

Animating the Margins: A Peer-Led Short-Term DEI Intervention with Teenagers

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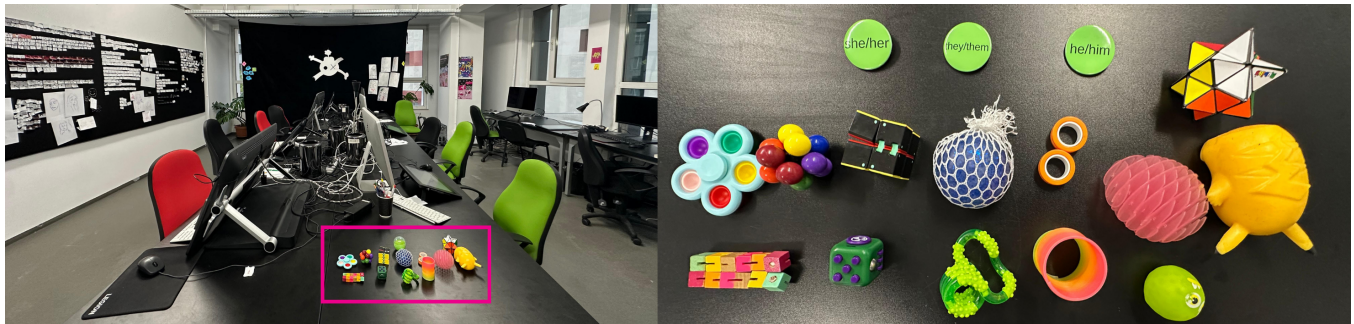


Figure 1: Left: The Animation Incubator workshop environment hosted at the National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale”. Right: sensory tools (fidget toys) and pronoun badges used as practical intervention elements.

Abstract

Creative communities increasingly function as sites of social experimentation, offering opportunities to drive creativity for social change. This paper examines the role of creative communities as small-scale infrastructures for inclusion through a case study of a digital arts community for youth in Eastern Europe. We evaluated a short-term, peer-led intervention ($N = 14$) designed to strengthen Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) literacy and bystander agency among teenagers. Using a pre-post survey design, we observed high baseline alignment with inclusive values and descriptive increases in knowledge of how to intervene in harassment and build inclusive spaces, although no statistically significant differences were detected. Leveraging peer credibility and experiential design, the intervention provided participants with the practical tools to move from passive support for inclusion toward active agency. We argue that in contexts with limited institutional DEI support, creative communities can operate as agile, low-cost platforms for promoting inclusive norms, contributing an example of creativity for change in youth education.

CCS Concepts

- **Social and professional topics** → Adolescents; *Informal education*; Cultural characteristics;
- **Human-centered computing** → Empirical studies in HCI; Accessibility theory, concepts and paradigms.

Keywords

Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI), Non-Formal Education, Creative Communities, Active Bystander, Resource-Constrained Environments, Eastern Europe, Youth

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1 Introduction

Creative spaces can act as powerful sites of social change: they offer young people not only technical skills, but also the social conditions to experiment with identity, belonging, collaboration, and participation. Under *Creativity for Change*, this paper examines how creative communities can function as small-scale infrastructures for social inclusion, particularly in contexts where institutional support is limited.

Inclusion and diversity interventions are frequently developed and evaluated within WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) contexts, which are known to dominate



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behavioural and educational research [11]. This raises challenges for transferability: in many Eastern European countries, inclusion has historically been driven by legislative mandates rather than long-term cultural changes. In Romania, inclusive education reforms accelerated around EU accession [34], outpacing national infrastructure and training [32].

This motivates the question: *which training strategies can support inclusion and diversity in low-resource environments?* Evidence suggests that short interventions can be effective when they are experiential and peer-led, rather than lecture-based [6, 29], making them well-suited to creative communities, where peer credibility and community culture can be leveraged as mechanisms of norm-setting.

This paper presents a case study of *The Animation Incubator Community*, a non-profit providing non-formal digital arts education for high schoolers in Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova. We evaluate a short peer-led intervention embedded within an animation workshop for teenagers ($N = 14$), designed to promote inclusion by combining a short DEI intervention with experiential components (quiet room, sensory tools, pronoun badges). Using a pre-post survey design, we assess changes in participants' self-efficacy, perceived knowledge of diversity and inclusion, and willingness to intervene in exclusionary situations.

2 Related Work

Research on disability awareness and inclusive education highlights a diverse range of interventions targeting both students and teachers. For students, evidence indicates that short interventions can be effective when methodologically well designed. The systematic review by Lindsay et al. [19] analyzing disability awareness interventions for children of all school levels in 14 countries (predominantly from Canada, USA, and UK) found that short curriculum-based interventions can create long-lasting attitudinal changes. This is supported by Freer [6] whose review across Europe, North America, and Asia concluded that longer interventions do not necessarily lead to greater attitudinal change. Instead, they identified that successful interventions included a behavioural component, such as direct contact or simulations.

Recent empirical studies support the efficacy of behavioural components over lecture-based formats. Liu et al. [20] found that brief sessions (5–10 minutes) making use of accessibility simulations were effective, enabling students to internalise the need for accommodation. Similarly, Silva et al. [28] showed that multi-component, empathy-driven exercises enabled students to physically experience accessibility barriers, facilitating deeper understanding. An Active Bystander programme evaluation [29] demonstrated that a 30 minute peer-led online module significantly improved college students' confidence to intervene in harassment cases. This aligns with broader research identifying the peer element as crucial in shaping youth attitudes—systematic literature reviews by MacArthur et al. [21] and King et al. [15] emphasise that peer leaders hold unique credibility and relatability that reduce power asymmetries and facilitate more open discussion than adult-led formats.

While student interventions focus on empathy and behaviour, research on primary and secondary education teachers highlights

the tension between personal beliefs, self-efficacy, and institutional resources. A meta-analysis [4] covering 102 studies globally (primarily Western states), found that the length of teacher training did not determine its success. Similar to student interventions, programmes that built practical experience were most effective for improving self-efficacy.

A distinction emerges between contexts where inclusion developed through long-term social movements and those where it followed legislative mandates (i.e., a top-down approach). Chae et al. [2] shows that in South Korea, inclusive education reforms were introduced primarily through national policy frameworks. They found that human rights-based interventions and role-playing had large positive effects, but emphasised that cultural context strongly impacted programme effectiveness. Similarly, G. Walker [34] documents that Romania's shift toward inclusive education accelerated after EU accession in 2007, driven by compliance with European standards rather than grassroots demand. Kessel et al. [32] mapped autism policies in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, and concluded that adhering to the EU had driven legislative changes that often outpace the actual infrastructure and training available. Additionally, Galović et al. [8] found that primary and secondary school teachers in Vojvodina (Serbia) held mostly neutral attitudes toward inclusion, with positivity linked to prior experience—suggesting that exposure, not policy alone, fosters acceptance.

The risks of importing Western inclusion models without cultural adaptation were highlighted by Sălăgean et al. [17, 27]. They showed that even a 1-hour, culturally tailored online intervention reduced negative attitudes and increased Romanian teachers' supportive behaviours, self-efficacy, and knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ students. Similarly, Rode et al. [24], found that Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion practices in computing conferences often rely on US-centric accessibility standards, misaligned with local infrastructures and cultural contexts.

In Eastern European and Balkan contexts, where infrastructure and specialised staff are scarce, waiting for semester-long inclusion curricula is unrealistic [3, 34]. The Youth Study Romania [7], found that nearly half of Romanian youth is dissatisfied with the quality of the educational system. As a result, many turn to NGOs to participate in extra-curricular activities [1], with many non-profit initiatives aiming to fill the gaps left by formal schooling [18]. Some of the most trusted sources of information for Romanian high school students are their peers and online influencers [26], a dynamic frequently overlooked by schools [25]. By operating beyond formal curriculum constraints, NGOs can deploy interventions that are more agile and relevant to students' lived experiences [31].

3 Methods

3.1 Study Context and Participants

This case study was conducted during the first day of a week-long animation workshop for high school students, organised by The Animation Incubator¹ (Animest Association) as part of the Animest International Animation Film Festival². The **in-person** workshop aimed to provide practical training in animation in an

¹<https://www.incubatoruldeanimatie.ro/en/>

²<https://www.animest.ro/en/>

Table 1: Psychosocial variables derived from the literature review and included in the survey.

Psychosocial Variable	Definition	Reference
Perceived Knowledge	The individual's assessment of their own understanding regarding diversity concepts, specific terminology, and the general requirements of inclusion.	[9, 19]
Self-Efficacy	The belief in one's own capability to execute specific inclusive behaviours.	[4, 29]
Affective Attitude	The emotional reaction associated with interacting with diversity, measuring the degree of comfort versus insecurity.	[9, 17]
Behavioural Intention	The expressed willingness to engage in inclusive acts, participate in future learning, and actively intervene as a bystander.	[6, 29]
Systemic & Institutional Beliefs	The perception of the external environment's readiness and the belief that top-down institutional support is necessary for success.	[2, 3, 34]
Inclusive Values	The cognitive belief that inclusion is a universal benefit and that all public spaces should prioritise accessibility.	[14, 28]

inclusive and safe creative space. As part of this, a short-term, peer-led intervention was conducted to raise awareness on diversity and inclusion, educate on key concepts, and empower participants to intervene in situations of exclusion or harassment.

By integrating tangible accessibility measures—including a quiet room, fidget toys, and pronoun badges (pictured in Fig. 1)—the workshop functioned as a form of direct contact and simulation. This design follows the findings of J. R. R. Freer [6] and Liu et al. [20], which suggest that practical, behavioural components are more effective for sensitisation than passive instruction alone.

Participants ($N = 14$) completed pre- and post-intervention surveys to capture changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural intentions related to diversity and inclusion.

3.2 Intervention Content

The intervention was delivered by an alumna of the programme (and lead author of this paper) and lasted approximately 20 minutes. It integrated knowledge-based and experiential components to move participants from abstract concepts to concrete action. The content was structured into three phases:

- (1) **Conceptual Framing:** We introduced the *Diversity Iceberg Model* to illustrate that most human characteristics are invisible and presented the *Curb-Cut Effect* to demonstrate how inclusive measures benefit the entire population, not just those with disabilities.
- (2) **Contextual Awareness:** Participants were presented with specific statistics to highlight local urgency.
- (3) **Behavioural Tools:** We provided practical tools for "Active Bystanding" using the 4D framework: *Direct Action* (addressing the situation), *Distraction* (defusing tension), *Delegation* (seeking help), and *Delay* (supporting the affected person after the incident).

3.3 Survey Design

To assess the impact of the intervention, we employed a pre-post survey design. The survey measured changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural intentions using a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

The instrument was divided into three sections:

- (1) **Demographics:** Collecting data on age, gender identity, residence (urban/rural), minority status, and social scholarship status.
- (2) **Emotions towards inclusivity and diversity:** A multiple-choice question asking participants to identify their current feelings towards diversity and inclusion (Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, Anticipation, Surprise, Trust, Disgust).
- (3) **Knowledge, self-efficacy, and attitudes:** A series of 15 statements rated on a 7-point agreement scale.

Demographic questions were asked only in the pre-survey. One open-ended free-text question was included. In the pre-survey, participants were asked whether they had previously learned about inclusion and accessibility and in what context; in the post-survey, they were asked to describe the impact of the intervention and how it made them feel.

Table 1 presents the psychosocial variables derived from the theoretical framework. *Perceived Knowledge* was included to establish a baseline, following Lindsay et al. [19], who note that knowledge is a prerequisite for sensitisation. *Self-Efficacy* was added to the model, inspired by Dignath et al. [4] and the Active Bystander report [29], which suggest that the confidence to intervene is a better predictor of action than theoretical knowledge alone.

The variable *Affective Attitude* was adapted from Ghergut et al. [9] to measure the emotional "discomfort" often associated with inclusion in resource-poor contexts. *Behavioural Intention* was incorporated based on J. R. R. Freer's [6] systematic review, which

Table 2: Socio-demographic information of the participants

Variable	Value / Percentage
Age	
Min	15
Max	19
Average	18
Gender identity	
Woman	71%
Man	14%
Non-binary	14%
Residence	
Large cities	64%
Small/Medium cities	21%
Village/rural area	14%
Minority status	
Belong to a minority	57%
Don't belong to a minority	36%
Preferred not to say	7%
Social scholarship status	
Received a social scholarship	7%
Did not receive a social scholarship	93%
Familiarity with the subject	
Didn't learn about DEI anywhere else	36%
Learned something in school	50%
Learned something from friends, family, influencers	14%

identifies the behavioural component as a key differentiator in successful interventions. Finally, *Systemic & Institutional Beliefs* were included to reflect the specific top-down nature of inclusion in Eastern Europe [2, 34], capturing participant skepticism regarding societal readiness.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via the EUSurvey³ platform. To link pre- and post-survey responses, participants generated an identifier code, which could be any self-chosen combination. The pre-post survey approach measures changes in a population by comparing data collected before (pre) and after (post) an intervention. While commonly employed in clinical research [5], the method has also been successfully applied in other fields, such as environmental education [30], school-based stress interventions [22], and household waste behaviour studies [12]. To statistically assess the impact of the intervention, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine whether the pre- and post-data distributions were significantly different ($p \leq 0.05$). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was chosen as the appropriate non-parametric alternative to the t-test given that the sample size was small ($N = 14$), the data were ordinal, the

distribution was not normal, and the two datasets compared were dependent. The statistical analysis was conducted using Python within a Jupyter Notebook [16] environment, using the Pandas and SciPy [33] libraries.

4 Results

4.1 Participant Demographics

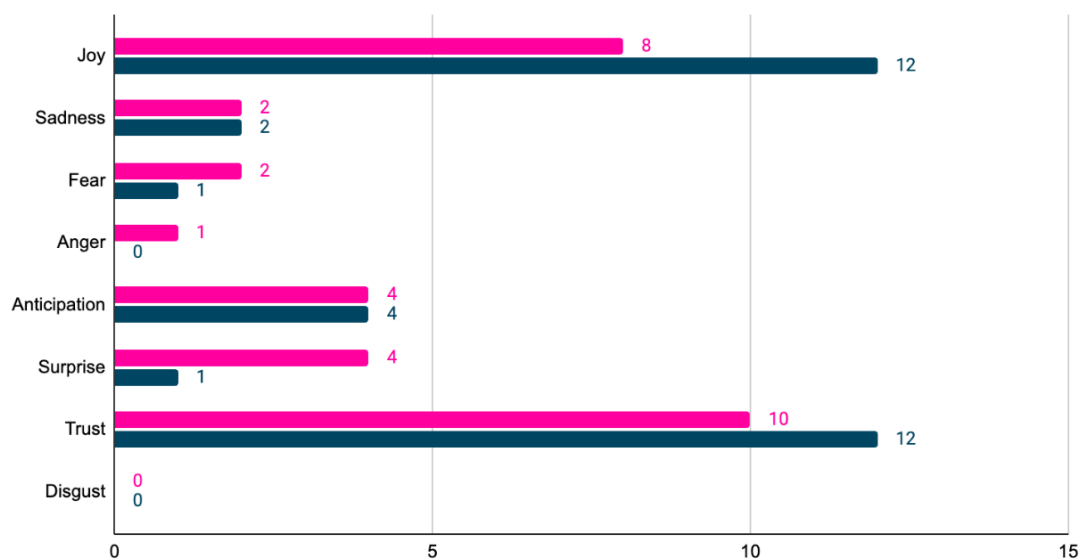
As detailed in Table 2, the participant group ($N = 14$) consisted primarily of late-stage adolescents with an average age of 18. The sample exhibits a gender imbalance, with women representing 71% of participants. Geographically, the sample was predominantly urban; 64% reside in large cities, while only 14% came from rural areas. A majority (57%) identified as belonging to a minority group. The sample appeared economically stable with only one respondent (7%) having qualified for a social scholarship. In Romania, these scholarships are strictly means-tested and reserved for students from families with a net average income per member lower than 50% of the minimum wage, or those in specific vulnerable social categories [23].

Regarding prior knowledge of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), the sample is split: 50% received formal exposure through school curricula, whereas the remainder relies on informal sources,

³<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/>

Table 3: Participants' pre-post responses on knowledge and attitudes towards diversity and inclusion

Variables	Mean Pre	Mean Post	Mean Diff.
<i>Knowledge and Self-Efficacy (7 items)</i>			
I am knowledgeable about diversity and inclusion	5.71	6.28	0.57
I feel like I need more information about diversity and inclusion	5.71	5.21	-0.50
I feel comfortable talking about diversity and inclusion	6.14	6.5	0.36
I can recognise when a space is welcoming to everyone	5.29	5.93	0.64
I know how to make a space inclusive	4.86	5.57	0.71
I know how to recognise harassment and microaggressions	6.14	6.50	0.36
I know how to intervene when I witness harassment or microaggressions	4.25	6.00	1.75
<i>Attitudes and Beliefs (8 items)</i>			
I am willing to learn about diversity and inclusion	6.36	6.79	0.43
I think inclusion cannot be effective without help from institutions	4.93	4.79	-0.14
I think everyone benefits from inclusion	6.36	6.79	0.43
The thought of being part of an inclusive environment makes me happy	6.79	6.57	-0.22
I think all public spaces should prioritise inclusion	6.57	6.71	0.14
I would do everything in my power to include others	6.43	6.71	0.29
There is a lack of commitment for inclusionary programmes in Romanian society	6.50	6.21	-0.29
I think Romanian society is not ready for inclusion	4.43	4.43	0.00


Figure 2: Self-reported emotions before (pink) and after (dark blue) the session.

such as social media influencers or peers, or had had no exposure at all.

4.2 Impact of the intervention on Knowledge and Attitudes

Table 3 presents the shifts in participants' responses. A primary observation was that baseline attitudes were notably high prior to the intervention. Most variables yielded "Means before" scores

above 5.5 on a 7-point scale, indicating a pre-existing alignment with inclusive values. Participants initially reported high levels of willingness to learn ($\bar{x} = 6.36$) and a strong belief that everyone benefits from inclusion ($\bar{x} = 6.36$). This "ceiling effect" made achieving statistical significance difficult, though the descriptive shifts revealed a clear pattern of growth.

Participants generally expressed high levels of agreement across all attitudes, with no variables scoring below the neutral value of

4. The lowest initial mean was observed for the variable related to intervening when witnessing harassment ($\bar{x} = 4.25$), and the highest rate corresponded to the happiness derived from being part of an inclusive environment ($\bar{x} = 6.79$).

Post-intervention, participants reported a further consolidation of these attitudes across the measured scales. The largest increase was observed for knowledge of how to intervene in harassment, which rose from $\bar{x} = 4.25$ to $\bar{x} = 6.00$ (+1.75). Although smaller, there was an increase in participants' ability to recognise when a space is welcoming ($\bar{x} = 5.93$; +0.64), and their knowledge of how to actively make a space inclusive ($\bar{x} = 5.57$; +0.71). The highest post-intervention scores were recorded for willingness to learn and perceived universal benefits of inclusion ($\bar{x} = 6.79$). Conversely, the lowest post-intervention mean was the belief that Romanian society is not ready for inclusion which remained at $\bar{x} = 4.43$.

Results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests showed that, for all measured variables, there were no statistically significant differences between participants' attitudes before and after the intervention (all p -values > 0.05). This suggests that the intervention did not produce measurable shifts in attitudes. However, this lack of significance should be interpreted in the context of the high baseline scores mentioned above.

4.3 Impact of the Intervention on Emotions Toward Diversity and Inclusion

Prior to the intervention, the emotions expressed by participants were generally positive (see Figure 2). The most frequently reported emotions were Trust ($N = 10$) and Joy ($N = 8$). Negative emotions were less prevalent, with only minor instances of Fear ($N = 2$), Sadness ($N = 2$), and Anger ($N = 1$).

Post-intervention, these positive trends were reinforced. Joy and Trust increased to $N = 12$. Conversely, negative or uncertain emotions (Fear, Anger) diminished; Surprise also dropped ($N = 4$ to $N = 1$). Anticipation ($N = 4$) and Sadness ($N = 2$) remained constant.

5 Conclusion

Despite high baseline scores, the intervention produced some small positive shifts. The most prominent shift was the increase in knowledge on how to intervene in harassment (+1.75). Smaller increases were observed in participants' ability to recognise welcoming spaces (+0.64) and their knowledge of how to make a space inclusive (+0.71). These changes suggest that the intervention provided participants with practical tools to intervene, evaluate and improve their environments.

The high baseline scores can be attributed to a self-selection effect [10]; as The Animation Incubator explicitly communicates values of inclusion in its public outreach, teenagers who already align with these principles are more likely to join. Considering the limitations of the study, the slight attitudinal changes observed can be partly attributed to the design of the method and to the initial level of knowledge of the teenagers. When pre-test scores are high, there is little room to detect further improvement in the post-test.

Future research should ensure that the population is heterogeneous in terms of knowledge to successfully assess behavioural changes. Another option would be to use a post-pre survey method,

which assesses attitudinal changes in post- and pre-knowledge at a unique point in time when the activities are over [13].

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