

SPEAK UP

Toolkit on youth participation, non-formal education and advocacy

Model developed within YEA – Young European Ambassadors, a KA154 – Erasmus+ project





This toolkit was created with the aim of presenting, in a clear and readable way, an experience of youth participation developed within an Erasmus+ KA154 project. It is not intended as a technical manual, but rather as an attempt to reconstruct a process: how a group of young people, accompanied by an organisation with experience in youth work and non-formal education, turned an intuition born from previous mobility experiences into a longer, more structured and progressively more conscious path. Over the course of a year, the project combined continuous training, co-design, methodological experimentation, local work, dialogue with the school world and a final advocacy action. Its specificity does not lie in a single event, but in the continuity of the process: the monthly meetings of the coordinating group, the residential mobility, the public events, the dialogue with stakeholders and the drafting of a petition formed one single path, in which each stage prepared the next one.

The following text aims to tell this development in its entirety. The goal is not only to describe what was done, but to convey the educational and political meaning of the project: the way in which non-formal education was used as a lever for empowerment, active participation and the construction of a public youth voice.





The start of YEA

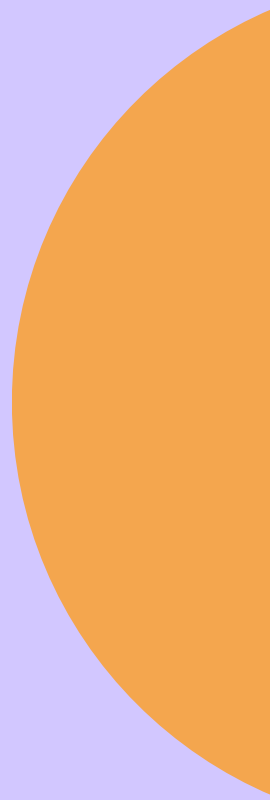
The project was born from the desire to give continuity to a number of youth mobility experiences carried out in 2024. For many young people, those exchanges had represented a space for listening, expression and active participation, but once back in their own territories there was a risk that the impact would remain isolated. From this, a shared question emerged: how could that experience be turned into something stable and useful at local level as well? The project sought to respond to this need, on the one hand by consolidating the participation of the young people already involved, and on the other by experimenting with the use of non formal education in different contexts, such as local activities, schools and dialogue with organisations and institutions. In this sense, the project acted as a bridge between an experience already lived and new possibilities for action.



Core Team

The coordinating group was the engine of the project. It was not a homogeneous group, nor was it already “ready-made”: it was made up of 11 young people with different levels of experience, confidence and skills. Precisely for this reason, group work was not a secondary aspect, but an essential part of the whole path. Throughout the year, the group learned how to organise itself, divide tasks, take on responsibilities and review roles. Some participants took on a stronger role in facilitation or communication, while others gradually found their place in logistics, activity preparation or writing materials. The organisation’s staff accompanied this process through mentoring, supervision and quality assurance.

Autonomy was not taken for granted: it was built gradually, allowing the group to grow without being left on its own. It was also essential to create team-building moments from the very beginning, in order to build a cohesive group ready to work together.



The project was built around 4 main components:

Monthly Core-Team meetings

A stable space for training, organisation and monitoring, in which the group gradually built autonomy and responsibility.

Residential Mobilities

Two immersive weekends encouraged the exchange of practices, strengthened the group and opened the path to other young people beyond the Core Team.

Local events with NGO and schools

Local activities brought young people, schools and organisations into dialogue in order to experiment with non-formal education in different contexts

Petitions and dialogue with stakeholders

The path was translated into a public proposal, presented and discussed with stakeholders and institutional interlocutors.

Residential Mobility at Eutopia



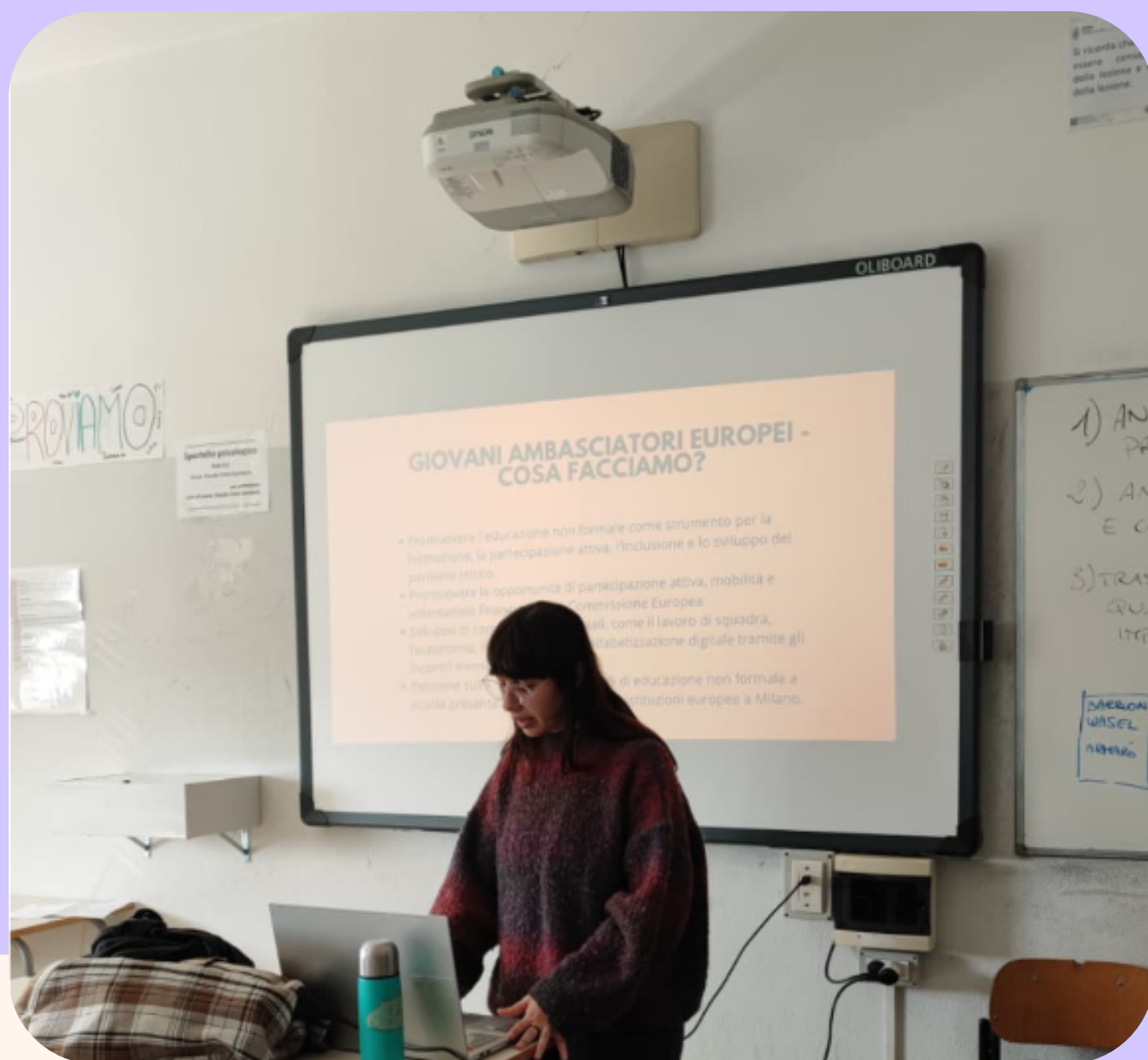
The mobility in Casaleggio Boiro, organised across two residential weekends, was one of the most significant moments of the project because it created an immersive, protected setting, different from everyday life, that helped strengthen relationships and trust within the group. It did not involve only the Core Team, but also other young people, former participants and former group leaders. This opening was important because it broadened the discussion, brought in different points of view and made the path more inclusive and more connected to young people beyond the stable group. During the weekends, participants shared practices and methodologies of non-formal education, reflecting on how these can be used not only in youth exchanges, but also in local activities, schools and other educational contexts

Local event in Milano



In Milan, at Cascina Sant'Ambrogio, the project opened up a moment of dialogue between young people and local organisations. The idea was simple: to understand together how non-formal education can be used not only in youth exchanges, but also in local events, in order to make them more participatory and inclusive. The meeting brought together young people and representatives of organisations in mixed working groups, where needs, possibilities and concrete ideas were discussed. The main value of this activity lay in bringing different points of view into relation and widening the project beyond the coordinating group, involving new stakeholders and opening up a space for experimentation that could also be useful for future initiatives. An important contribution also came from Share Radio, which recounted the exchange experiences of the young people involved in the project through a podcast.

Meeting with the school



The activity with the schools was one of the most delicate and interesting stages of the project, because it brought the path into a formal context, with timeframes, roles and languages different from those usually associated with non-formal education. It was not simply a matter of proposing a workshop in class or presenting European opportunities, but of opening up a broader discussion on how people learn, on what spaces for expression are recognised for young people, and on how more active forms of participation can also be built inside the school. The meeting, hosted by CAPAC Institute in Milan, involved members of the Core Team and fourth-year students in a reflection on the importance of non-formal education in school contexts and in introducing youth exchange opportunities to those who were not yet familiar with Erasmus+ projects.

Presentation of the petition to the stakeholders



The final phase of the project turned the path into a public act of taking the floor through the writing and presentation of a petition. This step marked a shift from participation as an educational experience to participation as a shared proposal, built through listening, dialogue, needs collection and collective re-elaboration. For the coordinating group, the work on the petition also represented a concrete exercise in synthesis, argumentation and mediation between different points of view.



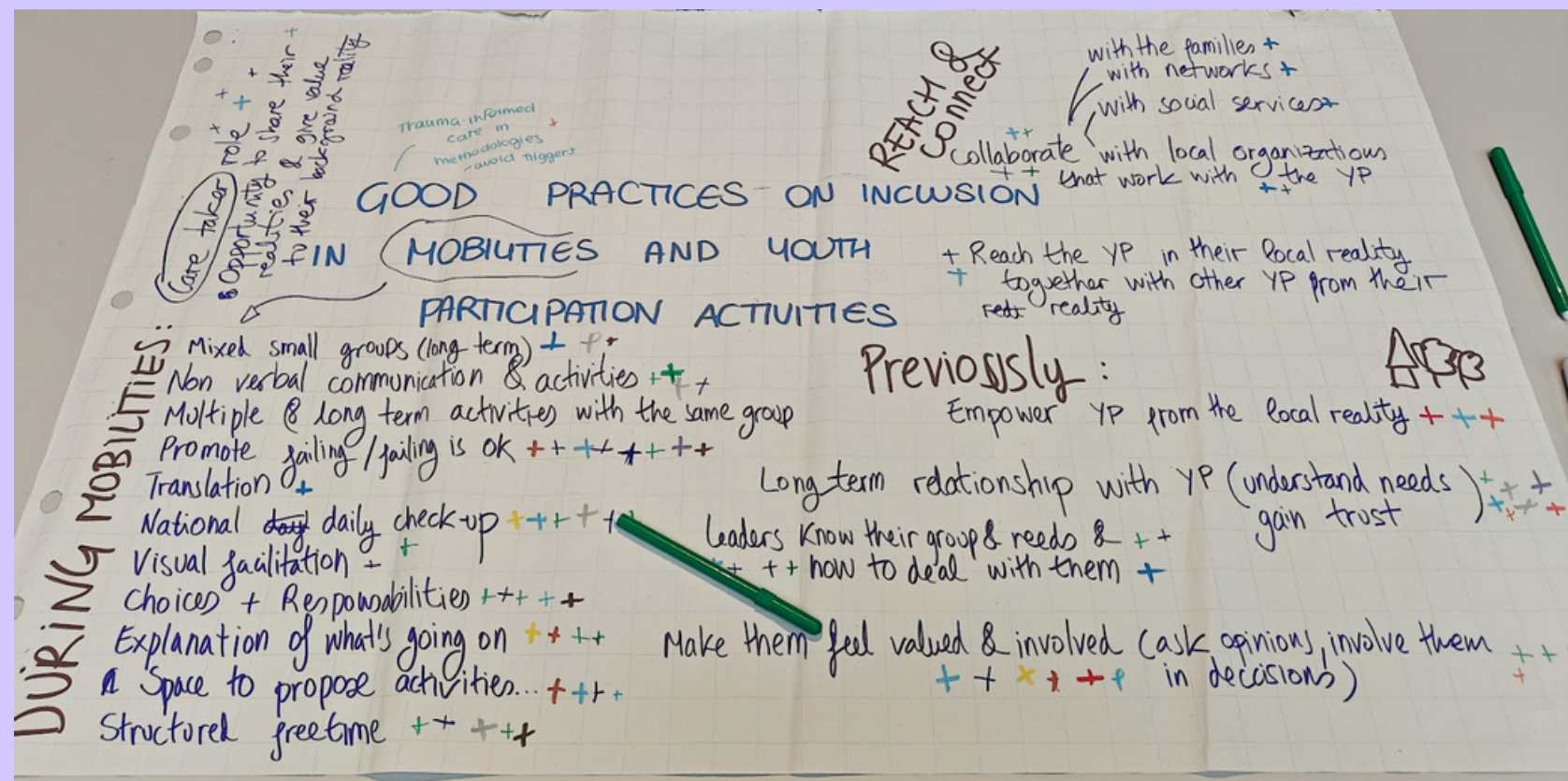
The final event was conceived as a space for restitution and dialogue. The presentation of the petition by the young people gave public visibility to the path that had been carried out, while the exchange with stakeholders, decision makers and members of the international inclusion network placed the group's work within a broader frame, connecting the local and the European levels. In this way, the project showed how a participation path can lead to the construction of a public proposal and to its discussion with external interlocutors



To support the final discussion, the Silent Floor methodology was used. This participatory tool is based on the written collection of ideas, questions and proposals on large shared surfaces. Participants move freely through the space, read the contributions already present and add observations, comments or new proposals. This method makes it easier for people who are less comfortable speaking in plenary to participate, makes the exchange more accessible in heterogeneous groups and allows content to be collected in an orderly and inclusive way. In the project, the Silent Floor was used to reflect on how to strengthen and make youth participation in Europe more inclusive, offering a concrete basis for the concluding discussion.

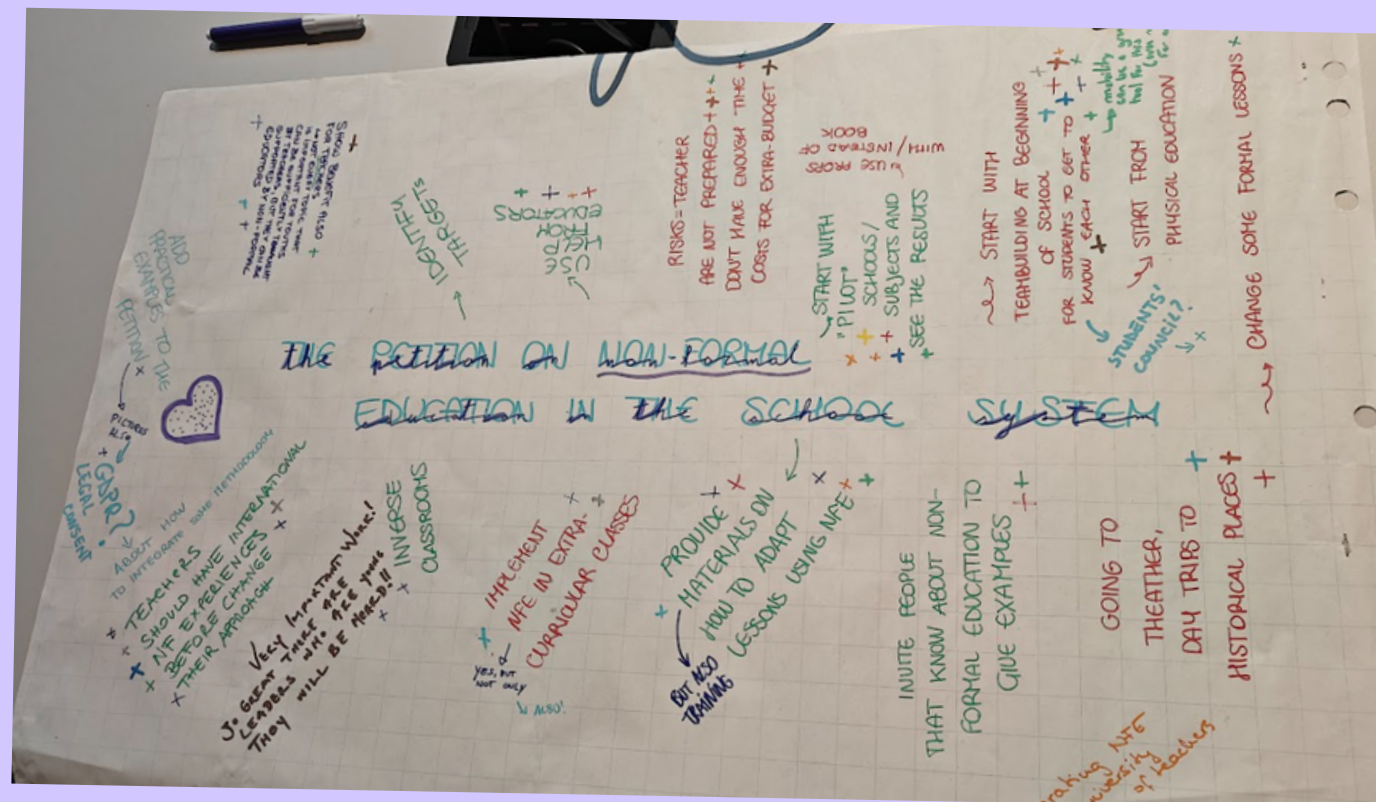


Good practices for inclusion in mobility and youth participation activities



- Several key elements emerged from the flipchart:
- Inclusion is built before the mobility itself, through relationships of trust and a good understanding of participants' needs.
- Networking with local organisations, families and services that know the young people in their life contexts is essential.
- Leaders and educational figures play a central role in creating a safe, understandable and welcoming environment.
- Young people feel more involved when they are listened to, valued and included in decisions.
- Some practices make participation easier: mixed small groups, visual supports, language mediation, regular check-ins, opportunities for choice and taking responsibility.
- The structure of the experience also matters: continuity, clarity and accompanied informal moments can make participation more accessible

Bringing non-formal education into the school system



A second area of reflection concerned the role that non-formal education could play in schools. The proposals focused above all on gradual and concrete integration, not an abstract one. In particular, the following ideas emerged:

- introducing elements of non-formal education into the school curriculum;
- starting with pilot schools, pilot subjects or pilot classes in order to test effectiveness;
- making greater use of participatory methodologies, group work and team-building activities, especially at the beginning of the school year;
- providing more structured extracurricular activities;
- organising educational trips, visits, theatre, out-of-class experiences and more experiential activities;
- involving people with expertise in non-formal education to bring concrete examples into schools;
- offering materials and training for teachers so that lessons can be adapted using non formal approaches.

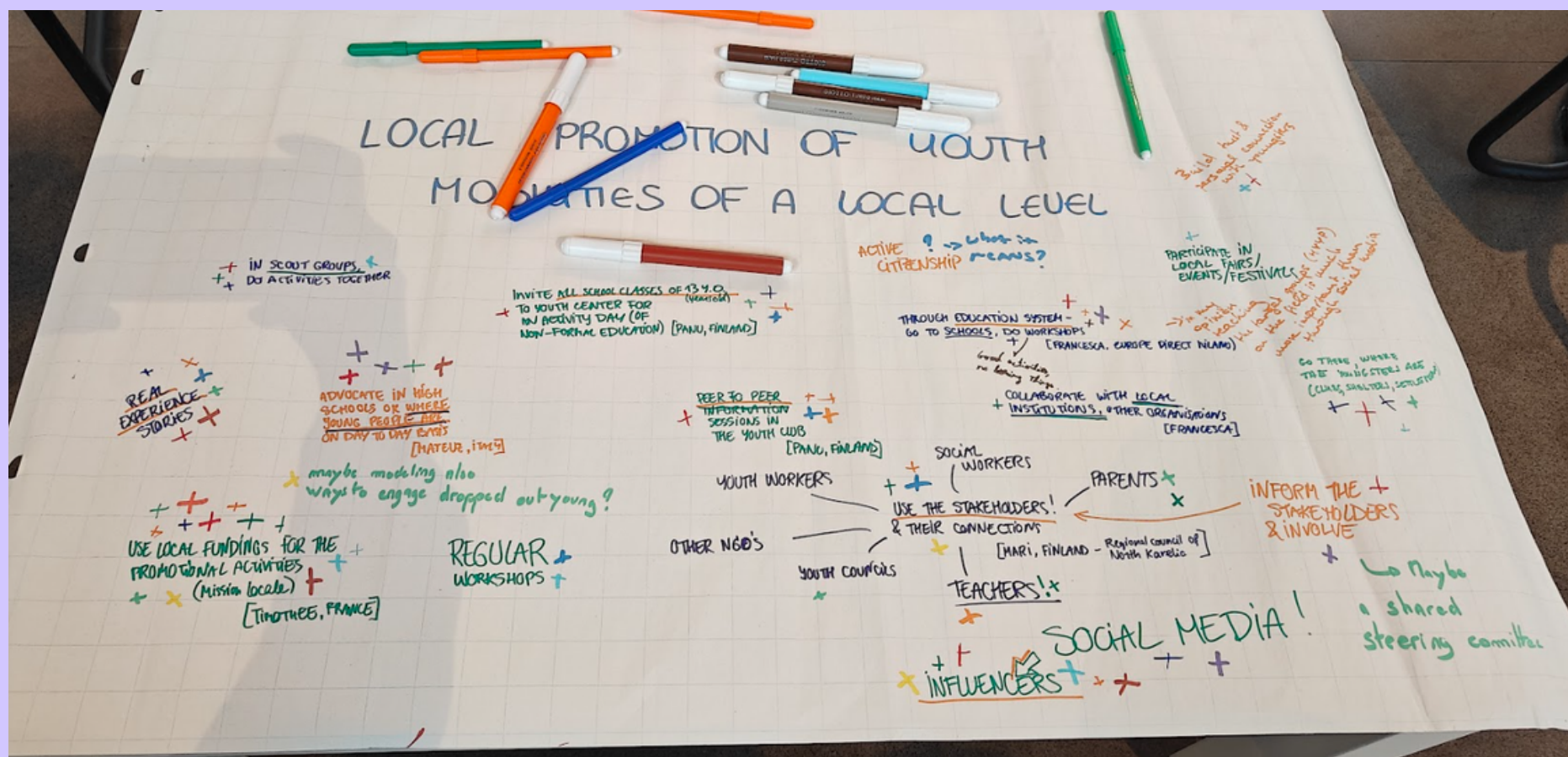
At the same time, several critical issues also emerged and should be taken into account:

- many teachers are not prepared to use these methods;
- school time is often very rigid;
- additional resources and budget are needed;
- integration should happen without losing the identity of non-formal education.

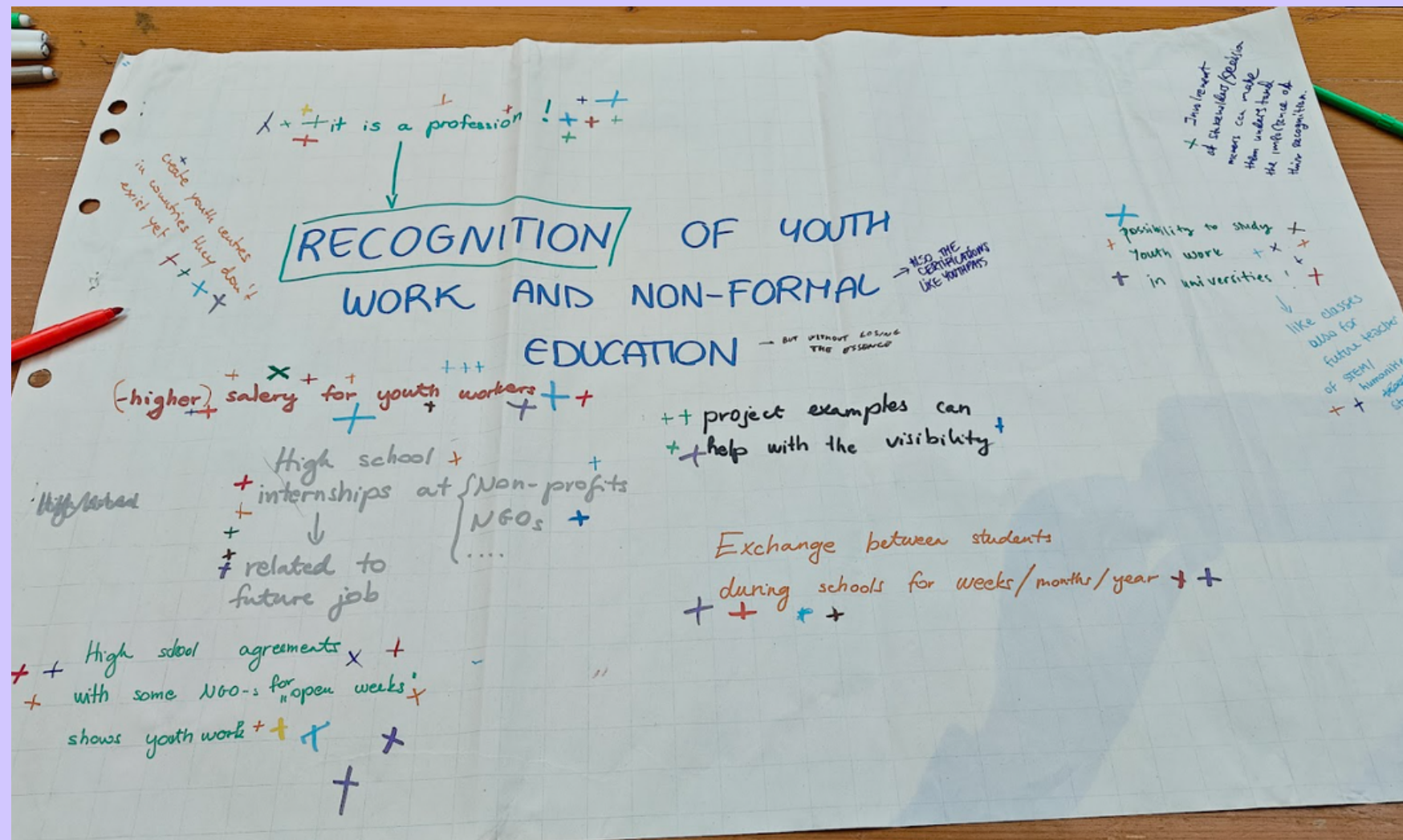
Promoting youth mobilities at local level

The third theme concerned how to better promote mobility and participation opportunities for young people at local level. Many operational proposals emerged:

- bring information directly to the places young people frequent, such as schools, youth centres, fairs and local events;
- make greater use of peer-to-peer approaches, with young people telling other young people about their experiences;
- give more visibility to real testimonies and concrete stories;
- organise regular workshops and information days;
- collaborate more with schools, local authorities, youth organisations, youth councils, teachers, parents, youth workers and social workers;
- activate stakeholders and their contact networks more effectively;
- use social media and influencers more strategically;
- seek local funds to support continuous promotional activities.



Recognising the value of youth work and non-formal education



A first recurring theme was the need for greater public, social and professional recognition of youth work and non-formal education. Among the ideas that emerged were:

- giving stronger recognition to youth work as a profession; increasing the visibility and social value of youth work; highlighting concrete project examples to better show the impact of youth work;
- creating study pathways or university modules dedicated to youth work;
- strengthening links between schools, NGOs and non-profit organisations;
- promoting school internships or traineeships in third-sector organisations;
- encouraging exchanges between students and learning opportunities outside traditional school contexts.

This toolkit aims to give back a concrete experience of youth participation built over time. The value of the project does not lie only in the activities that were carried out, but in its ability to hold together education, organisation, reflection, territory and advocacy. If it leaves a useful trace, it is in showing that participation can be cultivated as a long process, accompanied and progressively more aware. A process in which non-formal education does not remain confined to exceptional contexts, but becomes a resource for reading one's own context, building relationships, taking the floor and imagining change.

For collaborations, questions about the toolkit or the process:



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