

Blink

The magazine of Non Formal Education

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Report

How Pinocchio can help
detect lies in schools

International

The challenges of
integration through
Non Formal Education
in Sweden

Opinion

How Non Formal
Education Can Help
Rescue Democracy
Bruno António



Glenn Micallef

Learning outside the classroom

The power of Non Formal Education

INTERVIEW

DIRECTOR
Luís Alves

EDITOR
Agência Nacional Erasmus+ Juventude/Desporto
e Corpo Europeu de Solidariedade

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Texts and Photographs:

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Carla Pires (Photographs of the Main Interview)

Guest columnists:

Bruno António, João Queirós

Illustrations for opinion columns:

Pedro Sousa Pereira

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BRAGA HEADQUARTERS
Forum Braga,
Av. Dr. Francisco Pires Gonçalves
4715-558 Braga, Portugal
t. [+351] 253 144 450
e. erasmusmais@juventude.pt

LISBON
Rua Rodrigo da Fonseca, 55
1250-190 Lisboa, Portugal



Editorial

Luís Alves

Non Formal Education (NFE) continues to demonstrate a unique ability to reinvent itself and to generate innovative responses in times that put our social and democratic foundations to the test.

In this edition of Blink, that strength is given a voice in the interview with Glenn Micallef, European Commissioner for Intergenerational Justice, Youth, Culture and Sport, who speaks to us about NFE as a “secret ingredient” – a space where learning, participation and European cohesion meet and reinforce each other, from the heart of Ukraine to the future of the European project.

We also explore geographies and perspectives where NFE is transforming communities: from Sweden, with community centres and schools opening new paths of creativity and integration, to Portugal, where projects like Pinocchio at School teach young people to dismantle misleading narratives and cultivate critical thinking. We also bring reflections on democratic vitality and the role of civic participation, and a reading of the PIAAC study that highlights how NFE is crucial for developing and renewing skills and supporting adaptation to social, economic, cultural and technological contexts marked by rapid and profound transformations.

More than a repository of stories, Blink is – and will continue to be – an invitation to look at the world with curiosity and a critical sense, to connect ideas and practices from different places and to value what is born from the encounter between people, cultures and experiences. It is this open and committed outlook that drives us in every edition: to give visibility to examples that inspire, question and help imagine new ways of learning and educating for full citizenship and life.

Thus, in this edition, Blink is a place where Pinocchios swap strings for wings, fridges store ideas that never cool down, and stations are just stops for those who like to keep travelling!

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ON FORMAL EDUCATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

Bruno António

Executive Director of DYPALL Network,
Member of the pool of trainers in Non
Formal Education at the National Agency
for the Management of the Erasmus+
Youth and Sport Programme

In April, a study was published confirming what is increasingly felt: the rise of hate speech, the normalisation of extremist ideas and the limitation of fundamental freedoms. According to the European Policy Centre report, in European countries, and particularly in Portugal, young males are five times more likely to vote for far-right parties than young females. This phenomenon is not only seen in Portugal; we are the second country in Europe where this happens most intensely, only behind Croatia, where boys under twenty-five are six times more likely to vote for far-right parties compared to girls in the same age group.

In this context, it is important to look at young people. In what context do they live? What answers do they find? And, above all, what tools do they have to participate and intervene in an increasingly polarised public space?

Today, much of young people's "quality time" is spent at school. However, if we honestly analyse the role of school in the civic and political preparation of new generations, we quickly realise there is a huge deficit. School continues to fail in its mission to explain the various dimensions of democracy, to make known the different political ideologies, or to demonstrate, in practice, the importance of participation, whether civic or political.

There is little space within the quality time young people spend at school to learn about the world and to understand how society and our democratic institutions work. A practical example of this is citizenship classes, which could be a privileged space to work on these topics, but often teachers do not have the necessary tools to address them. Often, from the start of secondary education, a crucial time for the development of critical thinking in young people, these subjects simply disappear from the classroom.

And if this learning is little worked on, in what ways could we bring a different dynamic?

This is where Non Formal Education comes in. A methodological approach centred on the individual, taking into account different learning preferences, using reality and current events as a starting point and opportunity for learning, and based on participatory methods. A way of learning that rejects the idea of a "holder of knowledge" and recognises that everyone, through their experiences, opinions and backgrounds, has something to contribute to a process that is, above all, collective. Valuing the role of each person in the construction of knowledge.



When a young person feels an active part of their learning process, and feels they also contribute to the learning of others, it has a real and transformative impact. It is a feeling of empowerment that is hard to find in more traditional educational approaches.

But this frustration we find in young people, which manifests in various ways, is also directed at the education system. And it is precisely for this reason that a serious reflection on how we educate is necessary. The urgency to integrate more participatory approaches, centred on the person, based on the principles and methods of Non Formal Education, is increasingly evident. Empowering teachers, schools and institutions so that they are not just factories of future professionals, but also use their full potential to be true spaces for training for democratic citizenship.

If we can systematically and structurally introduce this logic into the school space, we will be taking an important step in building fundamental skills so that young people understand society, act in it and become true agents of change. Whether at school, in their communities or any other spaces where they intervene.

These are the fundamental pillars. Non Formal Education is one of the most effective tools in formative work for democratic values, citizenship and participation. Because young people live these situations, they experience them. There is no more efficient and lasting method than experience.

Many young people we work with express their frustration, repeating a phrase that is already becoming a 'slogan': "we are in a 19th-century education system, with 20th-century teachers, and 21st-century students!"

It is time to change! To bring new educational methodologies into schools. To work with the associative sector and open the doors of schools to civil society organisations. These have the tools and knowledge to work on these topics. I have no doubt, as there are several examples in Portugal and across Europe, of how we can work together with schools to create learning spaces that are more impactful, attractive and where young people enjoy learning.

As Dostoevsky wrote, "Every man is not only responsible for what he does, but what everyone else does." As a society, we cannot continue to look the other way. We must create strategies where this same responsibility is not only highlighted but also beneficial for the individual.

Just like the ancient Peripatetic School, where one learned while walking, debating and socialising with others, we need to return to a model where learning is alive, in motion, connected to the world and to people.

That is the challenge. And it is also our responsibility.

THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF LEARNING

A conversation on Non Formal Education

Interview with
Glenn Micallef

The conversation between the European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport and the Director of the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Youth/Sports and European Solidarity Corps began in Lviv, recently named the 2025 European Youth Capital. But it was in Brussels that Luís Alves interviewed Glenn Micallef about the crucial role of Non Formal Education in empowering young people across Europe. Originally from Malta, Micallef shares his vision of how programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps are helping to build a more inclusive and democratic future - both for Ukraine and for the European project as a whole.



What does Non Formal Education (NFE) mean to you?

Non Formal Education is like the 'secret ingredient' of learning - it means learning through activities that are planned and guided, without being part of the formal school curriculum. This has the potential to make learning feel like a positive by-product of engaging, and often social, experiences. In my opinion, culture, sport and volunteering are the best examples of NFE.

NFE aims to enhance the skills and competences of young people and adult learners alike, and to promote active citizenship. It happens through workshops, outdoor adventures, cultural exchanges, role-playing games - activities that often feel like play but result in deep and lasting learning.

Think of how you learned a skill related to your hobbies. Chances are it was through doing, in a group, sharing experiences and discovering new perspectives. That's the power of Non Formal Education.

Did the Non Formal Education influenced your personal, professional, and political journey? In which way?

The answer to this question is an unequivocal yes! Non Formal Education has been, and still is, an integral part of my formation. Just to give one example, through sport I have learned some of the most important lessons of my life. Getting involved with my local football team in Malta had a profound effect on my personal and professional journey. Growing from a young player as a "creative midfielder" into the role of Vice-President of the club, football taught me invaluable lessons in teamwork, interpersonal skills and communication.

At the base of our European Sport Model is the grassroots level, and it is here where non-formal learning has its greatest impact. Through sport and play, individuals learn new responsibilities, social skills, and lasting lessons related to physical health.

On Europe Day this year I visited my old club and was touched to see that the same values of inclusiveness, fairness and solidarity, that I had learned there are still alive and kicking.



“Non Formal Education and EU youth programmes play a crucial role in addressing modern social and political challenges”

Considering that Non Formal Education (NFE) is at the core of EU youth programmes aimed at empowering young people for active citizenship, how can NFE and these programmes help to address modern social and political challenges, such as disinformation, political polarisation, and social exclusion?

We are all familiar with the term ‘soft skills’, however it can sometimes be difficult to define this phrase. For me, these soft skills are what make us human, but also able to contribute to a group. A big part of this is the ability to process information and to use emotional intelligence.

Non Formal Education and EU youth programmes play a crucial role in addressing modern social and political challenges. They teach young people how to think critically, to use media wisely, and work well with people from different walks of life. These programmes also promote real world connections and encourage our young people to travel through our Union to explore its diversity.

Developing these soft skills helps prevent and counter disinformation and fake news.

By engaging young people in meaningful activities, Non Formal Education empowers them to participate actively in their communities and helps build more inclusive and democratic societies.

What is the importance of these programmes, from a broader perspective, for the affirmation of the European project itself?

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps are built around human connection and demonstrate that when young people are exposed to other cultures, they discover shared values that transcend European borders. These programmes are vital for strengthening the sense of European unity and identity, and for bringing the European project to life in a way that is



tangible, personal, and lasting. Through these programmes young people see the things that unites us.

By providing opportunities to young people to study, to train, and to organise projects, as well as volunteer across Europe and beyond, these programmes help break down cultural barriers and promote intercultural dialogue.

By engaging with diverse cultures and collaborating on shared challenges, young Europeans become ambassadors of EU values, whilst by living these values they become vocal advocates for them. I'm talking about values like inclusion, diversity, democracy, and peace.

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps together strengthen the foundations of the European project.

What is the importance of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), especially in a scenario of social and geopolitical challenges?

The European Solidarity Corps and the Youth strand of Erasmus+ are an important investment in our democratic future.

Whether it is helping out in local projects or responding to crises, young people gain skills, confidence, and a stronger sense of European identity. Through volunteering and community projects, the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ help bridge cultural divides, support vulnerable groups, and strengthen democratic engagement. In short, it is not merely about volunteering or participating in a project, but about shaping the next generation of engaged Europeans.

By investing in young people in countries such as Ukraine, Albania or Montenegro we make a long-term investment in democratic and inclusive societies. Erasmus+ supports this through civic engagement, democratic participation, and social inclusion among young people in neighbouring countries. It strengthens youth sectors on the ground and helps young people connect with peers across the EU.

For many candidate countries, it also helps build volunteering infrastructure and connects young people to a broader European purpose. Grassroots can only grow in healthy soil.

Together, both programmes prepare young people, and societies at large, for EU membership by reinforcing shared values and a sense of European identity.

How have these programmes contributed concretely to solving problems faced by young people, such as access to employment and social exclusion?

Through volunteering in areas like social care, environment, or youth work, young people develop important skills outside the classroom. Communication, teamwork, and leadership are 'baked in' as part of the volunteer experience. These are important skills valued by employers.

Similarly, beyond the well-known academic exchanges, Erasmus+ supports Non Formal Education projects that equip young people with skills for today's job market. For many, a European Solidarity Corps or Erasmus+ experience is a first step into society as confident and engaged individuals.

Both programmes have an inclusive approach, as they support young people from all backgrounds, for example by offering mentoring and financial coverage to remove barriers. Targeted inclusion measures ensure they can access meaningful experiences abroad or in their own communities. In short, the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ do not just improve employability, but they help young people to expand their horizons and their sense of what is possible.



“Erasmus+ supports Non Formal Education projects that equip young people with skills for today’s job market”



“
Non Formal Education has played a vital role for Ukrainian youth throughout the war
”

Corps and Erasmus+ programmes offer equal access to volunteering, exchanges, and local projects. I am proud to say that the European Solidarity Corps programme was quickly mobilised to support Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion. It allowed projects to re-focus on assistance to displaced Ukrainians. Under the 2023 Call one of two priorities was 'Relief for persons fleeing armed conflicts and other victims of natural or man-made disasters', with the financing of 10 projects worth EUR 2.7 million aimed to support the people displaced by the war in Ukraine. The same priority was included in the 2024 and 2025 calls.

Erasmus+ now includes a cross-cutting priority on responding to the consequences of Russia's war of aggression and is actively supporting these efforts, enabling youth workers to continue reaching those most in need. For the first time as of 2024, the Capacity Building for Youth action and for Sport is also open to organisations from Ukraine, with nine youth projects selected this year for €2.4 million. The European Youth Portal includes information to support young people from Ukraine based in the EU.

Although we are adapting, we need to keep listening to Ukrainian youth organisations and remain responsive to their evolving needs.

We are in Lviv, recently designated as the European Capital of Youth. The European Union has demonstrated clear and unequivocal commitment to Ukraine, which is also expressed concretely in cooperation in many areas. How do you see the role of NFE and its European programmes in this solidarity effort?

Lviv, as the European Capital of Youth, represents an example of resilience, especially in the face of the adversities that Ukraine is enduring. The motto "Not easy but move" is indeed quite symbolic. Non Formal learning has played a vital role for Ukrainian youth throughout the war. Inside Ukraine, it helps keep young people engaged and connected, whether through youth centres doubling as bomb shelters or organisations offering psychosocial support and civic education in war-affected areas.

Even in desperate times we must make sure there is space for hope. For displaced youth in the EU, the European Solidarity



How do you see Lviv's role in supporting Ukrainian youth in this challenging context, and its potential to inspire all of Europe, demonstrating the transformative power of youth engagement?

I am incredibly honoured to be in Lviv for the opening ceremony of the 2025 European Capital of Youth and to witness first-hand the energy and determination of Ukrainian youth. Lviv becoming the first Ukrainian city to hold the title of European Youth Capital is a clear signal that, even in the darkest times, youth engagement can drive resilience and hope.

Lviv is showing that young people are not just coping with the war: they're stepping up, organising, creating space for each other, and building the foundations of a future Ukraine rooted in democracy, solidarity, and European values.

To conclude, is there any other topic or area of intervention by the European Union in this field that you would like to highlight, which we have not covered yet?

Two areas that really resonate with me, particularly in a Ukrainian context, are our work to develop a European Culture Compass and our first ever European Strategy for Intergenerational Fairness.

“

**If you want to
destroy a nation,
you attack its
culture**

”

The Culture Compass will help celebrate the values of our shared European culture, in all its diversity. It will promote the conditions of those who work in the sector. As I have said before here in Ukraine, if you want to destroy a nation, you attack its culture. And just as Ukraine has shown, pride in protecting that culture goes a long, long way.

Our goal in relation to intergenerational fairness is to make sure that EU policies are fit for current as well as future generations. This will be instrumental for a stable and democratic future EU.

Profile

Glenn Micallef

Maltese politician and economist, aged 35. Since December 2024, he has been European Commissioner for Intergenerational Justice, Youth, Culture and Sport. He holds a degree from the University of Malta and a master's degree in European Law/Politics. He attended the College of Europe in Bruges and participated in the Future Leaders Invitation Programme in 2023. He was Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Robert Abela and President of the St John's Cathedral Foundation (2021–2024). He is married to an architect and councillor in Kalkara, Malta. He was vice-president of Zabbar St Patrick FC.

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

S

TOCKHOLM

NO TRAIN AT THE STATION,
NOR ICE IN THE FRIDGE



Fryshuset (“House of the Fridge”) and Trainstation (“train station”) are the names of two Swedish institutions visited by BLINK in the outskirts of Stockholm. Although different, both seek to balance a society in transformation through Non Formal Education, where integration is the main challenge.



FRYSHUSET, AN IDEA IN A CHANGED COUNTRY

In 1984, Anders Carlberg, a former MP and prominent figure in the student movements of the 1960s in Sweden, saw an unlikely opportunity in an abandoned cold storage warehouse: to create a safe space for young people to express themselves and grow away from crime and neglect.

Fryshuset (“House of the Fridge” in Swedish) is located in the south of Stockholm, in what is now the modern and dynamic district of Hammarby Sjöstad. At first glance, the space could pass for just another Nordic cultural centre of functional architecture. But as soon as you enter, you realise there is a different energy there, where Non Formal Education has taken over operations.

In fact, it all started with Carlberg’s idea to turn the “fridge” into a skate park and a pavilion dedicated to basketball. But what later grew around it was a non-profit institution that, over the last four decades, has become an international model of social integration, urban creativity and educational innovation.



When Non Formal Education Takes Over the Process



By the end of the 20th century, Stockholm was already feeling the effects of a fragmented youth marked by increasing immigration, social inequality and a lack of prospects in many of the growing suburban neighbourhoods. Carlberg believed that, instead of punishing problematic behaviour among young people, it was necessary to listen to them and provide them with pathways.

The success of Fryshuset turned the idea into one of the largest youth organisations in Europe, with dozens of active projects and a presence in several Swedish cities, such as Malmö and Gothenburg. It receives thousands of young people every year, many of them at risk.

But what makes this project unique is its educational approach. The space is simultaneously a school centre, a sports complex, a cultural incubator and a safe haven for young people at risk. At Fryshuset Gymnasium, the secondary school that is part of the institution, students can choose between areas such as music, urban dance, basketball, gaming or entrepreneurship, integrated into an official curriculum recognised by the Swedish Ministry of Education.

The idea is to unite each young person's individual passion with the development of their academic and social skills. But learning goes far beyond the classroom and uses Non Formal Education to complete the circle of individual and, above all, social aspiration. For this, there are rehearsal rooms, carpentry

workshops, recording studios, stages, cafés, meditation spaces and even areas dedicated to inter-religious dialogue.

From the Suburbs to Leadership

One of Fryshuset's programmes is "Exit", created to support people who want to leave extremist or violent movements, whether urban gangs, organised crime networks or extremist groups. These ex-militants are accompanied by mentors who may have gone through the same process, offering psychological support, professional training and community reintegration.

There is also "Elefanten i rummet" ("The Elephant in the Room"), a platform where young people can talk openly about mental health, anxiety, bullying or family problems, often in contexts where these topics are taboo.

As an institution that does not close its doors to marginalised young people who cannot afford a fee, Carlberg found very diverse sources of funding that combine public and private sources. Fryshuset receives support from the Swedish

government and municipalities that identify young people at risk and refer them to the institution, but also relies on European funds, crowdfunding and corporate sponsors, with brands investing in social responsibility.

Companies such as H&M, Ericsson and Spotify have already collaborated with Fryshuset, either through donations, youth mentoring or social innovation projects. Athletes, artists and other public figures contribute with resources, but also with knowledge, such as musician, producer and filmmaker Quincy Jones III, son of the well-known American musician of the same name, who donated and helped set up recording studios.

From these partnerships and the installed capacity, the organisation also manages its own cultural events, festivals and rented spaces, generating additional income and financial autonomy.

Although deeply rooted in the Scandinavian context, the Fryshuset model and its use of Non Formal Education is now studied and replicated in several countries, with partnerships established with institutions in Jordan, South Africa, the United States and various European countries.

Taking Young People Out of the “Margins of Society”

Jasmine Traoré works in strategic communication specialising in youth, peace and security. She believes that peacebuilding involves mediation and the role of grassroots organisations and civil society in preventing violence. At Fryshuset, she acts as leader of the “Brave Space”: a youth-centred platform to strengthen the personal sustainability, well-being and resilience of individuals and organisations working in communities affected by crises and conflicts.

In a presentation attended by BLINK in Stockholm, she explained that “the secret is to create group dynamics that are alternatives to those young people learn on the margins of society, and for that we need spaces where they feel safe so we can work with them.”

Although deeply rooted in the Scandinavian context, the Fryshuset model and its use of Non Formal Education is now studied and replicated in several countries



HANINGE

CATCHING THE TRAIN
OF INCLUSION

If in Stockholm we found a fridge without ice, south of the Swedish capital, in the municipality of Haninge, we visited a train station... without trains. In fact, this Trainstation does not serve to manage passengers or carriages, but it can easily transport us to another dimension: that of Non Formal Education.



Despite everything, the name Trainstation has a railway past, as its first headquarters was indeed in an old train station, but Johan Cedermark, one of its founders, explained to BLINK that the name can also take on the meaning of a training station.

For what really matters, it is a vibrant Non Formal Education institution dedicated to young people who, for different reasons, are at risk of exclusion, so it is no surprise that we found it nestled between social housing estates.

Founded with the support of the municipality of Haninge and civil society organisations, Trainstation is a hybrid space where traditional pedagogy has given way to more flexible methods, based on trust, creativity and active participation, usually using digital technology.

Its focus is on young people up to 25 years old, many of whom face challenges such as early school leaving, unemployment, family problems or unsuccessful or even forced migration experiences. "Here we never ask what failed. What matters to us is finding a path for each one," Johan told us as he showed

us a digital recording studio and a room where two very young children were literally making music with their feet.

"One of the main pillars of the institution is human relationships. Social educators, psychologists and mentors closely follow the young people, promoting routines, personalised goals and, above all, a sense of belonging. 'Trainstation can serve as a vocational starting point, as here they can try sewing, multimedia production, for example. But the goal is not always that, sometimes they are with us building Lego and it is enough for us to feel that we are helping them develop skills and integrate into society, discovering their path,' Johan explains.

The connection with the local business sector is another asset. Trainstation establishes partnerships with companies in Haninge and the Stockholm Metropolitan Area, opening doors for internships, practical training and even jobs.



UNG 137: THE POSTCODE OF JORDBRO

Not far from Trainstation, BLINK found Ung 137, a youth centre that has become a meeting and expression point for young people in the Jordbro neighbourhood, considered a vulnerable area of Haninge municipality.

The name of this centre is, in itself, a provocation, as it refers to the local postcode associated with crime. But the mission goes far beyond geography: it is about creating opportunities, promoting active participation and strengthening the sense of community among young people aged 13 to 20.

"We want every young person to feel seen and heard here," says Hanna Ahmed, explaining that "Ung 137 is above all a space where trust is built and doors are opened."

In addition to games, music and workshops, the centre promotes debates on social issues, school support sessions and projects created by the young people themselves, who are encouraged to take an active role in programming the space.



It was there that we met Nedson N'dele, an Angolan living in Sweden, and Petra Johansson, who guided us through the facilities, where sofas, cosy corners, pianos, and a kitchen coexist in a welcoming open space, where sharing is always present in the narrative.

We asked Nedson if the idea is to help the young people who attend Ung 137 to do, for example, their homework from the formal school they attend. "We don't have that capacity or specific function. We're not teachers. But yes, if they want to come here to study or do some work, they are welcome," he says.



JORDBRO PARKLET: SIMPLE AND EFFECTIVE

Still in the same neighbourhood, we noticed the existence of other projects dedicated to young people, always seeking their social integration through Non Formal Education and always with some intervention from the local authority. One example is a small green oasis called Jordbro Parklet, a simple but effective urban intervention that returned public space to the residents – especially young people and families in the neighbourhood.

This park was installed with the collaboration of local young people, artists and community organisations. “The most important thing here is not the space, but what it represents: it is a place where the community can be, create and be visible,” explained Omer and Samira, two of the project coordinators supported by Haninge municipality.

“The most important thing here is not the space, but what it represents: it is a place where the community can be, create and be visible”



More than an urban garden, the Parklet is used for cultural events, informal concerts, outdoor workshops and moments of relaxation in the daily life of the neighbourhood. Its creation directly involved young people from centres like Ung 137, reinforcing the sense of co-authorship and appreciation of public space.



VEGA SCHOOL & ACTIVITY HOUSE

The modern district of Vega, on the outskirts of Stockholm, is another face of Haninge municipality, forming part of an ambitious urban development project aimed at creating a sustainable and cohesive community. Since 2019, it has undergone significant expansion, with the planned construction of more than 4,000 new homes, including flats, semi-detached houses and villas, which have increased the community from 6,500 people in 2018 to over 10,000 today.

In Vega, everything seems to be in the right place, with cycle paths, green areas, parks and high-quality public spaces, as well as excellent transport links, capable of connecting residents to the centre of Stockholm in less than half an hour.

But development has not been limited to pure urbanism, and proof of this is the Vega School & Activity House, which BLINK found in the heart of Vega, serving as a meeting point for education, culture and leisure. It is an innovative community centre, inaugurated in August 2023, combining a school with various cultural and sports facilities, where Non Formal Education plays the main role.

The modern educational establishment serves students from pre-school to the 9th year, including a unit for adapted education. Designed to accommodate around 750 students, its facilities are modern and spacious, reflecting contemporary pedagogical practices inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy, emphasising creativity and active learning.



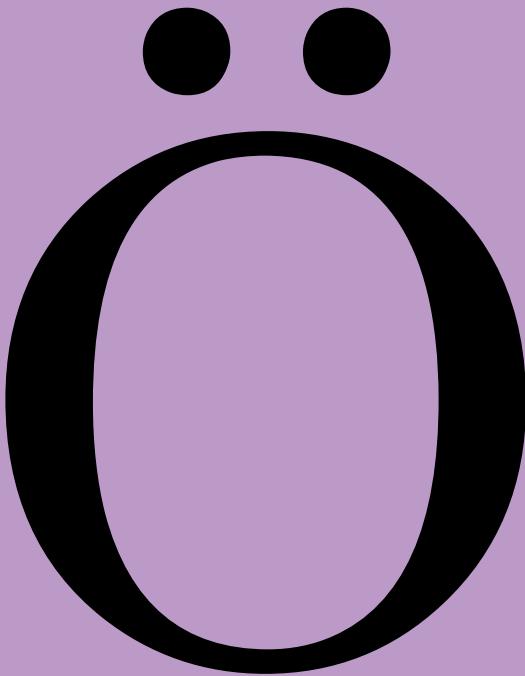
Literature, music, sport and more...

At the Vega School & Activity House, we found a set of facilities that, in addition to serving the school, are also open to the community. This includes the school and public library, equipped with study areas and free Wi-Fi access. There are also sports facilities, including a multi-sports hall with official dimensions and a movement room, used by local sports clubs and for community events. There is also Café Vega, managed in partnership with the Swedish Church, offering a welcoming environment for events and gatherings.

The "Kulturskola", in turn, offers courses in music, dance, theatre and visual arts for children and young people, and the "Fritidsgård" is a space dedicated to young people from the 7th to the 9th year, with recreational activities and educational support.

The centre regularly organises cultural events, such as art workshops, theatre performances and sports activities. These initiatives aim to strengthen community ties and offer Non Formal Education opportunities that are not limited to the school community, but are open to the entire community.





REBRO

AWESOME PEOPLE:
TRANSFORMING LIVES WITH EMPATHY

The Swedish city of Örebro, with around 120,000 inhabitants, lies on the western shore of Lake Hjälmaren, at the mouth of the Svartån river, just 200km from Stockholm, 280km from Gothenburg and just over 300km from Oslo, giving it a central location in Scandinavia and making it a cultural meeting point.



It was here that BLINK found an organisation that has stood out for promoting social transformation, especially among young people. This is “Awesome People”, a non-profit institution whose name is not just a brand, but a philosophy: believing that everyone has something amazing to offer the world.

Youth as a driving force

Founded in 2013, this organisation was born from the desire to create meaningful opportunities for young people, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalised.

Awesome People acts as a bridge between cultures, experiences and communities, encouraging active engagement and personal development through local and international projects. Its focus is on empowering young people to become agents of change, both in their own neighbourhoods and on a global scale.

To this end, it offers a wide range of activities, such as volunteering programmes, leadership training, social entrepreneurship and cultural exchanges through the Erasmus+ programme.

“Our goal is to create safe spaces where young people can grow, learn and discover their potential. We believe that each person has something unique to contribute, and we work to cultivate that,” one of the organisation’s coordinators explained to us on arrival.

But Awesome People does not limit itself to activity in Örebro or even Sweden, and is already recognised for its strong international involvement. Every year, the institution sends and receives volunteers from different countries, promoting intercultural dialogue and mutual learning. Young people from all over Europe participate in projects involving themes such as sustainability, social inclusion, human rights and youth entrepreneurship.

The organisation also collaborates with schools, municipalities and other NGOs to run workshops and educational events, often focusing on combating racism, promoting gender equality and strengthening social cohesion in multicultural communities.



“Our goal is to create safe spaces where young people can grow, learn and discover their potential. We believe that each person has something unique to contribute, and we work to cultivate that”





Portable Escape Room: a game with a purpose

At a time when education needs to be increasingly engaging, interactive and accessible, the Örebro institution has found an innovative and surprising solution: portable escape rooms. But, contrary to what many might think, these are not just quick-thinking games. They are mobile spaces for learning, empathy and social transformation.

Awesome People's portable escape rooms are immersive experiences that combine puzzle-solving with powerful social messages. Each travelling room is carefully designed to address important topics such as human rights, discrimination, empathy, inclusion, mental health and climate change, among others.

The idea is simple and effective: to learn in a fun way, connecting mind and heart. Through creative narratives and collaborative challenges, participants are led to reflect on complex realities, but in an accessible and engaging way.

The escape rooms are built to be transported and set up in schools, community events, conferences and youth centres, making them extremely versatile.

"We want participants to leave the game with more than just the satisfaction of having solved a puzzle. We want them to leave with new questions, new perspectives and a desire to act," explained one of the monitors during a session with a

group of Portuguese people who travelled to Sweden to learn about case studies.

The escape rooms have been successfully used in secondary schools, refugee youth integration projects, training for educators and public events. Their mobility means that the impact reaches communities that often do not have access to alternative educational activities.

They are, therefore, suitcases that carry Non Formal Education.



Measurable impact, unforgettable experiences

According to data provided by Awesome People, more than two thousand young people have already participated in their portable escape rooms since the project was launched. The results point to a significant increase in participants' engagement with the topics covered, as well as the strengthening of skills such as teamwork, critical thinking and empathy.

One of the most popular escape rooms is the one that deals with prejudice and stereotypes, where players have to unravel the story of a fictional character based on real experiences of exclusion and racism. The narrative, combined with physical and digital elements, invites young people to put themselves in someone else's shoes in a practical and emotional way.

THERE'S A PINOCCHIO AT SCHOOL WHO DISCOVERS LIES



The growing concern with the spread of false information, commonly called “fake news”, has led many media outlets to develop fact-checking projects, with the aim of helping the public distinguish truth from lies.

The online newspaper Polígrafo is one of the most notable examples in this field, standing out not only for its work directed at social networks, but also for the visibility gained through its partnership with the television station SIC. However, this type of scrutiny, often focused on political and general topics, does not exhaust the potential of fact-checking, which can also be applied in more specific contexts, such as the school environment. It was in this spirit that a Non Formal Education project emerged, with national scope, aiming to teach young people to separate the wheat from the chaff.

To fulfil this objective, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Polígrafo launched the “Pinocchio at School” project, with the support of the Representation of the European Commission in Portugal, the Office of the European Parliament in Portugal and the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Youth/Sport and European Solidarity Corps. The purpose is clear: to empower secondary school students to identify and combat disinformation, while simultaneously strengthening their critical thinking.

The initiative is developed in two complementary phases. The first took place in the first quarter of this year, covering all regions of mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions, starting in Funchal. In total, 14 sessions were held, plus a final one in Lisbon.

During these meetings, interactive workshops were held, providing students and teachers with free tools and educational



Mariana Lameiras
Researcher at the United Nations University

materials designed to identify and dismantle disinformation strategies, with particular focus on social networks. BLINK attended the session held in March in Guimarães, which stood out for the presence of several hundred students and a practical approach to the phenomenon of misleading information.

During the workshop, students analysed real cases of fake news, learned to identify warning signs and to use digital fact-checking tools. Direct interaction with Polígrafo journalists allowed them to better understand the mechanisms that fuel the spread of false content and to learn effective strategies to counter it. Teachers also participated in specific activities, focused on integrating media literacy into school curricula. Pedagogical methodologies were discussed and teaching resources were presented that can be used to foster students' critical thinking.

Among the guests was Mariana Lameiras, a researcher at the United Nations University, who shared with students some practical strategies based on her academic work on the relationship between technologies and citizenship. She highlighted, for example, the importance of consulting original sources and documents that support the information disseminated, as well as, whenever possible, contacting the authors of statements to verify their accuracy.

RUI DIAS' ANTIDOTE: “READ NEWSPAPERS”

Also present at the event, journalist Rui Dias, correspondent for Jornal de Notícias in Guimarães, stressed that the best antidote against disinformation remains regular reading of the press. “Read newspapers. But don't just read JN or Público, also read Expresso, Polígrafo and Correio da Manhã, read them all, not just one,” he recommended to the young audience, advocating for informative pluralism.

The journalist also highlighted the role of the information professional as a “mediator”, trained to select, process and present facts with credibility, respecting deontological, ethical and editorial rules that filter and prevent the dissemination of false or unreliable content.

Reading newspapers, listening to the radio and following news television channels, subject to editorial scrutiny and obliged to comply with codes and laws, are, in his view, the most effective way to combat the proliferation of disinformation and to discern between what is false and true.

With the conclusion of the roadshow stage, the project entered its second phase: a national competition challenging secondary school students to create original content, in text, video or social media formats, capable of dismantling misleading narratives circulating in the European public space.

Participants are free to choose the topic, provided they address cases of disinformation relevant at European and Portuguese level. Polígrafo suggests topics such as climate change, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, transphobia and electoral processes, all subjects that have been the target of persistent disinformation campaigns on digital platforms.

At the launch of the Pinocchio at School project, Fernando Esteves, director and founder of Polígrafo, had already highlighted the importance of the project: “Disinformation is one of the greatest challenges of our time and the only real defence against it is critical thinking. At Polígrafo, we believe that journalism goes beyond fact-checking and is also a commitment to empowering citizens,” he said.



Rui Dias

Journalist correspondent for Jornal de Notícias in Guimarães

But at the session attended by BLINK in Guimarães, Sara Beatriz Monteiro, a journalist who has followed this project, was more practical, explaining how young people can develop skills to defend themselves against disinformation. Not sharing unreliable information is the main rule pointed out by the professional, reminding that “a lie is faster than the truth” and that “disinformation can have serious consequences, so stopping fake news is everyone's duty.”



Sara Beatriz Monteiro
Journalist



“The school environment is a means of spreading disinformation,” says Filipe Pardal

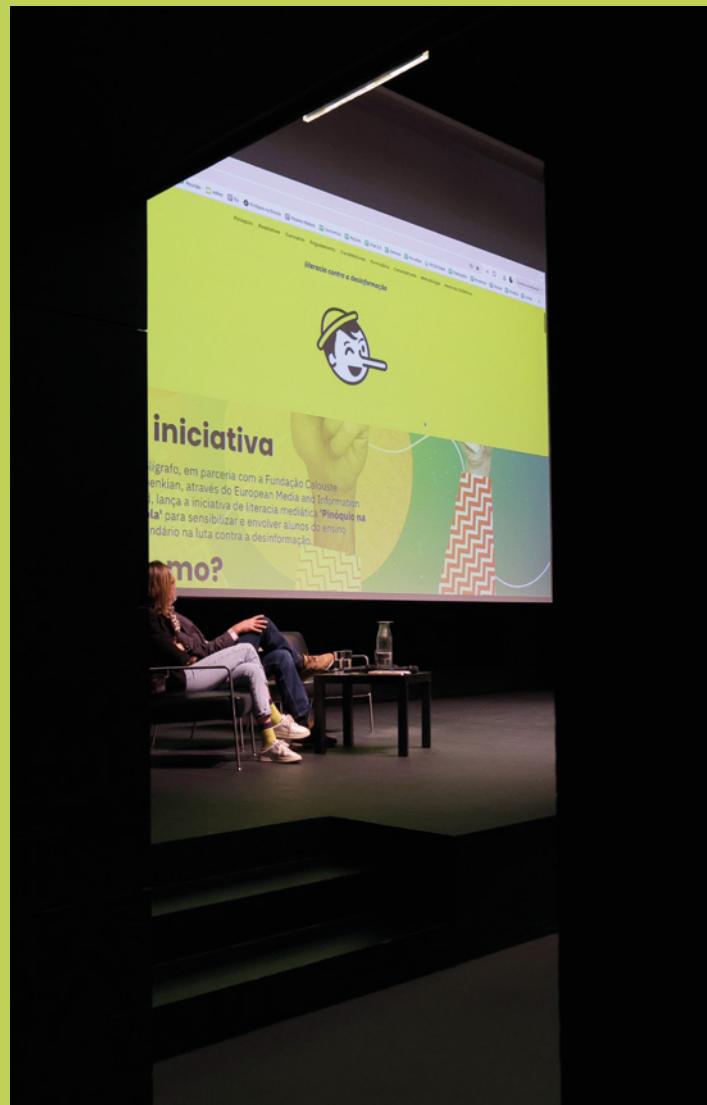
Filipe Pardal, leader of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), is also Chief Operating Officer of Polígrafo, where, in November last year, he published an opinion piece entitled “The lie starts next door”.

In his article, he argues that “local fact-checking is not a luxury; it is an urgent necessity. And those who do it in those newsrooms – even if unstructured, even if just one person – are often the last bastions against institutionalised lies.”

BLINK asked him whether the Pinocchio at School project is also a necessity and not a luxury, or whether the school and academic environment is more protected from lies than society in general: “the school environment is a means conducive to disinformation and its sharing. On the one hand, young people still lack awareness of the consequences of sharing false information, on the other, they use social networks a lot, where much of this disinformation originates.”

Filipe Pardal distinguishes, in fact, two types of disinformation usually in circulation: intentional and that which happens out of pure ignorance of the truth. “The second is more common and young people are more likely to spread it, as they find it harder to distinguish sources and assess their credibility,” he explains.

But, although he considers projects like Pinocchio at School important for giving young people the “literacy” they still lack, the Chief Operating Officer of Polígrafo warns of the even greater vulnerability of older people. “Personally, I think the problem is bigger in older age groups, because while younger people naturally find it easier to use platforms to identify and flag disinformation, older people do not have that ease of use and end up being more vulnerable.”



BLINK then asked who most uses fact-checking as a tool to distinguish truth from lies. On this, Filipe Pardal points out that Polígrafo is present on various platforms, from the website to SIC and TSF, as well as social networks, and that audiences are very varied. Older generations mainly use Facebook, where most of those who consult Polígrafo's fact-checking are over 55. The average age drops on the website to the 34 to 55 age group, even lower on Instagram (24 to 35) and is radically lower on TikTok (16 to 20).

On this last platform, Polígrafo had already developed a project called "Generation V", which created a virtual newsroom where the "reporters" were young users, accompanied by "real" journalists. These projects with young people, such as Pinocchio at School or Generation V, helped Polígrafo's newsroom realise that younger people like fact-checking to have conclusions, even if the conclusion is, for example, "imprecise".

These Non Formal Education experiences have helped Polígrafo understand the validity of its work, which Filipe Pardal considers different from other journalism. "One thing fact-checking brings to journalism is that it looks at different places and not just the usual sources, such as social networks. And since we don't give 'breaking news', our priority is to provide more information," he concludes.

Regarding Pinocchio at School, although the project's first year is not yet complete, he indicates that it has already exceeded expectations. "It's a pilot project, but schools are giving very good feedback and more and more are requesting sessions. If we move on to a second year, we'll try to extend the duration and reach more places," says Filipe Pardal, adding that "even so, we did more sessions than expected (14), plus a final one in Lisbon and we were in all regions of the country."

"The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation defended democracy even when there was no democracy," recalls Pedro Calado

Pedro Calado, Director of the Democracy and Civil Society Programme at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, reinforced, in statements to BLINK, the institution's commitment to "strengthening the ecosystem for combating disinformation, promoting more active citizens, more capable of understanding and acting in the face of threats that compromise the quality of our democracies."

Recalling the Foundation's nearly 70 years, Pedro Calado remembered previous projects, such as the travelling libraries,



Pedro Calado

Director of the Democracy and Civil Society Programme at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

created to bring knowledge and literature to all corners of a country lacking information. "With that, we defended democracy even when there was no democracy," he joked, referring to times when censorship and lack of resources limited knowledge. "Today, the challenge is the opposite. It's the excess of information and the growing difficulty in understanding what is or isn't true."

He also referred to the historical link between the growth of the press and the consolidation of democracies and warned of the current trend of declining information quality, with the disappearance of many media outlets, especially regional ones. "The quality and verification of sources is increasingly at risk because today there is less mediation of information," he warns. "Look at how people view science today. The number of flat-earthers proliferating now was unimaginable 20 or 30 years ago."

Pinocchio at School thus fits into the Foundation's mission to promote informed and active citizenship, within a European framework, and may, in the future, go far beyond the school. "We thought of starting in the school context and invited the Directorate-General for Education to join this project. We are pleased to see it grow and, by crossing themes such as environment, food or health, we are really forming citizens."

For this reason, Pedro Calado told us that the Foundation is considering expanding the project to other age groups, confirming what Filipe Pardal of Polígrafo said about the vulnerability of older people: "older citizens are the target of much disinformation and we think that taking this type of initiative to them could be the next step and be very interesting for citizenship," he concluded.

THERE ARE MORE “PINOCCHIOS” IN EUROPE

In addition to the project now developed in Portugal, there are or have been other Non Formal Education programmes implemented in schools in other European countries with the same aim.

FAIR NEWS:
Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and Romania also seek fair news



Fair News is a project co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme aimed at secondary school students in Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and Romania. The goal is to discover what makes news fair and to teach young people to identify bias and trustworthy sources in today's media landscape.

Through interactive labs and workshops, participants explore media and information literacy operations, learning to navigate and collaborate in the creation of inclusive and equitable news. The project culminated in the publication of the Fair News Guide, a practical guide for educators and students, useful both in school and community contexts.

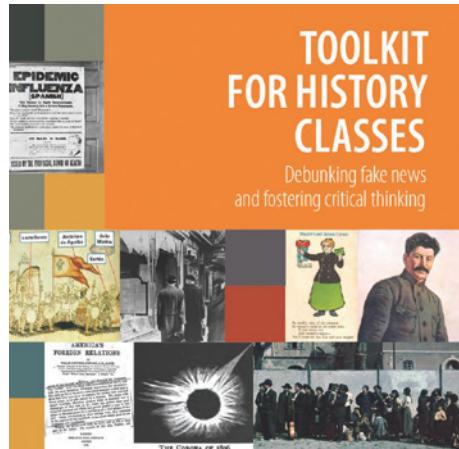
FAKE OFF!



Also known as Fostering Adolescents' Knowledge and Empowerment in Outsmarting Fake Facts, this was an Erasmus+ youth project (2018–2020) with a strong emphasis on digital literacy in Spain. It created a digital learning package consisting of an interactive app with activities and a communication platform, as well as an online resource for trainers and young people, with teaching materials, videos, graphics and exercises for young people and educators.

The format combines formal and non-formal methods, and young people learn while playing (game-based learning) and participating in workshops in schools or youth centres. It is a remarkable example of using Non Formal Education within school structures: serious games, active learning, peer collaboration and critical reflection on false information. Although FAKE OFF! ended in 2020, its resources (app, toolbox, materials) remain accessible and applicable today, and can be integrated into school curricula or extracurricular club programmes.

HISTOLAB:
another way to combat “fake news”



The Council of Europe, as part of the HISTOLAB project, launched in 2024 the toolkit “Debunking Fake News in History Classes”, which can be used not only in schools but also in Non Formal Education contexts with young people.

Comprising 11 practical activities, it includes debates, role-playing games and source analysis exercises, helping participants to identify disinformation, hate speech and manipulated narratives. Adaptable to workshops, youth clubs or community centres, the resource promotes critical thinking and media skills, essential for facing the challenges of disinformation.

N ON FORMAL EDUCATION AND ADULT COMPETENCIES: WHAT THE PIAAC DATA SAYS

João Queirós

School of Education, Polytechnic
Institute of Porto and Institute of
Sociology, University of Porto
Deputy Coordinator of the PIAAC Project
Group in Portugal (2019–2024)

PIAAC and adult competencies in Portugal

Between 2019 and 2024, Portugal successfully began and completed, for the first time, its participation in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), a multi-cycle international study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) dedicated to the skills of the adult population.

In the first round of Cycle 2 of PIAAC, 31 countries carried out the operations associated with the Adult Skills Survey, the main component of the Programme, and thus now have extensive and up-to-date data on the possession and use of skills and the proficiency level of people aged 16 to 65, in the key domains of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving¹.

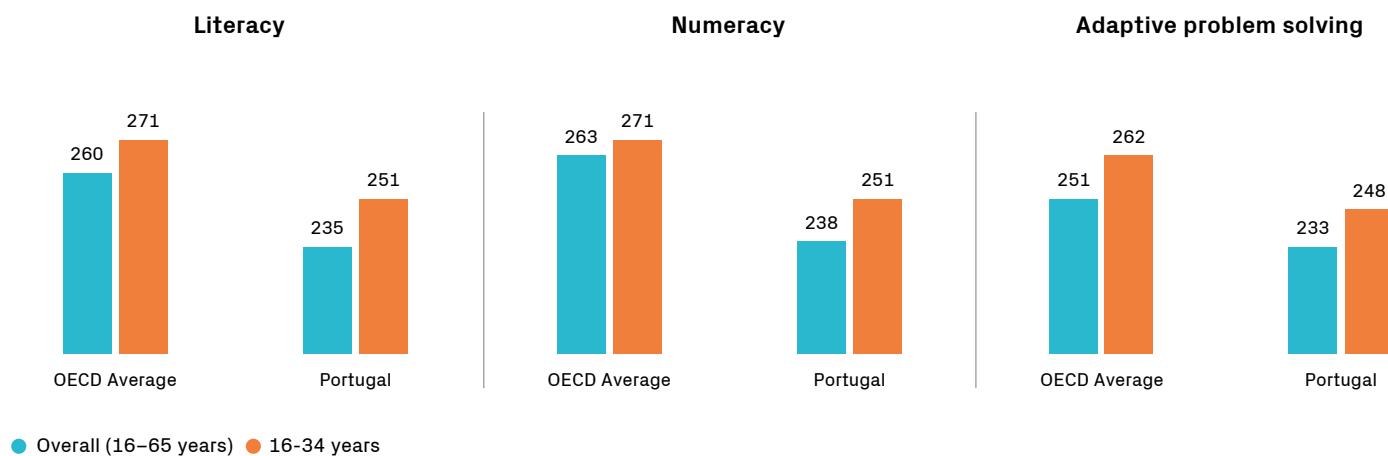
In a panoramic assessment of the results made available in December 2024, the indicators relating to the relatively low proficiency level of adults living in Portugal stand out. On a scale with a maximum value of 500 points, the average proficiency recorded in Portugal was 235 points in literacy, 238 points in numeracy and 233 points in adaptive problem-solving, with these results significantly lower than the averages recorded in the participating countries as a whole (Figure 1).

Even more relevant is the fact that a very significant proportion of adults living in Portugal have proficiency levels below the minimum thresholds considered necessary to adequately

respond to the challenges of today's societies: in literacy, for example, 42% of Portuguese adults have "Level 1" or "Below Level 1" proficiency, on a scale divided into five levels, and only from "Level 2" upwards is it considered that the minimum conditions are met for confronting the challenges associated with the appropriation, interpretation and mobilisation of written information in everyday life. These are adults who have difficulty understanding and using information that is not clearly indicated and that appears in texts or compositions that are not short texts or organised lists.

Proficiency levels are significantly higher among younger adults (16–34 years) – in Portugal, these adults have an advantage of 16 points in literacy, 13 points in numeracy and 15 points in problem-solving compared to the average scores for the adult population as a whole – but the disadvantaged situation of the Portuguese population compared to the OECD average remains even when considering only this age group (Figure 1)².

Figure 1
Average proficiency of all adults (16–65 years) and young adults (16–34 years) in the domains of literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving, in the OECD (overall average) and in Portugal (500-point scales).



Source: OECD, *Survey of Adult Skills*, 2024.
Own elaboration based on data extracted from the PIAAC Data Explorer.

¹ For more information about PIAAC, see: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about-programmes/piaac.html>. For information on Portugal's participation in Cycle 2 of PIAAC, see: <https://www.anqep.gov.pt/np4/piaac/>.

² The main results of the Survey of Adult Skills, the main component of PIAAC, can be found in OECD (2024). PIAAC data can be accessed and analysed using the PIAAC Data Explorer, a free online tool provided by the OECD at <https://piaacdataexplorer.oecd.org/ide/idepiaac/>.



The relevance of Non Formal Education

Because Portugal did not complete its participation in Cycle 1 of PIAAC – which included three rounds of surveys conducted between 2012 and 2017 in 38 countries – it does not yet have consolidated research results on the relationship between participation in Non Formal Education activities and proficiency levels among the adult population living in the country. This is a line of research that the data made available in December 2024 now allow to be developed for the Portuguese case, and whose exploration will certainly benefit from the results of studies carried out in other countries for this purpose.

Some of these results attest not only to the positive association between participation in Non Formal Education and proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technologically challenging situations and environments (Cegolon, 2015; Sulkunen, Nissinen & Malin, 2021; Nygren et al., 2019), but also to the positive economic and social effects that generally result from adults' involvement in educational and training activities of this nature. Such effects include, among others: increased chances of finding and keeping a job (Heller-Sahlgren, 2023);

wage advantages (Fialho, Quintini & Vandeweyer, 2019); or additional motivation for involvement in training processes, especially among adults with lower skills, who are usually the most excluded from educational participation, particularly if it is formal in nature (Helsingør et al., 2023).

Seeking to take a first analytical step towards exploring this topic, the presentation of the following data, which are part of the vast set of results from the Adult Skills Survey conducted in 2022–2023 as part of Cycle 2 of PIAAC, reveal, for the Portuguese case, before any other considerations, the fact that the level of adult participation in Non Formal Education activities is relatively low, when compared to the average values for this indicator in the OECD countries as a whole.

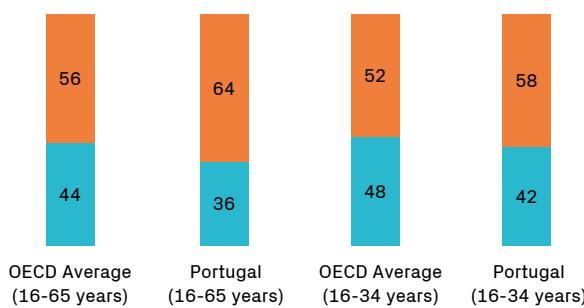
In the OECD, on average, 44% of adults aged 16 to 65 report having participated in some type of Non Formal Education activity in the twelve months prior to the survey, a figure that drops to 36% for adults living in Portugal. Among younger adults living in the country (16–34 years), this proportion rises to 42%, a value that slightly converges with the general average, but remains below the average observed for this age group in the OECD countries as a whole.

According to the definition proposed by PIAAC, Non Formal Education includes all training activities, whether job-related

or not, that do not lead to certification and do not result in the achievement of a formal qualification level.

If the gap between the proportion of adults in Portugal participating in Non Formal Education activities and the average observed for this indicator in the PIAAC countries would be enough to underline how much remains to be done in this area, the data comparing the average proficiency of adults who participate with the average proficiency of adults who do not participate in Non Formal Education suggest the need to give increased attention and priority to this issue.

Figure 2
Participation of all adults (16–65 years) and young adults (16–34 years) in non formal education activities in the twelve months prior to the survey, in the OECD (overall average) and in Portugal (%)



● Participated ● Did Not Participate

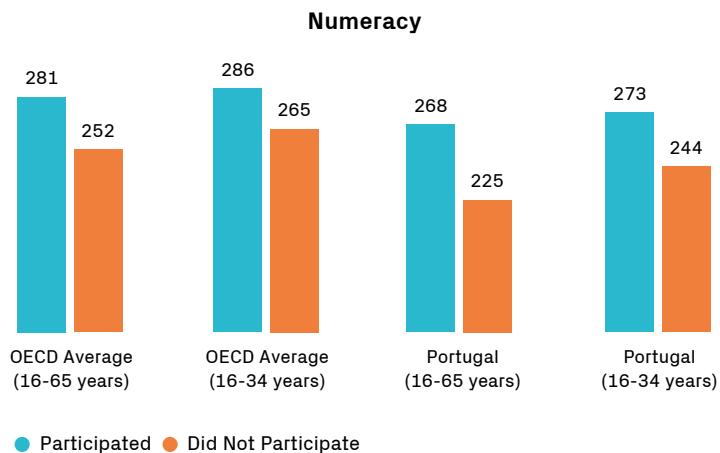
Source: OECD, *Survey of Adult Skills*, 2024.
Own elaboration based on data extracted from the PIAAC Data Explorer.

When analysing the data on numeracy proficiency – the results would be similar if literacy or problem-solving were considered – a positive and statistically significant differential is found in favour of adults who participated in Non Formal Education activities in the twelve months prior to the survey. In the group of countries involved in Cycle 2 of PIAAC, the average numeracy proficiency of adults involved in some type of Non Formal Educational activity reaches 281 points, 18 points above the overall average and 29 points above the average for adults who did not participate in Non Formal Education.

In the Portuguese case, the trend is similar, but with a greater advantage for adults who participate in Non Formal Education activities: these have a numeracy proficiency level (268 points) 30 points above the overall average and 43 points above the average for adults who do not participate in such activities. The pattern is similar among younger adults, with consistently higher numeracy proficiency levels among those who participate in Non Formal Education. (Figure 3).

Additionally, it is possible to see that the proficiency differential favouring adults who participate in Non Formal Education remains whether or not the training activities are related to their professional lives and activities. Although proficiency is the result of a complex equation – an equation that the PIAAC data can now help to unravel for the Portuguese case – what these data indicate is that, regardless of the nature or purpose of the chosen activity, what truly matters is regular participation in Non Formal Education.

Figure 3
Average numeracy proficiency of all adults (16–65 years) and young adults (16–34 years), according to participation in non formal education in the twelve months prior to the survey, in the OECD (overall average) and in Portugal (500-point scales).



● Participated ● Did Not Participate

Source: OECD, *Survey of Adult Skills*, 2024.
Own elaboration based on data extracted from the PIAAC Data Explorer.

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A GUIDE TO TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

A tool created by the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Youth/Sport and European Solidarity Corps reinforces the role of Non Formal Education in building local policies with and for young people

How can young people be involved in decisions that directly affect their lives? How can ideas be turned into local policies with real impact? These are two of the many questions that the Action Kit – Local Policies for Youth seeks to answer. Launched by the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Youth/Sport and European Solidarity Corps, this practical guide is a powerful tool for everyone working with and for young people – whether they are municipal youth workers, non-formal educators, youth associations or the young people themselves.

More than just a manual, the Action Kit is a call to action, inviting local communities to recognise youth as agents of change and Non Formal Education as the catalyst for more active democratic participation and citizenship.

“The Action Kit starts from the premise that young people have a central role in local life – not just as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of solutions,” highlights the team at the Portuguese National Agency responsible for the publication.

Non Formal Education at the heart of transformations

The Action Kit assumes Non Formal Education as its methodological basis. Through practical proposals, inspiring examples and participatory tools, it promotes dynamics that value active listening, critical thinking, experimentation and dialogue between different actors.

Organised into different modules, the Action Kit presents a journey that goes from local diagnosis to the construction of action plans. It includes suggestions for activities, facilitation techniques and reflections on the principles of Non Formal

Education, always with a close eye on diversity and inclusion.



A tool with European and local impact

Developed within the Erasmus+ Programme and aligned with European priorities for youth, the Action Kit also has strong local roots. It recognises the importance of municipalities as spaces of proximity and the role that youth workers can play as bridges between political structures and young people.

The publication is available in Portuguese and English, which will allow its dissemination in other European countries. Although it has a physical version, it can be downloaded free of charge from the Portuguese National Agency's website.

A compass for change

At a time when young people face multiple challenges such as unemployment or climate change, the Action Kit emerges as a compass to guide participatory, sustainable and transformative practices.

BLINK highly recommends this reading, especially to those working in the field of Non Formal Education, youth policy and community work. Because, as the kit itself states, “change begins where we are, with who we have, and with what we already know how to do”.

NO STRESS!

Gabriel and Rabia tell BLINK about two different experiences of Non Formal Education. One, leaving Portugal for distant Europe. The other, finding her “home” far from Turkey.



AT 18, GABRIEL LOST HIS FEAR OF THE WORLD

Gabriel Cunha decided to embark on the #DiscoverEU adventure, which gives 18-year-olds the chance to travel around Europe by train. But in fact, the journey began by plane, between Lisbon and Luxembourg, followed by, already on rails, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Berlin, Prague, Krakow, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Venice, Verona and Milan.

Gabriel explains his choice with the desire to discover more distant and less likely destinations than his usual family holiday trips. “Central and Eastern Europe was an opportunity to get to know other cultures. Basically, I wanted to go further.”

“I spent three days in Krakow and if you ask me what most impacted me on this trip, I have to talk about Auschwitz, but overall, I really liked the cities of so-called Eastern Europe. I felt at home,” he told BLINK. The “European spirit” was, in fact, a common factor in this experience that changed his life: “I lost my fear and it won’t be long before I’m abroad again, maybe even to do my master’s degree,” he concludes.



RABIA’S “HIJAB” IS NOW A CHOICE

We find Rabia Aydin, 25, in Barcelos, at IAFA – Intercultural Association for All, in northern Portugal. But her origins are in Turkey, in the city of Samsun, 10 hours by train from western Istanbul. Rabia’s first choice for an exchange was Lyon, in France, but things didn’t go well, as she felt that the “hijab” covering her head caused some discomfort.

Portugal was then the country where Rabia found herself, and the experience was so good that she has already returned after her first experience for a volunteering programme. “I feel very good in Portugal. I am not the target of racist behaviour, there is great integration in this country and people are very relaxed. I am learning to be like that too, because in Turkey everything is more stressful,” she says.

Rabia speaks of freedom. “I feel I can be myself, with or without a hijab I am myself. I feel free to wear it or not. I know no one will point the finger or discriminate. And I feel useful in what I do, in the area I like, which is the social field. The work I do here is multicultural.”

BREAKING

AND URBAN CULTURE AS A
SCHOOL OF CITIZENSHIP

From the streets to cultural institutions, from battles to classrooms, breaking has established itself today as an important tool of Non Formal Education, capable of transforming lives, communities and even public policies. These stories show how art, sport, culture and inclusion can build more conscious, creative, resilient citizens – and even those capable of flying...



Hip-hop culture emerges as a powerful example of how artistic expression, sport and social activism intersect to generate opportunities, foster inclusion and strengthen community bonds.

From the experiences of artists and cultural entrepreneurs who create training centres in vulnerable neighbourhoods, to international festivals that bring together thousands of young people in celebrations of diversity, such as the recent one in Porto that gathered thousands of young people from all over the world, and through European projects that integrate refugees, women and marginalised communities, these initiatives show that learning goes far beyond the classroom.

What unites all the protagonists of these ten stories presented by Blink is the conviction that dance educates not only bodies, but above all citizens. Because when young people find in breaking their discipline, self-esteem, cooperation and creativity, they are also learning to be active and transformative members of society.

It was with all this in mind that the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Youth/Sport and European Solidarity Corps promoted this year the first meeting of the European Steering Group for Breaking, which took place in Portugal. An event that marked the continuation of the strategy to value urban cultures as drivers of inclusion, youth participation and methodological innovation. The initiative follows The Power of Breaking: Dance, Inclusion and Youth Empowerment, which laid the foundations for the creation of a European ecosystem of structured cooperation in the fields of training, sport, culture and inclusion.

The meeting brought together partners from several European countries with the aim of transforming the existing network into a space for shared governance and strategic planning. Among the priorities defined were the consolidation of the European Breaking model as a discipline recognised in youth, education and cultural development policies, as well as the need to ensure coherence and quality in the implementation of initiatives with local and international impact.

Portugal was also this year the stage for the World Battle, a competition that brought together the best breaking performers in the incredible setting of Porto's historic centre. Blink attended and spoke with some of the protagonists, who take diverse angles on the subject and on how urban culture can contribute to the formation of a generation, outside the classroom.



“When young people find in breaking their discipline, self-esteem, cooperation and creativity, they are also learning to be active and transformative members of society”



Max Oliveira reinforces breaking as a tool for inclusion and a European network

The Portuguese Max Oliveira, recognised worldwide as a dancer, organiser and pedagogue of breaking, presented in Porto his vision of the four pillars that support this culture: training, sport, culture and inclusion. Founder of Momentum Crew and creator of iconic events such as Eurobattle and WorldBattle, Oliveira has a career of international achievements and collaborations with global brands such as Red Bull.

For the Portuguese, training is synonymous with empowerment, especially among marginalised communities; sport is seen as a universal language that conveys discipline and respect; culture, as a link between different identities; and inclusion, not as charity, but as social justice. As a member of the breaking development group at WDSF and a specialist at the Portuguese Federation of Sports Dance, he argues that the European Union should protect and expand this network of projects, which already has a direct impact on the lives of displaced young people and communities at risk.

Bogdan “Beat the Young Hustler” bets on training and equality in breaking

Romanian Nedelciu Bogdan, better known as Beat the Young Hustler, highlighted in Porto the importance of breaking as a space for training, inclusion and social transformation. With 16 years of experience in hip-hop culture and three world footwork titles, Bogdan works as a teacher, trainer and event organiser, and is preparing to open a creative space in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in 2026.

Among his initiatives is the creation of events that value female presence in breaking, such as women-only discussion panels and the 2v2 Thelma & Louise competition. For Bogdan, hip-hop was born as the voice of marginalised communities and should continue to be an open space for diversity, where values such as peace, love, unity and fun prevail. He also defends the principle “Each One Teach One”, reinforcing that everyone has a role in the collective growth of the community.

Roman Bedusenko uses breaking as a bridge for inclusion and education in Portugal

Based in Porto, b-boy and educator Roman Bedusenko presented the project “The Power of Breaking”, advocating dance as a tool for youth empowerment, inclusion and community transformation. With training that spans breaking, acrobatics, house dance and even contemporary jazz, Bedusenko runs MXM ArtCenter in Porto, an independent space that combines urban art, education and social intervention.

The centre works with young people from vulnerable neighbourhoods through workshops, mentoring and public programmes, in partnership with schools, local authorities and social institutions. Bedusenko, also a licensed coach by the FPDD and international judge for the WDSF, emphasises that breaking should be understood not only as a spectacle, but as an educational methodology capable of transmitting discipline, resilience and hope. His contribution to European projects involves creating inclusive and sustainable systems, aligned with the values of solidarity, equity and cultural diversity.

Darka: Breaking as Inclusion and Future

Lithuanian Darius “Darka” Marcinkus is one of the central figures of breaking in his country. With a career that began in 1999, Darka is now leader of the Lithuanian Breaking League, director of the Extreme Dance School, which welcomes more than 300 students, and producer of national and international championships.

His mission goes beyond dance: he promotes inclusion through free classes, especially for young people without resources and refugee children from Ukraine, and argues that breaking should be a tool for education, culture and social integration. In the championships he organises, he integrates technologies to measure results accurately and offers young people a clear trajectory: training, competition and overcoming. “Breaking connects different nations and communities. It’s more than a style, it’s a space for sharing, effort and persistence,” he emphasises.



Denys Lukashuk: Building Bridges with Breaking

Known as B-Boy Den, Ukrainian Denys Lukashuk is the national breaking champion (2022) and one of the most active ambassadors of hip-hop culture in his country. With more than 20 years of experience, he is a teacher, international judge and creator of online courses dedicated to training new dancers.

Denys highlights the Breaking Boundaries project, a platform aimed at connecting local, regional and global communities through breaking. The goal is to create “safe hubs” where everyone can learn, socialise and develop collective projects.

“Every experience is unique and valuable to someone. We need to build a network that connects all this, based on trust, sharing and support between generations and countries,” he says. For Lukashuk, breaking is both an artistic expression and a tool for social and cultural unity.

Xedo: Hip-Hop as Mission and Service

Italian Edoardo “Xedo” Bernardini has been a b-boy since 2002 and sees breaking as much more than dance: “it is my way of serving others through art, education and community.” Founder of the BreakDown Dance Project, one of the largest breaking schools in Italy, Xedo also organises international events such as Freestyle Session Europe and acts as a judge in top competitions, including the Pan-American Games, European Games and Olympic qualifiers.

His vision is clear: “breaking was born as a response to situations of exclusion and continues to have this transformative role.” Throughout his career, he has worked with young people in vulnerable contexts, creating spaces of inclusion and belonging. “Breaking is not about ego or results, but about community and hope,” he argues.

Xedo has participated in several European cultural exchange projects and believes that the future of Hip-Hop culture lies in structuring formal and sustainable networks that support youth worldwide. “They call me Xedo, but in reality, they call us Hip-Hop. Because this mission is collective,” he concludes.





Andrii “Pluto” Gregul brought Olympic energy to the stage

Helsinki was represented by one of the biggest names in world breaking: Andrii Gregul, better known as B-boy Pluto. With a 25-year career in dance and experience on some of the biggest international stages – from Red Bull BC One to Battle of the Year – Pluto presented himself as a multifaceted artist: dancer, DJ and coach.

He is the coach of the Finnish National Breaking Team and prepared athletes for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. “What motivates me is finding the right approach for each person and offering tools so they can evolve,” he says. In addition, Gregul highlights the importance of his work in the SADE ry organisation, which promotes urban culture and brings young people closer to hip-hop. In the show, his vision was clear: breaking is not only competition, but also community and a way of life.

Ángel “Kadoer” Patiño celebrated a life dedicated to breaking

Directly from Barcelona, Ángel Patiño, known as B-boy Kadoer, recalls the days when he danced on the streets of the Rambla in 1997, passing the hat to finance his first competitions, until reaching participation in the historic Battle of the Year in 2000.

Since then, he has built a solid career: he has represented Spain nine times in world championships, created the Street Dance Area project in 2008 and collaborated with renowned companies such as Rafael Amargo and Brodas Bros. Today he is also an official judge of the WDSF and a trainer of new talent. “My life has been dedicated to sharing, training, competing and building community,” says Kadoer, emphasising the educational and inclusive value of hip-hop culture.



Jona Wyns bets on breaking as a driver of social transformation in Belgium

With more than 20 years in hip-hop and breaking, Jona Wyns, from Ghent, is one of the most influential voices in the professionalisation and expansion of this culture in Belgium. A Master in Sports Management and founder of TWS – The Youth Home for Hip Hop, Wyns has dedicated his career to building inclusive communities, creating links between youth, sport and culture.

Among his projects are Breaking Blocks, supported by the Flemish government, which connects diverse communities through training and free masterclasses, and the Legacy League, a children's breaking league accessible to all levels. Jona is also one of the organisers of Unbreakable Breaking Champs, an event that in 2023 brought 17,500 people to Leuven and brought together dancers from more than 80 countries. For Wyns, breaking is much more than dance: it is identity, belonging and opportunity. The goal now is to expand these initiatives at European level, strengthening cooperation between communities.



Soria Rem (Babyson) gives voice to women and inclusion in hip-hop

Frenchwoman Soria Rem, known as Babyson, is one of the pioneering names in female breaking in Europe. A member of the historic Wanted Crew, she was the first woman to win the Battle of the Year, in 2001, paving the way for a career marked by dance, choreography and cultural activism. Today, she is the artistic director of her company, Art Move Concept, supported by the French Ministry of Culture, and acts as an international judge for the World DanceSport Federation.

Babyson highlights how hip-hop transformed her life and continues to be a culture of openness and opportunity. In her training, she works with everyone from professionals to young people in schools, promoting self-confidence and teamwork. She advocates breaking as a high-performance sport, requiring adequate support structures, and stresses the importance of inclusion in all its forms – gender, social origin, religion or disability. At the end of this year, she will also take on the co-direction of an arts centre in Île-de-France, consolidating her role as a reference in urban culture in France.



Take the leap with SALTO-YOUTH



Did you know that the European SALTO-YOUTH platform offers thousands of free resources dedicated to Non Formal Education? And that they are accessible to educators, facilitators, youth workers and organisations working with young people?

Through tools such as the Toolbox for Training & Youth Work, it is possible to explore, download and apply more than two thousand practical activities for training, group facilitation, skills development, active citizenship, inclusion, sustainability, among other topics. The materials include exercises, games, simulations, group dynamics and pedagogical support sheets, tested in multiple youth contexts.

The platform also offers the European Training Calendar, with hundreds of international training opportunities; the Trainers Online for Youth directory, with more than 700 active trainers; and the Otlas Partner-Finding platform, which connects thousands of youth organisations across Europe, promoting Erasmus+ partnerships and projects.

European Parliament wants greater recognition for NFE

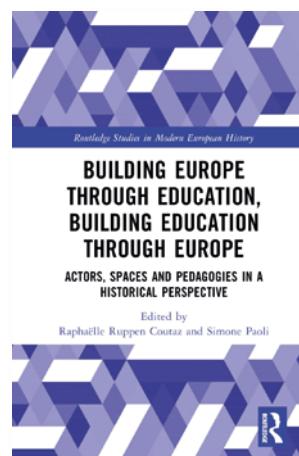


The European Parliament published this year the briefing “Fostering participation in education and training throughout life”, which highlights the importance of integrating Formal Education, Non Formal Education and Informal Education at all ages as a response to challenges of inclusion, employability and active citizenship.

The document emphasises that Non Formal Education is crucial for engaging young people and adults in volunteering, associations and community initiatives, arguing that the skills acquired in these environments should have greater official recognition, including through validation and certification systems.

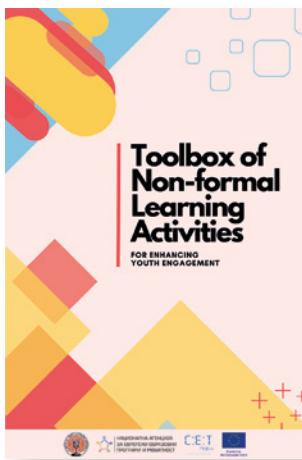
According to the report, investing in Non Formal Education is essential to “reach audiences that Formal Education does not reach” and to create more flexible learning pathways, aligned with social and labour market needs.

50 years of Non Formal Education in Europe



The book “Building Europe Through Education, Building Education Through Europe” (Routledge, 2025) brings together chapters by specialists on the impact of educational policies on European construction. One of the highlights is the chapter by Howard Williamson, “Non Formal Education and Learning in Europe”, which revisits 50 years of Non Formal Education practices developed by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, from 1972 to 2022. Williamson elaborates on how NFE became a pillar for the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, highlighting how these practices have helped shape generations of young people and continue to inspire NGOs, youth centres and local policies across Europe, strengthening the link between formal, community and democratic learning.

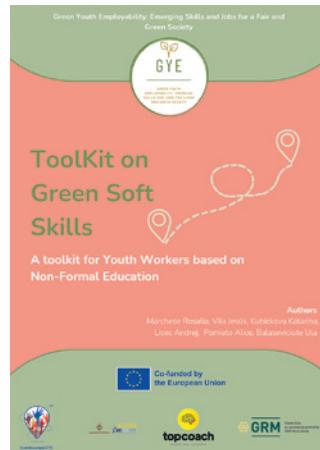
Toolbox of Non-formal Learning Activities for Enhancing Youth Engagement



A collection of 8 experiential activities aimed at youth participation, social inclusion and intercultural learning. Complete instructions (objectives, target audiences, assessment, necessary materials). Produced in 2023 and published in February 2024 via SALTO.



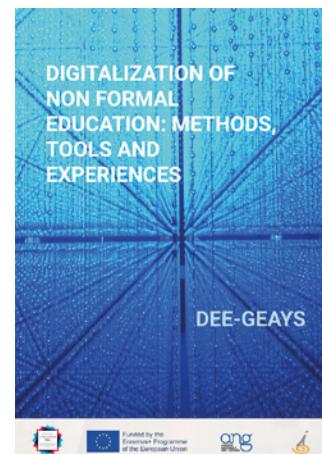
Toolkit on Green Soft Skills



A tool based on GreenComp – European Sustainability Competence Framework (2022), aimed at green skills. It offers three activities per sustainable competence, suitable for youth work and Non Formal Education. Available in several languages (including Portuguese) since September 2024.



Digitalization of Non Formal Education: Methods, Tools and Experiences



A 2023 study on the digitalisation of NFE, listing platforms and strategies for migrating non-formal methodologies to the digital environment. Includes operational strategic recommendations for youth organisations.



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