Children and Young People Today: Initial Insights from the WYRED Project

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Abstract: The WYRED project has undertaken a number of activities with children and young people in its first six months of operation. These include the development of manifestos, a questionnaire, Delphi activity, a series of dialogues and a slogan competition, in addition to the development of the online platform that will support the research activity and interaction in the project. The European Commission expressed interest in the initial findings of the project, prior to formal reporting, and this briefing paper responds to that request. It is important to recognise that given the nature of the project, this data is preliminary and fragmentary, compared with the scale of the population of children and young people in Europe. These findings are presented as indicators and weak signals which suggest important lines for further investigation. The paper discusses attitudes and engagement, key themes emerging from the activities, aspects which have surprised project workers, and differences between the concerns of stakeholders and participants. Finally, some reflections are offered on the implications of these initial results of WYRED for other projects and agencies working with children and young people.

Keywords: WYRED; Digital Society; Youth; H2020

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

This briefing document provides a summary of the initial results of the WYRED project (García-Peñalvo, 2016c, 2017; García-Peñalvo & Kearney, 2016), funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727066. The purpose of the WYRED project is summed up on the project website (wyredproject.eu) as follows:

> *Society is changing, the tools we use are changing, the way we express ourselves is changing. Young people are at the forefront of this change, but they rarely get a chance to say what they think, or to influence policy. WYRED aims to give the young a voice.*

The European Commission (DG CONNECT Unit G.3) requested some early feedback from WYRED in order to inform other activities they are currently engaged in that involve young people. While the outputs of the WYRED cycle are not due yet for some months, these preliminary out puts may prove useful, and it is for this reason that this brief report (which does not form part of the project deliverables) has been drawn up.

It is important to bear in mind that the scale of the activities carried out by WYRED is insufficient to generate the kind of quantitative research results that might provide an objective assessment of the concerns and attitudes of European children and young people think. Indeed, this is not the purpose of the project, which is focused much more on developing coherent spaces for participation in which young people's voices can be heard, on their terms. WYRED does, however, involve continuous conversation with young people across Europe, and it is therefore possible to report on the themes which emerge. These themes may offer clues to understanding their experience and aspirations. In time, the collective voice of WYRED participants may begin to have a weight of its own, at this stage what the project can offer are insights, clues, weak signals, and suggestions.

1.1 WYRED project activities to date

The work in the first six months of WYRED has been largely preparatory, focussed on building up a network of children and young people (C+YP), mostly through schools and youth organisations and on developing the technological ecosystem (García-Peñalvo, 2016a) to support the activity and share the results with the network (Durán-Escudero, García-Peñalvo, & Therón-Sánchez, 2017; García-Peñalvo, 2016b; García-Peñalvo & Durán-Escudero, 2017). In preparing this report we have gathered together insights from the most relevant outputs of the deliverables to date, and enriched this with comments from project partners. The principal project activities which have fed into this report are the following (summarised in Figure 1).

- The development of two Manifestos that made the WYRED comprehensible and closer to potential participants:
  - the Consortium Manifesto that sets out the philosophy of the researchers and youth organisations that have set up the project and who will support the process, providing ideas and suggestions where necessary.
  - an initial Children and Young People's Manifesto, drafted with the help of young people in Belgium.
- Partners establishing links with communities in order to engage children, young people and other stakeholders and map their heterogeneity and interests, reported in the WYRED First Networking Report.
- A Stakeholders Questionnaire, the first step in mapping those interested in getting involved, and setting key themes (WYRED Consortium, 2017c).
- A series of dialogues with C+YP, which have been discussed within the consortium and have contributed to this briefing, and summarised in the First Dialogue Report.
- The WYRED Delphi Process.
- A Slogan competition, an opportunity for young people to share their ideas on what the project is and should be about, with these results.

Figure 1: Flow of work in the first six months of WYRED (WYRED Consortium, 2017a, 2017b)

Project activities are currently continuing through a series of online and face to face dialogues where young people talk in more detail about these themes and identify specific issues that interest them. By end of June 2017, 25 dialogues had taken place across 9 partners and a wide range of nationalities. The first results of these dialogues have also fed into this report.

To enhance readability references to interim reports on WYRED dialogues in partner countries are referred to as '**dialogues**', while comments made by project staff in response to a request for input to this report are referenced as '**comments**'.

1.2 The questions addressed in this briefing document

Rather than presenting existing reports on WYRED progress in concise form, this document provides a snapshot of the emerging insight into three overarching questions about the work of WYRED in the six months since the start of the project, and some reflections about the implications for work with C+YP.

1. What has been learned about C+YPs concerns?
2. What has surprised project partners about C+YPs concerns?
3. What differences have been observed, if any, between the concerns of stakeholders and C + YP?

2 Attitudes and engagement

In general, WYRED has been welcomed by C+YP as a valuable opportunity to discuss issues that are important to them, in a context which may be taken note of by decision makers. The WYRED Delphi process also showed that young people are basically optimistic about the future, with most believing that the society in the year 2030 will be better if their voice is heard by decision makers (interestingly, this tendency is significantly higher among female respondents). They believe that first and foremost it will be a fairer society (more tolerant, more equal, more open to different genders, cultures, religions, political opinions, controversial issues, etc.). Moreover, they think that the education system will improve and that young people will feel more confident, expressive and in control of their role and impact in the society they live in. There are, however, two important conditions associated with this general picture.

Firstly, WYRED has shown that, as one might expect, the concerns of C+YPs concerns are not homogenous, even within a single country. For example, in Turkey,

> *Even though participating students had the same age and level of education, their profiles are very different and so are opportunities in their education. Students from religious schools placed higher expectations on their education: they believe that a good education can allow them to go to university and, by doing so, have an opportunity to plan their professional career. If, however, they fail in their education, they feel their dreams may be taken away and there may be nowhere else to go for them but to stay at home, especially the girls…. Initially, the girls from religious schools were silent, but by the third meeting they were more extrovert and very eager to participate and contribute to the activities (Daniele Ottorino and Zuhal Yilmaz).*

Students from the Doğa private school chain, in contrast, had high self-esteem, were used to working in groups and found it easy to take an active role in WYRED activities. This is also true of one of the Austrian groups, which though from a state school, and made up of young people of very diverse backgrounds, exhibited similar characteristics.

The contrasts observed in Turkey are still greater when projected across the range of social and educational backgrounds across the European Union. Averaging out the opinions of C+YP across different contexts might not lead to insight, but rather to distortion of the experience of individuals and groups, since to look at averages is to ignore the diversity and heterogeneity of perspectives across the C+YPO population in Europe.

Secondly, it should be remembered that there is an element of self-selection at work, as it is harder to engage the most disillusioned C+YP in project activities. Moreover, there are a number of indications in project work that suggest that positive attitudes and willingness to engage are fragile, and can easily turn into frustration. Project partner Youth for Exchange and Understanding (YEU) observe that

YEU is mostly working with youth involved in organizations, non-formal groups, volunteers and activists and that they are the ones with expectedly strongly expressed values regarding the society and how it should be shaped. However, as young people, they mostly do not believe that their voices will be taken into account, so they choose not to participate. They are aware that things are not going in right direction, but they also see that their opinions are mocked, ignored or they are being told off. This is when we get the attitude that "nobody cares, therefore, neither will I" and they go and mind their own business (Tamara Gojkovic, comments).

In Italy, it seems that disillusionment develops as a result of contact with decision making processes:

Teenagers still have a strong perception that they can really make a small revolution in their local context and community just because their values and beliefs are right and bring a vision of a fairer society, while university students already speak as disillusioned adults who have opinions but don't think they can influence in any way the status quo (Federica Cicala).

Tel Aviv University identify a similar result from their dialogues with C+YP, reporting that:

Teenagers assign a high degree of importance to their involvement in society, but "are sceptical about the ability to realize it (Aharon Hauptmann).

There are also indications of disaffection from particular social groups. For example, in Austria:

The right-wing views of some young people particularly among the apprentice group was surprising, saying for example that they do not care about refugees and they would like Austria to be old Austria (Sabine Zauchner-Studnicka).

In Italy, there is also an awareness of right wing politics, in this case both as a restraint on youth participation, and as a reality among young people.

There have always been youth groups with different names who were still supporting the ideas, or their perception of the ideas of Fascism, but today young people address this group (that unfortunately is emerging more and more) with its real name, which on a side is positive because it recognises the real identity behind what before was defined as "coatto", but in the same time gives a value on a set of negative racist and violent behaviours that youth recognising themselves in other values rarely can or feel like facing. (Federica Cicala).

Key messages on attitudes and engagement:

- **C+YP are, in general, engaged with thinking about the issues that concern them, and keen to discuss them.**
- **There is a widely-held frustration among C+YP (which confirms the need for a project like WYRED) that those in authority pay little attention to them, and take no notice of their opinions. In some cases, this frustration is aligned with other causes of alienation, and can lead to engagement with right wing thinking.**
- **Young people are not a homogeneous group, and it is important not to treat them as such.**

3 Key themes

The key themes identified by WYRED provide an initial sampling of engagement, which may serve to indicate generational shifts the conversations with and between C+YPs. One of the highest priorities of the WYRED Delphi was to identify the issues that are of greatest significance to young people. It showed that the most important issues were:

1. **Self-image and self-confidence.**
2. **Tolerance for different cultures/opinions.**
3. **Necessary changes in education.**

An additional issue, **mental wellbeing**, was added in the 2nd round following analysis of free-text additions submitted by young people in the 1st round. This is generalised here to overall 'wellbeing' to reflect the association with dietary and ecological concerns. This issue was also perceived as very important in the Delphi, and the issue was also emphasized in some of the initial face-to-face social dialogues with young people.

Delphi priority	Illustrative comments from dialogues
Self-image and self-confidence	• In Italy, 'self-image' was the most relevant issue for teenagers, and there were a number of mentions of '*wearing a mask'*. • In Northern Ireland, younger children (8-10) were very strongly aware of the role of '*lies*' in creating online self-image. • Teenagers in the UK dialogues identified '*the need to perform a self-image as a YP*''. • The issue was discussed extensively in Spain, and in Israel, where one participant stated "*everything stems from this. … You have to know who you are and how you perceive yourself*".
Tolerance to different cultures/opinions	• In Italy, there was a positive view of tolerance and integration, while one participant recognised an opposing trend "*Need of conflicts: in order to be part of a group young people need to take mainstream positions (emo, communist, fascists, etc..) using online verbal violence*" • In rural Northern Ireland, "*children aged between 8 - 10 (mostly 8) so have never known or grown up with the effects of the conflict or 'troubles' here in Northern Ireland. However, the discussions around discrimination and tolerance and acceptance of other cultures / migrants were really quite illuminating in children so young. They were quite emphatic that it was wrong to discriminate against other cultures /migrants/travellers and referenced the sectarian divide here.*" • In Israel '*tolerance*' was a very important issue. While '*education*' was the most important overall issue, '*tolerance*' was the most important aspect of education, with a number of references to the Arab-Israeli conflict and

	attitudes to LGBTQ. • Tolerance was a theme in the UK dialogues, and also in Austria and Spain, where the facilitator commented that young people are "*particularly concerned with the rights of minorities, any way of discrimination*"
Necessary changes in education	• In Italy, a need for education about violence online • In Spain, a need for emotional education for the Internet • In Austria and Israel, the relevance of education, and the route from education to fulfilling employment • In Israel, greater choice in subjects to be studied, avoidance of assessment based on memorisation, and adapting teaching methods to the student.

Wellbeing	• This issue was not identified as being important in the majority of countries, but emerged strongly among some specific groups of C+YP, for example:
	    o Secondary students in Austria "*are not too much concerned about their occupational future, but more about environmental (e.g. atomic-power, plastic), technological (robotics, biotechnology) or sustainability (food waste e.g. in school, reuse/recycling of products) issues*".
	    o In Israel health/wellbeing, emotional issues, veganism and cruelty to animals were raised in dialogue sessions, and proposed as relevant additional issues for the Delphi.
	    o Environmental issues were raised by participants in the UK dialogues in the UK.

Key message on themes:

- **The most important themes identified in the WYRED Delphi are self-image and self-confidence, tolerance to different cultures/opinions, necessary changes in education and wellbeing. The importance of these themes is borne out in the dialogues carried out with C+YP.**

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4 Surprises emerging from C+YPs concerns

The results of the Delphi showed that participants found it hard to differentiate substantially between the issues in terms of the scores assigned to indicate their importance, with the consequence that there was relatively little variation across the results between the most popular (4.26 out of 5) and least popular (3.18 out of 5) items. It may be that the issues were all felt to be significant, or that participants lack social or political criteria for making the judgement. Alternatively, the task of balancing the variables which characterise issues as diverse as

'tolerance to different cultures', 'environmental problems' and 'adults misunderstanding young people' may simply be inappropriate; we are rarely asked to prioritise in this way in other spaces. In any event, this evenness of response led to the inclusion of a question in the second Delphi round, asking the participants to rank the four most important among the same issues. This provided a much clearer result, with 'Self-image, self-confidence' being chosen eight times more often than 'Adults misunderstandings of young people'. These results confirm one of the premises of WYRED, that **C+YP have clear feelings regarding which are the most important issues**.

There was **little mention of technology in education**, with the exception of Israel, where it was reported in the dialogues that C+YP identified it as a research question.

> *Many young people think that in the future, innovative technologies will change the way they learn and teach. Technologies like virtual reality will change the way of teaching as well as the way of learning. In addition, it is thought that learning based on memorization will disappear and will no longer be relevant. The interesting research question is what will be the purpose (the goal) of education in this new reality? (Aharon Hauptmann).*

However, this is really a question concerning how institutions and individuals will respond to the new opportunities opened up by technology, rather than a matter of access to technology, or its characteristics.

The issue of media literacy, and the reliability of information on the Internet, was not rated as important by most young participants (as opposed to the participating stakeholders). In the WYRED dialogues, young people in Israel explained that in their opinion:

> *The younger generation today are confident that they can distinguish between right or wrong information and can identify the source of the information. They think that the majority of young users examine the information they received on the Internet and its reliability (Aharon Hauptmann).*

While some discussions with C+YP were concerned about bullying on social media, and about privacy and security, this was not universal. In Israel, this was the issue that young people perceived as least important, even though stories of abuse experienced by them or their friends were mentioned. The moderator's interpretation is that:

> *Young people do not believe that it is really possible to control the net and the use of apps, and that if there is nothing to be done about it, then this is not an important topic for discussion. One might draw a parallel with tolerance for nuisance, injury and loss of life associated with the expansion of car ownership (Aharon Hauptmann).*

Key messages on surprises.

- **Though C+YP may find it difficult to give scores indicating the relative importance of issues in the world, they know clearly which are the most important to them personally.**
- **Many young people take for granted that they and their peers are media literate and capable of critical examination of information on the Internet.**
- **Some young people seem to accept that online bullying and loss of privacy are facts of life, and therefore**

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5 Differences between the concerns of stakeholders and C + YP

The most significant difference between the concerns of stakeholders and those of C+YP was a fundamental one: the concept of a digital world that is separate from the "real" world. As YEU commented on their experience of the WYRED dialogues to date, for C+YP:

There are no two worlds - there is no offline and online. The world is one. That is the first thing that needs to be accepted in order to move on (Tamara Gojkovic).

Similarly, in Spain, the moderator of the WYRED dialogues commented that young people

… appear to perceive the digital society as something natural, as if it had always existed, since a non-digital world for them is like fairy tales for previous generations. Being so, they don't perceive any "digital vs non-digital world" conflict because their lives are both digital and non-digital at the same time and there is no gap between these two dimensions of their lives (Antonio M. Seoane).

A related issue at a more personal level is that a minority of WYRED participants reported arguments with parents about screen time, expressing some bafflement about why they should be concerned, as reported in the WYRED dialogues in Israel.

Other differences between the concerns of stakeholders and those of C+YP revolved around **different perceptions of the dangers of the internet and of proposed responses to those dangers**.

The WYRED Delphi report notes that:

Interestingly, the opinions of stakeholders regarding the most important issues is in general rather similar to young people, except one noticeable difference: the stakeholders attribute much higher importance than young people to the issue of media literacy, namely the reliability of information on the internet and in social media. It is interesting to note that this observation has been confirmed by some of the initial face-to-face social dialogues with young people (WYRED Delphi Report, p.34).

The moderator of WYRED dialogues in Spain expressed this issue as follows

We are probably much more concerned about the risks and security issues of the digital world compared to them and we try to instruct them "artificially" in some patterns or precautions that they in fact develop in

a natural way, as would an inhabitant of the forests who has been born there and knows this environment from his birth (Antonio M. Seoane).

Key messages on differences between the concerns of stakeholders and C + YP

- C+YP do not see the world as digital and non-digital, it is all one.
- C+YP are much less concerned than stakeholders about the potential dangers of the Internet, and do not feel the need for media literacy programmes.

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6 Implications for working with C+YP

In this brief report, we have mentioned the risks of treating C+YP as a homogenous group, and the resulting difficulties involved in attempting to establish general conclusions regarding '*what C+YP think*'. As for adults, there is little that can be said to be a truth which is applicable across a whole generation. However, we have also identified some significant surprises and valuable indications in the conversations which we have carried out. One vital lesson is that **the adults who work with C+YP, though better informed than other adults, do not always have an accurate picture of their attitudes and beliefs.** C+YP are easy to engage in dialogue, and there are great benefits to doing so. Care should however be taken in the interpretation of the outcomes of such dialogue and their implications, since they can be difficult to interpret and act on. This difficulty is best interpreted not as a manifestation of "confused thinking" of C+YP, but rather as a function of the complex and rapidly evolving environment in which they live, and of the lack of contexts within which they can hone their arguments by contributing to the evolution of society. **Researchers and policy makers should not abandon dialogue because interpretation is hard, but rather intensify engagement, and aspire to achieving genuine input by young people to policy.** This is demonstrated by the WYRED Delphi process, which placed great importance on the impact of dialogue with young people.

> *Among the potential ways to engage young people in decision making processes, the highest usefulness was attributed by young people as well as by stakeholders to "**direct communication between young people and decision makers**", followed by "**fostering active groups in schools/universities/workplaces and recognition of the activists** (WYRED Delphi Report, p.19).*

> *"... Regarding the question (only presented to stakeholders) how to ensure that decision makers take into account the views of young people, the highest usefulness was attributed to "**strengthening the citizenship of young people so that they learn to exercise their right to evaluate the system and not evade it**", followed by "**regular evaluation of decisions that affect young people and require their opinion**". (WYRED Delphi Report, p.32)*

The implication is that C+YP need not just communication, but also action and participation, and furthermore, they need the chance to test and explore their opinions and understandings. The problems which C+YP people face, and which they have addressed in the initial activities of WYRED, do not simply concern matters of information, of safety, and of practical issues of education and employment, however important these may be. **They are also issues which we might loosely term 'existential', in that they reveal uncertainties about what**

constitutes society and their role within it. As the moderator of the WYRED dialogues in Spain (Antonio M. Seoane) concluded:

> *The main lesson I've learned is that we are fully devoted to instruct them about practical questions that they don't feel to be really important (just useful), while they prefer to receive answers and solutions to their lack in terms of emotions, insecurity (not physical nor digital but emotional or even moral), feelings, etc.*

He goes on to consider the kind of contribution that young people seek to make in their online activity:

> *...they want to fight against the "pressure" they feel from the social environment to remark their own individuality. Instead of dissolving themselves in the "social mass", many of them want to make the difference and express their own insights, but they prefer to do it in a world that is opaque for adults, they prefer to remark in their own digital (and thus social) environments. They have their own criteria and opinions, and these are much clearer that they appear in their face to face contexts, since they prefer to express themselves using their own (digital) media, and there is where they feel really comfortable.*

As we have seen above, C+YP do not see their expression through digital media as separate from their engagement in social processes. Neither do they experience a need for guidance on the dangers of the Internet, nor do they complain of a lack of technology in their educational environment. These indications are sobering reading for those who have been involved with research into C+YP's use of technology and eLearning, and should be a cause for reflection among policy makers, researchers, and funders of projects. These preliminary results of WYRED suggest that the emphasis should shift to meaningful engagement of C+YP in social and educational development, while recognising that for C+YP there is an intermingling of the online and offline worlds, of the personal and the social, and of the emotional and the political which is unfamiliar to older generations, and which may be challenging to incorporate into existing structures of social governance.

7 Acknowledgements

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