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## **Social Inclusion and Exclusion in the Discourse of Selected Youth Organizations Operating in Poland**

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** This study analyzed social inclusion and exclusion within Polish youth organizations, focusing on discourse and organizational practices. The article approaches youth organizations as spaces of non-formal education and civic learning, examining how inclusion and exclusion are constructed within educational and participatory practices addressed to young people. The study aimed to identify internal and external dimensions of inclusion/exclusion, understand influencing factors, and examine how language and structures reflect or conceal these practices.

**Method:** Qualitative content analysis was conducted on texts from four youth organizations affiliated with the Polish Council of Youth Organizations (PROM). Data included websites, social media, statutes, statements, and reports. Using Bendl, Fleischmann, and Schmidt's framework (2024), the analysis examined linguistic expressions and organizational indicators related to inclusion/exclusion, focusing on values, participation, group identity, and openness.

**Results:** Organizations predominantly used inclusive language, with explicit references to exclusion being rare. Internal structures appeared generally open, though hierarchical elements could implicitly marginalize less active members. External practices addressed social issues broadly, but some activities and venues indicated potential symbolic exclusion, especially regarding membership restrictions and cultural accessibility.

**Conclusions:** Polish youth organizations promote inclusive ideals linguistically and structurally. The findings contribute to research on non-formal education, inclusive pedagogy, and civic education by demonstrating how organizational discourse shapes participation and belonging among young people.

**Keywords:** inclusion, exclusion, youth organizations, non-formal education, civic education, qualitative research.

## Introduction

Youth organizations constitute important environments of non-formal education in which young people develop civic competences, social participation skills, democratic attitudes, and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Beyond their social and organizational functions, they serve as educational spaces where values, norms, identities, and forms of participation are negotiated and reproduced. Therefore, analyzing their discourse contributes to broader educational debates concerning participation, citizenship education, and inclusive educational cultures.

This article discusses research findings closely linked to the outcomes of work carried out within the framework of the wider project<sup>1</sup> Previous studies and analyses conducted as part of the research project indicated the potential presence of inclusion/exclusion practices (Czech- Włodarczyk & Cuprjak, 2025).

According to our adopted definition, organizations that engage with young people and operate within their environment address their needs through their

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activities and thus serve as an excellent case for analyzing the phenomenon of social inclusion and exclusion within their discourse. Through these processes, organizations establish relationships with those perceived as close (e.g., “ours”, “in-group”) and those considered distinct (e.g., “theirs”, “out-group”). Studying youth organizations, language, and narratives can generate various concepts, objects, and subject positions within and between organizations, thereby capturing the relationships between social inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusion and exclusion are shaped by discourses and interactions within a given space. This implies that discussing these concepts influences how they are perceived and experienced in practice. Inclusion is often perceived as a “norm”, meaning that organizations tend to define an “internal” (included, integrated) group and an “external” group (remaining outside the sphere of interest or often excluded due to particular characteristics or viewpoints). This division is based on various dimensions of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social status), which can reinforce social hierarchies and marginalize those who do not conform to dominant norms. The binary division between inclusion and exclusion (re)produced within organizational practices may lead to oversimplifying complex social relationships and overlooking individuals’ diverse experiences within these categories. It is, therefore, crucial to examine the relationships between inclusion and exclusion and investigate the mechanisms and strategies that result in individuals being included or excluded. This, in turn, may be key to introducing more inclusive practices within youth organizations.

This article presents research findings on inclusion and exclusion in the context of youth organizations based on data collected within the project, as mentioned earlier. The article emphasizes the importance of studying the mechanisms that lead to exclusion or inclusion, which may aid in developing more inclusive practices within youth organizations and non- formal education. A critical analysis of inclusion and exclusion as social constructs highlights the need for reflection on the practices that shape them.

## Youth organization as educational spaces

Youth organizations are increasingly recognized as important environments of non-formal education and civic learning. Through volunteering, participation in projects, leadership development, and social engagement, young people acquire competencies associated with democratic participation, intercultural dialogue, and citizenship education (Biesta, 2011; Checkoway, 2011). Such organizations may therefore be understood not only as social structures but also as pedagogical spaces shaping attitudes toward diversity, participation, and inclusion.

## Theoretical Assumptions

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the assumptions outlined in the scientific paper by Bendl, Fleischmann, and Schmidt (2024), in which the authors, drawing on Robert E. Goodin's theory (1996), argue that both inclusion and exclusion can be internal or external. They examined these concepts in the context of non-profit organizations operating within the economic sphere, specifically those affiliated with the 'Economy for the Common Good' network. In this article, we apply these findings to the study of youth organizations operating in Poland, which were part of the PROM network (the Polish Council of Youth Organizations). Four organizations were selected for the study: ATD Fourth World Poland, AIESEC Poland, CIM Horizons, and CI UNESCO. The organizations were selected purposively to ensure diversity regarding organizational profile, mission, scale of activity, and target groups. The sample included organizations focused on intercultural dialogue, anti-poverty activities, international youth mobility, and civic participation. Their affiliation with the PROM network ensured their relevance within the broader Polish youth sector.

Below, we present a broad theoretical framework regarding the concepts of social inclusion/exclusion concerning the internal and external dimensions of youth organizations (who is to be included/excluded?) and the criteria for these distinctions (socio-economic status, age, gender, religion, culture, education).

By situating our analysis within this theoretical framework, we could examine the tensions between the two opposing social inclusion and exclusion phenomena. The essence of the relationship between them lies in the fact that every act of inclusion may involve integrating a specific individual or group while simultaneously excluding those who are not the subjects of inclusive efforts. Regine Bendl, Alexander Fleischmann, and Angelika Schmidt (2024, p. 116) reference critical research on organizations and their actions concerning social exclusion and inequality, demonstrating that inclusive measures often have exclusionary effects in both for-profit and non-profit organizations, as well as in public institutions.

Furthermore, social inclusion and exclusion have become political concepts that do not necessarily lead to effective action. They may even divert attention from real issues and hinder the implementation of radical changes, thus maintaining the status quo (Barry, 1998). Although the relationship between inclusion and exclusion has garnered significant interest from scholars across various disciplines, research findings have provided more insights into experiences of exclusion than the mechanisms, processes, or practices that foster equality and inclusivity.

A review of the literature on social inclusion, particularly in the humanities, reveals a wide range of definitions that, beyond the social reality, often also pertain to the educational sphere (Slee, 2014). The concept of inclusion aligns with practices based on generalization, universalization, and the overcoming of socially differentiating elements, ultimately leading to desegregation. Following Slee (2014), inclusion is not treated here as a neutral organizational value but as a discursive practice that may simultaneously produce new forms of marginalization and normative expectations concerning participation. From this perspective, inclusion may reproduce hidden boundaries determining who is considered an “appropriate” participant within organizational culture.

Conversely, the concept of exclusion is grounded in practices of selection and segregation, which, in turn, result in social divisions and inequalities (Frysztański, 2005, p. 18). These concepts are often framed as opposites. Zbigniew Kwiecieński (2014, p. 99) argues that inclusion (integration) is an oppositional

category to exclusion. However, according to Hilary Silver (2015, p. 3), this binary opposition does not exist despite its frequent usage. Difficulties in defining these terms arise from their embeddedness in specific contexts, particularly when they intersect with other concepts such as belonging, membership, or citizenship. This further complicates their precise definition – “place-specific ideas are embedded in institutions that both constrain individual choices and behavior and shape social cleavages and collective identities” (Silver, 2015, p. 3).

The phenomena of inclusion and exclusion significantly influence the formation of societies and, within this framework, youth organizations. Therefore, from our perspective, examining whether these practices appear in the discourse of selected youth organizations operating in Poland was crucial.

The transition from inclusive to exclusive practices can be diffuse and ambiguous. This is well illustrated by the neoliberal approach, which, on the one hand, has an inclusive character by facilitating access. However, on the other hand, its ultimate goal is economic participation, often overlooking individual aspirations. Furthermore, both concepts – inclusion and exclusion – are context-dependent, influenced by factors such as country, region, culture, available institutions, and social resources (Silver, 2015).

In our study, exclusive practices are considered to include discriminatory ones (organizations may unintentionally exclude certain groups based on race, gender, or sexual orientation) related to lack of accessibility (barriers to participation in programs, such as high costs, geographical location, or insufficient support for individuals with disabilities); specific organizational culture (organizations may promote only certain values or cultural norms, making it difficult for outsiders to integrate); insufficient support (young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or at risk of social exclusion may require additional assistance).

To explore inclusion and exclusion practices at the level of youth organizations, we apply the framework introduced by Bendl, Fleischmann, and Schmidt (2024), which distinguishes between internal and external inclusive/exclusive organizational structures. Figure 1 illustrates the expansion of Goodin’s (1996) concept of internally inclusive and externally exclusive

organizations. Bendl and others added internally exclusive and externally inclusive organizations, creating a framework for a more nuanced discussion on inclusion and exclusion within and beyond organizations.

The transition from inclusive to exclusive practices can therefore be diffuse and ambiguous. This is well illustrated by neoliberal models of participation,

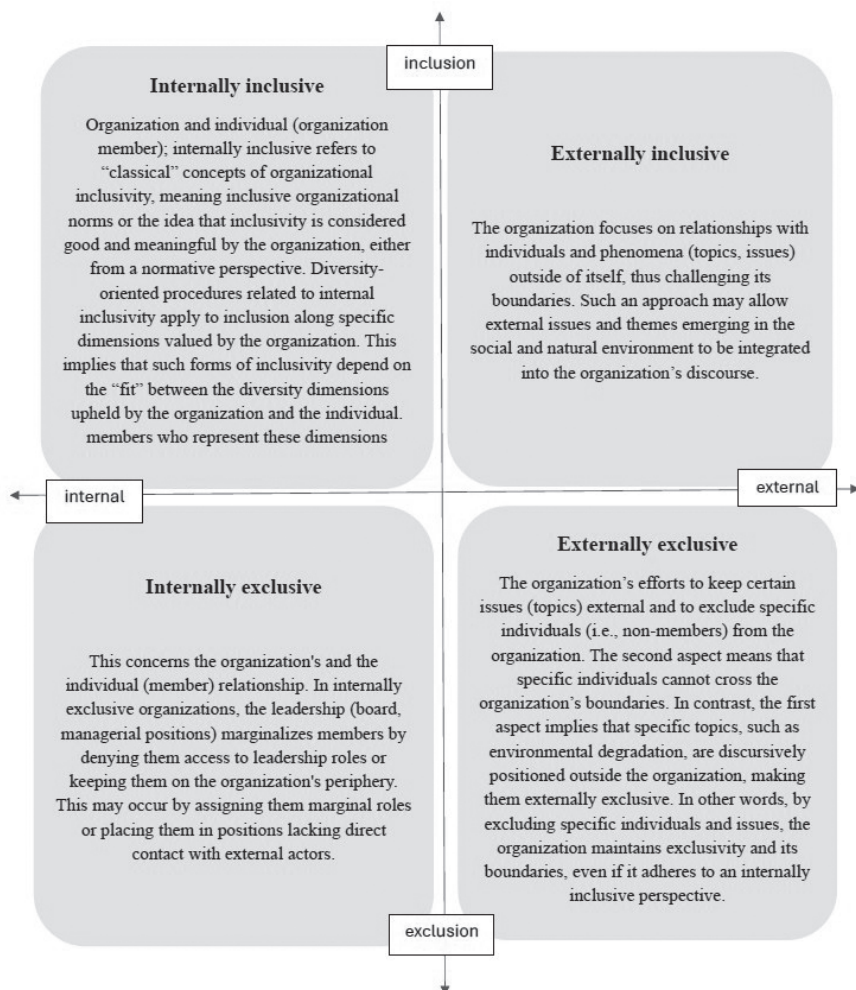


Fig. 1. Internal and external inclusive/exclusive organizational structures

Sources: Bendl et al., 2024.

which facilitate access while simultaneously privileging individuals possessing specific competences, resources, or forms of cultural capital.

In our study, exclusive practices include discriminatory mechanisms, barriers to participation, organizational cultures privileging specific norms or values, and insufficient support for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Methodology

As a result of conceptualizing the research and adopting the framework proposed by Bendl, Fleischmann, and Schmidt (2024) as the primary theoretical approach, the following research questions were formulated:

What manifestations of inclusion and exclusion, as well as their variants (internal/external), are present in the discourse of youth organizations?

What factors contribute to youth organizations being inclusive or exclusive, both internally and externally?

As expressed in the discourse, which values, actions, or attitudes towards oneself and others indicate inclusion or exclusion?

The study used a qualitative research strategy, employing content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Rapley, 2007; Gibbs, 2015; Graneheim et al., 2017). The research material consisted of texts published by youth organizations on their official websites and Facebook (FB) pages, including statutes, statements, invitations, and reports from events.

In the first stage, in line with the defined research directions on inclusion/exclusion and the areas of interest of youth organizations, text excerpts related to the organizations' values, engagement, and collective identity were selected for analysis. The units of analysis were generated using Atlas.Ti software through the application of the following coding categories: "values/ideas", "participation", and "community/nation/state" (with subcodes "we/ours/us" and "they/them") represented on Figure 2. The "values" code pertains to content related to the worldview adopted by the organization. Analyzing the

organization's norms allows for examining what is important to it, how the social world should be structured, what issues are identified as problems, and what solutions are proposed. The "participation" code was assigned to content reflecting the organization's membership practices and the activities undertaken within its framework. This included all actions carried out by the organization, their context, methods, and forms. Particularly significant was the code "community/nation/state – we/ours/us; they/them", which referred to content illustrating the organization from the perspective of its members – what they say about the organization and themselves as members (the "we" category), as well as their opinions and attitudes towards other communities, organizations, or groups (the "they" category). This code represents group identification, particularly important in the inclusion and exclusion study.

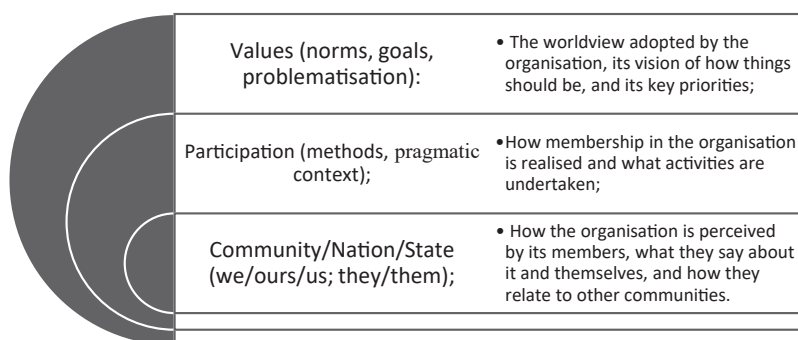


Fig. 2. Analytical Codes Used in Selecting the Units of Analysis

Source: Own elaboration.

Examples of lexical forms used in inclusion and exclusion:

- inclusion-related terms: we invite, come, we are waiting for you, we respect, we encourage, we support, join us, we are open, as well as words corresponding to the different levels of inclusion mentioned above;
- exclusion-related terms (mainly verbs with the negative particle "not"): we do not want, we do not respect, we do not acknowledge, we do not like, we do not accept, we disagree, as well as "we protest",

“we oppose”, “we are against”, and explicit exclusion-related terms such as “exclusion” or “marginalization”.

The next step involved searching for the generated materials based on developed indicators from internal and external inclusion/exclusion definitions.

As outlined in statutes, internal inclusion/exclusion indicators were primarily reflected in membership structures, volunteer involvement, and organizational structure. Moreover, the “we” code was handy, revealing how members perceived the organization from within.

Indicators from an internal perspective include:

- Formal structure – the hierarchy described in the organization’s statutes;
- Informal structure – divisions within the “WE” category, e.g., into organizers, volunteers, and beneficiaries;
- Membership conditions.

Indicators of internal inclusion include, among others, diversity within the organization – openness to every individual, open membership conditions, and a cohesive “WE” category. On the other hand, indicators of internal exclusion include a hierarchical organizational structure, which may marginalize “ordinary” members by limiting their participation in the organization’s daily life, as well as a fragmented “WE” category, meaning a division between volunteers as beneficiaries of activities and experienced organizers (Kopińska et al., 2023, p. 12).

Indicators of external inclusion and exclusion primarily manifest in organizational participation, including the types of actions undertaken and the issues addressed. Equally important are the values expressed, which reflect an organization’s openness or exclusivity toward a broader social perspective. The “OTHERS” code was also considered during the analysis, as it allowed for examining the organization’s perspective on individuals outside its structure.

Indicators of external perspective include:

- The types of issues/topics the organization addresses;
- The social groups toward which their attention is directed.

In this context, external inclusion is reflected in addressing a wide range of diverse social issues and in the way these issues are discussed – i.e., from a broad, inclusive perspective (Ostrowicka & Wolniewicz-Slomka, 2023, p. 180). Conversely, external exclusion may be observed in practices such as ignoring specific issues, problems, or social groups or focusing only on topics that align with the organization's interests (Ostrowicka & Wolniewicz-Slomka, 2023).

The study was conducted in the context of Polish youth organizations promoting civic participation and youth engagement, shaped by social and educational inequalities. The analyzed organizations differed socially but shared a civic and educational orientation toward young people. Organizations were purposively selected based on: affiliation with the PROM network, focus on youth engagement, accessibility of public discourse, diversity of missions, and target groups.

The study analyzed only publicly available organizational discourse and excluded observations and interviews. Thus, the findings concern discursive representations rather than participants' lived experiences.

## **Internal inclusion**

In the collected material, internal inclusion is primarily visible in the organizational structure, specifically, defining who can become a member and what rights they acquire. CIM Horizons is the most open organization in this regard, as its membership is available to anyone over 16, including foreign nationals. CI UNESCO and ATD Fourth World Poland add a requirement – a recommendation from two existing association members. Despite certain territorial limitations, such as CIM Horizons restricting its activities to the city of Poznań, there are no formal barriers preventing individuals from other cities or regions from joining.

“A regular member may be an adult who has received a recommendation from two members of the Association, has accepted the Association's statute, completed a membership declaration, and paid membership fees” (Statute, CI UNESCO).

It is difficult to determine the level of openness within internal relationships in these organizations. While their statutes define the rights of the board and regular members, they all regulate internal relations similarly and hierarchically. Despite this traditional structure, ATD Fourth World Poland explicitly declares a “democratic and non-hierarchical model of governance” (Facebook, August 2018). However, it remains unclear how these functions work in practice. Most organizations describe themselves in official documents as democratic, interculturally open, apolitical, and secular. For instance:

AIESEC Poland does not discriminate against anyone, particularly based on: race and ethnic origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or worldview” (Statute, AIESEC Poland)

These kinds of examples can be interpreted in two ways: as a manifestation of internal inclusion – within these organizations, all members cooperate harmoniously, regardless of their beliefs; and as a form of external inclusion – since these organizations invite everyone to collaborate and explicitly declare non-discriminatory policies based on beliefs, religion, language, or physical characteristics.

## **External inclusion**

External inclusion can be interpreted through the topics and issues an organization addresses in its activities, as well as the discourse it creates regarding individuals and social groups outside the organization. In defining its mission, every organization determines the scope of its activities. These missions are formulated openly and broadly, as seen in the following examples:

- The organization aims to serve broadly defined communities, including intercultural ones” (Statute, CIM Horizons)
- “A non-governmental organization engaged in active participation, promoting tolerance and dialogue” (Website, Who We Are, CI UNESCO)

In some cases, missions are more specific, tailored to the nature of an organization’s activities and target groups. For example:

[...] Personal and social engagement of members in working with people experiencing social exclusion, including children and youth at risk of marginalization and their families, large families threatened by extreme poverty, homeless individuals and their families, unemployed individuals and their families, people with substance dependencies and their families, people with disabilities and their families” (Statute, ATD Fourth World Poland).

Research findings (Ostrowicka & Wolniewicz-Slomka, 2023) indicate that the studied organizations: “refer to global issues (achieving peace and the full realization of human potential – AIESEC; reducing poverty and extreme deprivation – ATD; active participation, promoting dialogue and tolerance – CI UNESCO; intercultural dialogue, promoting tolerance – CIM Horizons), while simultaneously proposing solutions at the local level” (p. 186). Each organization prioritizes the well-being of every individual and humanity. Thus, such a broadly defined set of concerns creates an expansive, inclusive space. The analyzed materials contain explicit references to combating discrimination and exclusion, along with efforts to include those who have been marginalized for distinct reasons. For example:

- [...] This year we launched a grassroots initiatives competition, open to all residents of our district” (Website, What We Do, CIM Horizons)
- The MOMMAS coffee program focuses on key topics related to motherhood, child development support, and evolving perspectives on parental roles in today’s world” (Website, Projects, CI UNESCO).

## **Internal exclusion**

Internal exclusion is difficult to observe directly. It may only be discernible within an organization’s structure and membership recruitment processes. Each organization operates within a hierarchical structure as outlined in its statutes.

On the one hand, this structure may be perceived as excluding specific individuals, particularly regular members, from participating in key deci-

sion-making processes. On the other hand, provisions ensure that all members have a say through mechanisms such as the General Assembly.

Exclusion may also be observed in membership eligibility requirements. For instance, AIESEC's membership invitation is primarily targeted at students:

Regular members of AIESEC Poland can be students and graduates (up to one year after completing or discontinuing their studies) actively engaged in the Association's activities [...]. The acquisition of regular membership rights is decided by the General Assembly of Local Committee Members upon the recommendation of the Local Committee Executive" (Statute, AIESEC Poland).

Some activities and initiatives are specifically targeted at residents of particular cities, particularly when an event serves a promotional or outreach purpose.

Global Village is happening now. We invite you to the KEN Pedagogical Provincial Library in Lublin. You can't miss it! A warm atmosphere, delicious cuisine from different parts of the world, and friendly volunteers from China, India, and New Zealand are already waiting for you. Come, broaden your horizons, and embark on an incredible journey worldwide in just one day!" (Facebook, January 2018, AIESEC, Poland).

However, it is unclear who exactly is being invited to volunteer abroad:

Are you curious about the world? Would you like to embark on an unforgettable adventure while doing something meaningful for yourself and others? The Global Volunteer program is designed for people like YOU!" (Facebook, April 2018, AIESEC Poland).

Additionally, analyses conducted by (Kopińska et al., 2024) within two organizations – CI UNESCO and ATD Fourth World Poland – revealed a clear distinction between organizational leadership and youth participants: "There is a division between those who run the organization, and the youth involved.

The former are experts – competent and experienced. The latter are volunteers and beneficiaries of the organization” (p. 12 and onwards).

## **External exclusion**

The analyzed organizations do not explicitly exclude anyone; on the contrary, they express a commitment to combating exclusion. However, certain practices indicative of exclusionary tendencies can be identified within the materials reviewed.

For example, one of the stated objectives of AIESEC Poland is: “To educate students and graduates of higher education institutions [...] creating opportunities for the development of future managerial staff” (Statute, AIESEC Poland). This objective aligns with the membership criteria restricted to students and graduates. Additionally, it corresponds with the organization’s focus on skill development, particularly in areas associated with leadership and the effective management of human capital in both public and private organizational structures.

Moreover, some activities undertaken by the organizations, despite their declarations of non-discrimination based on religion, may still limit the participation of specific individuals or social groups. One such example can be found in the events marking the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, organized by ATD Fourth World Poland. Specifically, some of these events occur at the Oratory in the Basilica on Kawęczyńska Street 53 and begin with a Mass.

During this year’s International Day for the Eradication of Poverty celebrations, we wanted to highlight how to build a world where human rights and dignity are universally respected” (Facebook, August 2018, ATD Fourth World Poland).

Additionally, the Wrzesiński Workshops were organized at the editorial offices of ‘Więź’ magazine, a Catholic socio-cultural publication (<https://wiesz.pl/onas/>). Although there was no explicit mention of the Catholic nature of the

event in the official announcements, the choice of venue may implicitly suggest a particular ideological affiliation:

We warmly invite you to the next Wrzesiński Workshops, which will take place [...] at the editorial offices of 'Więź,' at Trębacka 3. During the meeting, we will discuss poverty and migration. Migration from smaller towns to larger cities does not always lead to social advancement; it often carries the risk of homelessness, poverty, and exclusion" (Facebook, April 2018, ATD Fourth World Poland).

## **Inclusion/exclusion – Summary and comparative analysis**

The analysis of both internal and external inclusion and exclusion has demonstrated a significant predominance of inclusion-related materials, covering both internal and external dimensions, represented on Figure 3. However, a deeper analysis indicates that inclusion functions not only as a social practice but also as an organizational and educational narrative legitimizing institutional identity. The absence of explicitly exclusionary language does not necessarily mean the absence of exclusionary mechanisms. Instead, exclusion may appear indirectly through: hierarchical participation structures, differentiated access to leadership, symbolic expectations regarding participation or cultural accessibility of organizational activities. This confirms Slee's (2014) argument that inclusion and exclusion should be understood relationally rather than as binary opposites.

## **Conclusions**

As presented in their available documents, the analyzed organizations declare an inclusive character and undertake actions supporting these inclusive ideals. The materials analyzed are dominated by expressions and phrases indicating inclusion. The most frequently used word is "we invite", which signals a willingness to cooperate and an openness to participation. Additionally, organizations use words like "engagement" and "diversity", further emphasizing their

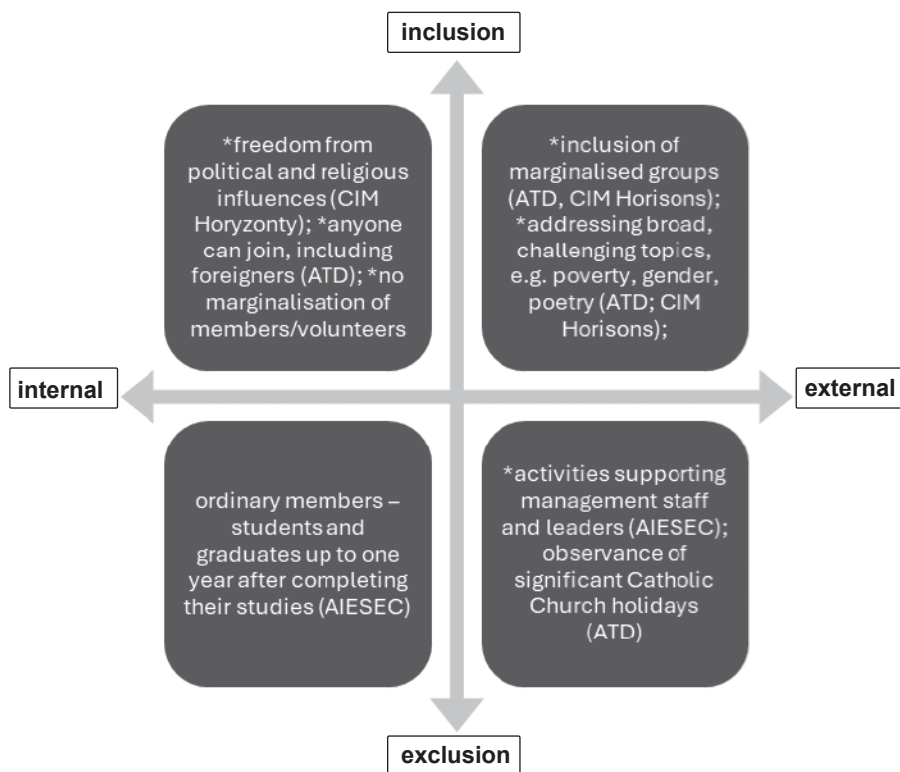


Fig. 3. Examples of key phrases from the discourse of youth organizations positioned at the intersection of inclusion/exclusion and their internal/external dimensions

Source: Own elaboration.

openness to different social groups. In the case of ATD Fourth World Poland, even words typically associated with exclusion are contextualized positively, suggesting their commitment to combating discrimination. Overall, inclusion is expressed through linguistic formulations, which can be categorized into three primary groups:

- Counteracting exclusion – organizations consistently use the word “exclusion” in contexts related to fighting against, eliminating, or preventing exclusion;
- Equal opportunities – linked to support and social integration;

- Openness to all – promoting an open world and creating intercultural dialogue.

However, despite the strong emphasis on inclusion, certain exclusionary practices may still exist, although they are not explicitly recognized in official discourse. While organizations declare a lack of exclusion, their internal structures may imply subtle forms of exclusion, especially towards members who do not participate in organizational management. Additionally, specific practices, such as organizing events in religious contexts, may not be entirely inclusive for individuals outside a particular tradition or faith.

The absence of explicitly exclusionary language in organizational discourse may indicate that exclusion is not acknowledged as an issue within these organizations. Alternatively, this could suggest that inclusion exists more as a slogan than a deeply embedded organizational practice. To verify these assumptions, further detailed research on organizational activities, incorporating the perspectives of engaged members, would be necessary. This calls for further reflection and analysis of organizational practices and internal structures.

The study contributes to debates on civic education, non-formal learning, and inclusive pedagogy by highlighting the importance of critically examining organizational discourse and participation structures. However, we recognize that certain issues require deeper exploration.

Research on youth participation emphasizes that organizational cultures influence who is allowed to participate fully and whose voices remain marginalized (Hart, 1992; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). Consequently, youth organizations may simultaneously promote inclusion while reproducing subtle inequalities in cultural capital, access, leadership models, and institutional expectations.

From the perspective of inclusive pedagogy, inclusion should not be treated merely as a declaration of openness but as a practice requiring continuous reflection on organizational norms, participation structures, and symbolic boundaries (Slee, 2014). Following critical youth studies (France, 2007; Wyn & White, 2013), it is also important to recognize that youth participation is shaped by broader social and cultural inequalities. Therefore, the analysis of

organizational discourse requires not only focusing on the explicit mechanisms regulating inclusion and exclusion, but also on the hidden, more subtle ones.

The findings highlight the importance of understanding and analyzing the practices of youth organizations and the necessity of striving for greater inclusivity in their activities. In the long run, this will contribute to building a more just and diverse society.

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