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# Participatory social and educational planning – A gateway to learning from the margin

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This article focuses on the development of a participatory social and educational planning approach (PSEP) that focusses on including highly marginalized young people into research processes aimed at expanding our understanding of what type of problems these young people consider most important. Based on experiences from an action research project aimed at enhancing a participatory way of involving and reaching out to highly marginalized youth, the aim of the article is to present potentials and discuss risks that arise when working with this approach.

*Keywords*: Participation, marginalized youth, social and educational planning

## Introduction

The social inclusion and mobility of highly marginalized young people is a Western concern. Young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET youth), and who thus fall outside the normative or expected life courses are marginalized' and socially excluded (Kallio, 2024; Pitti et al., 2023; Habegger & Mancila, 2019; Bladt, 2013; Tisdall, 2017; Tofteng & Bladt 2020, 2022; Percy-Smith & Nigel, 2009; Sinclair,

2004). Within institutional frameworks, emphasis is placed on the inclusion of individuals from this group into education, vocational training, and the labor market, as these domains are considered the right pathways to becoming an independent and self-responsible citizen (Kallio, 2024). However, studies show that what is considered the right pathway is often interpreted very narrowly, resulting in individualistic, universalist and traditionalist solutions that seldom create social inclusion of the highly marginalized group. This is because it is not sufficiently recognized what the young people themselves perceive to be the problem or problems (Percy-Smith et al., 2009; Thingstrup, 2021; Harju et al., 2024).

We share this critique and argue for the importance of involving highly marginalized youth in the ongoing development of diverse pathways in the strife toward democratic societal development. We underscore the urgency of creating innovative approaches that strive to be democratic, participatory, and responsive to the lived experiences of these young individuals. Drawing inspiration from critical utopian action research (CUAR; Tofteng & Husted, 2014), socio-educational action (SEA; Herrera & De Oña, 2017), and participatory planning (Coghlan & Brydon Miller, 2014), we conceptualize this effort as participatory social and educational planning (PSEP). This article is based on insights from the project LEMA – LEarning from the MArgins (LEMA.nu; Harju et al., 2024), in which the PSEP approach was developed and tested as a methodological framework for action research. Through this approach, highly marginalized youth were invited to act as co-creators of knowledge, enabling their voices and experiences to potentially inform public discourse on strategies for social inclusion.

The article aims to clarify both the conceptual and practical dimensions of the PSEP approach. The development and application of the approach are described with examples drawn from the LEMA project, highlighting its relevance for broader implementation in general practice. We emphasize methodological considerations, focusing on how PSEP may foster more inclusive and democratic forms of youth work planning. In addition, the article discusses potential risks associated with the approach, based on experiences from the project.

In the next section, we will present the LEMA project, and its theoretical and methodological foundation.

## Presentation of the LEMA project

The LEMA project was carried out as an action research initiative with the aim of strengthening participatory approaches that actively involve young people in exploring, analyzing, and responding to the complex realities of marginalization. Within the project, marginalization was not only defined by visible signs, such as unemployment or school dropout, but also through the underlying social factors—migration status, ethnic background, family challenges, and economic hardship—that shape and intensify these experiences. Together, these systemic and social dimensions contribute to what we refer to as wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Conklin, 2008): problems that are deeply complex, constantly evolving, and resistant to standard solutions or existing systems of support. From this perspective, the young people involved in the LEMA project did not face a single challenge, but rather a web of structural, collective, and individual interconnected challenges that cannot be addressed in a fixed or linear order.

A central premise of the LEMA project was the understanding of participation as a didactic form of organization and planning (Negt, 1978), enabling innovation and transformation by recognizing highly marginalized young people as competent agents shaping their own lives (Bladt, 2013; Tofteng & Bladt, 2022).

The PSEP approach was developed within the framework of the LEMA project to engage with wicked problems. The goal of the approach was to create spaces where young people could take part in the research process with their own knowledge, experiences, and ideas on equal terms with existing knowledge dominating the field. Accordingly, the structure of PSEP was intentionally designed to support non-hierarchical relationships, fostering mutual respect, dialogue, and co-creation throughout the research process.

The project involved youth from three countries: Denmark, Sweden, and Spain. From Denmark, the participants were young men and women aged 18–25 years with little or no connection to education and the labor market. From Spain, the participants were young people of Moroccan decent aged 18–21 years who had migrated unaccompanied when they were under the age of eighteen. From Sweden, the project involved young men aged 18–20 years living in a socioeconomically vulnerable neighborhood. Over the course of the LEMA project, approximately thirty-six young people were involved in various research stages and activities. Not all participants were engaged throughout the entire duration of the project, nor did everyone take part in every activity. Based on our

experience, this fluctuation is characteristic of working with this group and reflects the realities of their everyday lives. We have discussed this aspect in more detail in a separate publication (Harju et al., 2024). In addition, the project involved professionals from different organizations in the three participating countries, such as housing associations, welfare institutions, and NGOs. Researchers from each country participated as facilitators and co-analysts.

Several theoretical strands within the action research tradition have informed the conceptual foundation of the PSEP approach. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework and the relation between the theoretical strands.


*Figure 1: Illustration of the framework behind PSEP (Credit: The authors, generated by G-AI)*

One theoretical strand that has significantly informed the PSEP approach is critical utopian action research (CUAR) (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016; Husted & Tofteng, 2014). Another influential strand is socio-educational action theory (Herrera & de Oña, 2017). Both strands emphasize knowledge production through participatory processes. They are both grounded in critical epistemologies and share a commitment to help foster democratic engagement (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Tingstrup et al., 2021). A third theoretical strand that has influenced the conceptual framework of the PSEP approach is participatory planning, which reflects on the idea that any effort to bring about social change, whether in local communities, national education strategies, or initiatives aimed at enhancing social mobility, must consider the human resource counterpart involved (Kahn, 1969). The point of departure is that, for planning to be effective and contextually relevant, consideration of the lived realities of those it seeks to impact is required. Below, we present the main characteristics of these three theoretical and methodological strands.

The socio-educational action (SEA) theory is a participatory research strand inspired by critical pedagogy and critical theory (Freire, 1976; Giroux, 1983). The aim of this strand is for actions to be both social and educational in nature, and to contribute to transformation. The point of departure is to support participants in becoming more reflective and critical, and in understanding and analyzing their own situations so that they can express their thoughts and ideas in a clear and well-grounded way. In this way, SEA helps participants to gain a deeper understanding of their own reality and gives them the confidence and tools to try to change the situations that oppress them. In other words, SEA focuses on empowering participants to take control of their own lives. It is worth noting that the field of socio-educational action has often been characterized by an individualistic orientation, which tends to overlook the sociocultural contexts surrounding the individuals it aims to support (Herrera & de Oña 2017, 2016). Within the LEMA project, however, this limitation was addressed by integrating two other theoretical strands, critical utopian action research and participatory planning.

Critical utopian action research (CUAR) is an action research strand that is focused on democracy, change, and participation, as well as a general respect for people's knowledge (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Tofteng & Bladt, 2020). This tradition, which has been developed since the early 80s, is primarily characterized by a practical interpretation of critical theory (Tofteng & Husted, 2014), a theoretical framework first introduced by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001). They were occupied with the relationship between science, knowledge, and democracy, underlining that, if scientific knowledge is not produced in a cooperative way, science itself will contribute to the creation of an undemocratic reality. This implies that a participatory and collective critical analysis of existing realities is regarded as a methodological cornerstone within this strand. Moreover, the analytical work carried out is seen as a foundation for envisioning new societal developments and fostering radical, utopian ideas of alternative futures.

CUAR builds on the work of German philosopher Robert Jungk on future-oriented research through future creating workshops (FCW; Jungk & Müllert, 1984). This methodology was primarily an activist approach or a tool for creating spaces in which 'ordinary' people can voice their wishes and dreams based on the question "How do we want to live?" Within CUAR, the methodology has been applied to generate social change

by integrating everyday knowledge into the research process. Central to this approach is the recognition of participants as equal partners in the creation of new forms of knowledge and reflection.

The third theoretical strand is participatory planning. This approach highlights the importance of planning as a participatory process by involving the whole community in the strategic and decision-making parts of urban planning, which helps create local, community-driven processes (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Like participatory action research, this approach values the active involvement of marginalized people by recognizing their role in shaping meaningful change. Historically, participatory planning is a paradigm that grew out of planning in the field of urban development (Lane, 2005). According to Lane, it was developed as an alternative to traditional planning, which was defined as centralized and rationalistic, not considering the lived lives and voices of citizens or residents living in the area. Participatory planning is an approach that reflects on how to understand planning processes in a more social way, providing a human resource counterpart (Kahn, 1969: 27).

Bringing together these theoretical strands has contributed to a more holistic and context-sensitive framework in the LEMA project, ensuring that the lived realities of highly marginalized youth were not only acknowledged but actively shaped the direction of the research and its outcomes. While CUAR and participatory planning focus on creating collective reflection and finding solutions that lead to structural change, SEA takes a more individual-centered approach, adding an educational perspective to the work. In this sense, the PSEP approach brings together all three levels—individual, collective, and structural—into one methodological framework.

Having outlined the theoretical foundations underpinning both the LEMA project and the PSEP approach, the following section introduces the transnational workshops held as part of the LEMA project (Figure 2), which constitute the empirical basis for the results presented in this article. Furthermore, the section describes the future creating workshop (FCW), which served as an inspiration for designing a process conducive to dialogue and reflective engagement.

## The transnational workshops

The LEMA project was structured around two interconnected processes: one was working with young people within national contexts, while the other centered on a series of transnational workshops. This series of transnational workshops is shown in the Figure 2 below.

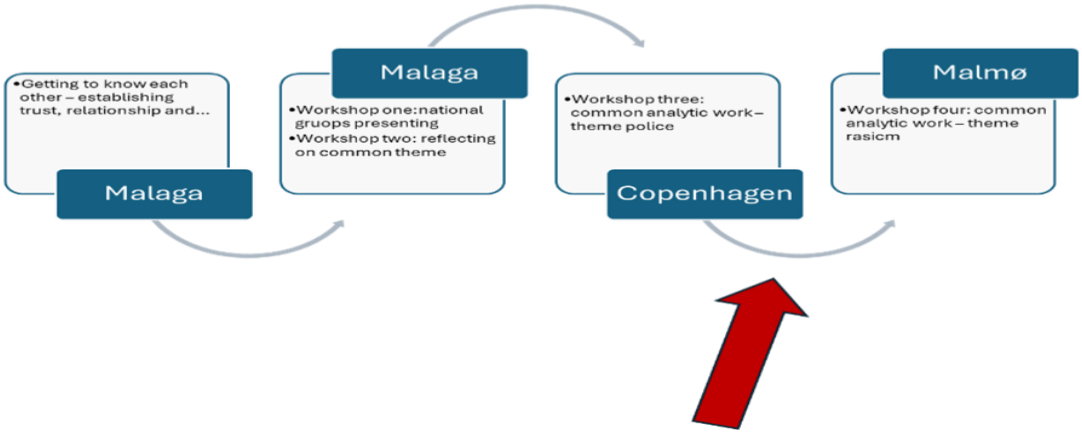



*Figure 2: Illustration of the transnational workshops in LEMA*

The empirical foundation of this article is the transnational workshops conducted in Malmö and Copenhagen (In Figure 2, a red arrow indicates the position of these workshops within the overall timeline of the transnational work in LEMA). Due to the geographical proximity of the two cities, the first day of the workshop was held in Copenhagen and the second in Malmö. We focus specifically on these two workshops, as they represent the primary settings in which the PSEP approach was applied and further developed. Prior to these, a preparatory workshop was held in Málaga, Spain, serving a different purpose: to facilitate social interaction among the young participants from the three countries and to present preliminary national analyses.

During the Málaga workshop, the participants collaboratively selected the theme for the upcoming transnational workshops in Copenhagen and Malmö. This process included a thematic brainstorming session based on the national presentations, resulting in a list of potential topics. In cross-national groups, the participants then voted for the themes they considered most important to explore further. The outcome of this voting process was that the themes “police” and “racism” were selected. This preparatory work

laid the foundation for the collaborative efforts in the Copenhagen and Malmö workshops, where the PSEP approach was actively tested and refined. The following section outlines how these workshops were conducted, with a particular focus on the method of the future creating workshop, which served as the primary source of inspiration for the work in the transnational workshops in Copenhagen and Malmö.

## The future creating workshop: a source of inspiration for the transnational workshop process

The transnational workshops were based on the techniques and processes of the future creating workshop (FCW). The methodology was originally developed by Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert (Jungk & Müllert, 1984) as a technique for democratic development, social imagination, and creative learning processes, with the overarching aim of fostering social innovation. At its core, FCW revolves around the productive tension between personal experience and social orientation. In this regard, it is a process-based methodology that counteracts individualization by emphasizing the socially justified ambiguities present in everyday life. The methodology requires that the participants possess the ability to orient themselves socially and that they are willing to engage with the theme at hand (Tofteng & Husted, 2005; Bladt & Nielsen, 2013; Bloch 1995).

In the workshops, participants continued to explore and discuss the challenges associated with the themes of racism and police violence, which had been identified as areas of common experiences during the preparatory workshop in Málaga. Following these discussions, the participants were tasked with envisioning alternative futures, guided by a so-called "miracle question." This exercise encouraged them to imagine what a radically improved situation, free from the constraints of current realities, might look like. The workshop concluded with a reflection round, where each participant shared concrete actions they intended to take upon returning home, either individually or in collaboration with others.

## Protocols and "wallpapers": documentation practices in the transnational workshops

The empirical material from the transnational workshops is made up of so-called "wallpapers" or flip charts (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6). These wallpapers encouraged participants to express themselves concisely. By emphasizing brevity, they helped reduce intellectualization and lengthy arguments, thus providing a platform for all participants, especially those who might not typically have the opportunity to speak, to share their views and experiences.

At the same time, the wallpapers served as a publicity tool, keeping all statements visible to the entire group in the form of keywords. Finally, the wallpapers acted as catalysts for social chains of association and social imagination, with keywords being linked, contradicting, refining, or confirming one another.

The wallpapers produced during the transnational workshops constitute a central part of the empirical material in the LEMA project, as they became a shared space for documenting discussions, analyses, and conclusions. Depending on the format of each activity in the transnational workshops, whether group work or plenary dialogue, the wallpapers were created in collaboration between researchers and participants. Figure 3 presents a summary from one of the group sessions, in which all groups displayed their respective wallpapers side by side. This activity was entitled "Our wish is…" It invited participants to articulate collective visions and aspirations related to the workshop themes.

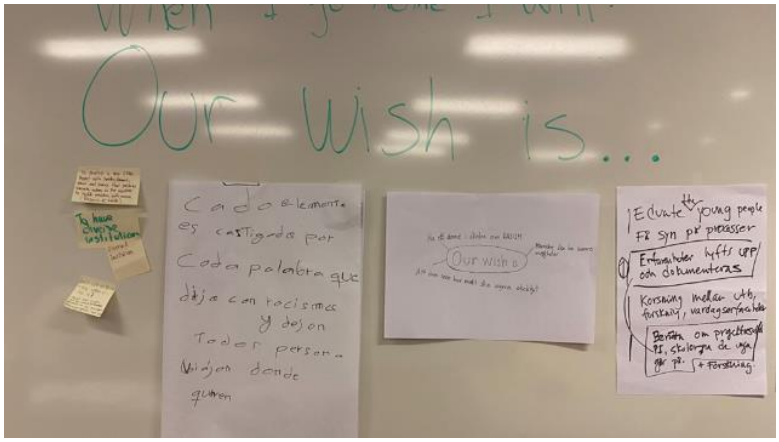



*Figure 3: Wallpaper from the workshop LEMA protocol_2023*

Here, the wallpaper shown in Figure 3 serves as an illustration, and we will delve deeper into the specific content of this wallpaper later. As part of the documentation of the transnational workshops, we collected all agendas, wallpapers, drawings, presentations, and selected photographs into what we refer to as a protocol. One comprehensive protocol was thus compiled to cover the entire transnational work of the LEMA project.

In the next section, we present the potential of working with the PSEP approach. The section is based on the protocol compiled by the researchers following the transnational workshops in Copenhagen and Malmö (LEMA protocol_2023), but it is the transnational workshop in Malmö that serves as the main illustration of this approach.

## Transnational workshops: Illustrating the potentials of the PSEP approach

In Malmö, the researchers and participants met up at the University of Malmö in a typical classroom. There were five researchers, three professionals working in welfare institutions or NGOs, and twelve young people. To create a setting that encouraged reflection, analytic thinking, and symmetric relations, the researchers had changed the configuration of the room by setting up tables and chairs in a way more inviting to group work. They placed pens and paper on the tables and started out by welcoming all participants and introducing the theme—in this case, racism. The process was inspired by the FCW. Accordingly, the first phase of the workshop was a critical phase, grounded in the young participants' lived experiences. This was followed by a utopian phase, anchored in what was referred to as the "miracle question," and the workshop concluded with a realization phase based on the prompt "When I go home, I will…"

The critical phase began with the researchers asking the young participants, who were seated according to their country of origin, how they experience racism from their own perspectives. Figure 4 shows the answers of the Swedish youth.

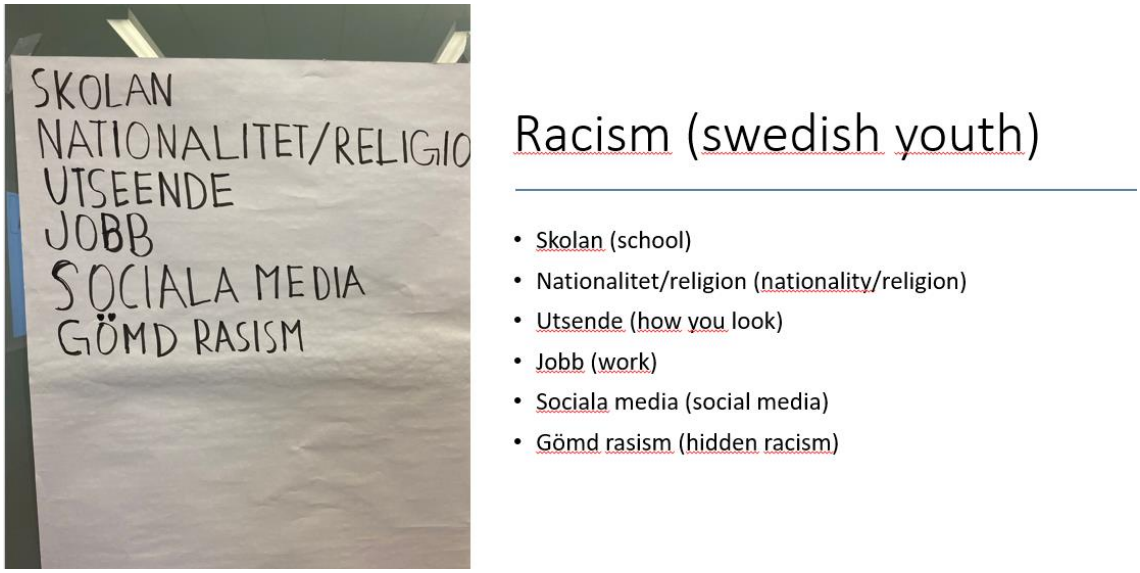
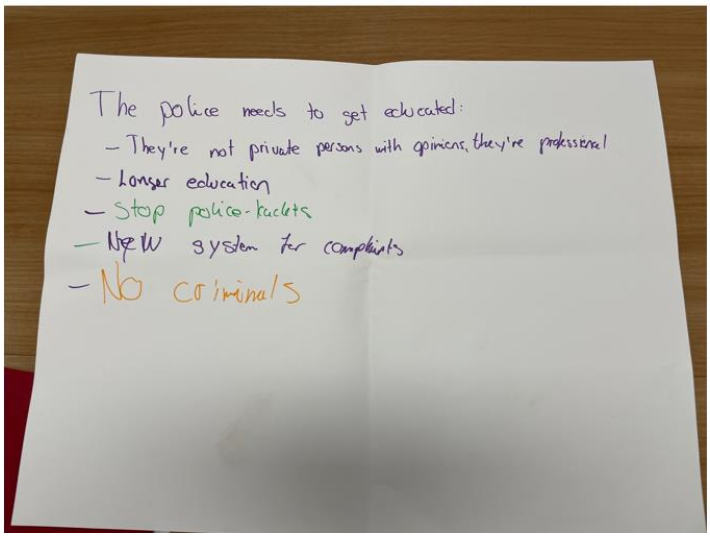



*Figure 4: Wallpaper from transnational workshop (LEMA protocol_2023)*

The experiences of the participants from Sweden show that racism is linked to nationality and to economic and societal status. It is experienced in public spaces as well as in schools and at workplaces. These experiences are also mirrored in the presentations from the Spanish and Danish youth. Across all participating groups, the young people's experiences consistently pointed to racism being both pervasive and multifaceted; visible in everyday interactions, yet often subtle or hidden. This outcome reflects the potential of the PSEP approach: When young people engage in facilitated dialogue and collective reflection, a broader and more nuanced range of perspectives emerges. These dialogues foster reciprocal exchanges, allowing new insights to surface. One such example concerns the perception of police behavior toward youths with migrant backgrounds, which was described as subtly racist. This is illustrated in the wallpaper from the transnational workshop seen in Figure 5.




The police needs to get educated:

- they're no private persons with opinions, they are professionals
Longer education
Stop police-kadets
New systems for complaints
No criminals

*Figure 5: Wallpaper transnational work (LEMA protocol_2023)*

The wallpaper reflects how the police are perceived by the participants: not as objective professionals, but rather as private individuals with personal opinions. The issue was understood as a matter of ignorance and lack of awareness within the police force. In response to this, the young participants proposed that racism is addressed whenever it is encountered, and that individuals in positions of authority should act with objectivity. Building on this, the participants began to articulate their role as experts, emphasizing their responsibility to educate society by sharing their everyday experiences of racism, including in contact with the police. The participants expressed a desire to contribute to the police academy curriculum by engaging directly with future officers to promote greater understanding and awareness.

The results show that the participating young people wanted to turn the knowledge created into actionable knowledge, creating awareness in a broader societal context. This can be seen in their desire to be part of the educational system and bring their knowledge into the police academy. Their reflection on how education needs to be longer and how police cadets tend to show problematic behavior because of insecurities and lack of knowledge is a reflection on what their societal responsibility could be. The reflections are connected to the argument that the problems of marginalized young people are wicked. The issues they face, such as racism and negative experiences with the police, are not always directly linked to access to jobs and education or staying away from crime. Instead, they are often about not feeling accepted as full citizens. The idea of educating

the police force is a radical suggestion, and it highlights why it is so important to learn from the margins. This way of thinking was made possible through the methodological approach that invited young people into a broader societal dialogue: not merely asking them what they want to do with their lives to escape marginalization but instead engaging them in discussions about how to shape society for the better.

In the next phase of the workshop, the utopian phase, the researchers encouraged the young people to dream and think in a visionary manner, setting their thoughts free from the constraints of current realities. This activity was called the "miracle question" and inspired by the utopian phase of the future creating workshop. Figure 6 shows the wallpaper emerging from the discussions in the miracle round.

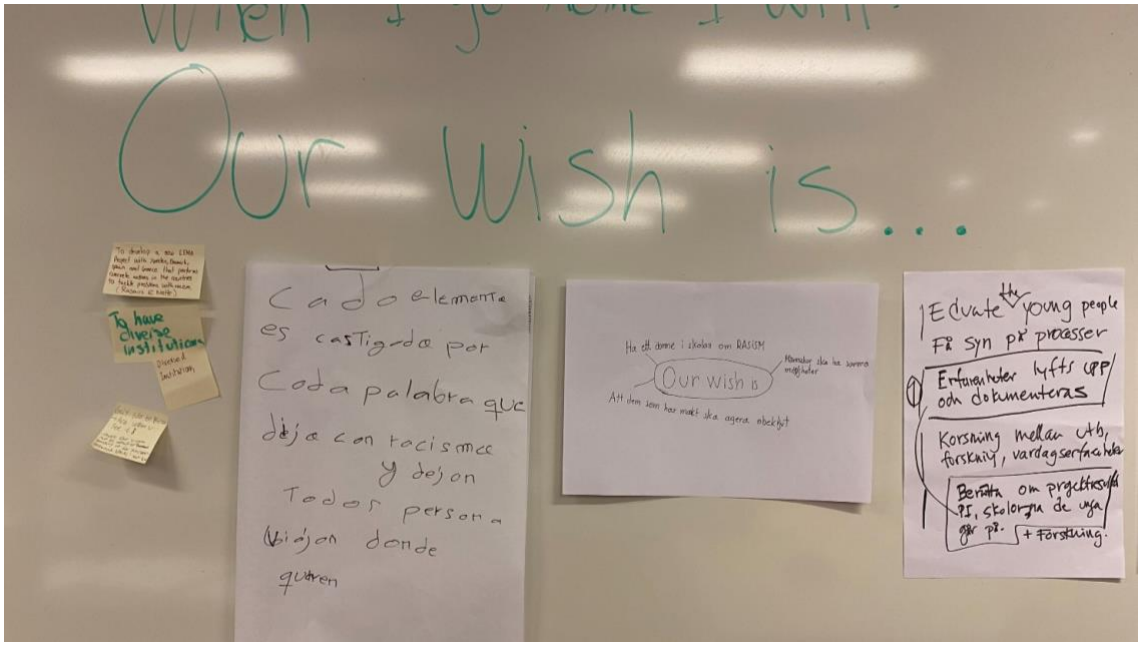



*Figure 6: Wallpaper from miracle round (LEMA protocol_2023)*

Making room for the "miracle question" prompted the young participants to reflect on various aspects of the theme of racism. This is illustrated by the keywords presented on the wallpaper in Figure 6, where the participants expressed visions such as the need for concrete actions in their respective countries to address racism, including confronting individuals who express racist views. They emphasized that everyone should actively oppose racism whenever it occurs, that experiences of racism should be highlighted and documented, and that borders should be open to allow free movement for all. Furthermore, the young participants envisioned a world without migration laws, where

the concept of "illegal people" no longer existed. The keywords also reflect how research had become a meaningful part of their thinking about societal change. They expressed a desire for more initiatives like the LEMA project—projects that connect lived experiences and strengthen collective narratives, thereby amplifying their voices. This illustrates how the methodological approach not only enabled reflection on racism but also fostered a sense of agency and responsibility among the youth, positioning them as contributors to societal transformation. This is illustrated by the statements made by the participants when asked what they would do upon returning home:

> *When I get home, I will suggest to the school where she went that we do a project together where we figure out something about biases and the way that we teach and we are with each other.*
> *When I go home, I will stand up for racism every time I see it.*
> *When I go back home, I will keep trying to really abolish the immigration law, but also, I will keep surrounding myself with different people*
> *I will finally become active in the network in Malmö and Copenhagen that works against deportations of refugees*
> (LEMA-protocol_2023)

The participants' engagement shows that creating projects based on the PSEP approach—working collaboratively with young people to analyze and reflect on their experiences of living in marginalized positions—is both meaningful and necessary. It represents a valuable way to approach so-called wicked problems. This is largely due to the openness of the methods and dialogues, which allow participants to determine where the process should begin and end. The PSEP format also supports a collective process, framing the issues as structural rather than merely individual. In this way, the approach shifts the focus from personal shortcomings to broader systemic challenges. This section has highlighted the potential of the PSEP approach. However, the approach also entails certain challenges, which will be discussed in the following section in relation to the concept of growing clarity.

## Navigating growing clarity: risks and potentials in applying the PSEP approach

The purpose of the transnational workshops was to create social and collective learning processes with a strong incentive for open and democratic reflections and dialogues. This approach was inspired by Oskar Negts (1985), who wrote: Democracy is a life form that is existentially dependent on a developed sense of judgment. Participation in common public affairs is therefore a crucial element in these learning processes (Negt, 1985, 14 – our translation). The quote underscores the importance of understanding democracy not merely as representation and voting, but as a dynamic process through which social knowledge is continuously developed by the population. However, more recent approaches to democracy and youth participation place greater emphasis on the role of young people as active citizens within democratic processes:

> If children are to gain real benefits in their lives and communities and create a better future they can only do this by being active citizens, formulating their own values, perspectives and experiences and visions for the future and using these to inform and take action in their own right and if necessary in conflict with those who hold power over their lives (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009, 3)

This perspective, which emphasizes the agency of children and young people, proved particularly relevant in this study, as the participants reflected on how their experiences, despite being rooted in different national contexts, revealed shared challenges. These reflections underscored the urgency of identifying common solutions and highlighted the value of transnational dialogue in addressing complex societal issues. This process can be seen as contributing to what we refer to, with reference to Nielsen & Nielsen (2007), as growing clarity, a concept that captures both the potential and the challenges of enabling deeper understanding and agency among marginalized youth:

In social learning processes, the individual, in cooperation and opposition with others, begins to reassess his own and (potential) communities' strengths, their possibilities and limits. You come to a growing clarity about what you can and must have – or try to take (co-)responsibility for, and what you, by virtue of your actions or failure to act, are co-responsible for. (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007, 30)

When the young participants in the transnational workshops began to reflect on their own role and agency, their insights aligned with what Nielsen and Nielsen (2007) describe as growing clarity. The youth gained a clearer understanding of what they could be co-responsible for—and what lay beyond their influence. However, this growing clarity also brought a sense of disillusionment, as they came to realize that the issues they were confronting were transnational, structural, and deeply complex—far more entrenched than they had initially perceived. One example of this disillusionment is illustrated by a conversation between a Spanish youth and a researcher during the flight back to Spain. As recounted by the Spanish researcher:

> He [the young participant] told me that the participation in the project had made him realize that his situation, as a young man who had migrated illegal to Spain, was much more complex and complicated than he had thought of. It had made him think that developing a life like the one he dreamed of was almost utopia. And, as a result, he was thinking that perhaps it was better to return home to Morocco.

Ultimately, this particular participant chose to continue his struggle in Spain and eventually succeeded in obtaining residency. However, his reflections and heightened awareness illustrate a broader risk inherent in action research. When research projects aim to foster new awareness through educational or formative processes among co-researchers—in this case, marginalized young people—there is a risk that these new insights lead to disillusionment as much as empowerment.

Throughout the project, the researchers remained attentive to the ethical and social risks involved, particularly the possibility that the young participants might ultimately face disappointment. These concerns were actively considered throughout the process. Nevertheless, despite this risk, initiatives like LEMA can play a vital role in fostering clarity and critical awareness among young people. By creating spaces for reflection and dialogue, such projects help participants recognize that the challenges they face are not merely individual struggles, but manifestations of broader, complex, and systemic issues. They come to understand that the racism and other challenges they encounter is embedded

within structural and societal frameworks, and crucially, that these injustices are not their fault.

## Final reflections and perspectives

In this article, we have presented examples of how the PSEP approach can be understood and applied in practice. The theoretical foundations underpinning the approach have been outlined, and the interaction between these frameworks illustrated. The findings indicate that social and educational engagement with young people at risk, combined with participatory planning, holds potential for developing new methods to address the complexity—or wickedness—associated with marginalized lives and social inclusion. As demonstrated, the PSEP approach as employed in the LEMA-project) created spaces and opportunities for transformative approaches to social and educational planning. The participatory element, along with an openness toward the reflections, analyses, and ideas of at-risk youth, proved to be a central strength. The young participants became co-creators of new ideas for addressing complex societal challenges. One such idea involved initiating dialogue with the police academy. Facilitating conversations between marginalized young people and police academy students could introduce new perspectives on racism into police work, thereby fostering deeper understanding of the problem and inviting multiple voices into the dialogue.

Despite the inherent risk of disappointment, participation in projects such as LEMA can lead to empowerment. Engaging in reflective practices enables young people to explore their agency and potential influence within broader social and societal contexts. This aspect is central to social learning processes and aligns with Regina Becker-Schmidt's concept of ambivalence tolerance (Becker-Schmidt & Knap, 1982; Bladt, 2013), which refers to the capacity to endure and navigate contradictory realities and their inherent tensions (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007: 170). This capacity can be cultivated, and the PSEP approach contributed to its development among the young participants. Throughout the different phases, such as the critique phase, the miracle question, and especially the collective work, the participants were confronted with challenging realities. While this clarity could be overwhelming, it also led to deeper understanding and enabled collective reflection. This was evident in the miracle and realization phases, where participants emphasized the importance of initiatives like LEMA. Hence, LEMA

provided a protected setting for exploring both critique and constructive ideas. In this way, the process became formative, allowing participants to perceive their life situations as dynamic, structurally influenced, and socially shared (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007).

### Reaching out

The theme of this special issue is Reaching Out, and this article explores the concept in two distinct ways. The first is through the framework of the LEMA project, which engaged young people by involving them directly in the process of knowledge production and integrating them into the research journey. In this context, outreach was directed toward the youth themselves.

The second interpretation of Reaching Out concerns political and institutional engagement. The PSEP approach offers an alternative model for youth work, establishing a framework in which young people play a central role in shaping new structural pathways grounded in their own ideas, experiences, and reflections. This represents a bottom-up perspective, contrasting with traditional top-down approaches, where agendas are set by external actors. The bottom-up model emphasizes the inclusion of relevant citizen groups—in this case, highly marginalized youth—by involving them in strategic and managerial planning processes within the field of social work. This approach recognizes and values their active participation as essential to meaningful and inclusive development.

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