

“Students just want to be heard: Youth-led spaces and psychological support at school cannot wait!”

Young People in a Post-COVID World: Recommendations for Policy & Practice in Palermo, Italy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing inequalities in Palermo and beyond, highlighting the need for youth-led spaces, an active involvement of young people in policy-making process and a more accessible psychological support at school. This briefing details specifically how students (15-18 years old) living in Palermo have been affected by the global crisis. Produced as part of the CONTINUE project, the recommendations proposed aim to achieve long-term positive effects both on young people at school and their local communities.

CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

The core recommendations in this briefing are:

- Increase youth-led spaces at school and in the city;
- Provide more accessible psychological and peer-to-peer support at school;
- Create stronger synergies between youth and adults, schools and the local society;
- Actively involve young people into policy-making processes.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted inequalities and shortcomings that affect the lives of young people. This policy briefing sheds light on young people living in Palermo, Italy and how they have been dealing with the crisis.

They are experiencing challenges with their mental health and wellbeing, difficulties in socialising, disengagement in school life, a lack of appropriate support from adults and youth-led spaces; they struggle to make their voice heard by institutions and policy-makers, feeling excluded from the decision-making processes on a local level, especially concerning youth policies.

This document highlights the value of the school as a place of coexistence beyond formal education, a place in which individual and collective transformation takes place, impacting and involving not only young students, but also teachers, families, public institutions, youth organisations and stakeholders.

The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Palermo

- **Lack of socialisation and equal opportunities:** fear and anxiety; lack of accessible mental health support; loss of sense of belonging to a group; less chances to experience the world and self-discovery; less chances to speak about key issues related to their age (sexuality, addictions, relationships, etc);
- **Lack of educational and professional opportunities:** no equal learning opportunities and tools; lack of motivation towards learning experiences; re-using digital skills;

- **Lack of active citizenship opportunities:** disengagement in civic and school life; sense of exclusion from political decision-making processes on youth policy;

In order to address these issues:

- Schools should promote alternative curricular and extra-curricular learning opportunities which would increase youth participation and peer-to-peer learning;
- Establish permanent and accessible mental health and peer-to-peer support at school for students;
- Adults should be more aware about young people's needs and desires and actively listen to them;
- Institutions should provide young people with youth-led spaces at school and in the city, applying the existing policies on participatory democracy;
- Create connections between students with local youth organisations and stakeholders to increase opportunities for learning and active citizenship;
- Policy-makers should actively involve young people into policy-making processes and create accessible political conversation spaces.

Creating change and COVID-19 recovery in Palermo

During the process of co-creating pandemic-recovery social actions, students expressed their desire for an 'open and participatory school', the need to be listened to and actively participate in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of young people and society.

However, there is a lack of safe and open spaces available for young people where they can socialise and engage in the civic life of the community. There seems to be a gap between the needs of young people and the understanding institutions have of them. In order for

more safe spaces to be developed, communities need to understand and support them.

Key learnings

- There aren't enough appropriate open spaces where young people feel able to express their worries, opinions and advice to political bodies (both at local and national level), as well as to social civic groups;
- Young people's mental health has declined after the pandemic and the need for appropriate psychological support, which is easily accessible for students, is as important as ever;
- Young people need to be more involved in the creation of policies and programmes that support them;
- There is a need for better relations and communications between students and teachers, so students can express their concerns and feel heard;
- There is a strong need for more inclusivity: social barriers and stigmas should be eliminated, particularly in the school context.

Policy & practice recommendations

For schools:

- Establish permanent psychological support at school, free and accessible to all;
- Establish partnerships between schools and youth organisations to expand learning opportunities and actively involve young people in the society;
- Promote the sense of initiative and active citizenship in young people, giving students spaces to self-manage under the idea of a "open and participatory school".

For local policy-makers and stakeholders engaged in the youth field:

- Increase synergies between schools and municipalities, creating a dialogue between young people and policy-makers to co-create and develop policies and practices;
- Create accessible decision-making spaces where the younger generations feel able to communicate with policymakers and representatives;
- Open accessible youth centres in the city which valorise public spaces (e.g. abandoned spaces which now belong to the municipality);
- Apply the existing policies promoting active citizenship and valorization of the common goods.

For national policy-makers:

- Support schools to establish a permanent psychological support, free of charge and accessible to all;
- Promote policies supporting equal opportunities

For European policy makers:

- Create equal opportunities for young people all over the member countries actively involving youth in co-creating educational programmes

METHOD

This policy and practice briefing has been produced as part of the CONTINUE project. It uses:

- Data from young people's stories gathered using [Community Reporter methodology](#), which facilitates people sharing lived experience in order to create social change;
- Information gathered during interviews with local and pan-European stakeholders.
- Information gathered from young people and youth workers during the social action co-creation process;
- Information shared during Conversation of Change events and Knowledge Exchanges, both local and pan-European. These were held with young people, youth workers, and policy- and decision-makers.

At each stage, this data has been synthesised into reports which have informed the next stages. These have, ultimately, been synthesised to inform these policy and practice recommendations.

ABOUT CONTINUE

CONTINUE supports young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities. The project is being delivered by a consortium of 8 NGOs from different European countries who are experienced in youth education and community-based activities. The work involves storytelling, social action projects, policy development, knowledge exchanges, an outreach campaign and the creation of an online platform. It is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

Find out more by scanning the QR code.



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