identity is a dynamic, ever-changing thing that is shaped by both internal reality and external social structures. A person who is both neurodivergent and queer may deal with relationships differently due to their sensory perceptions and societal expectations of gender and sexuality. A disabled, trans person may encounter transphobic and ableist barriers in the healthcare system. These layers are not cumulative — they represent completely different realities that cannot be reduced to a single narrative.

Accepting this diversity means leaving binary definitions behind and being open to the fact that there are some identities and experiences that exist outside of our knowledge— that does not negate their reality or validity.

- **Queerness** is not just an identity — it is an act of liberation in a world that refuses to tolerate deviations in gender and sexuality. Queer youth live in a world that is not meant for them and often struggle with institutional rejection from their families, schools and institutions that are supposed to protect them. This is no accident, but the result of a deeply ingrained cis-heteronormativity that categorizes queer existences as "other", as something to be discussed rather than affirmed. Creating spaces that are truly inclusive requires dismantling this structural otherness and not just offering a superficial "acceptance". Perhaps the most important aspect of working with queer youth is the refusal to impose strict definitions of gender and sexuality. Identity is not a linear process from "confusion" to "certainty", but an ongoing, dynamic process. Someone who identifies as lesbian today may find out a few years later that they are non-binary and bisexual.
- **Neurodivergence** is not a deficit to work with — it is a disruption of the myth of the "ideal" brain defended by capitalism and ableism. Neurodivergent young people are often forced to fit into an environment that was never meant for them, and they are punished for behaviors that are "inappropriate" only because they violate neurotypical norms. A child with ADHD who has difficulty with impulse control, for example, is not "misbehaving"- they are struggling to fit into a system that values conformity over genuine engagement. Similarly, an autistic teen who won't make eye contact or speak in any other way is not a "failure" at socialization — they are resisting the demand to be neurotypical for the sake of convenience.

- **Disability** is not a human tragedy, but a political condition — the inevitable result of a world privileged by abled people and a society constructed around them. Many disabled people are neurodivergent, but neurodivergence is not quite the same as disability. There is some overlap between the two categories, but they are not identical. A person with dyslexia may have difficulty with normal reading, but can manage with the help of aids and has no barriers to overcome in everyday life. In contrast, a person with ADHD who is unable to function due to executive dysfunction may have social barriers.

True solidarity means recognizing that disability justice is indistinguishable from queer justice.

3.3 A brief history of queer, neurodivergent, and disabled communities

To understand the struggles and victories of queer, neurodivergent and disabled youth, we need to look at the history of their movements.

- **Queer history:** in the 1960s and 1970s, the LGBT+ civil rights movement underwent a radical transformation as large numbers of LGBT+ people openly fought for their rights. The Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York are traditionally seen as the beginning of the modern LGBT+ liberation movement. The riots were a result of a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, an LGBT+ bar, which led to massive demonstrations. Soon after, the Gay Liberation Front was formed and Pride festivals began internationally to commemorate Stonewall. Harvey Milk was elected as San Francisco's first openly gay Member of Parliament in 1977 and campaigned for LGBT+ rights. In the 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic broke out, which had a serious impact on the LGBT+ community as the disease was misrepresented in its early stages. In the 2000s, LGBT+ rights improved and most countries legalized same-sex marriage. In Italy, the first attempt to organize a national LGBT+ movement was made in 1922, but real success only came after the end of the Second World War, even against the opposition of the Catholic Church. In the 1980s and 90s, the first associations such as ARCI gay and Arcigay emerged to campaign for LGBT+ rights. The first Pride in Italy was held in 1994.
- **History of Disability rights:** disability has evolved from a stigma or a punishment to a test for inclusion. In the past, disabilities were seen as a sign of inferiority or a form of punishment from God and therefore led to discrimination. The emergence of Christianity cemented this attitude and disabled people were institutionalized as a result. In modern times, especially

after the industrial revolution, disability became a social issue and the Nazi party targeted people with disabilities. The first Disability Pride Parade took place in Boston in 1990, coinciding with the signing of the "Americans with Disabilities Act" (known as the "ADA") by U.S. President George Bush, which remains the main U.S. legislative act on disability. In 1995, the first Disability Pride Parade was held in New York City, thanks to the initiative of jazz musician Mike LeDonne, whose interest in this cause was inspired by his daughter Mary, a person disabled. This event has become an annual tradition. In 2015, on the 25th anniversary of the ADA, New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio declared July as Disability Pride Month, establishing a globally recognized celebration.

- **Neurodivergent movement:** we can trace the autistic rights movement back to Autistic Pride Day, as this is a pivotal moment in the fight for autism and neurodivergent acceptance. The idea of Autistic Pride Day came about because individuals wanted to change the message about autism that had been clouded for so long by medical models of "curing" or "correcting" people with autism. Instead, this day emphasises the importance of accepting and welcoming neurodiversity. The movement itself, which began in 2005 with Aspies For Freedom (AFF), was born out of a demand for a platform for autistic people to express pride in their identity, just as other oppressed communities do through pride events. The launch of Autistic Pride Day was not only a sign of society's rejection of stigma, but also spawned further campaigns for autistic rights, increased representation and inclusion in all areas of society. Since its inception, Autistic Pride Day has been an annual event that brings together autistic people and their allies to celebrate the principles of acceptance, self-determination and diversity.

4. Educational objectives

In this chapter, we focus on the core educational goals for youth workers who aim to support queer, neurodiverse, and disabled young people. By understanding these key learning outcomes, youth workers will be better prepared to foster inclusive, supportive, and empowering environments for youth of all identities and backgrounds. This section outlines essential skills and competencies to develop in order to effectively engage with diverse youth populations.

4.1 What youth workers can take away from this guide

The key learning outcomes for youth workers are:

- **Understanding intersectionality:** by studying intersectionality— particularly in the context of queer, neurodiverse and disabled young people — they will be better equipped to deal with the complex experiences of these young people.

Example resource:

"Intersectionality" by Kimberlé Crenshaw

"The Gendered Society" by Michael Kimmel, as a reference for understanding young people's gendered experiences

"Visibility of Disability: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century" by Alice Wong, which includes a range of voices of disabled people. outh workers working with disabled, neurodivergent and queer

- **Building Empathy through Education:** youth workers need to be equipped with skills to critically examine themselves, acknowledge their own biases, and learn to engage in discussions on sensitive topics like gender identity, disability, and sexuality.

Example resource:

"Me and White Supremacy" by Layla F. Saad.

- **Developing allyship and advocacy competence:** youth workers must learn to become good allies of oppressed groups, not just verbally, but on a daily basis through actions.

Example Resource:

"How to Be an Ally" by Black Lives Matter movement resources.

"Ashley Mardell's ABCs of LGBT+" is a concise, yet comprehensive, guide to LGBTQIA+ vocabulary and allyship.

- **Learning to build autonomy:** it is critical that young people learn to enable young people to make decisions on their own lives and identity. This is done by encouraging self-determination and enabling young people to become self-advocates of their own needs through the acquisition of skills and confidence.

Example resource:

"The Freedom to Choose: How Autonomy Shapes Our Lives" by Nancy E. Snow.

4.2 Building an inclusive and accessible learning environment

Here is how youth workers can proceed to build such spaces:

- **Physical accessibility:** for physically disabled young people, physical accessibility for youth workers implies considering all aspects of the environment. For example, accessible means of entry, pathways, ramps, and seating are required for physically disabled young people. This extends beyond physical mobility to ensure that people with different abilities, including hearing or visually impaired, have equal access to the facility as well.

Best practice example: a youth club could invest in sign language interpreters to be used in group work and assistive listening equipment. This ensures that youth work is more accessible to deaf or hard-of-hearing young people.

Resource: "Disability and Equity at the Crossroads of Youth Development" by Kristie L. P. Timmons

- **Technological accessibility:** this is also crucial in this age of technology for inclusive education. This may include providing alternative text for visual materials, using screen readers, or including captioning and subtitles on video materials.

Media example: the TV show "Special" (2019) centers around queer identity and disability and gives a sharp-eyed representation of being in the world as a neurodivergent person. The creators ensured accessibility features of the show were made inclusive, such as captioning and audio description for the blind or visually impaired audience.

- **Inclusive pedagogy:** utilizing the combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning methods along with modifying material to be appropriately adapted to suit neurodivergent learning requisites is at stake.

Example: during an identity workshop for youth, consider incorporating role-playing activities, art projects, and storytelling. These diverse approaches may reach different learning styles, so that all youth can have access to the material in ways that meet them.

Resource: "The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Differentiated Instruction" by Margo A. Mastropieri and Thomas E. Scruggs.

- **Safe social and emotional spaces:** accessibility is not merely physical. An emotionally safe space would entail ensuring a context in which young people can feel free to discover themselves without prejudice and judgment. Youth workers must then be sensitive to the emotional needs of marginalized young people and create spaces for honest dialogue.

Example: hold periodic "check-in" sessions during which young people can discuss how they are feeling, their concerns, or their suggestions on ways to make the group better. For instance, in a youth support group for LGBTQIA youth, a "check-in" might be asked such questions as "What was the highlight of your week?" or "Is there something you'd like to talk about or need assistance with?"

Resource: "Creating Safe Spaces for Women" by Tori de Montfort.

- **Additional considerations**

Pronoun and name cards: to establish a space that is inclusive in all ways, youth workers can offer name and pronoun cards to assist in ensuring that all participants' identities are respected and valued. This simple tool supports the building of a space where youth feel safe being seen for who they are, without fear of misgendering or exclusion.

Stimming toys: for neurodivergent people having stim toys readily available can be invaluable. The toys can help with sensory needs, calm anxiety, and be soothing during teaching or group time, enabling the participant to be able to participate without becoming overwhelmed or feeling out of place.

4.3 Supporting identity exploration and self-determination

One of the key roles youth workers play in fighting for marginalized youth is offering spaces where young people can safely and supportively explore their identities and practice self-determination. These are some of the ways youth workers can support these processes:

- **Facilitating identity exploration:** identity exploration is a highly personal process, particularly for queer and neurodivergent youth.

Example:

Encourage creative forms like journaling, drawing, or writing as a form of self-expression. The youth worker could facilitate an activity where youth are asked to create a drawing that symbolizes themselves, maybe a self-portrait, and share it in a group if they feel comfortable.

Resource:

"Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue" by Nicholas M. Teich.

- **Being respectful of self-determination is the absolute minimum to create a supportive space.** But actually providing a comfortable and welcoming one goes beyond that. It involves actively not assuming people's gender, neurodivergence, or invisible disabilities. For gender-nonconforming youth, self-determination relates to how they express their gender, e.g., by name, pronouns, or presentation. Youth workers ought to be respectful of these choices and do more to honor all identities being seen and respected.

Example from practice:

A youth group can use "gender-neutral" name tags, where participants can write their preferred name and pronouns. This small step not only supports self-determination but also helps to build a culture that respects all individuals' identities.

Resource:

"The Gender Identity Workbook for Kids" by Kelly Storck, which can help facilitate discussions with young people about their gender identity.

- **Empowering neurodivergent people as self-advocates:** neurodivergent young people are normally hindered in self-advocacy for their needs. Workers can support such them to enhance self-advocacy abilities. They have to describe their rights to them, lead them to communicate their needs, and provide them

with the right strategies to control overwhelming contexts like sensory overload and anxiety.

Example:

Schedule self-advocacy training where the neurodivergent people will be taught about their rights, requesting accommodations in school settings, and how to communicate their needs in a way that feels comfortable to them.

Resource:

"Neurodiversity in the Classroom" by Thomas Armstrong. This book focuses on how to embrace and support neurodivergent students in educational settings, which is directly applicable to youth workers.

- **Providing opportunities for autonomy:** autonomy is the key to making young people feel empowered. Young people can be assisted by youth workers in taking control of decision-making in their lives, making them more confident and self-reliant. This is done by giving youth opportunities to participate actively in defining the learning process and the surroundings.

Example:

Instead of a scripted lesson, challenge the young people to jointly decide on the purpose or theme of the session so that they can choose what is most interesting or intriguing to them. Alternatively, give them a choice in terms of how they would prefer to work on the material, i.e., discussion, creative task, or group work. This approach not only makes them owners of learning but also teaches them to be critical and be responsible for the decisions.

Resource:

"Encouraging Self-Determination and Goal Setting Among Youth" by Dickinson D. (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2024). Retrieved from: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-HE23_1300-PURL-gpo235621/pdf/GOVPUB-HE23_1300-PURL-gpo235621.pdf

5. Teaching methods and tools

This chapter delves into the teaching methodologies and tools that can be utilized to engage young people in learning experiences. Specifically, it highlights the transformative potential of art-based methodologies in addressing complex topics related to identity, expression, and social justice. These methodologies are particularly valuable when working with marginalized young people, such as those who are queer, neurodivergent, or disabled.

5.1 Introduction: Why choose art-based methodologies?

Art-based methodologies—such as theater, writing, visual arts, and music—offer a rich and transformative space for exploring identity, expressing emotions, and engaging with social dynamics in profound ways. These approaches are not just creative outlets but powerful tools for addressing complex issues related to the human condition. They are especially significant when discussing topics such as belonging, identity, and social justice (BAG), particularly in relation to young people who are marginalized in society, such as queer, neurodivergent, or disabled individuals.

Why focus on art, rather than other methodologies? Because art is never just an aesthetic representation—it is an act of resistance, a language that speaks beyond words, that digs deep. When working with young people who live in a world that often fails to recognize them or labels them as "different," art offers a way out: a form of communication that, though not always immediate, is infinitely more powerful and empathetic than a simple intellectual debate. In contexts where words can be limiting or even exclusive, art becomes a shared language, capable of transcending barriers of verbalization.

Then, there is the issue of empathy. Theater, for example, allows individuals to step into someone else's shoes, to inhabit a different reality. It is not just about "putting oneself in another's shoes," but about living it, challenging oneself and one's beliefs within a safe context. Music and visual arts, in the same way, provide an outlet for expressing emotions that may be too difficult to verbalize, creating a space where one can experience themselves without fear of judgment. In a world that often forces young people to conform to rigid stereotypes, these methods allow them to play with fluidity, complexity, and self-determination.

Moreover, there is the dimension of growth. Art-based methods are not just a means of reflection; they are opportunities to develop vital skills such as critical thinking, listening, and empathy. These tools create fertile ground for change, self-discovery, and the evolution of interpersonal relationships. They are not merely educational techniques—they are transformative experiences that speak to that deep part of each

of us that is often silent, hidden between the lines of a society that struggles to recognize beauty in difference.

In this chapter, we will explore how theater, writing, visual arts, and music can become tools for building a more inclusive and aware world. It's not just about creating art; it's about creating humanity, about giving space to what we are in both our strengths and our vulnerabilities. And most importantly, it's about giving voice to those who are too often unheard.

5.2 Art-Based methods (theater, writing, visual arts, music) to explore identity and expression

- **Theater** is a dynamic way to look at identity and power dynamics. By acting through the different characters and roles, students can more clearly recognize the dynamics of identity. It also allows them to adopt perspectives and experiences that are not their own, which leads to empathy.

Example: Including plays and identity-based improvisational games, such as "The Laramie Project" (play on Matthew Shepard's assassination and reaction of the community), can provide rich discussion on discrimination, violence, and being an ally. Adding role-reversals, where students switch gender roles or abilities, can push them to challenge and examine social norms.

- **Writing activities** can facilitate the processing of challenging thoughts and emotions surrounding identity. For neurodivergent or disabled students, writing can be a form of communication if other forms of communication would be inaccessible or overwhelming.

Example: writing exercises can also be designed to encourage self-reflection, such as: "Write a letter to your younger self" or "Envision a world in which your gender identity or disability is not stigmatized but celebrated." And "The Disability Memoir" by Kay Kerr is an excellent text to elicit reflection on how disabled voices can shift hegemonic narratives.

- **Visual art** is, for most students, an immediate means of expression. Asking students to create a self-portrait, sculpture, or abstract art based on their experience is an invitation to speak in a non-verbal sense.

Example: youth workers can provide sets of materials, e.g., paints, clay, markers, and collage items, and encourage students to create artworks representing aspects of their gender identity, disability experience, or intersectional identities. The activity of making has the potential to be healing and empowering, particularly for marginalized young people.

- **Music** offers an emotional outlet and can potentially aid young people in processing their identity and experiences. Musical activities such as songwriting, playing an instrument, or simply listening and reflection can help individuals process making sense of their sense of self, difference, and expression.

Example: incorporate music and dance as forms of resistance and self-determination by exploring their historical and cultural significance, such as the role of ballroom culture in the LGBTQIA+ and Black communities. Show how these art forms provided marginalized groups with a space for self-expression and empowerment, challenging societal norms. For instance, you could play music by LGBTQIA+ and disabled artists like "Born This Way" by Lady Gaga or songs by Sia, who is neurodivergent, to provoke discussions around identity, marginalization, and personal strength.

5.3 Experiential learning (role-playing, simulations, interactive exercises)

Experiential learning is learning through experience and reflection.

- **Role-playing exercises** help adolescents to empathize with other people and experience various encounters of gender, sexuality, and disability. Role-playing exercises push a person to navigate complex situations and practice empathy.

Example: utilize role-play activities where members take on the perspectives of experience with privilege or discrimination. A role-play activity, for instance, may involve students playing a transgender person who is trying to get health care to demonstrate systemic barriers. Or members having to learn to act as an advocate for a disabled peer in a public setting can build up courage for protesting.

- **Simulations** provide for healthy experiences of challenging situations. Simulations enable young people to grasp complicated systems of privilege and oppression through role-playing real-world situations and interactions.

Example: role-playing the challenges of queer or disabled persons in public places or schools, such as experiencing microaggressions, can help young people learn about the daily struggles of the oppressed. In one of the simulations, for example, students can be provided with an idea of the challenge of trying to enter a building which is wheelchair inaccessible to learn something about peers who are disabled.

- **Interactive learning tasks**, such as group work and discussions, could be the key to engaging students in thinking about themselves and other people's experiences and developing empathy and critical thinking.

Example: interweave activities like the "Privilege Wheel" or "Privilege Walks," where students discover their identity and privilege through connecting personal experiences in a safe, supportive environment. The "Privilege Wheel" requires participants to spin a wheel with different categories of privilege (e.g., race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status) and share how each category influences their lived experience. These activities foster extensive self-reflection and allow learners to understand the multifaceted experiences of members of oppressed groups, fostering a more empathetic response. With these activities, learners understand the intersectionality of privilege, oppression, and identity and gain a better understanding of how these factors shape individual and group experience.

5.4 Accessible and multimodal learning strategies (sensory-friendly approaches, universal design for learning)

To make learning more inclusive, spaces where learning is happening must be made available for all learners who may have sensory, physical, and cognitive variations. Multimodal learning options provide students with alternative methods to access and experience content so nobody gets left behind.

- **Sensory-friendly strategies:** for neurodivergent people, sensory feelings in the room (such as jarring sounds, lights, or strong odors) may cause distress or anxiety. Creating a sensory-friendly room can significantly increase engagement and engagement.

Example: offer stimming toys or sensory materials (such as fidget spinners, texture material, or stress balls) for use if needed. Design the room with lighting controls and offer sound-masking materials. Offer a "quiet area" where a person can retreat if overwhelmed.

- **Universal design for learning (UDL):** UDL is a policy that ensures all individuals, regardless of ability or learning style, have access to and are able to engage with education content. This policy encourages the delivery of content in different formats, such as text, audio, video, and hands-on activities, to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Example: use closed captioning in video for deaf students. Provide written copies of audio material for students who have to work with print. In addition, all content needs to be available using screen readers for blind students.

- **Non-visual communication:** recognize that not everyone learns best through visual communication. Provide multiple forms of communication, such as auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic, to enable all students to access and engage with the learning material. For students who are visually impaired or neurodivergent, providing non-visual alternatives can greatly assist in ensuring more effective learning experiences and prevent these students from being excluded from the material.

Example: for audio learners, offer audio tapes or spoken directions as substitutes for written text. Offer all materials in forms that are readable by screen readers or other adaptive technologies, so that students who have visual disabilities can participate fully. For kinesthetic learners, incorporate hands-on activities or interactive exercises that engage movement or touch, such as modeling activities or activities with textured materials.

- **Interactive and digital tools:** the use of interactive and digital tools in the learning process has the potential to enhance engagement for all students, but especially for students with individual needs or learning styles. Some of the tools that can help students with different abilities in engaging with the content in ways that are more appropriate for them include interactive whiteboards, educational software, and gamified websites.

Example: use electronic media offering flexible environments (e.g., font size, background colors, or speech-to-text capabilities) to meet the needs of diverse learners. For example, some dyslexic learners may benefit from using tools offering text reading aloud or word highlighting as it is being read. Utilize assistive technology, such as voice-activated devices or speech-to-text software, to assist students who may struggle with typing or writing.

- **Flexible assessments and tasks:** the other most crucial aspect of accessible and multimodal learning strategies is offering flexible assessments. Allowing students to demonstrate what they know in various ways—whether through written assignments, oral presentations, video productions, or artwork—enables all students to showcase their strengths while accommodating different learning needs.

Example: for a history class, instead of a written essay, accept a video presentation, an infographic, or a skit. For students who have motor problems or writing difficulties, these non-traditional forms can be less intimidating and more freeing.

- **Collaboration and peer support:** is a positive step in encouraging inclusivity. Student-to-student interaction allows learners to share perspectives, pick up

skills from peers, and assist one another, especially learners with disabilities, so that they feel more included and are part of the learning process. Collaborative work also provides an avenue for students to draw strength from one another's strengths, hence a platform where every learner's ability counts.

Example: for a more experiential learning activity, attempt to set up activities where sighted students are blindfolded and guided by visually impaired students through an obstacle course. This not only promotes empathy but also teamwork and trust between students of different abilities. You may also incorporate "reverse mentoring" scenarios in which students with disabilities or neurodivergent students guide their peers through an activity, creating a learning experience from shared responsibility and respect. Such activities deconstruct assumptions and provide all students with the opportunity to experience leadership, resulting in better understanding of each other's strengths and viewpoints.

5.5 Stories of Inclusion: From Theory to Practice

Inclusive education is not just about theoretical concepts; it's about implementing strategies and methods that make a tangible difference in the lives of marginalized communities. Below are concrete examples of initiatives that are successfully integrating inclusive practices for different marginalized youth groups through art, storytelling, and community engagement.

1. "Tutti Inclusi" – Promoting Autonomy for Young People with Disabilities (Fondazione La Comune, Italy)

The **"Tutti Inclusi"** project is designed for young individuals aged 18 to 30 with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorders. The initiative fosters personal autonomy by developing transversal skills and actively involving families in creating an independent life project for these young people. A key component of the project is the use of art as a tool for creative expression, enabling participants to engage actively in social life.

Through artistic activities, young people with disabilities are encouraged to express themselves creatively and to participate in community life. These activities not only improve their self-esteem but also foster inclusion by allowing them to be visible in social settings, breaking down stereotypes associated with disability.

Source: <https://www.fondazioneacomune.org/Progetti/tutti-inclusi-promuovere-il-protagonismo-di-giovani-con-disabilita/>

2. "Reach+" – Empowering LGBTQIA+ Youth in Rural Areas

(Comitato d'Intesa, Belluno, Italy)

The **"Reach+"** project focuses on creating a network of inclusive associations for LGBTQIA+ youth living in rural and mountainous areas of Italy. This initiative uses **digital storytelling** as a powerful tool for empowerment and visibility. By allowing LGBTQIA+ youth to share their personal stories, the project aims to promote greater community engagement and visibility in isolated regions where access to LGBTQIA+ support might be limited.

Participants engage in creating digital narratives that address their challenges, experiences, and aspirations, thus promoting both self-expression and community solidarity. The project has empowered young LGBTQIA+ individuals by amplifying their voices in rural spaces, which are often underserved by traditional LGBTQIA+ resources.

Source: <https://www.newsinquota.it/i-giovani-lgbtqia-nel-bellunese-percorso-di-progettazione-partecipata>

3. "MigrArt" – Art for the Integration of Migrant Youth**(Popoli Insieme, Padua, Italy)**

The **"MigrArt"** project is a European initiative aimed at developing creative skills among young migrants and youth workers through artistic and digital activities. The project emphasizes **intercultural integration** and resilience, promoting an inclusive and intercultural community. The young migrants involved in this initiative have the opportunity to express their experiences and identities through visual arts, theater, and digital media.

By encouraging creative expression, **"MigrArt"** helps migrant youth to integrate into their host societies while also preserving and sharing their cultural backgrounds. The initiative fosters mutual respect and understanding among diverse communities, enhancing social cohesion.

Source: <https://www.popolinsieme.eu/culturecomunita/migrart-giovani-arte-e-intercultural/>

4. "Art is Love Made Public" – Combatting Discrimination Through Art**(Le Tre Ghinee APS ETS, Rome, Italy)**

"Art is Love Made Public" is a project that uses the language of art to combat discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community. The initiative takes place in the **San Lorenzo neighborhood of Rome**, an area known for its diversity and social activism. Through artistic workshops and performances, young queer individuals at risk of social exclusion are empowered to express themselves and engage in public dialogues about their identities.

The project not only provides a safe space for marginalized youth but also sensitizes the broader community to LGBTQIA+ issues. By using art as a tool for visibility and empowerment, the project creates inclusive spaces where young people can be seen and heard.

Source: <https://thecare.actionaid.it/progetti/art-is-love-made-public-il-linguaggio-artistico-come-contrasto-alle-discriminazioni-nella-comunita-lgbtqia>

5. "The Unexpected Artrepreneur"

(Greece, Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal)

"The Unexpected Artrepreneur" is a European initiative funded by the Erasmus+ programme and involving six different organizations from Greece, Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal. The project aims to promote social inclusion and empower young people with autism and Down syndrome through visual arts and entrepreneurship. This is done through the development of an educational curriculum and an e-learning platform, and the creation of a toolkit for professionals working with young people with autism and Down syndrome.

Source: <https://www.tua-project.eu/>

Conclusion: Bridging Theory and Practice Through Art

These case studies highlight how art-based methodologies can make a tangible difference in the lives of marginalized youth. From providing creative outlets for self-expression to fostering social inclusion and intercultural dialogue, these projects demonstrate the potential of art to empower young people from diverse backgrounds.

Whether it's through the use of art to promote autonomy in young people with disabilities, giving voice to LGBTQIA+ youth in rural areas, or fostering intercultural integration among migrant youth, each project serves as a model of how inclusive education can be put into practice. These initiatives offer concrete examples of how communities can use creativity to bridge divides, challenge discrimination, and foster inclusion.

By integrating these methods into everyday educational practices, we move closer to creating a society where all young people, regardless of their background or identity, feel seen, supported, and included.

Language shapes the way we interact with and perceive others. For educational and social spaces to be truly inclusive, the language used must respect people's identities, experiences, and differences.

5.6 Contextualize to decolonize: study the laws, understand the risks, build possible spaces

There is no real inclusion without an awareness of context. We cannot promote effective — and above all, safe — educational tools if we don't have a deep understanding of the legal, social, and political fabric of the places we work in. Studying the laws, mapping the risks, and understanding the possible consequences of every action is the first step toward acting responsibly and respectfully. In some countries, even talking about gender identity or sexual orientation can expose people — especially young people — to violence, discrimination, or criminal penalties. In these cases, our role is not to "import" educational models, but to open safe, creative spaces where awareness can grow without exposing anyone to unchosen risks.

This also means questioning our own gaze: never assuming that "we know how to do it," but instead listening, building alliances with those who know that territory from the inside — activists, educators, and local leaders. Decolonization isn't just a theoretical stance: it's a concrete, daily, political responsibility. It means rejecting the Western arrogance that seeks to teach without first learning.

Adapting doesn't mean giving up on universal human rights: it means finding the right language, rhythm, and channels to let them take root where they might seem impossible today. Sometimes, change begins with a theatre workshop or a poem shared in a safe space. Sometimes, it begins with a handshake between people who choose to trust one another. But it always begins with respect — and with the courage to resist both silence and imposition.

1. Acknowledging cultural and religious diversity

Identity is never neutral. Gender and sexual orientation don't exist outside of history, language, or spirituality. In some cultures, the very categories we use in the West simply do not exist — not because they are "behind," but because they have different ways of naming, feeling, acting, resisting.

To assume LGBTQIA+ labels are universal is a deeply colonial mistake. Imposing a single grammar in the name of "inclusion" often erases other worlds. If we want real solidarity, we must learn to listen even when we don't understand. We must make space for those who don't name themselves but resist in silence. Diversity means allowing identities to exist in their own terms — not domesticated by our vocabulary.

2. Adapting tools for countries where LGBTQIA+ rights are criminalized

In many countries, visibility is not liberation — it's a death sentence. The idea that pride and visibility are the only paths to freedom is a Western privilege. In some contexts, being out isn't brave — it's dangerous. And so, activism takes different forms: quiet, symbolic, relational, and deeply radical.

When designing educational tools in these settings, we must prioritize flexibility, listening, and humility. Speaking of dignity, creativity, respect, human rights, and the body can be far more powerful than directly naming identities that are taboo — not because of fear, but as a strategy of survival and care. Seeds can grow anywhere, but only if we understand the soil, the season, and the risk.

3. Decolonizing our lens: allyship, not imposition

“Universal values” often mask cultural supremacy. There’s no such thing as neutral universality — it’s always created by someone, somewhere. Bringing our vision of gender and rights into another context as “the truth” is not inclusive — it’s a new form of colonization dressed up as progress.

To decolonize our gaze means giving up the position of savior. We are not there to rescue anyone. We are there to listen, support, and stand beside. Real allyship means following the lead of those who already resist, even when they don’t use our language or fit our frameworks. Dignity cannot be exported. It can only be co-created — in tension, in relation, in solidarity.

4. Adapting educational tools to local contexts

Education is not a one-size-fits-all tool. What’s empowering in one context can be useless — or even dangerous — in another. In schools where queerness is taboo or where religion plays a dominant role, we must read the room before we speak. Sometimes, not saying “LGBTQIA+” is not censorship — it’s protection.

Theatre, writing, music, and storytelling can sidestep censorship and create spaces to feel, imagine, and change. These languages offer symbolic shelters where people can explore themselves without exposure. The goal isn’t always to name queerness — it’s to spark awareness, in ways that are safe, strategic, and sustainable. Even silence, when chosen, can be radical.

5. Building genuine and respectful alliances

Bringing education into a community doesn’t mean showing up with a finished lesson plan. It means building relationships. It means listening — and letting ourselves be changed. Local activists, teachers, and youth are the true experts. If they’re not part of the process, then we’re doing it wrong.

This requires giving up control, welcoming conflict, and being uncomfortable. We must keep asking: Who is speaking? Who is deciding? Who is being heard? And more importantly: Who is paying the price for the tools we choose to use?

Allyship is not soft. It’s not a warm, fuzzy word. It’s about accountability, power, and responsibility. Good intentions are not enough.

6. Knowing the law to prevent harm

Knowing the law is not a side note — it's a political necessity. In many countries, LGBTQIA+ identities — and those who speak about them — are criminalized. Ignoring these laws can put people at risk of arrest, violence, exile, or death.

Anyone working on sexuality or gender education must take the time to study the legal and cultural terrain before acting. Doing good isn't enough if we also do harm. That means knowing the laws, understanding the risks, and deferring to those who live them every day.

6. Creating safe and affirming spaces

Creating safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQIA+ and disabled youth requires intentional practices that foster inclusion, respect, and validation. This includes making sure that youth feel seen, heard, and supported within their communities, both physically and digitally.

6.1 Inclusive language: practical guidelines for communication

Language shapes the way we interact with and perceive others. For educational and social spaces to be truly inclusive, the language used must respect people's identities, experiences, and differences.

- **Introduce pronouns as a standard practice:** when presenting yourself in group settings, it's crucial to model the practice of stating your pronouns first. For example, rather than asking participants to share their pronouns right away, start by introducing yourself and saying, *"Hi, I'm Liam, and my pronouns are they/them."* This sets the tone for others to follow suit and avoids putting anyone on the spot.
- **Respecting identity through language:** it's important to use the correct names and pronouns consistently and accurately. This includes avoiding *deadnames* (the name a person was given at birth but no longer uses after transitioning) and addressing individuals by their chosen names, which fosters a respectful environment.
- **Avoid assumptions:** never assume a person's pronouns based on their appearance, body, or gender expression. For instance, don't assume someone who looks feminine uses "she/her" or someone who presents as masculine uses "he/him."
 - **Example:** in a group setting, you might ask, *"Please let me know what pronouns you'd like me to use, if you're comfortable sharing."*

6.2 Addressing and preventing discrimination in educational and social spaces

Creating an inclusive space involves actively addressing and preventing discrimination. This requires constant vigilance and commitment to ensuring that individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, ability, or other characteristics.

- **Establish clear guidelines and consequences:** start by setting clear guidelines for what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Ensure that these guidelines explicitly address discrimination based on gender, sexuality, disability, race, or other intersecting identities. Establish a transparent process for how violations will be handled, ensuring that all participants know that discriminatory behavior will not be tolerated.
 - **Example:** when creating a code of conduct for the space, include statements such as, *"We commit to creating a respectful environment where all forms of discrimination, including racism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia, are not acceptable."*
- **Training and ongoing education:** regularly provide training on recognizing and combating discrimination. This could include workshops on gender identity, disability awareness, and inclusive language, helping to deepen understanding and empathy within the group.
 - **Example:** conduct a quarterly workshop that focuses on identifying and addressing microaggressions or discriminatory remarks and offering practical tools for intervening in those moments.
- **Bystander intervention:** encourage everyone in the space to actively engage in protecting others. Bystanders can play a key role in preventing and addressing discrimination. Training youth workers and peers on how to safely intervene when witnessing harmful behavior can make a significant difference.
 - **Example:** teach bystander intervention techniques, such as *"If you see something, say something."* Encourage participants to use phrases like, *"Hey, that comment isn't okay,"* or *"Let's keep things respectful for everyone."*

6.3 Handling difficult conversations and challenging situations

Sometimes, difficult conversations or situations arise in educational or social spaces, particularly when individuals are faced with conflicting views or experiences.

- **Create a safe framework for conversations:** establish ground rules for any difficult conversations. Ensure that participants understand that the goal is to share perspectives with respect and understanding, not to argue or invalidate each other's lived experiences.
 - **Example:** before starting a sensitive conversation, say, *"We're going to have a conversation about gender and identity. Please remember to*

listen actively and respect everyone's experiences. We are here to learn, not to debate."

- **Approach with empathy and open-mindedness:** when challenging situations arise, approach them with empathy. Acknowledge the discomfort that might accompany difficult conversations but emphasize the importance of discussing sensitive topics to deepen understanding and create a more inclusive space.
 - **Example:** if someone expresses ignorance or makes an offensive remark about a marginalized group, respond calmly by asking them to reflect on their statement, such as, *"I can tell you may not have meant any harm, but can we take a moment to consider how this comment might impact others in the group?"*
- **Be transparent about boundaries:** some conversations, especially around trauma or sensitive issues, may require setting firm boundaries to ensure safety. Respect these boundaries and allow individuals to step away if they feel overwhelmed.
 - **Example:** *"If anyone feels uncomfortable during this discussion, it's okay to take a break or step out for a moment. We want to ensure that everyone feels safe in this space."*

6.4 Digital safety: supporting youth in online spaces

In today's digital world, supporting youth in navigating online spaces is crucial. Digital platforms can be both empowering and harmful, especially for LGBTQIA+ and disabled youth, who may face increased vulnerability to cyberbullying or harassment.

- **Educate on digital footprint and privacy:** teach youth about the importance of maintaining privacy online and the potential risks associated with oversharing personal information.
 - **Example:** run workshops on setting strong privacy settings on social media and managing online identities. Encourage youth to think carefully about the information they share in public forums and what is best kept private.
- **Report and block harassment:** empower youth to use the tools available to protect themselves from online harassment. Encourage them to report inappropriate behavior and block individuals who make them feel unsafe.
- **Promote positive digital communities:** encourage participation in online communities that are affirming and inclusive. Introduce students to online

support networks or forums such as LGBTQIA+ groups or disability advocacy communities, where they can find solidarity and support.

6.5 Mental health and well-being: strategies for support and crisis intervention

Supporting mental health and well-being is essential to creating affirming spaces. Youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ or disabled may face unique mental health challenges, often exacerbated by discrimination, isolation, and systemic barriers.

- **Recognize signs of distress:** be aware of the signs that youth may be struggling with their mental health, such as withdrawal, changes in behavior, or expressions of distress. It's important to approach these moments with care and sensitivity.
 - **Example:** if a youth appears withdrawn or disheartened, initiate a private check-in. *"I noticed you've been quiet today. How are you feeling? Is there anything I can do to support you?"* A non-judgmental tone can open the door to meaningful support.
- **Provide access to mental health resources:** ensure that youth have access to mental health resources and professionals who can support them, especially if they are experiencing acute mental health challenges.
 - **Example:** share local mental health services, counselors, or helplines with the group. Consider establishing a partnership with mental health professionals who can provide workshops or one-on-one support.
- **Develop a crisis intervention plan:** prepare to handle crisis situations by developing a clear and structured response plan. This plan should be in place to respond to incidents of self-harm, suicidal ideation, or extreme distress with urgency and sensitivity.
 - **Example:** ensure that all staff are trained in mental health first aid and know how to respond to crises, such as by having a list of emergency contacts and mental health professionals that can be contacted immediately.

7. Resources and further learning

7.2 Recommended books, articles, and research papers

- **Books:**

- *"Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue"* by Nicholas M. Teich
- *"NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity"* by Steve Silberman
- *"The Queer Art of Failure"* by Jack Halberstam
- *"Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century"* edited by Alice Wong

- **Articles:**

- "Intersectionality and Education" from *The Journal of Educational Equality* Link: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>
- "Building Inclusive Communities for LGBTQIA+ Youth" from *Youth and Society* Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/yas>
- "What are pronouns?" Link: <https://www.shoutout.ie/blog/pronouns>

- **Sources of Cited Projects**

- "Tutti Inclusi" – Fondazione La Comune. Link: <https://www.fondazioneacomune.org/Progetti/tutti-inclusi-promuovere-il-protagonismo-di-giovani-con-disabilita/>
- "Reach+" – Comitato d'Intesa. Link: <https://www.newsinquota.it/i-giovani-lgbtqia-nel-bellunese-percorso-di-progettazione-partecipata>
- "MigrArt" – Popoli Insieme. Link: <https://www.popolinsieme.eu/culturecomunita/migrart-giovani-arte-e-intercultura/>
- "Art is Love Made Public" – Le Tre Ghinee APS ETS. Link: <https://thecare.actionaid.it/progetti/art-is-love-made-public-il-linguaggio-artistico-come-contrasto-alle-discriminazioni-nella-comunita-lgbtqia>

- **Research papers:**

- "Inclusive Education for LGBTQ+ Youth" by the *American Educational Research Association* Link: <https://www.aera.net>
- "Empowering Neurodivergent Youth: Strategies for Social Inclusion and Learning" from *The Journal of Autism* Link: <https://www.springer.com/journal/10803>
- "Gender identity and sexual orientation in autism spectrum disorder" George R & Stokes MA (2018) Link: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319835198_Gender_identity_and_sexual_orientation_in_autism_spectrum_disorder
- "Increased gender variance in autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder" Strang JF et al. (2014) Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25285194/>
- "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder" Dewinter, J., de Graaf, H. & Begeer, S. (2017) Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28597143/>
- "The female autism phenotype and camouflaging: a narrative review" Hull, L., Petrides, K.V., & Mandy, W. (2020) Link: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40489-020-00197-9>
- "Exclusion of females in autism research: Empirical evidence for a "leaky" recruitment-to-research pipeline" Anila M D'Mello, Isabelle R Frosch, Cindy E Li, Annie L Cardinaux, John DE Gabrieli (2022) Link: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9804357/>
- "ADHD and Female Specific Concerns", Nussbaum, Nancy L. (2012) Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21976033/>
- "Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care", Institute of Medicine (IOM), National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2003) Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25032386/>
- "Every child has an equitable chance in life", UNICEF (2020), Link: <https://www.unicef.org/media/102481/file/Global-annual-results-report-2020-goal-area-5.pdf>
- "Mental Health Disparities Among Racial and Ethnic Minorities", APA, Link: <https://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/mental-health-disparities>

- "Disability and Health Factsheet", World Health Organization (2023) Link: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

7.2 Supporting organizations and online communities

- **The Trevor Project:** A leading organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services for LGBTQ youth. Link: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org>
- **Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN):** An advocacy organization run by and for autistic people that promotes disability rights and inclusion. Link: <https://autisticadvocacy.org>
- **GLAAD:** Works to amplify LGBTQ+ voices and supports LGBTQ+ inclusion in media. Link: <https://www.glaad.org>

7.3 Films, podcasts, and other media for inclusive learning

- **Films:**
 - *Disclosure* (2020): A powerful documentary about the representation of transgender people in media. Link: <https://www.netflix.com>
 - *Crip Camp* (2020): A documentary about the disability rights movement, showing how a summer camp helped shape a revolution. Link: <https://www.netflix.com>
 - *Pose* (2018): Pose is a drama series about New York's ballroom scene in the late '80s and '90s, highlighting LGBTQ+ communities, chosen families, and the AIDS crisis.
 - *Special* (2019): A young gay man with cerebral palsy branches out in hope of finally going after the life he wants.
- **Podcasts:**
 - *Queer as Fact:* A podcast exploring the history and stories of LGBTQIA+ people. Link: <https://www.queerasfact.com>

- *The Neurodivergent Insights Podcast*: A podcast dedicated to neurodiversity and the experiences of neurodivergent individuals. [Link: https://neurodivergentinsights.com](https://neurodivergentinsights.com)

7.4 Evaluation and feedback: how to measure the impact of inclusive education

Effective evaluation in inclusive education involves collecting feedback from both the students and the educators involved. Tools like surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of teaching methods and whether students feel heard and supported. It is important to use both qualitative and quantitative measures, ensuring that feedback captures not only academic outcomes but also the emotional and social well-being of students.

Engaging youth in self-reflection and gathering their feedback on their educational experiences can also help shape future educational practices and ensure continuous improvement.

7.4.1 Example of evaluation tool: observation sheet template for inclusive education

An observation sheet is a valuable tool for educators to assess both the academic and emotional well-being of students during the educational process. The following template can be adapted to fit specific classroom settings or activities. In the next pages, you will find a printable version of the observation sheet and a focus group guide, complete with instructions on how to use these tools effectively.



Observation sheet template for inclusive education

Date: _____

Instructor/Facilitator: _____

Activity/Topic: _____

Student Name (Optional): _____

Observer: _____

Criteria	Observations	Rating (1-5)	Comments
Engagement with Material	Did the student participate actively in the activity (e.g., discussing, creating)?		
Collaboration with Peers	Did the student work effectively with others?		
Emotional Expression	Did the student express themselves emotionally during the activity?		
Inclusive Behavior	Did the student show respect and empathy toward others, especially marginalized peers?		
Coping with Challenges	How did the student handle challenges, frustrations, or setbacks during the activity?		
Self-reflection/Insight	Did the student demonstrate self-awareness or self-reflection regarding their experience?		
Communication Skills	How well did the student communicate their thoughts, emotions, and ideas?		
Support Needs	Was there a noticeable need for extra support, and was it provided?		
Overall Impact on Well-being	Did the student appear emotionally and socially supported throughout the activity?		

Rating Scale:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree/Very Poor
- 2 = Disagree/Poor
- 3 = Neutral/Average
- 4 = Agree/Good
- 5 = Strongly Agree/Excellent

Example of evaluation tool: guiding questions template for feedback surveys

A survey or focus group discussion guided by specific questions can provide insights into how students perceive the inclusivity of their educational experience. The following template outlines guiding questions that can be used to gather both qualitative and quantitative feedback.

Feedback Survey: student experience in inclusive education

- 1. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable did you feel expressing your true self during this activity?**

(1 = Not comfortable, 5 = Very comfortable)

- 2. Do you feel that the activity respected and considered your individual identity and needs?**

(Yes/No)

If No, please explain: _____

- 3. Did you experience any challenges or discomfort while participating?**

(Yes/No)

If Yes, please describe the challenge(s): _____

- 4. How inclusive did you find the activities and discussions during this session?**

(1 = Not inclusive, 5 = Very inclusive)

- 5. Did you feel heard and understood by both your peers and the educator(s)?**

(Yes/No)

If No, please explain: _____

6. What part of the activity did you find most meaningful or helpful in exploring your identity?

(Free-text response) _____

7. On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think this activity helped you understand others' perspectives on gender, sexuality, or disability?

(1= Not well, 5 = Very well)

8. What suggestions do you have for improving this activity or the educational approach?

(Free-text response) _____

9. Overall, how satisfied are you with your educational experience today?

(1 = Very dissatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied)

How to use these tools effectively (for educators, teachers, and facilitators):

- The **observation sheets** you've just seen can be used systematically throughout your educational activities. Choose one or two fixed moments each week to complete them (e.g., after a group activity, workshop, or at the end of a lesson).
- Focus on **just 2–3 observable indicators at a time** to keep the process manageable and focused. After 3–4 weeks, review the sequence of sheets to identify patterns, improvements, or recurring signals. If you're working in a team, compare your observations to build a **shared understanding** of the group's dynamics or individual progress.
- The **feedback questionnaires** can be given at key moments of the learning journey: at the beginning (to collect expectations), mid-way (for a check-in), and at the end (to evaluate perceived impact). Use **rating scales (e.g., 1 to 5)** to assess elements like: sense of belonging, feeling heard, trust in the group, and freedom to express oneself. Always include 1–2 **open-ended questions** to capture unexpected insights or suggestions.

To make the questionnaires more **accessible**, you can:

- Create an **online version** using simple tools like Google Forms or a shared Google Doc with tables;

- For **printed versions**, use **AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)** with simplified language or icons;
- Offer **braille** versions or ensure compatibility with **screen readers** for blind or visually impaired participants.

The goal is to combine **observational data with direct student feedback**: the sheets help you track what's happening in the room, while the surveys tell you how participants are experiencing it. This dual approach allows you to quickly adjust your educational practices, prevent exclusion, and **strengthen participants' sense of trust, safety, and belonging**.

8. Conclusion and next steps

8.1 Summary of key takeaways

Inclusive education is not just about modifying curricula but about creating spaces where marginalized youth feel seen, heard, and supported. It involves listening actively, addressing intersectional needs, and advocating for systemic changes that promote equity. Youth workers must continually educate themselves, engage in self-reflection, and commit to amplifying the voices of those who have been historically silenced.

8.2 How to continue learning and evolving as an inclusive educator

To continue evolving as an inclusive educator, it is essential to engage in ongoing professional development. Attend workshops, read current research, and actively participate in community discussions about inclusivity. Developing partnerships with local organizations and marginalized groups can provide valuable insights and ensure your teaching methods remain responsive to the needs of diverse youth.

8.3 Building networks of solidarity among youth workers

Creating a network of solidarity among youth workers, educators, and community organizations helps build a stronger, more supportive environment for marginalized youth. Collaborating on initiatives, sharing resources, and providing mutual support can enhance the collective ability to address the challenges these youth face. By working together, youth workers can ensure that their actions have a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of the youth they serve.



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abagofinclusion.com



[facebook.com/abagofinclusion](https://www.facebook.com/abagofinclusion)

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