

Young People's Participation — Where Next?

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This article is about young people in the UK's participation in decisions that affect them. It draws, in particular, on three research and evaluation projects that were undertaken in partnership with young people as researchers, and directly exploring the views and experience of young people of their participation in the voluntary and statutory sector. Its purpose is to contribute to reflection on young people's participation to review what has been done and what has been learnt, to consider what next, where our efforts should be focused in the future as adults and young people seek together to develop and implement meaningful opportunities for participation. © 2012 The Author(s) Children & Society © 2012 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Thinking about participation in the UK

Participation has received considerable attention over recent years; but the idea is not new, 'from Aristotle to Marx to Habermas, all have had something to say about how citizens engage with the state and institutions of governance' (Brodie and others, 2009, p. 7). However, it is only relatively recently that the concept of young people as citizens has entered the debate and become a feature of later modernity (Hill and others, 2006). Youth participation has been mainstreamed in much policy and practice in the UK (Middleton, 2006, p. 181), and the participation of children and young people in social policy and service delivery decision-making in England is now 'widely accepted, supported by statute and enhanced by specific practice guidance' (Gunn, 2008, p. 253).

Nevertheless, the concept of participation is contested. It is seen to be broad and not clearly defined (Barbar, 2009; Gallagher, 2008). The word participation is used to cover a variety of activities (Sinclair, 2004). These include consultation 'where young people's views are gathered to be used in decision making' (Faulkner, 2009, p. 89) to young people being involved in the whole process of change and influence themselves (Middleton, 2006). Hart (in Tisdall, 2008) favours an understanding of participation that is transformative for individuals, organisations and society. An analysis provided by Brodie and others (2009) does not suggest that participation needs to lead to improved outcomes for people, or that people themselves are crucial in validating evidence of dialogue and evidence of change. In contrast, Smith (2010) writes that young people themselves have an obvious interest in the quality of their lived experience and they are increasingly seen as competent social actors (Prout and James (1990). Reflecting this, Participation Works (2008) review does address the link between participation and change, writing participation is the process by which people 'can influence decision making and bring about change'. Hear By Right (Badham and Wade, 2010), a framework of standards for participation used by many youth organisations, says that 'the

shared aim of participation should be change' (2010, p. 4). These words are echoed by Middleton (2006) and in what young people themselves tell us — they get involved because they want to make a difference, they are seeking transformation.

Tisdall (2008) suggests that we should look beyond literature relating solely to young people to enhance our theorisation and understanding of young people's participation. Brodie and others (2009) reviewed literature about participation generally — not just of young people — and identified several reasons why people advocate participation. These include strengthening the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions; building community cohesion; reforming public services and 'providing services that are better suited to people's needs and are more efficient' (2009, p. 6). Furthermore, participation is associated with 'greater social justice, more effective public services and a society of self confident citizens' (Beethan and others, 2008, p. 11 in Brodie and others, 2009, p. 6). Finally, it is an expression of citizenship (Brannan and others, 2006 in Brodie and others, 2009, p. 6).

Sinclair (2004) suggests consumerism has played a role in giving consumers (or service users) more power over the nature and quality of services. Respondents to a national survey indicated that 'consumerism' was the most important driver for English social services managers to include young people in decision-making (Gunn, 2008). An alternative view is that participation in the UK and elsewhere has recently risen up government policy agendas, prompted by the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC; United Nations, 1989; Hinton and others, 2008). Lundy (2007) suggests that the strongest case for the increased involvement of young people in decision making is framed within a human rights perspective. Article 12 is one of the commonly mentioned drivers for participation, although the CRC covers 42 substantive rights, which include health, safety, family life and education (Children's Rights Alliance England's, 2009). Some consider that there is a conceptual clash between the consumerist and rights-based approaches to youth participation — with policy-makers emphasising the consumerist rationale, whereas service users are more likely to refer to their rights as citizens (e.g. Carey, 2009; Wyness, 2009).

The reality is nuanced, with a number of drivers combining to motivate new legislative duties and policies that stimulate young people's participation. The UN CRC arose in the same year as the 1989 Children Act, whose powers of participation were extended in the 2004 Children Act affecting England and Wales. A wave of policy initiatives was orchestrated through the cross-governmental Children and Young People Unit. This confident mood was translated into centrally run programmes specific to children and young people, such as the Children Fund, as well as generic programmes, such as New Deal for Communities. Organisations can gain significantly from involving young people in decisions. Tisdall (2008, p. 427) suggests 'funding streams, meeting performance indicators, enhanced media access, and particularly relationship with policy makers' are potential benefits from involving young people. It is important to remember that these were all initiatives of the previous UK government. The status of this legislation and policy is now uncertain. What place there will be for young people's voice and how much influence they will have in the new political order is not yet clear.

Constraints on participation

Increasingly, critics — including young people themselves — raise questions about the assumptions behind and intended impacts of many youth participation initiatives. Questioning,

for example, what are the drivers for participation work and what fundamental differences arise from participation in the immediate lived lives of young people (Middleton, 2006). Fielding (2006) critiques the orientation towards participation for effective organisations and services rather than for the flourishing of human communities. Indeed, participation often seems to only have adult validity in the form of consumer choice as users of services rather than in their own right and according to their own agenda as citizens (Barbar, 2009).

A danger of the popularity of participation is the potential for tokenism. Alongside examples of participation having an impact, there are examples of participation as not giving voice, but instead consulting in such a way that people are controlled and professional identities are not threatened (Hodge, 2005). Writing about participation in social welfare services, Ward (2000) suggests that much participation is based on the more powerful inviting the less powerful. Fitzpatrick and others (1999), specifically with regard to young people taking part in regeneration projects, describe this as participation 'by invitation'. Hodge takes a slightly different angle arguing that service user involvement needs to be 'clear and explicit about remit, particularly about the limits of the debate' (2005, p. 177), suggesting a need for terms of the 'invitation' to be clear. She writes that the 'normative barriers' within which involvement operates are frequently maintained, resulting in important items being effectively kept off the agenda (2005).

Houston uses Habermas' notion of instrumental rationality to inform his understanding of how ends are 'achieved by the most effective and expedient means possible' (2008, p. 1288). He writes that instrumental rationality has morphed 'into an iron cage of regulation' — much of the policy, guidance, requirement to consult set out above could be seen as forming part of this 'iron cage' limiting the empowering potential of participation.

What's happening — young people talking about participation

Having considered the theoretical and political context in which young people's participation takes place, it is important to consider how this rhetoric works in practice (Cairns, 2006; Gallagher, 2008). This article will consider the reality of how participation works for some young people in the UK. This section provides a critical overview of three empirical studies all undertaken by young people in partnership with the author. It will explore and review what they tell us about young people's participation. The three research projects that have contributed to this are:

- A critical review of young people's participation in Beacon Local Authorities (Skinner and Fleming, 2007).
- Information about young people's participation gained as part of an evaluation of an organisation supporting young people's participation in the third sector (Fleming, unpublished data).
- Information about young people's participation in local Youth Opportunities Fund (YOF) schemes gathered as part of an evaluation of Action Speaks Louder (a competition within YOF) (Fleming and Skinner, 2007)

Reports of all three studies are publicly available for full details. Overall, we heard from more than 175 young people about their experiences of participation in decisions that affect them. The young people ranged from 8 to 23 years old; however, the majority were between 12 and 18; slightly more young women than young men took part. Each study included dis-

abled young people, young people from black and ethnic minority groups and young people with specific experiences: for example, being 'looked after children', young parents, refugees and carers. There were projects from both urban and rural areas. The young people who took part in the studies were a small proportion of those who actually used the projects; they were those with experience of participation within the group or projects. Taken together, they were a diverse group of young people covering a wide range of lived experiences. The three studies were qualitative and young people contributed via individual and small group interviews as well as interactive group sessions with a range of activities and exercises to enable them to share and explore their experiences, opinions and reflections. All projects spoke directly with young people involved in a range of participation activities about their experiences. This is unusual. As Halsey and others (2006) write, all too often, young people are not consulted about their participation experiences.

We also spoke to 30 Council officers, 13 local authority members and 56 youth workers from statutory and voluntary organisations. However, in this article, prominence is given to young people's voice. As an overview of three studies, the themes presented here are overarching, rather than specific and detailed. The examples and quotes are intended to be illustrative and all quotes are from young people.

The studies are uncommon in young people who were taken seriously, not just as respondents. Young people employed as researchers were co-creators in all stages of these studies. This strengthens the findings, giving them greater significance and credibility, as young people were involved as respondents, and in the undertaking of the research and the analysis and knowledge creation (Fleming and Boeck, forthcoming).

Young people's involvement in research has been discussed elsewhere (see, e.g. Fleming, 2010; McLaughlin, 2006; Coad and Evans, 2007). It is worth noting that this is a form of participation in itself. It is some time since Bailey and Brake (1975) wrote of how reality is created by hegemony. At that time, concern was with how men defined the world of women, heterosexuals the world of homosexuals. Feminist and disabled researchers (e.g. Oakley, 1981; Oliver, 1992) have argued that research has been dominated by male and able-bodied people who have controlled the agenda, the questions and the findings. We would add to this debate the concern of adults defining the worlds of young people. Young people's involvement in research is one means of challenging these hegemonies, valuing their first-hand experience as the basis for knowledge (Beresford and Evans, 1999).

How have young people been involved in decision making?

Whilst the organisations that took part in the studies may also have been promoting young people's participation in individual decisions — it was young people's involvement in the public decision making (Sinclair, 2004) that was the focus of the studies. We found evidence of young people being actively involved in a range of forums, groups and roles:

- Elected authority wide forums and groups (e.g. shadow cabinets, young mayors)
- Trustees and board members, including chair of trustees
- Specialist forums (e.g. Leaving Care User Group or Black and Minority Ethnic Youth Forum)
- Local panels and forums (e.g. YOFs and Youth Banks, local youth councils, schools councils)

- Community-based groups
- National groups (e.g. UKYP)
- Members of Advisory Groups
- Management committees
- Being responsible for particular activities and events

In the course of the evaluation of a large national programme, we spoke to many young people in local voluntary sector projects about the influence they had in their organisations. Most reported effective ways for their ideas to be heard within their organisations. Many felt strongly that they were listened to and that they were supported by workers to develop ideas; and that through the structures of representation, they felt that every young person had the opportunity to be heard.

There are lots of ways for young people to get involved and a flexible environment to help young people feel welcome relaxed and valued.

Young people told us that through their participation, they contributed to decision making, for example, strategic planning. One young person from a local project spoke of being involved in a 'Head Office' steering group, influencing the development of the organisation's national policies as well as being active locally.

One of the young researchers summarised:

Structure is young people-led, especially the junior club. Young people put forward ideas to other young people who are representatives and chair of the groups. These representatives come all together and make decisions for the whole organisation.

Although established as widespread practice in the sector over recent years, recruiting staff was still perceived as new and often highlighted as one of the major initiatives young people were involved in. We heard from young people of their changing person specifications for posts and deciding what questions they would ask in a formal interview.

We have been involved in the interviewing staff — that is good. We get to have a say on who works here. Also we learn about interviews which can be useful if we go for jobs ourselves.

Young people were involved in grant giving as part of YOF and YouthBank groups.

We're funding people who would otherwise be unable to take part in activities.

They took part in promoting positive images of young people and challenging stereotypes. They were also campaigning and lobbying on local services and local environments; for example, young people were successful in achieving a negotiated discount on their bus fares. Further examples include:

We lobbied (company) to get a leaflet changed which had a picture of a stereotypical teen and were successful.

Park development; we've helped the next generation, helped the residents.

Overall, many young people have told us that they felt that they did have some influence on the decision making in their organisations.

I feel I am making a positive part in a major organisation and feel I have achieved something.

I can see that when I say something sometimes it changes for the next person.

It is of note that these current empirical findings exclusively from young people affirm those from adults and show that the range of opportunities for young people's participation has not developed significantly in recent years. For instance, in 2006, Halsey and others conducted a literature review of the effectiveness of youth participation and produced a very similar list of the settings in which young people had achieved some discernable impacts. In 2004, Oldfield and Fowler investigated existing levels of youth participation and found very similar structures and activities within them. However, these older studies relied predominantly or exclusively on information given by adults.

Impact on young people and organisational change

The benefits from participation for the individual young people actively involved are important; Batsleer (2010, p. 193) writes that it can be 'potentially a joyful and life-enhancing experience' for the young people involved. However, this, on its own, is not enough. If participation is to be 'a process by which people can influence decision making and bring about change' (Participation Works, 2008, p. 9), then we would expect to also hear about changes for other young people using the projects, and maybe beyond as a result of participation. In all the projects we visited, the number of young people actively involved within the organisation was inevitably a small proportion of the total number of young people who use the projects. For this reason, we asked young people what they thought the impact of their participation was more widely — on services and on other young people. We sought in our research to distinguish between the process of participation and the outcomes of participation. Respondents often blurred the two, which we reflect may itself be an indication of the dominant discourse on participation and the hegemony of adults making participation a restricted and organisational construct.

The young people active in organisations were clear that there could be a connection between their participation and developments and improvements in services for other young people using the services. We were given examples of young people's participation having a profound effect on service delivery and on the lives of young people. One example related to the confidentiality policy at one project.

The policies were re-written because the young people did not understand them, now they are written by young people and everyone can understand them.

It was not just a matter of re-wording the policies. The young people felt strongly that the changes in the confidentiality policy proposed by workers would limit the use of the centre by young people, who would not feel secure that what they told workers would not be passed on, and so fundamental changes were made.

At another project, the young people spoke of a number of examples of where young people's participation had led to service improvements both within their project and more

widely. A group of disabled young people had been involved in a number of projects relating to integrated education, accessible transport, housing for young people and access to leisure services — any changes in these areas could potentially benefit all disabled young people. Some challenges remained, as action was in the hands of others:

The DVD for the education authority has been shown to head teachers and so they now know what we think about schools and how they can be made better for all disabled children.

Young people spoke of involvement in developing policy and practice, which would have an effect on young people more widely, for example, overturning Dispersal Orders, changing attitudes through consultation processes, introducing independent support staff for young people. They also influenced policy and practice relating to specific groups of young people, for example, travellers or looked-after young people.

I've attended the education of looked-after children training course and taken part in giving my opinions about the way young people should be supported and treated at school.

The model of grant making by young people demonstrated in the YOF process had a far reaching effect on Local Authority staff and councillors that we spoke to in one of the studies. In a number of cases, from a position of initial scepticism, elected members had seen young people making responsible decisions. This had the effect of encouraging them to both consider other settings where young people could be involved in commissioning services to support young people in need and also to consider further roles for young people in the authority. Examples we were given included opportunities for young people in commissioning of young people's services such as teenage pregnancy prevention and in recruiting and training young people to be involved in the inspection and evaluation of services.

What is not going so well?

Despite considerable effort having gone into creating structures, strategies and systems for participation and young people's enthusiasm and commitment, those involved saw there were factors hindering participation. We heard this particularly within local authority contexts; most young people from third sector organisations did not tell us of the same concerns. We heard of Councillors actively discouraging young people's participation in local authority structures, despite official acceptance of young people's right to participate in these. Some young people spoke of dismissive attitudes from some adults.

At a council meeting, we got ignored. They were rude — a youth worker had to have a word with them.

Often, young people felt that there was too much adult control of participation processes in youth forums. Young people in one authority told researchers that a number of the structures they belonged to were affected by overly intrusive adults.

In the Youth Fund, you find that adults are too much in control; the boards are run by adults.

We found some young people very frustrated about the slow pace of change and lack of accountability and feedback.

Youth Parliament, when following up an issue, it takes a long while. You have to take it to one person and they have to keep taking it higher and higher, for example, getting the lighting in the park or more performing arts. None of it has happened yet. By the time it does, I'll be out (of the group) and won't get the answer.

Young people in the Beacon study reported that they felt councillors were listening to them more, but not necessarily acting on the information. There was a lack of feedback about both the constraints on their decision making and even routine consultation,

They listen, but there is not really a culture yet to engage young people.

Reflections on the state of participation and future developments

Many of the Local Authorities and voluntary sector organisations involved in the studies were using Hear by Right (Badham and Wade, 2010) to inform the development of their youth participation. Hear by Right is a framework to support organisations in ensuring that young people take part in the decision-making processes, and their voice is heard and acted upon. Hear by Right is based on the Peters and Waterman (2004) seven S model of organisational change, which covers seven factors: Shared values, Strategies, Structures, Systems, Staff, Skills and knowledge, Style of leadership. They divide the seven factors into 'hard' (strategy, structure and systems) and the others as 'soft'. They point out that many organisations concentrate on the 'hard' elements and do not give enough consideration to the soft elements. It is these soft elements that are crucial for the success of the development of meaningful participation of young people in an organisation.

From the overview of our research projects, it seems that many organisations are indeed making real progress in the hard elements. Young people reported a range of structures that they could be part of to inform decision making; they also spoke of systems in place to support their participation, for example, budgets for participation activities, recording and evaluation. There are strategies, such as how to meet the obligations to demonstrate involvement of young people as part of Children's Plan or the requirements of many funders. We found much less consistent evidence that similar progress was being made on the soft elements, particularly in local authorities; the findings presented earlier indicate that there is often more work needed on the shared values, staff, skills and style of leadership. Hear by Right emphasises each standard depends on the others to move forward (Badham and Wade, 2010). The Hear By Right framework requires that all seven aspects should be developed simultaneously. Without the development of the 'soft' elements the progress in the other elements may stagnate.

The review of the findings of the three studies confirms that young people have the vision, passion, skills and knowledge to take an active part in the governance of an organisation (Badham and Davies, 2006). However they are easily able to spot tokenism when their contributions are not being acted on and leading to the changes they anticipated.

The evidence reviewed here has come directly from young people, and it raises issues relating to both organisations and the role of adults. They commented on opportunities for them to participate through structures created by adults and on agendas set by adults — it was essentially 'participation by invitation'. Our research, whilst celebrating much success, did hear about participation that was often transactional, limited by the normative barriers (Hodge, 2005) and instrumental rationality (Houston, 2008). It was sometimes limited by an

iron cage of regulation (Houston, 2008) and ways of interacting, rather than being transformational, changing the power relationships within organisations and between young people and adults. It is not just in the UK that this is observed. In Australia too, young people's participation has been criticised for a reliance on formal mechanisms and as a consequence is seen to have remained static and focused on formal initiatives (Vromen and Collin, 2010). The review identifies issues that need further consideration by those interested in developing young people's participation. As Sinclair writes 'each step forward alerts us to how much more we need to learn and understand' (2004, p. 116).

The examples we have discussed above are testimony to young people's commitment to participation and to making a difference. Further evidence was collected on The National Youth Agency's 'What's Changed' web pages, which showed change that young people have achieved. As a portfolio of examples, they also illustrated the limitations of change often secured, being predominately narrow in focus and effect.

Much fewer are examples of change led by young people, of greater ambition and scope, crossing community boundaries, ages and services. These do exist. The author has for some years had contact with a group of young people in Baltimore — Youth Dreamers — who have tirelessly worked to create a young people's run centre in their neighbourhood. It was finally successfully opened this year. They are the backbone of the organisation, take responsibility and make important decisions. They talk of adults who are allies (e.g. members of the board alongside young people, or *pro bono* solicitors). They recognise that the project is not about them as individuals, but about the community and that they feel they have 'changed the world, made a difference, and had a voice' (<http://www.rightspace.org.uk>). There are also groups of young people in the UK taking action for change on issues that concern them, like the young people's campaigns against mosquito devices and the cuts in Sheffield (Children and Young People Now, 2011). Furlong and Cartmel (2007, p. 134) suggest that young people often prefer the 'simplicity of single issue politics where they both know what they are buying into and can judge progress towards specific goals'. However, such young person-led activity tends to be relatively isolated and there few organisations of young people in the UK (Tisdall, 2008).

Ways of working in partnership with young people are needed that develop participation activities building on what has been both learnt and achieved by the type of participation activities discussed in this article. These need to move participation 'beyond young people "having a say" to make children's participation more meaningful' (Percy-Smith, 2007). The intention would be to move outside adult set, institutional boundaries for participation, and to support young people to use their knowledge, skills and experience to take action on issues they identify of concern to them. Hill and others (2004) suggest that we need to recognise the self-emancipatory skills of children and young people; this would involve challenging the established power relations between young people and adults.

Important questions about participation remain to be asked (Hinton and others, 2008). We need to think critically and reflectively how to establish new ways for young people and adults to engage in discussion, and negotiate decisions together, so that power is shared and not held by adults. We need to stop the move to participation only referring to activities that fit with adult agendas (Tisdall, 2008). Relationships need to develop between young people and adults that can support and facilitate rather than control and dictate young people's lives and actions. This raises questions about values and the motivation of adults to work

with young people as equal partners or allies to support them in taking actions on the issues they identify as important to themselves (Sinclair, 2004; on the RightSpace website: www.rightspace.org.uk) Talha Ghannam reflects on the Islamic understanding of motivation and intention. He asks, do we do participation work in the role of a miser, 'for what you yourself can gain' or as a trader 'trading gains and doing it for future benefits' or as the lover to work in partnership with young people 'for the love of it, because it is the right thing to do'? This is a critical question at this time of change, when policy direction and financial support are uncertain. As Batsleer says, there is a need for adults 'with a "burning heart", and passionate commitment to young people' (2010, p. 194).

If more equitable partnerships between young people and adults are pursued, this could support young people in being active citizens in addressing the issues and concerns that are important to them and creating a better future (Thomas, 2010).

Conclusion

Participation needs to continue to evolve and develop, ways need to be found that build on all the experience there is in UK and internationally to move participation forward. As this overview of our studies shows, there is much good practice and there are many excellent examples of young people's participation in organisations — yet there is more to do in supporting young people working on issues they identify themselves.

Participation is the means to address challenges and issues young people face. If participation is to go forward and make a progressive contribution, practitioners and policy-makers need to move from the organisational focus of much current participation and young people need to set the agenda for action. People with 'burning hearts' need to create new alliances with young people and spaces for them to take a more active role in decisions on issues that they consider important. Such participation is not an end in itself, but lies at the heart of moving forward for young people to improve their lives and make a difference in ways that are important to them.

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