

# APPROACHES TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORK PRACTICE: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**



Youth Affairs Council Victoria

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# Introduction

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Participation, and the inclusion of young people in decisions that affect them, is important to professional youth and community work practice (Smith 1983, 1988; Jeffs & Smith 1987; Irving, Maunder & Sherrington 1995; Harrison & Wise 2005; Ord 2007; Wood & Hine 2009; Batsleer & Davies 2010; Sapin 2013; Corney 2014a, 2014b). However, application of the concept is contested (Farthing 2010, 2012) and, as Smith (1983) has warned, participation, while central to youth work, has not been well understood. Ord (2007) goes further to suggest that understanding what is meant by participation is crucial to good youth and community work practice.

According to Kellet (2009:43), participation is to be “actively involved in something”. Reddy and Ratna (2002) suggest that the way participation is conceptualised is both ideological and cultural and its translation into action is mediated through a particular context. Enabling the participation of young people in decisions that affect them has been and continues to be a key principle underpinning the practice of professional youth and community work (Batsleer & Davies 2010; Sapin 2013). This principle of participation is informed by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). In the various international contexts that professional youth and community work takes place, the principle is further strengthened by ratification of the UNCRC and enabling legislation, acts of parliament and/or regulatory measures specific to the state or local government of that particular country or jurisdiction (Lansdown 2010).

Practitioners of youth and community work have long held the view that young people who are yet to reach the age of majority or enfranchisement (18 years in Australia for example) are disenfranchised, not treated equally by virtue of their age and thus often on the margins of political and civic decision-making (Farson 1974; Corney 2004; Hoiles & Corney 2007; Seebach 2008; Sapin 2013; Corney 2014a, 2014b). Some young people are further marginalised from mainstream society by the social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which they live (Brown 1992, 2010; Joseph, Akpokavi, Chauhan & Cummins 2002). It is the powerlessness associated with the social and political marginalisation of young people that links youth and community work to social justice, to human rights and, more broadly, to the concept of participation embedded in the idea of active citizenship (Farson 1974; Crooks 1992; Corney 2004; Chouhan 2009; Wood 2009, 2010; Ife 2012; Corney 2014a, 2014b). Kenny (2011) strongly links citizenship and human rights to civil and political rights. She asserts that it is the right of all people, based on their common humanity, to participate equally in the making of a civil society, and to reap its benefits regardless of age, gender or economic position. In this sense, youth and community work is underpinned by human rights, and by a commitment to enable the active participation of young people in decisions that will affect them, particularly those made by governments and legislators on their behalf (Corney 2014b).

Governments that are a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are accountable to ensure that the human rights of children and young people under the age of majority are valued and protected within government and the community. This is exemplified in the UNCRC's (1989) 'best interests' principle. Article 3.1 of the UNCRC prescribes that:

*In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.*

The right of young people under the age of majority to participate in decisions being made about them is enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). These covenants are designed to inform various pieces of government legislation (for example, the Victorian Government's *Children Youth and Families Act 2005*) in relation to the responsibilities of agencies and individuals who work with young people. As such, the concept of youth participation as a principle of professional youth and community work practice is well documented (YACVic 2007; Podd 2010; Sapin 2013; Batsleer & Davies 2010; Corney 2014a; 2014b). However, in terms of the policy and practice implications, we still need to ask: what does 'participation' mean? What does it look like? And what are the issues it raises for professional youth and community workers?

## **CRITICAL DIALOGUE**

There is renewed interest by governments and non-government youth agencies in the role and place of youth participation in funded programs and services. Terms such as 'co-design', 'co-creation', 'co-production' and 'co-management' appear regularly in the youth sector literature and concepts such as 'client-centred' practice are often mandated in funding agreements. In spite, of this renewed interest, there appears to be a lack of a nuanced understanding of the theory and practice of youth participation and associated concepts (Lansdown 2010; Farthing 2010, 2012). In this critical dialogue, experts from the field of youth and community work in Australia and internationally are asked to critically respond to a series of provocative questions on the topic of 'youth participation'.

This critical dialogue focuses on the principle of 'youth participation', reflecting in detail on its meaning and the various understandings of its use and application in the practice of professional youth and community work. The dialogue takes the form of a moderated discussion between authoritative voices in the fields of youth and community work, who are both practitioners and academics. Critical dialogue (Freire 1972) is the proposing of provocative questions and reflecting on them critically, enabling the responses to challenge and inform future action. Critical dialogue is a common practice within youth and community work. The following is a transcript of this dialogue, with minor edits for clarity.

# Chapter 1: What is ‘Youth Participation’?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** Let’s begin by defining what we mean by ‘participation’, because ‘youth participation’ is a term that youth and community workers and agencies use regularly and think is important. Government funding agreements for youth service provision are beginning to mandate ‘youth participation’. However, youth participation is not well understood and has been described as a “fuzzy concept” (Sotkasiira, Haikkola & Horelli 2010:176). So what does it mean? What does the term ‘participation’ mean to the youth sector? And what does the term mean to youth and community work practitioners and academics?

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**Harry Shier:** That’s a very tricky question, however you approach it. In 2017 I worked with international experts at UNICEF HQ in New York trying to determine a broadly acceptable (i.e. unobjectionable) conceptualisation of youth participation. The background was that UNICEF was developing an instrument called the ‘Adolescent Country Tracker’ (UNICEF 2018a) that would compare and contrast the situation of young people around the world and track it over time. They had decided that ‘adolescence’, as a global state of being, involved five key aspects: health and wellbeing, education and learning, protection, transition to work, and finally participation and engagement. They had already agreed on five broad indicators for each of the first four aspects that would enable them to track the progress of adolescence throughout the world, but when they came to write the indicators for ‘participation’ they drew a complete blank. As they struggled to come up with even one indicator that would serve as a proxy measure for ‘participation’, the underlying problem was revealed: they didn’t know what they meant by ‘participation’. They had the word, and they were sure it was a good thing, but they were lacking a concept to go with it. So they formed an international expert group, and that is how I came to be in New York in 2017. Our deliberations led to a published report (UNICEF 2018b), which contains the following definition:

*Adolescent girls and boys (individually and/or collectively) form and express their views and influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly (UNICEF 2018b:3).*

The reason this is so sparse and, you might say, unhelpful, is that it seeks to be a genuine definition. That is, to find a form of words that will encompass everything that *is* participation and exclude everything that *isn’t* participation. It tells us what participation *is*, but it doesn’t tell us anything about how it *works*, or make any value judgements about it. How are young people’s views formed? How are they expressed? How does influence occur? Are we in favour of it, and if so, why? Here lies a real understanding of the meaning of participation: in the narratives, the theory, the praxis, the constructs, the discourses, and the critical reflection. That’s what makes it a tricky question.

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**Robyn Broadbent:** Yes, I think youth participation is quite vexed, both globally and in Australia at this time, because there is not any consistent pattern or definition to youth participation. I see the voice of young people being shut out. At the last Australian federal election in the western suburbs of one of our states, a local government youth service ran a consultation with young people interviewing all of the aspiring politicians and asking young people their views on the politicians. However, the municipal councillors would not release the findings. Now that is terrible. You ask young people for their opinion, but if that opinion is deemed to be too controversial or doesn't fit the views of local politicians, you don't release it. So, it's a very vexed space, and increasingly, young people are struggling to have a voice.

**Tim:** I think you are right, Robyn. From my perspective this can also be seen clearly in the way young people have been demonised by some political leaders for taking the day off school to participate in the Schools Strike 4 Climate protests for example or for participating in the Black Lives Matters rallies. Their voice and participation has certainly not been encouraged by some politicians.

**Roger Holdsworth:** Youth participation is about young people having real roles in their communities. I think it is nothing much different from the participation that we all have. It's about us all being active participants. It also means looking at the structures within our communities that deny young people those opportunities to participate, which exclude them.

Adam Fletcher (2015) in the United States talks about adultism as being an ingrained anti-youth assumption that young people can't do things because of age rather than anything else. Youth participation is a struggle against those sorts of things. Therefore, it is a form of positive discrimination. It is seeing the sorts of barriers to participation that exist for young people and what we can do structurally or in attitudes and so on to overcome those sorts of discriminations.

Participation can manifest itself in all sorts of different ways: for example, in governance, which I think often people get focused upon, like putting young people on a committee or a council or something like that. However, within education, I have been much more interested in what happens in the classroom in terms of student participation than on the school council.

**Howard Williamson:** Participation needs contextualisation. As a youth worker, I always tried to work to the mantra that I only do those things *for* young people that they cannot do by virtue of their age. Otherwise, we work together. Roger mentioned age, and obviously, there are limitations to what young people can do and can decide. There is debate about that, about their empowerment and words like that. However, what I have tried to do as a practitioner was always to have conversations with young people in order to say, 'Well, you can do a lot of this. What do you want to do? How would you like to do it?' It is about equalising the balance of power. It was not for me to determine what should be done to them. I wanted to do things *with* them, and I wanted them to do things for themselves when they felt able to do that.

I think sometimes there's a bit of an over-gushing belief that young people (a) want to do it all for themselves, and (b) can do it all for themselves. So there's always contextualisation and interpretation of 'participation'. If you are talking to a 10-year-old, it is different from talking to a 15-year-old. However,



the 'what' question: 'what is participation?' is about enabling young people to take part in whatever is shaping their lives, whether that is formal schooling or in non-formal education and learning settings, or in other things.

**Katherine Ellis:** For me, youth participation is, at its core, taking young people seriously, as citizens, as having a right to have a say in matters that affect their lives. That can be in terms of programs for young people or it can be in terms of policy that affects their lives. It can be in terms of participating in governance of organisations that have influence and power over them. Participation really means many different things in different environments, so there is no one real way to do youth participation. I think the reason we want to do it is because young people have unique perspectives and, quite often, they have unique needs as well.

Just recently, YACVic<sup>1</sup> made a submission to the Royal Commission on Victoria's Mental Health System. It was critical that we focused on young people because mental health is an issue for them. Seventy-five per cent of mental health disorders emerge before the age of 25, and yet the system at the moment doesn't make any real allowance for the unique needs of young people.

So enabling young people's participation in the submission was important. They co-designed it; they co-facilitated all of the consultations with about 300 young people, and the submission was very informed by their lived experience. That's a critical part of participation - that young people are experts in their own lives - and that needs to be acknowledged. They may not be experts in other areas, but they are experts in their own lives, and they know how systems affect them and where the gaps are, and quite often, what the solutions can be.

**Tim:** So, Katherine, do you think that young people participating – that is, young people having a say, a voice, providing advice and feedback – or to use your term 'co-designing' programs – that it actually makes programs potentially more efficient and effective, and better able to service the needs of young people?

**Katherine:** Yes, certainly, in my experience, it does. My time in the youth sector started at the Reach Foundation, and I was quite fortunate to start in an organisation where youth participation was taken for granted. All the programs were designed and delivered by young people for young people. It meant that those programs were coming out of the minds of young people, and therefore very relevant and engaging for young people. They also had a real understanding of what would inspire and shift young people's behaviours and thinking, and how to create safe spaces for them, to encourage them to open up about their lives. My early experience of youth participation was that ability of young people to really know what is going to work for them.

**Tim:** So what you are saying is that participation is about relevance and the ability of the program or service to relate to, and meet the needs of young people?

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**Katherine:** Yes, absolutely; relevant programs, services and policies are a significant outcome of youth participation.

**Robyn:** My concern is that we still have a whole range of youth practitioners and services that do not have a strong framework of practice that is underpinned by human rights, and who actually understand and will advocate for participation. My view is that the quality of participation really varies across our youth service system. It depends on the employer or agency, and on how the youth worker views youth participation, and how they have been trained and whether they can either advocate or even understand what youth participation, or to use the new term 'co-design', actually looks like.

There are some good examples within youth residential housing settings that are using co-design. That was an initiative of the Victorian state government youth minister, giving young people much more say over their program, their personal space, in residential care environments. I think there are pockets of good participation, but I think it's really still fairly patchy. I'm not going to put that patchiness squarely with youth workers, though I think there is some responsibility there. I think it is mostly about the youth services and government having some sort of consistent pattern and definition.

**Tim:** Robyn, you mentioned youth workers taking some responsibility for participation and the lack of good models. As a lecturer in youth work, do you think that is about training and students understanding and having a commitment to youth participation? And do you think that is also about the quality of the youth work training – lecturers delivering appropriate models of what participation might look like: teaching students how to advocate and facilitate that? There are lots of people and other professions that are working in the youth sector who don't have a youth work qualification, who may not necessarily be trained in or have a framework for youth participation, or who may not have skill sets to enable and facilitate that. So how do you respond to that: is that what you also mean by patchiness?

**Robyn:** Yes. I do think the training is patchy and there are key differences in content and quality between certificate level vocational training in technical and further education (TAFE) colleges and a university degree. I also think you have youth workers who are committed to and skilled in youth participation, but they have bosses who are not youth work trained and who are not committed to youth participation. I think that part of knowing the amazingness of young people, of what they are capable of, is actually working with them every day, and if you don't, you don't necessarily have that privilege of understanding of what young people can achieve if you give them some respect and some resources and some opportunities to partner with you to do things. You have, instead, this attitude of defensiveness or patronising or even fear of what young people might do if they have too much power. And so you then have a conflict between the youth workers who can see the potential and their supervisors and managers who don't want to let that happen.

**Trudi Cooper:** Participation can mean different things to youth workers, young people and funding bodies. The minimal everyday meaning of 'taking part' (Dictionary.com) in pre-planned activities is arguably how young people initially understand participation. This same meaning is prominent in evaluation systems that use outcomes-based metrics (for example counting numbers of participants).

Harry mentions the problem of metrics, and outcomes-based metrics, as a means to measure service utilisation and efficiency, which have become the norm for public services under new public management (Gruening 2001). By contrast, most definitions of youth work present youth work as a *process* that is relational, collaborative and negotiated (Cooper 2018; Jeffs & Smith 1987, 1988, 2005; Ord 2007). The relational and collaborative aspects of the youth work process, *necessitate* a more engaged understanding of participation, as others have alluded to in their examples.

However, 'outcomes' focused youth work, as conceptualised by funding bodies, is in tension with the concept of youth participation implicit in youth workers' definitions of youth work. Arguably outcomes-based funding mitigates all but minimal concepts of youth participation because youth workers are pressured to meet the 'outcome' targets without regard to process, or the means by which the outcome has been achieved. The problematic nature of pre-determined numerical targets for quality management has been well-documented in many other areas of management (Gruening 2001), long before new public management methods became prominent and problematic in youth work (Ord 2007). The funding regime for job placement agencies provides a classic example of how outcomes-based funding disempowers young people and *undermines their genuine participation*. Job agencies are 'incentivised' under outcomes-based funding to 'persuade' young people to 'participate' in training or work that will benefit the job placement agency but may not benefit the young person. If persuasion fails, job agencies have the power to coerce young people to accept training or job placements against their will (through financial sanctions).

A first step to promoting an expanded concept of youth participation beyond narrow outcome targets is to attend to the integrity of the youth work processes used by youth workers (what youth workers do and why), rather than focusing on *apparent* outcomes (what outcomes are claimed or apparently achieved, by whatever means). If youth work methods achieve what they claim, then positive outcomes for youth participation will follow, if youth work processes are followed with integrity. This form of monitoring and evaluation is realistic. In the early days of my career in youth work, much more attention was paid to ensuring the integrity of youth work processes (or inputs) than attempting to measure claimed outcomes, many of which may be ephemeral or inauthentic.

**Katherine:** On that last point of outcomes-focussed work with young people, I'm very interested now in looking beyond the youth work sector to other spaces where young people are. There are many people who are not technically youth workers, but who work with young people, and their ability to engage with young people and promote youth participation in an effective and skilled way is almost non-existent, because there's not a recognition that young people's empowerment, agency and competence are really important in those spaces.

**Tim:** That's an interesting perspective Katherine, and I agree that there are a lot of people who work with young people in various contexts and who are not trained or qualified as youth workers. What are some of these contexts and 'spaces' that you are thinking of?

**Katherine:** Well, employers are one. Employers that have a lot of young people who work for them. I'm thinking of businesses such as the fast food franchise chains, the movie cinema chains; they all

have large groups of young staff, but do they have any understanding of youth participation or any skills in engaging young people?

In addition, I would say the media is another industry that needs to take a long, hard look at how they are engaging young people and promoting youth participation. There is recent research (Notley, Dezuanni & Zhong 2019) analysing young people's voices in media. They found that only 1% of the pieces quoted a young person directly, and only 15% had young people as the focus, and the majority of those were negative stories about young people involved in accidents or crime.

**Tim:** So are you saying, Katherine, that often the way that young people are presented and the role they play in businesses and/or in the media is lacking something, that it is deficit based? And, that these organisations and business could benefit from understanding the principles of youth participation and the strengths of young people?

**Katherine:** Yes, I am. And I would say that government departments could benefit too. They often undertake reviews and reforms, and advise on policy, on matters that affect young people's lives enormously, but without enough consultation or inclusion of young people's perspectives.

## IN SUMMARY

The contributors agree on the human right of young people to participate and the ramifications of this right for youth and community work practice, particularly Article 12 of the UNCRC. Contributors also agree that the participation of young people in decision making is useful in both the development and evaluation of policy, programs and services. It improves the quality and informs the effectiveness of service delivery and the meeting of young people's needs.

However, the application of participation processes means different things in different contexts. Outcomes-led funding criteria for youth services is one example where context can shape the form that participation may take. Youth worker training and the level of qualification is also important to the understanding and application of youth participation processes, and a lack of training, particularly a lack of understanding of the relevance of the UNCRC, can be an inhibitor and barrier to the facilitation of young people's participation. As Lansdown (2010:12) has said,

*"If advocacy to promote [young people and] children's right to participation is to be effective, it is imperative that it is grounded in a clear understanding of the scope of the relevant rights in the Convention and the obligations they impose..."*

# Chapter 2: Models of Youth Participation – are they helpful?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** There are a numerous 'models' of participation and they often contain measures of the level of participation. Probably the most well-known is Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of Participation'. But it is not the first of its kind: Arnstein (1969) developed an early 'ladder' model and, later, Shier's (2001) work on 'pathways' and Treseder's (1997) 'degrees of participation' have all been informative and are widely recognised. In more recent times there have emerged a range of new models, for example Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010) have built on Harry Shier's work to create an interesting typology of youth participation, and Anderson (2017) has drawn on Swedish youth research to propose a Pedagogical Political Participation model (3-PM).

However, Hart's 'Ladder' has become synonymous with *youth* participation. It drew from work in the 1960s by Sherry Arnstein, who proposed a ladder of citizen participation to depict the different ways that we all participate in society. Hart's Ladder starts with a very low, or 'token', level of involvement and goes right through to a high level of 'genuine' participation and collaboration with adults. So do these models help or hinder youth participation?

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**Roger:** Hart's levels of participation have been a matter of contention – including as to what should be at the top or not: should it be shared decision-making with others, or unconstrained decision-making by young people? However, I would take the argument about levels of participation seriously because, in fact, we are all constrained by things. Everything that I do is constrained by reality. So to say to young people that you can do anything you like and put young people's total decision-making at the top level is, in fact, a fallacy. Maybe what it is actually saying to young people is, 'What you want to do is so unimportant that you can do whatever you like'. The reality of young people and adults working in partnership, I think, is quite correctly at the top ... if there is a top; and the issue of a 'top' has been another criticism of Hart's Ladder – the linearity of it. Hart's Ladder relates specifically to young people but, ideologically at least, we can say young people are no different from the rest of us in that we are all in that same sort of structure.

**Howard:** I was going to mention Sherry Arnstein as well because, as you say, Hart's Ladder is derived from Arnstein. Many people assume it is Hart's Ladder, however Hart (1992) acknowledges that it is Arnstein's. The Ladder has been used extensively in community planning and development and it was adapted by Hart for UNICEF to apply to children and young people.

I agree very much with Roger about this. When I was a practitioner, the most crystal clear area of youth participation in my long history of youth work practice was the planning and doing of weekends away. Who would call the shots? Who'd do the cooking? Who would do all the bits of

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organising it? And many, many sorts of youth participation issues arose during that process. One of the things I used to say in the pre-meeting before we went away was, 'Okay, how is this going to pan out?', 'There are laws that apply to me. There are things that you cannot decide because they are beyond the power of either of us. Then there are things that I want to impose on you'.

Perhaps a silly example was a thing like, 'If you keep me awake all Friday night, because you want to stay up all night in some remote cottage on a Welsh hillside, then fine. We will stay up all night, but then I am not driving the minibus anywhere on the Saturday. It is as simple as that because I will be too tired, and it will be unsafe. That's the deal. You can make that decision. But if you want me to drive you to the seaside on the Saturday, then let's all be tucked up and asleep by midnight' or whatever. So it's negotiated. Then I would say to them, 'But there is still space beneath those two sets of rules and regulations for you to determine a whole range of things, and what would you like to do, and how would you like to do it?' Of course, that opened up a huge can of worms because different young people wanted different things.

So one of the reasons I don't like Hart's Ladder too much is that it's very easy to cry tokenism when you don't respond positively to a set of demands and wants that are expressed by young people. They do have to be interpreted. They have to be slotted into a program. It is about negotiation. It's about conversation. So I don't like to classify participation as a ladder – many a time, we've seen examples of people who've taken the hearing of young people's views seriously but have not acted on all of their wishes. Then young people have responded by saying, 'Oh, it was obviously only tokenistic; a low level of participation' when, in fact, the practice might have been a very high level of participation.

**Harry:** I declare an interest, as the creator of one of the models under discussion. But having said that, I must say I still find Hart's Ladder essential. Others, myself included, have built on it and gone beyond it, but what keeps bringing me back to Hart is his analysis of the three forms of false participation or 'non-participation' at the bottom of the ladder: manipulation, decoration and tokenism. In my view all three of these are still rampant in the practice of adults facilitating child and youth participation, and more attention should be given to exposing them and weeding them out. An example I've looked at recently is the way teachers often encourage children to invent lists of rights and responsibilities as part of a manipulative classroom management strategy (Shier 2018).

And I believe my own 'Pathways to Participation' model is still useful. The original article appeared in the journal *Children & Society* in 2001, and the fact that, nearly 20 years on, it currently tops that journal's 'most cited' list tells me that plenty of others agree. A couple of weeks ago I was invited to record some reflections on how the COVID-19 phenomenon is affecting children's right to participate in the educational sphere. I haven't been working directly with children and young people these past few years, and certainly not in times of pandemic, so I wondered what I could find to say about this that would be of any use. I found the answer in the 'Pathways to Participation' diagram. Whatever your work setting, if you just put the words, 'In times of COVID-19 ...' before each of the 15 questions in the matrix, the way forward reveals itself. Of course, these days there are dozens of models and analytical tools available. I draw ideas from many places and, besides Hart, the models I keep coming back to are Gerison Lansdown's (2001) and Laura Lundy's (2007).

Lansdown's genius is to reduce the whole world of child and youth participation to just three basic categories: consultative, collaborative and child-led (or I would say 'protagonistic') participation. Fair enough, this is a gross oversimplification of reality, but it has served me on many occasions; firstly because it gives me a child/youth-friendly framework for discussing this whole area with the children and young people themselves, and secondly because it lends itself to the addition of further dimensions to create matrices that become useful tools in their own right. See for example my recent work on helping researchers develop partnerships with children and young people (Shier 2019a).

Lundy's brilliance is to find a way to avoid altogether the whole area of types or levels of participation, and instead identify the four critical elements that have to be in place for it to occur: space, voice, audience and influence. Having been wholeheartedly embraced by our government here in Ireland (DCYA 2015), this is now regarded as the official national participation model and it has proved to be very useful. Often, when you are trying to understand an instance or a situation of participation, or unpick a problem, it is helpful to ask: What is the space, and whose is it? How is voice produced and expressed? Who is listening? And what is the influence, and how does it come about?

Discussing these models reminds me of an epigraph I came across when I was writing my thesis, which sums it all up beautifully: *Essentially, all models are wrong, but some of them are useful* (George Box 1979).

**Tim:** Recognising that Hart (2008) has been critical of his early conceptions of the Ladder, what do others think of it and these other models of participation being discussed here?

**Trudi:** A way of judging models is their utility in context (Sterman 2002) and I agree with Harry that all models are wrong, if viewed as 'truth' statements. Various models are useful in teasing out some of the complexities that arise in real life when discussing or supporting or facilitating youth participation. Arnstein's (1969) and Hart's (1992) models differ because they were developed for different purposes. Arnstein's purpose was to promote citizens' participation in planning, Hart's purpose was to promote young people's participation in matters that affect them. Both are useful because they draw attention to *faux*, false or inauthentic forms of participation. Arnstein discusses 'manipulation' and 'therapy' as inauthentic forms of participation, and Hart discusses 'manipulation', 'decoration', and 'tokenism' as false forms of participation. Both these models draw attention to various ways in which (young) people are co-opted into subordinate positions purely to provide legitimacy to decisions that others have made, as illustrated by Harry's classroom example. Roger, Howard and Harry (in his writings) all discuss the importance of *placing models into context* because all settings come with inherent constraints on decision-making, whether legal constraints or natural consequences, as illustrated by Harry's and Howard's examples.

A question of importance to me is how adults fit into the picture of youth participation. Because Hart does not discuss the limits of adult power, Hart's Ladder risks implying that adults (or young people) are powerful without constraints (Cooper 2009). By contrast, Arnstein's top rung of 'citizen control' makes an explicit link with participative democracy. Through this, Arnstein draws attention to the ways in which current democratic forms limit citizen participation, for both adults and young people,

in the workplace, in local planning and in many other aspects of our daily lives. On Hart's Ladder, the upper 'rungs' are sometimes referred to as youth-led. Harry's writings discuss how any of the models of youth participation can be subverted by failing to implement processes that maximise young people's capacity to genuinely participate, as he says, "*Any kind of participation can be rendered meaningless if the basic requirements are not met*" (Shier 2019b). According to Shier (2019c), the processes that maximise young people's empowerment to participate in consultation processes are: 'capacity', supporting young people to develop their capacity to participate; 'attitude', supporting them to become willing to engage in processes; and 'context and opportunities', looking for or promoting conditions that are favourable to young people's participation. In my view, these same processes are fundamental to good youth work practice.

**Katherine:** Models of participation can be very helpful. YACVic does quite a lot of work with people who don't really understand youth participation. We try to train them in the concepts and to think about how to practically implement participation in their organisation. So I think these models, like Hart's Ladder in particular, are very helpful for getting them to think beyond the very tokenistic level of consultation, because that's where a lot of organisations stop their participation because they think they're doing it.

**Robyn:** The key question for me is how to push Hart's model through to the final stage where participation is much more about youth-led activity and real partnership and collaboration between adults and young people. For some people this is quite often a new way of thinking, and actually having a theoretical model that you can point to that shows how it's done in practice is very helpful. I find actually that the final stage of Hart's Ladder, and Shier has it too as his final stages, the idea that youth-led activity is *not* the pinnacle. The pinnacle is actually where there is a multigenerational collaboration and partnership.

**Katherine:** When using a model with people who are not familiar with participation, you have to be clear that there is no single model of 'best practice' because it is always going to depend on the situation and the young people's level of competence and the older people's attitudes and behaviour. I recently attended a presentation by a Victorian government Minister, and I asked him what sort of consultations and inclusion of young people they were doing in their policy setting; the answer was not much. Yet his policy areas are as relevant for young people as they are for anybody else.

**Robyn:** Models provide an informative link to practice, but I have consistently maintained that the only way to ensure the right of young people to have a voice is through legislation, legislated youth participation. So that municipal councils, state and federal governments are required to have a youth participation process.

Legislation does force behaviour change. There is no doubt about it. You can look at it in the simplest form, like the mandatory wearing of seatbelts in cars, for example. Legislation will change behaviour because you have no choice. Because I don't think that adults will willingly give over money and power. I just do not think it is going to happen unless participation is legislated into law.



## IN SUMMARY

Contributors agree that, despite its limitations, Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation continues to provide a useful starting point for considering the various models of youth participation. Contributors point out that, while no model is perfect all are useful in some way when contextualised to the needs of young people and their particular environment. Underpinning most models is the right to participate and that this right needs a mandated process. Once legislated, government entities, institutions or funded bodies are then required to provide a process and/or models for young people to participate in decision-making. However, the danger with mandated or compulsory participation is the potential for the process to be disempowering or even oppressive, as Farthing (2010, 2012) has noted. The role of adults in the participation process and the limits or constraints on adult power is contested, but it remains important for the success or otherwise of youth participation models, as does the capacity of young people to participate in them (Francis & Lorenzo 2002; Malone & Hartung 2010).

There are also models and theories of participation, some recent, that haven't been discussed in detail in this dialogue but are nevertheless important to the ongoing development of participatory processes and to youth and community work practice. These include models advanced by writers such as, Wong, Zimmerman, and Parker (2010); Anderson (2017); Cahill and Dadvand (2018); and Holdsworth (2020); and theoretical perspectives proposed by writers such as, Francis and Lorenzo (2002); Thomas (2007); Lansdown (2001, 2010, 2011); Lundy (2007); Theis (2010); Malone and Hartung (2010); Grimm and Pilkington (2015); Villa-Torres and Svanemyr (2015); and Havlicek, Curry and Villalpando (2018), to name only a few.

# Chapter 3: Perspectives on Participation – is the process, linear and hierarchical, sequential and developmental, or organic and circuitous?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** One of the criticisms of Hart's Ladder is that it is too linear, with sequential and hierarchical levels or rungs that follow each other and build on one another. Hart (2008) has written about this, recognising that it can lead the reader to assume that for participation to be successful it must progressively move up the ladder. Shier also shifted his ideas from an earlier sequential 'pathway' model (advanced in 2001) to a more complex and organic one called the 'Participation Tree' (Shier 2010), which was based on asserting the right to participate, albeit still developmentally. Even Reddy and Ratna's (2002) various discursive diagrams can be construed as developmental, where they describe participation through a series of complex schemas. How do others respond to these perspectives on participation?

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**Roger:** The text that was important to me was Reddy and Ratna (2002). They said that young people *are* participating all the time and in many and varied ways. What they developed was a pyramid of participation that said, "It denotes the control and influence adults have over the process of children's participation" (2002:28). So it was the framework that organisations and adults were putting on the top of what young people were actually doing. It was how organisations were responding and enabling or restricting participation.

Shier (2001) also talks about participation being an organisational response. What he said was, 'Let's talk about this in terms of organisational responses'. So he talks about openings and opportunities and obligations for organisations. He doesn't talk so much about what young people are doing. He talks more about how organisations are responding to young people.

The other criticism of these models was that they were one-dimensional and didn't portray complex organisations and relationships. Gerry De Kort (1999), who did work in Bangkok on youth policy and youth participation, started to question what a youth organisation is and does. He looked at policy setting, employment, and so on – he had about 10 categories of what an organisation did and then

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talked about what young people's and adults' roles were in *each* of those 10 categories. That way, you have a two-dimensional grid that starts pushing the boundaries of what participation really means. I used that a few years ago to enable the rating of participation within, and of, an organisation. Asking the organisation: How are you, as an organisation, doing in each of these areas? How can you plot youth participation across all the activities of your organisation? How are you responding to young people? Then asking young people how they see the organisation; asking males and females how they see the organisation; asking young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds how they see it, and so on. So you can start getting a conversation going about different people's perceptions of the power and participation of (different) young people in that organisation.

**Harry:** Roger is right. 'Pathways to Participation' has little to say about what is going on for the young people themselves. It's all about what the adults involved in supporting and facilitating the participation are thinking, and what they are up to. It has been argued that the focus should be more on the young people, and if you are going for a deep theoretical discussion, I'd say that is probably true. But if we are trying to engender change in the practice of adults around participation, this is where we need to focus.

About the 'Participation Tree' from Nicaragua (Shier 2010): that is such a different kind of a thing. 'Pathways to Participation' was carefully constructed and formally laid out in straight lines. The Participation Tree, as its name suggests, grew organically out of the fertile soil of Nicaragua, through a series of discussions and workshops with young community activists on the coffee plantations and neighbouring communities. I still use it frequently, but when I pull it out of my tool-bag my aim is not to explain or instruct, but rather to motivate and inspire.

**Trudi:** The people who developed these participation models were focused upon how to *change* the ways organisations responded to young people. Therefore, the primary intended users of the models were *adults*, not young people. In particular, the intended model users were people who could influence how organisations provide opportunities for young people's participation in decision-making.

This has raised again for me the purpose of these models of youth participation. What the dialogue seems to point to is an agreement that many models of youth participation focus on how organisations (and adults) respond to the potential for young people's participation rather than how young people perceive participation. This is because the people who developed the models wanted to improve the ways organisations facilitated young people's participation. For Hart, whilst the 'Ladder of Participation' was developed for adults, the rationale for children and young people's participation was to use participation as a tool for youth development, community development and political self-determination. This can be found in Hart's (1992) *The Benefits of Participation*. Therefore, the primary intended users of the models were adults, not young people.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors, while observing some of the weaknesses in participation models, acknowledge that young people are participating all the time in different ways and at different levels often without assistance from adults or models of participation (Reddy & Ratna 2002; Vromen & Collin 2010). Adult models, however well-intentioned, can unwittingly be used to limit or restrict young people's organic participation (Francis & Lorenzo 2002; Malone & Hartung 2010).

Contributors posited a preference for youth workers facilitating and using models of participation that *are* developed *by* and/or *with* young people for use *by* them and *with* them. An example is the model developed by young people with youth workers from Gloucestershire's *Youth and Community Service* in the UK (Huskins 1996). This model, while still a very linear 'staged' approach, with intrinsic weaknesses, is directed at assisting youth workers to include young people in the organisational processes of doing youth work rather than a way of measuring how involved young people are in the decision-making of an organisation.

# Chapter 4: Do All Young People Want to Participate?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** We have been mostly talking about the ‘what’ rather than the ‘why’ of youth participation. We’ve briefly reflected on the issue that not all young people want to participate, or certainly not all at the same level. I wonder, how we should respond to this? Moreover, there is also the issue of what young people want to have some control over. Roger, you have spoken about this in other settings. You have talked about when you were involved in the running of a community school, the amount of time that you spent, teachers and students, talking about student control and decision-making and how a single issue could become an issue that defined the broader debates about participation.

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**Roger:** Yes, that’s right. Smoking was the issue (this was the 1970s) and, in many ways, it was an issue that became symbolic, because smoking was important to young people at that time, but in the general scheme of things, it wasn’t *that* important. Not world peace, for example! It was more about: are you (the school/adults/teachers) going to take us (the young people/students) seriously? You are espousing a rhetoric here of participation, of including us in decision-making, but are you serious about it? For those young people, this was a testing point about how far we, the adults/teachers/school would go in including young people.

We used to meet every week for an hour: the whole school, 70 people, teachers and students together. We agreed that every person had one vote. Outcomes of votes became the decision of the school; the staff would only overrule those decisions if it threatened the existence of the school. While we talked about those sorts of issues like smoking most weeks, there was an underlying discussion happening about seriousness, about inclusion and about respect. The more I think about it, the more I think it was about power and respect and they are the things I am more interested in now.

**Howard:** Roger’s point made me smile because nowadays in all youth centres in the UK you would not be allowing cigarette smoking at all, because it is against the law. However, it was also a perennial issue in my youth centre, which was not a very big building, but it had different sort of spaces. And you’d get the changing balance in terms of the ages of the young people who were coming to the building. You would often get an influx of 13-, 14-year-olds who had absorbed their health education messages at school. They would come in, and they would say, ‘We don’t like all this smoking that’s going on, so can we have a designated space for those people who still want to smoke?’ So we’d have a small space for the smokers and discourage (not ban) smoking everywhere else in the building. But

then as these kids got a bit older, 15, 16, and started to smoke themselves, the small space became absolutely choc-a-bloc with young people. Then they would approach and say, 'Can we use the larger space to smoke and have the smaller space for non-smoking?' So you'd get this constant shifting balance of power about where you were permitted to smoke within the building.

**Tim:** Is it fair to say that in both these illustrations the form that participation took was democratic because the majority were ruling?

**Howard:** Yes, exactly. Except that my role as the 'youth worker' was also trying to avoid the tyranny of the majority. I was trying to enable the voice of the one lone individual who liked a different kind of music, or wanted to do things slightly differently, or the smaller number of girls and the young people with disabilities who wanted to play pool or table tennis and have a go, but did not want to take on the older, more able boys who favoured a 'winner stays on' approach, and so on. As the youth worker, you had to stand up for the minority of one against the tyranny of the majority.

**Roger:** In the school I worked in, a Year 11 girl convinced the school for a while to move from democratic to consensus decision-making. And for tough, Year 7, boys in what was then inner-city working-class Brunswick (not gentrified Brunswick as it is now) the idea of keeping on talking about an issue until we all agreed, rather than it being a competition – 'Ha, ha, ha, I beat you' – was a challenging idea. However, she did it. She was a very powerful Year 11 student, and she managed to get this through.

**Tim:** It raises the question of how much time an organisation or a group of people have to commit to this idea of participation. If it is making decisions by consensus, then there is an enormous amount of time that needs to be committed to the process of decision making – is this the case and is it worth it?

**Howard:** In youth work practice, you have to give as much time to participation as it needs, and that may not be practical in schools. I'm not a fan of separating youth participation from youth work. I think youth participation is an integral part of youth work practice. So, if young people want a conversation about it and want to argue it further, you make the time for arguing it further.

**Roger:** But going back to what you were saying before, Tim, I was aware of the different levels at which young people understood their participation and those restrictions. One example was an issue a student raised for discussion in a whole-of-school meeting: 'What would happen if the ball went on the roof of the school? Could the students get up on the roof and retrieve the ball from the gutters?' One of the teachers said, 'No, my duty of care (as an education department employee) is that I have to be there and supervise you, or your parents could sue me or the school, if you fell off the roof. That's the restriction we have.' There was silence for a moment and then a student, who was in Year 8 at the time said, 'Then why the f\*\*\* are we talking about this?' He was aware of what the restrictions were in reality and the students' capacity to be co-decision-makers in that.

**Harry:** Trying to make young people participate when they don't want to has never been an issue for me. When I completed my first degree (1976) I thought I'd like to become a teacher, so I applied to do teacher training. But I took a year off before starting this, and that's when I started working

on adventure playgrounds. A year flew by and the following July I got a letter from the Institute of Education asking me to confirm that I would be taking up my teacher training place in September. I wrote back saying sorry, I'd changed my mind. Though, by doing this, I was charting a course into the unknown, my guiding star was the knowledge that, if I became a teacher, I would spend a whole career working with young people who were obliged by law to work with me, whether they wanted to be there or not. As a play worker, by contrast, I would always know that the children and young people I worked with were there because they wanted to be there, and under no obligation to stay if they didn't want to. And for me, that has been the way ever since.

**Tim:** Harry, you have provided an important reminder of the 'voluntary association' principle in youth work (Ord 2007; Batsleer & Davies 2010; Sapin 2013; Corney 2014a, 2014b) and that as soon as young people are mandated or obliged to participate, that it undermines the point of participation and undermines a key principle of youth work. Rhys Farthing (2010, 2012) has written about this paradox that, if participation is made a compulsory process and young people don't have the option to opt out, it actually functions as a form of social control.

**Harry:** Another way of saying this is that I, as an adult, have lots of opportunities to participate in the community I live in, but I want to make my own decisions about how and when to participate. For example, these days I seldom attend public meetings, I go on marches and demonstrations less often as I get older, I've never stood for public office, and I haven't been a member of a political party for some years. I know I can do all these things if I want to, but I'm not going to be forced. If that's good enough for me, it's good enough for the young people I work with, too.

**Robyn:** Do all young people want to participate? This is an interesting question because it raises the issue of cultural competency and sensitivity. I did a piece of exploratory research (Broadbent 2018) on a municipal council purpose-built recreation and leisure centre for young people, and why they weren't using it and why they couldn't get a young person to sit on the board of management. The council also tried to survey young people about their use of the centre but could not get young people to participate. So, with local youth workers, I engaged key young people from each of the area's major cultural groups, and their key job was to bring a dozen friends with them, and they were all willing.

So they all turned up with friends who were excited to talk about the purpose-built leisure centre and the current barriers they faced in accessing it. So I think it's about who is asking and organising, and that can influence young people's motivation to participate. It's also about a cultural competency and recognising that young people from different cultural backgrounds will actually participate but in different ways. As long as we are providing those opportunities at the very grassroots as an alternative to young people having to sit on the board of the leisure centre, for example, in this case, but their voice is still heard.

**Tim:** So Robyn, is what you are saying, that it is not necessarily the case that young people don't want to participate; it's about their opportunity to participate and the models and processes that are provided to enable their participation? Not all young people want to be on the board of a community centre for example, but they may still want to have a say about access to the centre or the services it provides or how those services are delivered.

**Robyn:** Yes, that's right, the participation models have to be broad enough to be inclusive of a diverse range of young people and accommodate differing levels of participation.

**Katherine:** I also agree; there have to be multiple entry points into participation. There are some organisations where young people just see it as normal to participate, whereas in other environments, they may not actually feel safe to participate – culturally safe. They may not feel like they are being heard and therefore it is a waste of time.

Part of the responsibility of youth workers and anyone who wants authentic youth participation is to make sure that barriers are taken out of the picture. Having said that, we also have to acknowledge that young people have a right to opt out of civic participation like anybody else does. If there are young people who don't want to participate because they're too busy with their school life or their social life or their sporting life, or they're just not interested in that particular issue, then we should respect that and not try and force them to participate either.

**Trudi:** The question of whether young people *want* to participate is important. From a youth work perspective this question can be understood in many ways, as the various responses showed. One implicit question is why it sometimes appears as if young people *do not want to participate* when adults offer opportunities. Robyn's example provides one answer, which is that sometimes the opportunities that adults offer (being on a committee or responding to a survey) are not perceived as the types of 'participation opportunities' that this group of young people feel comfortable with, or value. Robyn's example illustrates how, if young people are offered *different* participation opportunities that they feel comfortable with, the same group of young people will willingly engage. This approach is based upon one of the fundamental principles behind youth work practice, which is starting from where young people are at (Jefferies & Smith, 2005). This means understanding how young people perceive the 'participation opportunity' they have been offered. This may be in terms of whether they see the offer as interesting, or whether, as Katherine said they feel culturally safe in that environment.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors concur that, despite the various forms that participation may take, not all young people will choose to participate. For those who do, not all will participate at the same level. For youth workers to remain consistent in their practice while promoting youth participation, they will need to reflect on and incorporate the key principles of youth work, such as voluntary participation, anti-oppressive practice and contextualisation (Sapin 2012) in order to be sensitive to the diversity of young people.

Youth workers need to be able to understand the nature of participation *in situ*: the context in which it is taking place, the boundaries of decision-making, what is able to be negotiated and/or what is achievable within those boundaries, and the level and range of participation options for young people in a given time and place.



# Chapter 5: Are There Limits to Participation and Young People's Decision-Making?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** How do we involve young people in difficult conversations about activities or decisions they may want to make? Sometimes these decisions and the outcomes could have serious legal consequences. Is the easy answer to say, 'You're not allowed to do this because that's what the law says?' Are there limits to participation and young people's decision-making?

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**Howard:** Alcohol and drug use is one of those issues. At the youth club I ran we always had a relaxed meeting on the Monday night before we went away on the following Friday for the weekend. We would talk about how long the journey would take and whether parents had any concerns and a whole range of things. The big issue was always alcohol. Can we drink? Now, of course, if you are talking about 12-, 13-year-olds, no. They rarely ask the question. However, once you are talking about older young people, 16, 17, it's a tricky one. They *always* ask the question! What most youth workers knew was that in schools, when they made trips away, there would be a blanket ban on alcohol, but kids would smuggle it in and it would be problematic. And this wasn't school.

I wanted a sensible, relaxed conversation about alcohol use, to actually bring it to the surface and be able to talk about the pros and cons of drinking in society. So, yes, with your parents' permission you can drink. Then they would think, 'Ah, great – we can bring as much as we want.' But I'd say, 'Hang on a minute. There are a couple of conditions to allowing you to drink. The first is that we buy all the food first because I am not paying for the alcohol or interfering in your effort to buy it. You can try your luck buying it and if they sell it to you they are breaking the law. You're not breaking the law by buying it.' (At the time in the UK, it wasn't illegal for a young person under 18 years to purchase and consume alcohol, but it was illegal to sell it to a minor.)

'Secondly, there's a limit.' We would talk about the limit: 'four cans of lager for two nights' or whatever the case may be. I would say, 'And the third thing is, you put it out in the open. When we get there, I want everybody's alcohol to be on the table.' And you'd always get, 'Well, somebody'll steal it.' I'd say, 'Well, there's going to be only 12 of us in the cottage. It must be one of us. If you don't trust your mates, don't bring any.' This produced a lot of what I felt was useful discussion.

**Tim:** So Howard, you were providing young people with an opportunity to discuss a difficult issue and you were also providing some boundaries, saying that participation doesn't mean a free-for-all. You were enabling a conversation about values and in particular the responsibilities that go with participation? This provides an example of the *dialogical conversations* (Freire 1972) that the youth work relationship enables.

**Roger:** Exactly. There is in young people, as with all of us, a balance between altruism and selfishness. Part of what I hear you saying there, Howard, was that the compromise point for young people was that they cared for the program. So you can sell your boundaries discussion on the basis of making sure no one endangers the program by getting drunk and out of control. Some of the point running behind the concept of youth participation is the idea about that balance between selfishness and altruism, and the reasons why that is important to us.

**Howard:** Yes, that's right, but if we shift onto illegal drugs, I made it absolutely clear that it's an illegal substance, it's banned by law. Whatever views people might have about drug use (or I had about it) it was irrelevant in terms of thinking about *use*. We could certainly *talk* about it but the law came first – and if anybody did bring illegal substances with them, we turned the minibus around and went home. It was as simple as that. Some things are open for debate and some are not because of the laws of the land – but they are all open for conversation and explanation. This is important so that young people do understand the reasons for the constraints that invariably limit their own scope for 'autonomy' and 'self-determination'.

**Katherine:** We used to have these issues at Reach. The approach we took was firstly, we had young leaders over 18 who were very clear that alcohol and drugs were not involved in our camps because it didn't add value. So their acceptance in that sort of cultural space, saying 'That's how things are here', meant that the young people under 18 who participated generally accepted it because they admired the leaders and saw them as role models. We then also had conversations around the fact that we are here for a purpose, and substance use will actually impede the purpose of that weekend. I think it comes down to treating young people seriously and treating them with respect. So let's have a respectful conversation about why we don't want alcohol or drugs in this particular environment.

Alternatively, we used to have young people who wanted to smoke cigarettes on our camps at Reach. We let them because our view was that it was far more important that they actually participated and focused on the program and did that with a really good spirit rather than getting all resentful or on edge because they couldn't smoke. The only rule we had was that if you were a non-smoker when you came on camp, you had to be a non-smoker when you left camp as well.

**Harry:** I think this is a fascinating discussion. I'm one of those who are rebellious at heart and don't feel morally obliged to obey bad laws. But what happens if you're employed in a professional role as a youth worker, and you're working with young people who feel the same way? In places like Ireland, Australia or the UK, supporting young people taking action against the state may get the youth worker into trouble, but the young people themselves are likely to come through unscathed; maybe even empowered. But in many parts of the world, young people speaking out against the state (or

other powerful interests like mining companies or drug cartels) are putting themselves at risk. What stance does the youth worker take in these situations?

I lived my adolescence during the civil war in Northern Ireland commonly known as 'The Troubles'. During those years there was massive youth participation in public social action on both sides, much of it violent and some of it lethal. What was the responsibility of the youth worker when young people wanted to join marches and demonstrations? What if they wanted to join their mates throwing stones at British Army Saracens?<sup>2</sup> What if they chose to join loyalist or republican political parties that actively supported the armed struggle? What if they wanted to join the IRA or the UVF<sup>3</sup> and commit to the armed struggle themselves? It's one thing for a youth worker to understand their professional role and the rules of conduct that go with it, but that's a very different matter from knowing your own heart, and knowing how far you are willing to support the young people you work with as they strive to make a difference.

**Trudi:** The question about whether, how and why young people's decision-making should be restricted, is one of the very difficult questions for youth workers. A harm reduction perspective on an issue may give the opposite answer from a legal perspective. Howard's example of negotiations about alcohol are familiar from my experience, and most likely come from a harm reduction perspective (Fairbairn & Murray 2004). An absolute ban on alcohol might risk clandestine drinking, which might cause greater harm than the open consumption of a small amount of low-strength alcohol. At a time and in a context where under-age drinking was not illegal, and was socially accepted by parents, as Howard indicated, this was a common response to the problem. Katherine's example of smoking is similar. However, both examples show that the acceptability of a harm reduction course of action can change over time. As Harry observes, the youth worker will be blamed if they appear to sanction illegal activities or activities that are not socially acceptable, even if they are acting from a harm reduction perspective.

Harry also raises an important moral question about whether there is a duty to obey bad laws. This is an ethical question which philosophers have discussed for millennia, frequently concluding that unjust laws do not have legitimacy (Hinman 2013). There are differences between actions taken as a private citizen and as a professional youth worker, as Harry and others observe (Banks 2010). The question for youth workers is where that difference lies, especially in contexts where legal avenues for change may not be open to young people. The example Harry provided, illustrate that, for some youth workers, these questions are not hypothetical moral dilemmas for classroom debate.

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2. An armoured personnel carrier.

3. Irish Republican Army & Ulster Volunteer Force.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors agree that there are limits, legal, ethical and others, to participation and decision making for all people. A measure or rationale for making difficult decisions with young people can be found in the UNCRC 'best interests' principle. It is important to ask what are the benefits for all young people, and what will be the direct outcomes or consequences for those who participate in the decisions or who will be affected by them? – be they moral, ethical, legal, political or developmental and so on.

This section of the dialogue raises interesting questions about the ethical dimensions of participation and the relationship to youth and community work practice. Many countries around the world have developed codes of ethics and/or practice for youth work. These codes are designed to assist youth workers in the making of difficult decisions when working with young people, such as the *Commonwealth Code of Ethical Practice* (Corney 2014a). Hinman (2013) provides an introduction to the different theoretical positions associated with the moral and ethical issues surrounding the accepting or disobeying of unjust laws. For more information on ethical practice in youth and community work see Roberts (2009), Sercombe (2010), Banks (2010), Corney (2014a, 2014b), Davies (2016).

# Chapter 6: Why Should Young People Participate?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** This section is about the *why* of youth participation. It is about the rationale and justification of why participation is important – why should young people participate? The dialogue begins with the question: *Do we need a rationale for participation?*

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**Roger:** I think we do need to discuss the underpinning rationale and logic of youth participation, however I don't think it should be couched as an obligation; the obligation should be on organisations to 'allow' and enable it.

**Tim:** But organisations ask themselves why they are obliged to facilitate participation? They ask for a rationale for young people's participation? Youth workers say, 'Young people in this program should be able to participate in decision-making, to have some say in it, or over it'. The organisation then asks why: Why should young people participate? And why should the organisation facilitate it?

**Roger:** I think there are two big frameworks that provide a rationale for participation. One is a rights-based framework; however, rights, in my view, only exist when they are asserted, codified, fought for and defended. The other framework is effectiveness. Better outcomes happen if young people participate and their voices are heard. They are the two big theoretical frameworks in my view. However they need to be teased out into what they actually mean in practice.

If we are looking for organisational reasons, then it is effectiveness, that participation improves professionals' work. What young people know improves our work. We don't know what's in their lives: they have the information – they are experts in their own lives. This is often what we call youth voice or student voice (Holdsworth 2000). The second organisational reason has more to do with a developmental approach to young people that improves outcomes for them. Much of the research (Kirby & Bryson 2002) that has been done in this area indicates that people live longer, are happier, are safer, if they are active participants in their communities rather than passive recipients. The third reason is that there are issues facing us all in our communities that everyone should be working together on solving and that will benefit the whole community. And that might mean some structural changes to how we work so that young people and adults can work as partners in addressing those common issues together.

**Tim:** What do others think about these two overarching frameworks proposed by Roger: 'rights and effectiveness'? Do these two frameworks provide the central rationale for participation?

**Howard:** I am pretty close to Roger on this. There is obviously the need for compliance with the various UN human rights declarations and articles, and the UNCRC in particular. My own experience of both

the youth rights agenda and effective youth work really started in the 1970s in terms of policies looking at youth unemployment issues and employment programs. Rights are important – that is, providing employment pathways and job training; however, if as a practitioner you don't get into the heads of young people and actually start to listen and understand what perspectives and aspirations they attach to different kinds of provisions, then you can get programs and services dreadfully wrong.

**Tim:** So you are saying Howard that participation is about both young people's rights and about the efficacy of programs and services, and that these two frameworks ought to be seen as mutually beneficial.

**Howard:** Yes. Hearing from young people, their participation if you like, improves policy and practice, as Roger has said, because you get a different angle on many things. For example, the angle that I got in the late '70s was that, yes, we needed to run employment programs, but that it did not always matter to young people what quality or type of occupational training a youth employment training placement offered in terms of job destinations (the main preoccupation of government). This was because a lot of these young people were much more interested in a placement that was close to home, where they could fall out of bed a bit later in the morning, or because their mates were there, or because supervisors took them on and paid them cash off the books on the weekends. There were many hidden things that went into the criteria for young people assessing the value and quality of these programs, compared to the government's Department of Employment that had very fixed ideas on 'outcomes' and about what they should be. I learned very early on in both policy and practice terms that if you don't listen to young people, you can waste a huge amount of public money on ineffective programs.

With regard to rights, what I don't like is when young people are boxed in. We have good reasons for saying we ought to provide the opportunity for young people's participation, but we ought not to compel it. In the 1980s some radical youth workers were saying, 'We've got to put all the power in the hands of young people'. And I asked, 'Do they want it? For example, if you're arrested by the police, you probably don't want to be empowered to represent yourself. You may want a lawyer to represent you'. Sometimes young people want youth workers as advocates, and don't want to be empowered to participate and do it for themselves.

It is easy to ask for more participation. Why aren't there more young people involved? Why aren't we hearing more of the voices of young people? However, the real question is which young people? Why, how, when and where? If we box youth participation into highly structured representative youth councils and youth parliaments, we potentially exclude the voices of vast numbers of young people.

**Tim:** So to summarise, what you are saying here, Howard, is that participation is nuanced and value-driven, that rights are a good starting point but not the end point of participation?

**Roger:** Yes, I agree with Howard and would add that this is where values become important. Professor Art Pearl once pointed out that fascist youth organisations in the 1930s, for example, could be seen as effective youth participation movements. So one cannot say that youth participation in and of itself is the necessary end game – because there are values sitting behind it. One of those big values is about exclusion and inclusion. What worries me about some of the work I am still doing with young people

is that young people can become the agents of excluding other young people. In taking power, they want power to themselves, which comes back to the selfishness/altruism concept I raised earlier.

**Howard:** Nowhere is that more evident than in the democratic youth representation structures in Europe. They say, 'We are the democratic voice of young people'. I say that you also need the categorical voice of young people. The democratic voice of young people very rarely expresses any kind of understanding or experiences of young people in public care systems, young people in custodial institutions, or young people with disabilities. Those young people are very rarely represented in overall democratic structures. I agree with Roger about this inclusion/exclusion, selfishness/altruism concept of youth participation. We need multiple avenues to express voice.

**Roger:** I have worked for many years here in Victoria with student representative councils in schools about the issue of excluded voices. I was heartened by the fact that, over a two-year period, students with significant disabilities were elected by fellow students to a 15-person state-level council, so they saw the value of diversity. One of the ongoing issues being debated by these students is how to increase diversity. I was heartened by that because it demonstrated altruism over selfishness within a democratic process.

**Harry:** I would re-frame Roger's analysis by saying participation is important (a) because it is a human right, and (b) because it brings benefits, both to young people themselves and to the community/society they live in. But I think it is important to be clear that the first of these, the fact that it is a human right, is sufficient in itself. That is, if something is your right, you do not have to demonstrate any consequent benefit in order to be allowed to do it. You still have the right to do it, even if it doesn't bring any obvious benefits.

But, having made that point, there is evidence growing by the day of the real benefits that participation brings. When I first got involved in promoting participation over 25 years ago, we mostly had to rely on intuition about what was beneficial in the application of participation processes and models - and it wasn't that important to us at the time to document what we were doing, as we were busy defending a human right. But in the intervening years, more research has been done and the evidence base is building.

The benefits of youth participation are now known to include:

- improving the quality of public services
- improving outcomes for service users
- reducing alienation and antisocial behaviour such as bullying
- enhancing social and political education
- better protection against exploitation, abuse and mistreatment
- increasing job satisfaction for frontline workers in education, social services et cetera
- empowerment of children and young people, enabling them to develop a role as agents of social change rather than subjects of social control
- enhancing active citizenship and democracy; holding duty-bearers to account for rights violations

**Trudi:** The discussions about the rationale for youth participation illustrate to me that the answers depend upon perspective –whose perspective and whose rationale? From a political perspective, the rationale for participation comes from a human rights perspective, as Harry, Howard and Roger identify. However, from the perspective of a policy maker, the efficacy rationale that Howard and Roger mentioned provides a persuasive rationale for why they should include young people in decision-making. For a young person, the rationale for participation may be so they can have their say, or it may be simply because they want to be with their mates.

From a youth work perspective, the rationale for young people's participation will be centred on the benefits that participation brings directly to the young people who participate, and indirectly, when their participation has positive outcomes for themselves and other young people (YACVic 2007). The youth work rationales focus on either the political education benefits of self-advocacy for young people or on the informal education, self-development and life-skills benefits of the process of participation for young people (Jefferies & Smith 1987, 1988, 2005).

Howard is right to raise the point about unequal access for young people to structures that provide platforms for young people's participation. As youth workers supporting young people's participation, this raises a number of challenges. The first challenge is to look for ways to broaden participation by young people who are not typically chosen as 'youth representatives' and would not volunteer or self-select if asked (Cooper 2009). The second challenge is to work with all potential 'youth representatives' so they become aware that their life experiences may be very different from those of other young people, so that when they share their experiences and opinions they acknowledge that they may not be speaking on behalf of all young people.

## IN SUMMARY

The underpinning rationale and logic of youth participation is informed by what the contributors describe as the 'two large frameworks' of firstly, human rights and secondly 'efficacy' and development. The first is based on the fundamental human right of young people to participate in decisions being made about them (UNCRC 1989). Two important points were made, 1. That if something is a right, it doesn't need to demonstrate benefit in order to be exercised. 2. While we ought to provide the opportunity for young people to exercise their right to participation, we ought not to compel it.

The second is concerned with the benefits that participation brings, such as the development of the participant, or, how participation improves the outcomes of decisions, and the 'effectiveness' of policy, planning, programs and service delivery. While contributors acknowledged the important benefits of participation there are also dangers in this approach. Malone and Hartung (2010) sound a warning about the 'efficacy' framework. Drawing on the seven 'participation realms' of Francis and Lorenzo (2002) under which participation takes place, Malone and Hartung (2010) warn that young people can be used by adults, to plan for them or on their behalf, seeing young people primarily as a 'resource' to meet adult outcomes.



# Chapter 7: Empowerment and Co-design – what roles do they play in participation? And what is the role of ‘listening’ to young people?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** We focus now on the *application* of participation and some of the key terms that are associated with it such as: ‘empowerment’, ‘agency’ and ‘co-design’. These terms are currently popular with government and other funding bodies – what do they mean in relation to youth participation? And, what do they look like when applied in youth work?

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**Howard:** We used the expression earlier about young people being taken *seriously*. I am often asked by young people themselves, ‘What’s it take to be a youth worker?’ I know that there are many versions of professional matrices and occupational standards but invariably I say it is about three simple things: listening, humour and patience. Listening means, at one level, tuning into young people’s vernacular because that shifts and changes in meaning. But there’s also *serious* listening, when young people really want to be listened to, and human beings are not always very good at that. When people have something serious to say, they hope that the person they are saying it to is taking them seriously and listening carefully. Listening can be empowering for the person being listened to and is a part of youth ‘agency’ and important for face-to-face youth work and the application of participation.

**Roger:** In regard to listening, I agree with Howard and think that it is also important that there aren’t presumptions, especially systemic presumptions, which categorise young people as having nothing worthwhile to say. Adam Fletcher (2015) from the US talks about the difference between ‘convenient’ and ‘inconvenient’ voice. We often listen to convenient voices either because they are saying things we agree with or because they’re saying them in ways that we like. When it comes to the *inconvenient voice*, it is not always verbal. It can be actions like graffiti or vandalism – even defecating on the floor in a youth centre is voice. We need to be listening and asking what young people are saying with this inconvenient expression of voice. What does it mean? How do we listen and how do we respond? In regard to ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’, young people tell us very strongly that just having a voice, inconvenient or otherwise, is not enough; they want to see *action* coming out of voice. And they often want the skills to be able to make an actionable difference to the world in which they live. This is part of empowerment.

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**Tim:** In the context of the application of participation – terms such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘co-design’ are widely referred to but have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. Howard Sercombe (2010) for example has written about the important role that youth workers play in facilitating young people’s ‘agency’ and he privileges this term over empowerment. However, governments and funders of youth work have often been elastic with the use of these terms stretching the meaning of them in various directions. Katherine and Robyn have already used the term ‘co-design’ earlier in our discussion to describe part of what youth participation means. What do others think of the terms, empowerment and ‘co-design’ and their use in participation?

**Harry:** ‘Empowerment’ is a buzzword widely used in a range of literatures where seldom any attempt is made to define or understand it. That, by the way, is the Devil’s Advocate speaking. The truth is that some years ago I made it my mission to change this situation, but I have to admit progress has been slow. Some years ago I and my colleagues at CESESMA<sup>4</sup> in Nicaragua, through a participatory research process with active and ‘empowered’ young people in various parts of the country, came up with what seemed to us to be a valid conceptualisation of empowerment in the context of child and adolescent participation.

*In order to be ‘empowered’ a boy or girl must be in conditions where they can have an influence, must have the knowledge and abilities required in order to have an influence and, above all, must feel themselves capable of having an influence (CESESMA/UNN, 2010:44; translated from Spanish in Shier, 2015:213).*

However, further research is needed to develop the concept, and to create and test indicators to demonstrate that it is meaningful, measurable and useful (and to test the extent to which such a concept can cross continents and cultures).

**Katherine:** I like the word ‘co-design’ because I think it makes it very clear to people who don’t understand the terminology around youth participation or youth rights. It is a very clear statement. ‘Co-design’ means we design this with the people who it’s going to affect and that is empowering for those people.

**Tim:** Yes, but is it enough? Does co-design encompass all that is the participation process? What happens after co-design? What about co-delivery, co-management and co-evaluation and so on?

**Robyn:** Yes, I agree Tim. As a youth worker trained in the 1980s, I see ‘co-design’ in much more holistic terms and, as much more akin to what we once described as ‘community development’ (Kenny 2011; Ife 1995). Community development in this sense is the larger project of community empowerment.

**Tim:** To summarise in relation to the term ‘co-design’ - when governments and funding bodies begin to use new words or terms for participation and plonk them into funding agreements, like ‘co-design’, does there need to be some definitional documentation that sits around these terms and explains

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4. The Centre for Education in Health and Environment.

the process of participation? - 'This is what we mean by this term'. Participation shouldn't be asking more than what young people can deliver – they shouldn't be set up to fail.

**Howard:** Yes, that is right. We can't be asking or expecting the wrong things of young people. Because the danger with aspirational participation concepts, such as co-design, is that the responsibility for failure can be placed on young people - if the project doesn't work, then, 'Oh, well, it's the young people's fault'.

**Trudi:** In relation to the term 'empowerment', a method of youth and community work is undertaking 'dialogical' conversations (Freire 1972; Cooper 1994, 1999; Corney 2004, 2006, 2019) with young people. These conversations simultaneously take young people's views seriously and challenge young people to think critically about the world and how socio-political structures shape the world that they live in (Chouhan 2009). Therefore, it is important that participation methods have a dialogical component, otherwise 'non-radical empowerment' (Cooper 2012; Cooper & White 1994) may lead to simplistic and stereotypical thinking that is unreflective and lacks what Freire (1972) would describe as consciousness raising.

An example of non-radical empowerment that comes to mind occurred when a community newspaper asked for suggestions about how local parks could be improved. The following week, letters were published from several children all ages 10 or 11 years old, from a local primary school, all of whom suggested drinking fountains should be provided in the park. Whilst this might be a reasonable suggestion, it seemed like 'group think' had occurred, and a suggestion was presented that would be pleasing to adults (especially the teacher). A purpose of dialogical discussion would be to go beyond group think. Almost certainly, a dialogical discussion would have elicited a wider range of perspectives, some of which might have been much less acceptable to the adult world.

This draws attention to problems that can arise for co-design. In an earlier section, Howard mentioned a problem of 'representation', that frequently youth representatives who speak only for themselves are treated as if they speak authoritatively for others. This can be a problem in co-design. Other problems of co-design are that young people may seek to express views that will please (or displease) their adult partners in co-design, or they may become captive to group think and not deeply analyse problems, as in the previous drinking fountain example. These flaws can be resolved if the dialogical methods (Freire 1972) of good youth work are applied, however, co-design experts are not necessarily familiar with youth work methods.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors began by describing the process of listening to young people and respecting what they have to say as an important part of the participation process. Contributors provided definitions and examples of empowerment and current terms such as co-design, agreeing that they do play important roles in both the process and outcomes of participation, while also sounding a warning about the elusiveness and flexibility of language and the fashionable use of particular terms or 'buzz words'.

Contributors, while acknowledging the usefulness of a word such as co-design, recognise that the meaning of words may change over time, be redefined and/or used to manipulate or coerce in ways that may be detrimental to young people and not in their 'best interests'. Participation processes that enable co-designing of services for young people should include those that the service is being designed for. Not all young people will use the service so those participating in the co-design must be representative of service users. It was also recognised that terms can be reclaimed such as 'community development' and re-fashioned in the ongoing struggle to hold on to important concepts, none more so than 'empowerment' and the term 'participation' itself.

As this critical dialogue confirms, contributors also agree on the importance of 'dialogical conversations' as a key part of youth work practice and youth empowerment processes. The influence of seminal youth work texts (for example, Smith 1988; Jeffs & Smith 1987, 1988, 2005) have shaped much of the underpinning values of youth work practice, in particular the concept of youth work as an educational practice ('non-formal and informal education and learning') and its pedagogy as critical, progressive and emancipatory (Freire 1972; Mayo 1999; Corney 2004, 2006, 2019). Maunders (1984, 1990, 2009) and Smith (1988) drew on the Gramscian notion of hegemony and its influence on youth work as a counter hegemonic practice, further developed by Chouhan (2009). This conceptualisation of youth work sees the youth worker acting as an 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci 1971; Smith 1988; Corney 2006, 2014; Singh & Cowden 2009; Chouhan 2009). This liberatory educational concept of youth work draws directly on the critical pedagogy of Freire (1972) and his use of dialogue. These ideas are consistent with this critical dialogue.

# Chapter 8: Agency and Control - is it important that young people have control?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** The concept of agency and its relationship to empowerment and participation of young people is interesting and pertinent to youth work. Annette Fitzsimmons et al. (2011) have written about the relationship of these three concepts and their importance to youth work practice. There is the idea in youth work that individual young people should have some agency and control over their lives in the same way that adults do. So often we will hear youth workers saying, 'Young people should have more control'. And sometimes, that's about being able to make decisions that affect their lives, but sometimes it's about other things. It's about the quality of their life or what they want their future life to look like. What is the relationship of control to agency and participation more broadly? Is it important that young people have control?

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**Howard:** Anthony Charles at Swansea University talks in his doctoral thesis about the link between agency and control. He found that, while young people wanted to participate, they also wanted control. He wrote using the language of youth participation, but he was really using the language of agency – that young people wanted to have control over the clothes they wore, the decoration of their bedrooms, what colour the walls were, and whether they could put posters up. That control of their environment gave them a sense of agency, a sense of self-determination that spilled over into the public space of participation. However, it was largely a private good that was considered much more important to them. In the public space, Anthony found that, when young people spoke about being on school councils and other related bodies, they were often saying that the schools didn't take them seriously so they didn't feel that they had much control.

**Roger:** The educational historian David Labaree (1997) has written about the goals of education. He broke them down into democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility – *democratic equality*: schools should focus on preparing citizens; *social efficiency*: they should focus on training workers; and *social mobility*: they should prepare individuals to compete for social positions – and he said that these goals formed alliances and struggled and fought with each other for dominance all the time. He distinguished some of these as delivering public goods and some of them delivering private goods. So the altruism that I've been talking about is a public good. It says, 'We are involved, we are active because we believe in something about the better operation of society'.

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The individualised outcome of control of my life can become a private good, a selfish thing about looking at my own interests and position in society. That struggle keeps going on regardless of age. I'm struggling in my life for the public good to outweigh the private good all the time.

**Harry:** 'Agency' is a theoretical construct central to classical sociological theory. I prefer to use the term empowerment, and you could say that being empowered is being able to influence others around you. A first level of empowerment, then, is being able to influence those who directly control aspects of your day-to-day life, like your parents or carers, or your teachers. So, using the examples Howard mentioned, if one of those people is controlling the clothes you wear or not letting you put a poster on your wall, one of your first goals as you become empowered is to influence them so that control passes back to you. With greater empowerment, you are able to influence a wider range of those who control your life. Young people are unlikely to take over control of their school, but by concerted action they may be able to influence decisions made by school leadership that determine the way they are treated at school. Another level is to influence wider decisions at district or national level, and finally you have adolescents like Greta and Malala<sup>5</sup> who influence the entire world.

**Robyn:** Being a grassroots youth worker is about enabling and empowering a young person to build agency, but also to understand their boundaries. And to understand the rationale as well. To talk it through so that young people understand how to use their agency to make good life decisions. We all have levels of control and boundaries over our behaviour as adults and young people. Not just legally, but also in our workplace, in public places, how we can act, how we should behave to others. So it's not that boundaries and control are necessarily a bad thing. It is about how we build the capacity of young people to actually understand where the boundaries are, what's appropriate and how to build their agency and decision-making capacity.

Agency is not well-understood. When I look at the diverse students that I teach, it is personal agency that cuts them apart from each other. It's not about their academic ability, it's their agency, to make a decision and trust their judgement to go forward. Agency is complex, more complex than just enabling them to participate in something. It's about their being able to make a whole range of life decisions and actually trusting that they have the ability, knowledge and skills to go forward on those.

For example, when VU went to online enrolments, we had a group of students – many who are the first in their family to attend university – who said, 'I need to come in to the university; I can't do this at home, I can't do this on my own'. What that means is that they are alone at home trying to do their timetable or enrol, and they do not have the personal confidence to make the decision on their own. Even knowing all the safety nets are there, like you are not locked in, you can un-enrol, they still want to come in and actually do it with someone because they lack agency.

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5. Greta Thunberg is a Swedish environmental activist. Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate.

**Katherine:** Yes, I agree. Agency is that ability to act with confidence, with awareness and understanding of the situation. To be acting for yourself or for other people with a real sense of ownership and control over an issue, or a situation or an initiative.

A part of a youth worker's job is actually coaching young people in how to have and use that agency in the first place. Understanding what is going on for the counterpart that a young person may be dealing with. There are many young people who have agency, and they are so confident, but often without any empathy for the person who they are dealing with and the challenges they may have and the constraints they may be working under. There are very different ways to achieve outcomes with your agency.

The Schools Strike 4 Climate was a really great example of young people exercising their agency and participating in a very effective way. At the rally in Melbourne, they had a number of speakers, and I had gone expecting it all to be young people talking about their future. But in actual fact, they led off with First Nations people talking about what the land means to them and the seas and the oceans and how climate change is affecting their custodial lands, which was very powerful. They also then had people representing the Pacific Islands talking about what it means for them, that their islands are disappearing.

They had trade unions speaking about what the loss of certain industries will mean, but how they're still supporting the climate cause because they believe that, for the future, it's absolutely imperative. In the demands that the young organisers put out, as part of the Schools Strike 4 Climate, the third demand is actually a plan for redeploying the people who work in coal and gas and oil industries. And that is, in my view, a very effective way of actually advocating with empathy and understanding of the impact that what you're advocating for is going to have on other people's lives. It also was a great example to set for the thousands of other young people at the rally that day.

So agency and having some control over your life is a very important part of growing up for a young person. Starting to gradually take on responsibility and have self-determination is part of developing an identity. So a level of control is actually very important, and the idea that you can just do anything you like, is still effectively being like a child in a way.

I think the other side of agency is that we must value young people's ability to be disruptors because they are often idealistic; they can be values-driven, and they can also bring new ideas that are outside the controls or boundaries that an adult may put around things. Young people often see things with a very different perspective. I am always very hesitant to put controls on young people because you never know actually what flower might bloom where they've thrown a big, hot pile of manure.

**Robyn:** I think the Schools Strike 4 Climate action and the Extinction Rebellion protests are a prime example of where some adults would have liked to have more controls over young people, but that is not what a democracy should do. Young people are quite within their rights to protest. The question for me is about how we as adults view power and control. Adults most of the time like to control young people, even undemocratically, because some adults don't like young people's behaviour or inconvenient voice even when they act within their democratic and human rights.

**Trudi:** Young people's agency and control is contextual. The concept of the mature minor, which is a young person who is not legally adult but has sufficient capacity to make decisions about their life, is important to youth work (Cooper & Brooker 2020). On the other hand, how that capacity is determined, even within a rights-based framework can be used to restrict young people's autonomy and their right to make decisions for themselves.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors agree on the importance of both control and agency and the role that youth workers play in facilitating young people's agency (Sercombe 2010; Fitzsimmons et al. 2011). Vander Ark (2015:1) provides a helpful definition of agency as the "opposite of helplessness". It is, he suggests "the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative", and he goes on to assert that:

*"Young people with high levels of agency do not respond passively to their circumstances; they tend to seek meaning and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives."*

The relationship of agency to participation practices is less clear, and the place of an individual's agency, particularly those with lower levels, within collective and cooperative group processes is undeveloped. There appears to be an interesting tension between the concept of participation and the related ideas of empowerment, self-determination, agency and control and the way these terms are defined, interact and used in youth and community work practice.



# Chapter 9: Are Alliances with Adults Strategically Important for Young People's Participation - or is there a danger?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** I want to ask now about this idea of young people collaborating with adults or partnering with adults as represented in the top rung of Hart's Ladder. Perhaps just to contextualise the question and to give you an example – we have recently had here in Australia, and around the world, strong participation by students in Fridays for the Future (FFF) – Schools Strike 4 Climate action (SS4C), which we've already touched on in this discussion.

The protests, thus far, have been led by secondary school students, many inspired by Swedish student and climate activist Greta Thunberg. In the most recent action, students asked 'adults' – their parents, teachers and others – to participate also. They asked for adults, and governments, to respond and to do something. This has now led to the student climate strike movement partnering with adults and creating alliances with adult organisations. However, is there potential in this alliance of co-option or influence and control by adults? Is it something to be concerned about? Are alliances with adults strategically important for young people's participation or is there a danger?

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**Roger:** Again, it is about young people being taken seriously and how young people – and others – achieve outcomes for the issue or cause. Some of this comes down to strategising. In my first year of teaching, many male students were getting suspended for having their hair longer than their collar. I was a young teacher and I didn't have much power at that school. But I slowly grew my hair long in solidarity and this worked as a strategy so that students didn't get hassled anymore. So that was about strategising and alliances: working out ways other than confrontation to win in situations.

Michael Fielding (2011) has created a six-category typology for young people and adults as partners. At the bottom level is young people as data sources: information from or about young people is used to change teaching for example. At the top end is young people and adults working in inter-generational partnerships for transformation of society. So they are looking at collaborative power rather than confrontational power.

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6. See Schools Strike 4 Climate Australia at <https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/about>

**Howard:** In regard to young people's strategic alliances with adults I co-wrote a book some time ago called *Children Speak* (Butler & Williamson 1994). It was about young people reflecting on the worst things that had happened to them and how they handled them. Some talked to adults, parents, neighbours, older brothers and sisters, and so on. My question was, 'What did you want from adults when you spoke to them?' It turned out they usually wanted one of three quite different things. One was a sounding board: they just wanted to unload. They didn't think adults could do anything for them about, for example, the bullying in the playground, but they wanted to tell somebody. Often they gave up talking to adults because adults reacted wrongly in their terms, so they talked to their pets or cuddly toys because it was just about unloading.

The second area was wanting to get some ideas about things for *them* to do that might make the situation easier for them, while the third was actually wanting adults to do something for them or sometimes with them. Often, however, adults were so pleased at being confided in, they took control, went off and did something without checking back, without asking what the young person wanted to be done or said.

Having said that, young people have also got to read the differences in situations. Part of our job as youth workers is to help them to do that. It is to say to young people, 'How do you present yourself or your cause to be taken seriously and to maximise your chances in that particular situation or with that alliance? Be too passive, and you can easily get left behind. Be too active, you may get kicked out'. It is not for us to tell young people how to behave, or when, but it is our responsibility to help them to anticipate the possible and varied consequences of their actions, for themselves and for their cause.

**Harry:** I think I've addressed this in an earlier answer. It's one thing to look at this issue from the perspective of an employed professional like a youth worker, obliged to follow rules of professional practice, and something very different to see it from the perspective of an active citizen, where you can ally yourself with those whose cause you share and support them in any way you can, and equally you can turn your back on those whose views you disagree with. In the latter case, I'd say the age of the people involved is of very little importance.

**Tim:** What do others think about alliances between young people and adults in regard to youth participation and protest movements such as the climate 'alliance'? Is it a positive? Are there dangers?

**Robyn:** I do not think for one minute that the young people who are, for example, in Extinction Rebellion<sup>7</sup> are being coerced. I think that they are very clear about their motivations. They have decided that that is the way that you get your voice heard. I was very disappointed with the Lord Mayor of Melbourne Sally Capp who said, 'I understand the right to protest, but there's a time and place for it'. No, there isn't; you clearly don't understand the right to protest, which is about disruption. It is about getting noticed, this is what a democracy is about. So was it inconvenient? Yes, I'm sure it was. But this is what young people have to do to get their voice heard or their cause even noticed. Look at the student-led protests in Hong Kong. This is what you will get at the major end of

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7. A recent but now global environmental movement. See <https://rebellion.earth>

disruption – and here in Melbourne; it's not Hong Kong; it is young people sitting down and blocking a major thoroughfare in the middle of the city because no-one is listening. In regard to the Schools Strike 4 Climate, I agree with young people that the Australian government, a conservative federal government, is not listening. We still have climate deniers.

**Tim:** Yes, as I said earlier, both the Australian Prime Minister and the Minister for Education at the time publicly stated that students shouldn't protest but should be in school on the climate strike day. The NSW Education Minister went further and actually threatened students saying that they had broken the law by taking the day off school to protest.

**Katherine:** This idea of young people being coerced is part of a strategic political narrative to undermine the power of young people's voices. Those adults making these claims clearly don't have a lot of engagement with today's young people. They are not being coerced; they are the most informed generation ever. They have access to so much information and so much mobilisation ability that they actually don't need adults. They are out there doing it on their own.

YACVic took an active role in encouraging adults and businesses to support the young people in their advocacy for the climate rally. As far as we're concerned, first, it's a brilliant example of young people's agency and activism around an issue that they really care about; secondly, they have serious fears for their future; and thirdly, they are taking action when nobody else is.

**Trudi:** Within the British-influenced tradition of youth work (BIYW) there has been a strand of political education. In the 1980s, this was interpreted as helping young people to become more knowledgeable about politics, but also to gain skills in advocacy and political activism (Smith 1982; Jeffs & Smith 1987, 1988, 2005). During this period I was working in a youth work team providing government funded life and social skills courses for young people. The young people were concerned about unemployment. They interviewed other young people about unemployment and we supported them to gain the skills to collate their data into a report. They decided they wanted to send it to Mrs Thatcher (then British Prime Minister). This was a legal, non-violent and legitimate democratic activity. The activity helped the young people develop writing skills, interview skills and analytical skills. However, the organisation I worked for lost its government funding for supposedly politically indoctrinating young people. Should we have stopped them from sending in their report? I don't think so, although it could easily have meant that I became unemployed, as my contract was temporary and tied to that government funding.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors acknowledge the importance of young people and adults working together, collaborating and sharing power, particularly in the context of social and political change. However, contributors also recognise that there are boundaries between the role of professional youth work practitioner and active citizen and the limitations in collaborating with young people that professional practice may bring, such as the constraints of employment conditions, government funding criteria and professional ethics and so on.

# Chapter 10: Youth Engagement and Participation - can these two concepts work together?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** At the moment, in Australia, we have governments providing funding for youth programs and services and often writing into those funding agreements with service providers that young people need to be 'engaged' and that these youth engagement strategies are important to youth participation. What do we think about this concept of youth 'engagement' and is it prefaced on the deficit assumption that young people are 'dis-engaged'? Can these two concepts, youth engagement and participation, work together?

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**Howard:** Can I address this term 'engagement'? That word takes me by surprise because I don't align engagement with participation at all. Engagement, in the UK context, emerged partly from research (Istance, Rees & Williamson 1994) in the 1990s around young people who were not in education, employment or training (now depicted as 'NEET'). Young people then were referred to and defined as 'disaffected', but I objected strongly to that description. There was no positive opposite. Disaffection is a very evaluative term; it sounds like there is something wrong with young people. Speaking as a youth worker, I wanted something that was much more descriptive about the distance between institution and individual, but without attributing blame or causation. Disengagement seemed to me to be a rather better term in the early '90s than disaffected. At least that's what I argued for, and at least it did allow the possibility of re-engagement. There has been a lot of policy development since. In Wales, for example, a few years ago we had the Youth Engagement and Progression Strategy (2013). That was about reaching out to young people who have been excluded in some way or other, and trying to provide pathways for inclusion and progression.

**Tim:** So, Howard, are you saying that, in some sense, the concept of engagement is actually about inclusion and that this is leading towards or ultimately enables participation in its broadest sense? So is social inclusion of young people prefaced on engagement?

**Howard:** Well, yes and no. At the 1st European Youth Work Convention, in 2010, I characterised youth work as a stray dog looking for a home! But is the dog a guide dog (Labrador), guard dog (Rottweiler), companion (Terrier) or retriever (Shorthaired Pointer)? In recent years, government wants youth work to be a retriever – 'Go and fetch these 'NEET' young people and bring them back into the fold': this is the political concept of re-engagement. Professionally, we have to keep asking 're-engagement with what... and why'? While many, probably most, young people want to be in education, employment and training, others do not. So we have to 'engage' in a conversation with young people about their wants and needs. This I think is related to, but different from, the youth participation agenda in youth work.

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**Katherine:** I don't think of youth 'engagement' as necessarily being about re-engaging disengaged young people. I see it as part of hooking young people's interest into the particular topic, or program, that you want them to participate in, in a way that they are keen to be part of and are informed. So engagement in this sense is really the first step in any effective youth participation process.

**Tim:** It does seem to me that the way these terms are used can either be deficit-based or strengths-based. We've already discussed some of the other terms that are now being used by governments in youth service funding agreements, such as 'co-design'. Are terms like 'engagement or re-engagement' the same as participation?

**Roger:** All these terms are stretchable – and 'participation' as a term has been stretched. In the 1980s, participation was about program participation rates (Holdsworth 1985).

**Tim:** Yes, that is right; participation was about how many young people attended a program, not their level of participation or decision-making in the program. Now the term is 'agency' or 'engagement' and governments seize these terms and redefine them in the ways that they want. Do you think that it is important for youth workers to hold on to a term or definition that has become popular with government and to resist it being redefined in policy?

**Roger:** Yes, I do. For governments, participation was and mostly still is 'Come along and take part in the activities we run' so you'll participate in the activities. Young people may have had no say in what those activities were. We had to argue that there is a maximalist and a minimalist idea about participation. We can take ideas in a minimalist sense as being shallow or, in a maximalist sense, we could argue that participation and engagement are much deeper. State governments used the term 'engagement' for a long time as being something professionals worked on, rather than participation, which involves moving and changing structures and approaches. Engagement is a deficit term because it starts by saying young people are disengaged.

An example of this was when researchers (Zyngier, Gale & Mitchell 2004) were suggesting that a particular demographic group of primary school students from grades 4 to 6 in particular schools were 'disengaging' from school. I worked with two of these schools to set up student action teams to investigate 'engagement' in the school and what it meant to students (Student Action Teams at Preston South Primary School and Penders Grove Primary School 2009). We had students who volunteered, who were the engaged students in that mainstream sense, so we had to tap other students on the shoulder and say, 'You know stuff. You hate school. You hardly ever turn up. Would you be interested in being on this student action team?'

This team worked for three years to investigate what engagement meant. They surveyed the whole school about what it was, and developed a 'switch-o-meter'. They started by saying, 'It's like a switch. It can either be on or off'; then they said, 'No, it's more complex than that. It's like something you could turn up and down like a dial'. They worked out a zero to four scale for their dial: zero was total disengagement, four highly engaged. Students could say, 'I'm feeling, at this minute, a number three on the scale'. Students took on and owned these ideas and finished up writing a cartoon-style book

for teachers about what they learned, about how teachers could help students to become more engaged, which was really about how to be more participatory.

One thing students said was, 'What bores us are the excursions. Teachers organise these excursions that are really boring. We go out somewhere we don't want to go. What would happen if we organised the excursion?' So the teachers said to them, 'Okay, if you want to organise the excursions, these are the compliance things you have to go through'. So the students had to go through all the things and tick the boxes – and they organised the excursion. But they used the switch-o-meter/dial as a measuring tool during the excursions to see whether in fact students were engaged and which ones were more engaging and so on. These nine-year-old researchers worked out engagement strategies and evaluative outcome measures for themselves through their own participation and decision-making.

**Howard:** Roger's example has reminded me about the word 'citizenship' and other warm words like 'community' or 'enterprise'. In his book on citizenship, Derek Heater (2006) says citizenship has been invested with so much meaning that it has become meaningless. That is one of our problems with a word like 'engagement'. These words get co-opted and corrupted in policy-making circles. They start off with a particular meaning, which might be close to Roger's explanation, but they get taken up by civil servants and are used in very different ways in government policy.

**Harry:** That is interesting. I've never thought about how I use the word 'engagement'. I'd have said it was a very general term like 'involvement' with no hidden agenda. But now I can see what you're saying. In certain discourses 'disengaged' has come to mean what 'alienated' used to mean. Disengaged youth are troublemakers – they probably wear hoodies and spray graffiti – and we need to find ways to make them engaged. I think I'll stick with 'participation'.

**Trudi:** As Tim has already alluded to, we must beware of how government documents twist language to empty it of meaning or even give it a reverse meaning. In Australia and elsewhere, engagement has become one of those words, and participation, and rights are also in danger of the same treatment.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors *engaged* in a debate on the meaning and usefulness of the term 'engagement', and expressed concern about the deficit connotations the use of such terms can elicit in youth work, such as 'dis-engaged' and 're-engage'. Contributors agree on the need for both academics and practitioners to be vigilant about preserving the intended meaning of words like 'participation' or 'engagement' particularly if they are to be used in the best interests of young people.

Academics and practitioners must continue to resist and rebut the redefining of words that are not used in the best interests of young people. Managerial discourses have become insidious in this regard, particularly the dehumanising use of the term 'client' to refer to young people 'participating' in services or programs. Jim Ife (1995, 2012) has written about the dangers of allowing this language to become common parlance across the youth and community work sectors.

# Chapter 11: What is the Relationship Between Citizenship and Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** Howard, previously in the dialogue you mentioned the term 'citizenship' in the context of participation. Some years ago, with Tom Hall and Amanda Coffey (1998, 1999, 2000), you wrote a lot about young people and active citizenship and the relationship to social inclusion. What does it mean for a young person to be an active citizen? And what is the relationship to participation?

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**Howard:** While these ideas are related, it is important not to conflate citizenship and participation, which in youth work and in wider discussions are invariably talked about together.

**Tim:** Is it fair to say that citizenship gives you rights to participate? Ruth Lister (2001, 2003, 2007; Smith, Lister, Middleton & Cox 2005) has written about citizenship as both a 'status' and a 'practice' and that young people are often seen as 'learner citizens' who are transitioning to full 'adult citizenship', eligible to enjoy the rights and exercise the obligations and responsibilities associated. Is this a fair representation?

**Howard:** Citizenship may give you rights to participate, but you can be a very active participant – and that may actually jeopardise your right to citizenship as Harry has already alluded to. In 1999, in Prague, I met a guy who'd taken a very participative approach to youth work in Bhutan. He had been running a human rights education program for young people one weekend, came out of the building and found he'd been stripped of Bhutanese citizenship and was forcibly escorted across the border to India. He then went to Nepal. He had no passport; he was only in Prague by virtue of a safe passage document from President Havel. So I learned that we cannot say citizenship and participation necessarily go together.

**Harry:** Citizenship has many meanings, some positive, some dubious. For example, my daughter Laura, who was born in Nicaragua, was automatically granted Irish citizenship at birth, and the Irish Embassy in Mexico City couriered her Irish passport to her when she was two years old. However, Laura's mother, also born in Nicaragua, is even now going through the arduous process of applying for Irish citizenship. This is as much about rules and regulations, certified documents, sworn affidavits and hefty fees, as it is about participation or social commitment.

**Tim:** However, citizenship does provide citizens with certain rights, such as the right to vote and the right to access government services. It also provides protection by the state, if you so choose, so 'formal' citizenship does provide rights to participate. Or, why become a citizen?

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**Harry:** Well, there's also the concept of citizenship that Lee Jerome has written about in his study of the UK 'New Labour' government of the noughties, and their project 'to create the new citizen of tomorrow', an experimental citizenship education program where "citizens are educated, coerced and ultimately required to demonstrate an appropriate level of responsibility" (Jerome 2013:165). And then there is the concept of 'active citizenship' that I and my colleagues developed and promoted in our work in Nicaragua, where children and adolescents, as active citizens, far from being 'educated, coerced and required' to accept responsibility, may themselves choose to take on responsibilities as advocates and activists in defence of children's rights (and indeed all human rights). If that is your concept of citizenship then, yes indeed, it is intertwined with the idea of participation.

**Katherine:** YACVic has just done a piece of work in the Mallee area in Victoria on young people and their rights as 'citizens' to education in sexual and reproductive health, because there was an uptick in teenage pregnancy. YACVic did a youth-led awareness-raising campaign with young people, and a lot of them were talking about the fact that they don't get decent sexual and reproductive health education. They're embarrassed to learn from their teachers. Services are not coming into schools. There's stigma in small towns of going to the local services because everybody sees you; everybody knows you. The preventative, early intervention work quite often is actually a really easy fix. It's about more people, more workers. It's about better-educated workers. It's about services that are in accessible places that are non-stigmatised or easily accessible by public transport for young people, and can actually help young people be empowered and be more positive and productive 'citizens'.

**Tim:** So Katherine, are you saying that young people should be viewed by governments as 'citizens' with rights?

**Katherine:** Yes, I think every person has a right to expect and ask for inclusion in the society that they live in as a citizen regardless of age. And it's about representation. It's about trust. It's about respect and it's also about obligations. And if governments and people are not respecting those rights, then you get situations where young people decide, 'Well, I'm not going to participate then,' and maybe that means they don't vote. Maybe that means they don't turn up. Maybe it means that they actually respond negatively. Or they're disruptive. And if you think about it, democracy is the ultimate form of participation, so if we're disenfranchising young people, we're actually excluding them from participating in their own society.

**Trudi:** In Australia, from the 1970s until the early 2000s, 'citizenship' was aligned with multiculturalism and liberal democratic values that accepted cultural diversity. During this time citizenship was aligned with the values of various political ideologies (Heywood 2017), including democratic socialism and liberal nationalism. Being a good citizen meant doing things like voting, serving on juries, and volunteering. In the last decade, citizenship, in political parlance, has been conflated with the flag-waving patriotism of the ethnocentric-nationalist conservative right that rejects multiculturalism and



Indigenous rights. This has been evidenced in the fights between the Federal government and local government about citizenship ceremonies, the controversy about Invasion Day/Australia Day and changes to the citizenship test, which now requires specific cultural knowledge (not just knowing the four duties of a citizen). Citizenship has been altered in everyday language to a point where it is now hard to use in its original meaning.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors see citizenship as a contested concept; they debated the relationship of citizenship to participation and its level of importance to youth participation processes in particular. However, most agree that citizenship is a conceptual framework for how governments view not just young people but all people.

Contributors also agree, with some critical caution, that participation is connected to citizenship, the value of that citizenship and the rights and responsibilities that come with that citizenship. We must repeatedly remind ourselves that there are differing levels of rights, responsibilities and security depending on the country you live in, and the government you live under.

# Chapter 12: Can Participation Go Wrong - even with the best intentions?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** We turn now to discuss what might potentially derail the youth participation agenda. Can participation processes go wrong, even with the best intentions, and is there too much of this sort of participation?

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**Harry:** Yes things can go wrong. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No 12 on the right to participate (UNCRC1989), introduced nine essential requirements for meaningful and effective participation that, in my view, deserve to be better known and universally applied.

The Committee states that in order for participatory processes involving children and young people to be meaningful and effective, they must be:

1. Transparent and informative
2. Voluntary
3. Respectful
4. Relevant
5. Child/youth-friendly
6. Inclusive
7. Supported by training for adults
8. Safe and sensitive to risks
9. Accountable

So the simple answer to your question is: provided participation operates through processes that meet these criteria, there can never be too much of it. However, there is far too much participation where these criteria fall short; where young people are left in the dark about what is going on (failure of criterion 1); where they are obliged to do things they haven't chosen to do (failure of criterion 2); where they feel disrespected (failure of criterion 3); where they are wasting their time (failure of criterion 4); and so on through the remaining criteria.

**Howard:** One of the big problems with some formalised youth participation processes is that they can actually increase the youth divide. Most young people who are part of formal participation structures,

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or even informal ones, are more articulate, self-confident and privileged – and will probably end up with better educational outcomes. Participation in these sorts of structures is another string to their bows. Public authorities that promote youth participation in these kinds of ways are often inadvertently colluding with and enabling an increased separation of the included and the excluded.

**Roger:** I don't think you can have too much participation. But you can have too much participation by particular groups of young people. Often the young person who ends up in structured participation processes does not represent all young people. Just because you are young does not mean you can speak for all young people.

**Howard:** That's why you need a 'broad highway' made up of multiple forms of participation, so you are connecting with some of those young people who wouldn't routinely be on the formal or semi-formal structures, and can have broader conversations in other places. However, in order to broaden participation in favour of those less likely to participate, the allegation often is that you are being undemocratic about it.

European commissioners and politicians have often rallied a group of young people that they feel represent a broad church of perspectives, but then the democratically-elected representatives of non-governmental youth organisations say, 'Hang on a minute; where did these young people come from?' You are almost not allowed to have those handpicked groups in Europe anymore. So you get a lot of well-resourced and supported young people nominated to be elected democratically, and on some matters at least this ensures a rather poor shadow of the diversity of views that you need to create good policy.

**Howard:** Yes, and there are important fault lines within participation processes. For instance, separating out from the generic concept of youth participation the process of involving young people in decision-making, which is a sub-part of the participation agenda.

**Tim:** Do you mean the idea that participation can often be about 'hearing from young people'? That is to say, where governments or youth organisations take soundings or advice from young people about policy or programs rather than enabling young people to participate in decision-making about policy or programs?

**Howard:** Well, yes, and the related issue of what happens when we do empower young people to make 'good' decisions about their future, and then, if they don't, we blame them.

**Robyn:** Participation can go wrong when you are listening to a narrow cohort: the white, articulate, middle-class voices for example. I think it can go wrong when we've got one voice, and not multiple or diverse voices.

**Katherine:** I would say that too. Having a diversity of voices and representation is important for genuine participation and representation. And if a young person is participating as a representative of

other young people, that they are aware and informed enough to do that effectively.

**Trudi:** Participation can go wrong for young people and for adults, if participative structures privilege some voices and exclude others. In practice, this is seen in almost all political, community and representative structures. This is seen in most workplaces, most community organisations and in many educational settings. A real challenge for youth work and for education more generally is how to provide an environment where people who have differing cultural capital are able to participate on equal terms and where people are able to share differing points of view without being immediately judged (Cooper 2019). I think this has become more difficult since social media algorithms created echo chambers (Coldwell-Neilson & Cooper 2019), which means people are less exposed to differences of opinion or worldview.

### **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors agreed that participation processes can go wrong and that there will inevitably be challenges experienced by youth workers in the implementing of participation (Malone & Hartung 2010). Contributors agreed that the question should not be about whether there can be too much youth participation per se, but crucially it should be about what sort of participation, the quality of the process and who gets to participate.

The issue to be addressed for a successful participation processes is that of positive discrimination (Scanlon et al. 2011; Barrett 2003) and whether the structures allow and enable the participation of young people to be representative of a wide and diverse range of views and backgrounds.

# Chapter 13: Can Too Much be Asked of Young People's Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** Related to our earlier discussion of models is the idea that youth participation mechanisms often reflect adult structures; for example, the election of a youth council to sit alongside an adult council. Or when a young person is asked to sit on the adult council they may feel that they have an enormous responsibility for the governance of that organisation that is too big for them as a young person. Can participation be disempowering for young people? Can it ask or expect too much of young people? Can it be a potentially overwhelming process?

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**Howard:** Yes, I think we can be asking too much and perhaps also asking the wrong things of young people.

**Trudi:** There is a heuristic concept used in community consultation (adults and young people), which says that at the conceptual stage, the consultation and participation should be maximal to develop the overarching brief (Coover 1985). If this is done effectively, at later technical implementation stages, less consultation should be needed. In the context of co-design of a youth work program, the broadest consultation should establish the parameters of the program. This should involve as many potential users as possible. The detailed planning for how that vision would be implemented would require less involvement. This is one way to make participation less onerous for young people. Typically, however, some youth work programs do exactly the opposite. The parameters are presented as given (rather than negotiated), and young people are asked to work collaboratively on the detail of implementation, which may be less interesting and for which they may have less expertise.

**Tim:** An example of asking too much or the wrong things, could be that a local council wants to build a skateboarding facility for young people and they want to involve them in the design and construction process, which is fine. But council shouldn't expect young people to understand the chemical composition of concrete or how to engineer the construction, or construct it on their own, should they? Could it potentially ask too much or the wrong things of young people? Can we set young people up to fail?

**Robyn:** Well, yes. You can intimidate young people by asking them to do something they are unable to do or without putting boundaries around it. It is about making sure that asking young people to participate is done in a fair and reasonable way.

**Katherine:** Yes, and it is very similar to how you would engage with anybody really, so don't ask a young person to do something that they can't do as part of a co-design process. You have to look at the sort of age group you are working with and what capacity and interests they have, and what capacity might you be able to build in them as well.

**Tim:** So, Katherine, are you saying that participation can also be looked at as a developmental process for young people? Young people may not be able to literally build the skateboard park, but there could be a project where they are learning skills about an aspect of building as part of that project?

**Katherine:** Yes, exactly, that's right. Maybe they're working with the engineers to say, 'I'd love the skate ramps to do this or can the angle of the walls do that?' and the engineer says, 'Well, if we put this scaffolding and formwork here and we pour the concrete here and put that railing there, then, yeah, we can make it work'. And the process, while developmental, might also inspire young people to be interested in becoming builders or engineers as well.

The Youth Disability and Advocacy Service (YDAS) have a program called *Together* (<https://www.yacvic.org.au/ydas>) that trains youth services to create more inclusive and accessible environments for disabled young people, and they are partnering with FYA<sup>8</sup> at the moment to build those concepts into the disability stream of their Young Social Pioneers program.

The program is for a group of young people with disabilities or young people who are working on projects for people with a disability. One of them is a young guy who's in a wheelchair and he does wheelchair skating – he uses the skate park in his wheelchair. His project was looking at how to use skateboards in different ways to make them accessible for people with a disability. And I was like, 'Oh, that's really cool', thinking that he was talking about it as a recreational thing, and it's partly recreational, but then he said, 'Actually, doing skating with my wheelchair, I've increased my mobility enormously, so I can go up escalators on my wheelchair now. I can get upstairs. I can actually get into a lot of spaces that were not accessible to me before.' How awesome would it be to make sure that every skate park that's built from now on actually has access for young people with disability? And to include them as co-designers and consults on it as well?

**Tim:** That's a great example, and of course, there's the simple reality that Robyn and I know from our years in local council youth work, that if you don't consult with young people about recreational facilities ...

**Robyn:** They don't use them!

**Katherine:** Exactly. It's all about ownership and the issue of accountability. If you're creating expectations or making promises you can't, or don't, keep as part of that process, all you're going to do is undermine young people's willingness to participate in any future process.

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8. The Foundation for Young Australians.

**Tim:** Can this lead to a concern that the participation process can potentially set young people up to fail, even unwittingly? For example, if young people are asked to do things they can't do or don't have the knowledge or expertise to do. Is this an accurate summary?

**Howard:** Yes, it is. You can ask young people to be a part of the design and construction process, learning skills in construction, for example, as a development opportunity. But it wouldn't be developmental if you said to young people, 'Great. Now build what you've designed', without knowledge or expertise. So, it's about facilitating an appropriate participation process.

**Tim:** Similarly, it is not hard to imagine that a municipal council that does not consult with young people about the sort of skateboarding facility it should build, will spend a lot of money doing something that young people may not use. So Howard, can that lack of expertise you refer to be used as a reason not to involve young people in decision-making processes, to not consult them – to exclude them?

**Howard:** Yes, it can, but sometimes for good reason. Concerns I have about the youth participation agenda is about power, responsibility and accountability. It is all very well young people saying, 'We want a skateboard park' at a particular time, but what is their responsibility down the track? What if the design causes problems or safety issues?

That's why the 18-year-old adult threshold is there for who can be directors of charities and NGOs and so on. When we talk about participation and say young people can't be actively involved in shaping the direction of a charity or making financial decisions, for example, because they're 'only' 14, it is partly about accountability and the legal responsibility that goes with decision-making. So, this isn't to rule out anything; it's to say we have to work through tensions, contradictions and paradoxes to maintain momentum so that young people's voices are heard and, where appropriate, acted upon. And that's the tricky bit about who makes the decision.

**Harry:** I've been tweeting for a number of years now, and if one of my tweets gets a dozen likes I consider that a result. The only time responses to one of my tweets went into the hundreds was when I tackled an influential Irish broadcaster on this very point. Ryan Tubridy has both a daily radio show and weekend TV show with our national broadcaster RTE. On his radio show he likes to give little homilies about whatever is in the papers that day. The morning after Greta Thunberg made her emotional speech to the UN in New York, he was going on about how this was all too much for her, that she needed looking after, especially since she has a disability, and that 'she needs to go home and watch a movie and come back in a year or two'. I was incensed and immediately tweeted how sad it was that this influential broadcaster wanted to silence a young person who has achieved influence, and worse, that he mentioned her disability as an argument for her not to be heard. This was picked up and retweeted many times, and ended up in the next morning's papers.

So my answer to your question is that participation cannot ask too much of young people (note my previous answer about how it must always be voluntary), but that young people can give unbelievable amounts to it, with astounding commitment and selflessness, and if that is what they choose to do, I'd like to think they can count on my support.

**Robyn:** I think there is always risk with youth participation. There is a risk that organisations see young people as a collective group and so they put a single young person on a committee and feel like their youth participation is done. They think that a young person can speak for everyone, which, of course, they cannot. Young people are diverse. The other risk is that organisations can, often unknowingly, exploit articulate and well-resourced young people. They want to use them because they're trusting of their voice: it's articulate.

**Tim:** Is there an issue of accountability that also needs addressing? That adults should be accountable to young people – reporting back on progress and informing them about how they have used the information and expertise that young people have provided within the participation process?

**Katherine:** Yes, accountability is really important. Young people also have a right to hear back during and after the participation process on how their expertise, their experience has been utilised to develop the new program, service or policy, and how young people will be involved going forward, in co-production or governance. It is not respectful to take their knowledge, and then 'ghost' them. In my experience this does happen, sometimes multiple times to the same young people, which can itself result in disillusionment and disengagement. Conversely, if young people understand how their contribution has mattered, they will feel huge pride and ownership.

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors agree that the concern was not that participation asked too much of young people but that certain types of participation were in danger of asking the wrong things of young people and that young people were in danger of being set up to fail. Contributors also warned that adults were not always accountable to young people, informing them of how their participation has been used.

It was also recognised that participation can be conceived positively as developmental. Rather than participation being seen as a chore, or the responsibility as being overwhelming, participation can be conceptualised as developmental, providing opportunities for young people to learn new skills and gain new knowledge.



# Chapter 14: What are the Organisational and Structural Barriers to Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** To put this question in context, we are having this discussion about youth participation because we think it's important and because we think it doesn't happen in and of itself as a natural consequence. We're saying that young people are more likely to be excluded than they are to be included in decision-making processes about them, based on the idea that they lack something like experience, knowledge, expertise or age. So is an important part of enabling youth participation dealing with the organisational and structural barriers to participation?

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**Robyn:** Yes, I think we do need to deal with structural barriers, but when I look back to when I started out as a youth worker, one of the barriers was my own lack of training, as at that stage I hadn't formally studied youth work; I wasn't trained. So I think a barrier to enabling young people's participation can sometimes be a lack of awareness and understanding of what youth participation is and why it is important by well-meaning but untrained youth workers. When I started as a youth worker, there were some real gaps in my knowledge, and there weren't the professional development opportunities that there are now for youth workers. I'd come into the sector without having done a Bachelor of Youth Work, so there were skill sets and knowledge that I was missing. So in that sense, lack of knowledge and training and understanding by workers, managers of services and board members of youth organisations can be a significant barrier to enabling young people's participation.

**Tim:** So Robyn, what you are saying is that an important aspect of enabling participation is about valuing the professional training of youth workers, about having a framework for good practice?

**Robyn:** Yes, exactly, because that is what I really lacked in my early days as a youth worker. I did eventually go back and train as a youth worker and that was important for meeting those gaps and realising a framework for good youth work practice that values youth participation and sees it as central to good practice.

**Tim:** Another barrier or reason given for not including young people particularly in decision-making, is this idea that they 'lack experience'. So in general terms do you think that a 'lack of experience' and the relationship of 'experience to age' may be seen as a barrier to young people's participation?

**Roger:** Yes I do, but I recognise that young people are learning, as I'm learning, but young people are learning rapidly. I would say that young people are now learning more rapidly than I am currently learning as an older person. Therefore, we need to instead talk about levels of experience and background and years of accumulated knowledge, whereas a young person might have only 16 years

of accumulated background information – though I also recognise that my accumulated knowledge is specific and compartmentalised, and that young people equally have specific experience and knowledge that I lack.

**Tim:** But isn't the concept of experience and knowledge both contextual and relative? For example, I couldn't sail a boat single-handedly around the world, but 16-year old Jessica Watson (2011) did, not long ago. She's now an expert in that field and I'm not – she has more accumulated experience and knowledge of sailing than I will ever have. I've got a privileged, white-male, restricted set of knowledge. Whereas, there are young people who have greater knowledge, experience and background about a whole host of areas in which I don't have any knowledge or experience. So is participation less about age *per se* and more about respect and recognising our differences and valuing what we all bring to a given situation?

**Roger:** Yes, I think that's right, there are internal contradictions to participation that need to be challenged. The other thing is to see participation as a 'verb', rather than a 'noun'. It is a way of relating or doing, not a set and fixed 'thing'. It is a process and not a product or a fixed project.

**Harry:** I'll accept that age may be related to experience, but its relationship to knowledge is more doubtful and its relationship to wisdom very tenuous indeed. Malala Yousufzai is 22 now, but she was 17 when she won the Nobel Peace Prize. I would turn to her for advice before asking many older people. As for the organisational and structural barriers, dismantling them is at the very core of our work. It's what we do and should be doing as workers.

**Trudi:** I agree with Harry that dismantling structural and organisational barriers to participation is the core of what youth workers should be doing. We should also be supporting young people to gain the skills to participate effectively in sub-optimal structures that cannot be changed. Very often youth workers can give young people useful information about how organisational structures work, because organisational structures are things we need to know about. My experience also resonates with Robyn's. I went into youth work untrained as a volunteer and had to learn as I went along, including from my mistakes. I feel I am still learning about how to dismantle or overcome organisational and structural barriers to participation. It is not only young people who face these barriers; they are in many parts of civil society and they affect how youth workers organise (Cooper 2013).

## IN SUMMARY

Contributors agree that minimising organisational and structural barriers to participation, and facilitating access for young people, are key roles for youth and community workers. The issue of a lack of knowledge and skills of those responsible for facilitating participation was raised once again and the need for appropriate training and ongoing professional development was acknowledged.

Contributors grappled with the question of age and its relationship to both experience and knowledge; they emphasised that these were both contextual and relative. There was strong consensus that respecting and valuing the unique knowledge and experiences that young people bring is important to the participation process.

# Chapter 15: Are All Voices Equal in Youth Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** In relation to the mechanisms and structures of youth participation and those that control them, is it a legitimate criticism that often they are only listening to young people who express what are deemed positive or acceptable messages? I'm thinking here of the voices that some people may be concerned about elevating. Do 'unacceptable' messages also have a right to be voiced and to be a part of the participation process? Are all voices equal in youth participation?

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**Roger:** That is a very, very important question. How do we work with those we disagree with, respecting the principles of participatory approaches, but arguing the values and attitudes expressed? We come with a set of values: I don't come as an empty vessel to work with young people. I come with a set of personal values, which I argue with logic and evidence. I do that and then expect young people also to argue with logic and evidence, which is an issue in itself. I've always felt that the important thing was to be willing to contemplate that I might be wrong.

**Harry:** Manipulation certainly goes on a lot, not just selectively choosing those voices that are considered worthy of being heard and promoted, but manipulating processes so that the desired 'opinions' come to the fore (see my earlier answer in relation to Hart's Ladder, where I discussed how the question of manipulation of youth voices has not been given enough attention). An example I came across recently was where children were involved in a participatory health promotion program. One of the activities was nutrition and cookery, and, though the program was supposedly driven by the children's ideas, the adults in charge had to twist their arms to make sure they only cooked things the adults considered healthy, and none of the tastier stuff they actually wanted to cook.

As a more serious example, a few years ago I was talking with members of a district youth council in Northern Ireland and I was saddened to be told that they were not allowed to talk to the media or promote their views in any way. Any communication had to be sent to the local authority's press office to be cleaned up and have suitable language applied before it could be issued. I'd say that's a good example of how the 'inconvenient youth voice' that Roger mentioned earlier can be effectively stifled.

**Howard:** If you look at youth work in some European countries, some organisations will not go near extreme right-wing, paramilitary youth groups. Perhaps youth work is equally if not more important with those groups, as the Offenburg Talks of 2019<sup>9</sup> suggested. But youth work with the participatory

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9. The Offenburg Talks consider the role of youth work in relation to broad social and political challenges. In 2019, the theme was populism, nationalism and the rise of the far Right.

element? There are question marks about that. A lot of youth participation – look at Putin's youth in Russia – is going in a very different direction from the ones I would subscribe to. But then do we say we should close those voices down?

**Katherine:** I think everyone has the right to speak, but I think there's a line where, if what people are saying and advocating for is against the law or is designed to disenfranchise or marginalise other groups of people, then they shouldn't be listened to.

But if they genuinely are raising their voices because they're concerned about the prospects of their cohort, then, yes, I think it is okay. So there is a line that you can draw fairly easily. It's important to be clear about our country being a place where everybody is welcome, everybody's views and behaviours are acceptable as long as they're not impeding other people's rights, is quite key to that thinking.

It's incumbent on all of us, to look at who are the people who are being silenced – who are the young people who don't have a voice, particularly if they come from cultures where the expectation of young people is that you stay silent or you are acquiescent and you don't rebel against your elders – that we're actually encouraging an environment where young people's voices can be heard, albeit potentially in a more respectful and collaborative way rather than an activist way.

**Tim:** And would that include voices that you wouldn't necessarily agree with?

**Katherine:** Yes, for example, young men who are tending towards white nationalism. My view is that a lot of them, they are just looking for a sense of belonging, and if we can provide more positive activities and environments and engagement for them that gives them that sense of belonging that's not about their white identity, then that will go a long way to addressing that particular issue. At the same time, it's actually empowering those young people and re-including them in mainstream society.

**Trudi:** If dialogical conversation (Freire 1972) is a central youth work method (Corney 2004, 2006, 2019; Coburn 2010; Chouhan 2009; Cooper 2018), then youth workers must be open to dialogue with young people who hold very different views from each other and from youth workers themselves. Katherine mentioned white nationalism. I worked as a youth worker in the UK, in a working-class white community, in a youth centre attended by young people most of whom had been in institutional care (children's homes, foster care, youth detention, adult prison, residential youth mental health facilities) for all or part of their childhoods and youth. Within the youth centre, there were only a few rules primarily about not putting other people down, and not using violence. One evening, two of the young men said they were joining the National Front, a white supremacist political organisation and political party. A dialogical conversation invites an open discussion about why, and in this case about how social circumstances are interpreted differently by various political worldviews. Because I already knew them well, it was possible to begin this conversation. Their interest in the National Front did not persist for very long, and my conversations reverted to more basic survival issues. On the issue of not getting what they wanted, I found they were so accustomed to not getting what they wanted that it came as a surprise to them if anyone ever took any notice of what they said or what they wanted. They managed their own expectations, perhaps too well.

**Howard:** In Europe, and almost certainly in Australia as well, this notion of being dogmatic or doctrinaire about participation has been thrown into relief by world events. There was a big youth work conference in Bruges, Belgium, on 14 September 2001 and what had happened in the days previously caused many youth workers to reflect on their practice. They had been promoting multiculturalism, they'd been tolerant, anti-racist and anti-xenophobia – and suddenly the Twin Towers came down. People at the conference asked themselves what this meant for youth work practice and many felt they'd been too dogmatic in saying that we should all be nice and 'everyone should treat everyone else with respect'. Well, if you are a Bosnian Muslim, for example, whose family has been killed by Bosnian Serbs, you may not want to say it nicely, you may want to say it with anger and hatred. And you've got to actually allow space for participation involving the expression of those views in louder, more hostile ways, but within a safe context.

### **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors agree that working with diverse voices, and elevating those voices that are often silent, was important and crucial to good participation. This may entail difficult encounters where youth workers may not always agree with the perspective or opinions of young people. However, critical dialogue (Freire 1972) is central to youth work practice, and youth workers must be open to dialogue with young people who hold different views. The welcoming of 'convenient voices' only, and manipulation of participation processes and or outcomes, is always a danger. Where to 'draw the line' on inconvenient voice remains contested.

# Chapter 16: How Should Ethnicity, Culture and Diversity be Considered in Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** Cultural issues are important in regard to participation. For example, young people may face difficult questions in relation to the importance of their own voice versus the voice and views of cultural or faith leaders and other authoritative voices in their community. What role does culture and diversity play, and how should it be considered in youth participation?

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**Roger:** I worked with a young Islamic woman who looked at the question of 'What does participation mean for young refugees from Horn of Africa communities, and the degree to which they are able to see themselves as active participants?' And she said, 'Unless you're the right tribe, unless you're older, unless you're male, you haven't got much hope of speaking up or being heard', because that's the way participation is culturally framed in that community. However, she then went on to argue that, if we talk about participation as being 'community development' instead of a 'right' to be heard or participate, then young people from those communities, because they have skills within their refugee communities that the elders within the communities don't have, can be leaders in community development. This might be what we mean by 'participation' in this context.

**Tim:** So in culturally sensitive contexts, if we move away from the term 'participation' somewhat, and the potentially negative cultural connotations associated with 'demanding to be heard', we can make gains for young people and for their communities by framing participation differently, using different language and mutually beneficial understandings. For example, drawing on the theory and practices of community development (Kenny 2011; Ife 1995) to enable the right to participate and empowerment of those whose voice has traditionally been silent or silenced in that community, not just young people.

**Roger:** Yes, I think that is right; ultimately youth participation is about collaboration, understanding and mutual benefit for the whole community.

**Howard:** Yes, and allowing young people to make mistakes and to potentially learn from those mistakes as they participate.

**Katherine:** Yes, that's right but there are also further issues. YACVic is the auspicing body for the Koorie (Indigenous) Youth Council. They get asked to be part of everything, which is very positive in terms of inclusion of indigenous young people. But it's a big demand on their time, quite often

without any recognition of the value they bring and the time they give in terms of remuneration or investment in the organisation. On top of that, it can become very disillusioning if they don't see any change happening, if they are being constantly consulted but nothing ever changes.

**Trudi:** I agree with Tim that, in all youth work, there needs to be awareness of inhibitors of participation. To maximise participation, youth workers structure processes to establish a safe environment. Sometimes it may be necessary to work with culturally or gender homogeneous groups to achieve this, whilst at other times it may be important to work with culturally diverse or mixed gender groups. There is no universal application of participation processes, it is necessary to observe groups and individuals and adjust processes accordingly.

**Tim:** So there's a couple of issues here. Within participation processes there may be potential areas of cultural conflict and differing levels of participation, so adaptation of models and process to the context is crucial. However, there is still the need for young people to see actionable outcomes, and that young people participate in realising these in some way.

**Katherine:** Yes, and part of it is young people understanding the nature of the context, whether it is cultural or whether it's bureaucracy and government and the glacial pace of policy change or organisational change. An example is the working group on the YACVic submission to the Victorian Royal Commission on Mental Health System (Rycken 2019); we had our last meeting recently, and one of the youth participants was expressing how disillusioned he was that he'd done all this work, and then he went and saw his mental health provider and nothing had changed. So it's important to manage the expectations of young people, to say yes, you have done all this participatory or advisory work, but it may be years before that flows through to changes.

**Harry:** Well, even taking on board all these considerations, I am not swayed from my commitment to the promotion of participation as a human right, and that means, specifically, a right for *all humans*, regardless of any objections that the 'elders' of their particular community might have. I can't accept the kind of cultural relativism that says that, in certain cultural contexts, respect for elders (almost always male) makes the silencing of youth voices – particularly young women's voices – an acceptable thing to do.

But for me this has to be tied to the principle that participation is voluntary. If some young people living in a certain cultural context prefer to follow the code of their ancestors and let male elders speak for them, I will not be twisting their arms to do otherwise. But throughout the world you will find that there are young people who believe culture evolves from within, and who want to be a part of that evolution. If those young people want my support in claiming their right to be heard, I will give it. But as an outsider, I will be looking for ways to help, not forcing the issue.

As an example, my last job involved supporting development projects in Africa, particularly around child safeguarding (addressing female genital mutilation, child marriage, and corporal punishment and so on). Where my ingrained habit would be to quote the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, for many of those I encountered, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

(OAU 1990) was a better point of reference. It enshrines much the same rights framework as the UNCRC, but was formulated by Africans for Africans, is monitored by a council of African experts, and resonates strongly with African cultural identities. Children's rights are thus no longer seen as the product of post-colonial cultural hegemony, but as a vibrant element of Africa's own cultural evolution.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors agree that the *right* to participate and the inclusion of diverse voices are important to the participation process. However, it was acknowledged that rights-based advocacy of young people's voices in traditional cultural contexts is contested, and that language and cultural sensitivity was paramount in these contexts. Mason and Bolzan (2010) have acknowledged these complexities and recognise that there is limited research on the conceptualisation of youth participation both within and across traditional cultural contexts.



# Chapter 17: How Should Disadvantaged Young People be Included in Participation?

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**Moderator - Tim Corney:** We have discussed the inconvenient voice of young people and those whose views may be controversial or extreme. We have also discussed the diversity of young people's views and the relationship to cultural values and the communities of which they are a part. But what about the voice of 'disadvantaged' young people, such as young people in the youth justice system, or in residential care, or those with very limited financial resources for example? How should disadvantaged young people be included in participation?

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**Katherine:** Yes, I think that is actually one of the most important questions. You have to put the effort in to find those young people. Because young people with lived experience are able to speak on their own behalf and on the behalf of other young people like them far better than a bright, shiny young person who is very articulate but who has had every privilege in life, and limited experience of challenge.

**Tim:** Is it true to say that these young people are often unlikely to know about or be invited to participate? Or if they are provided with the opportunity to participate, they may not have adults supporting them, providing resources and time to assist their participation?

**Katherine:** Yes, you have to put the work in to find them. You have to put the work in for them to feel safe and supported in their participation, and you have to put the work into developing their skills to understand issues and processes, and to speak up. That's hard work, but if you don't do that, then you don't have genuine youth participation. In my view, having representative voices from disadvantaged and marginalised groups is absolutely key.

**Harry:** I agree, and once you've found them, you have to put in more work to prevent an army of adult 'gatekeepers' from effectively silencing them. In fact, I will put forward the hypothesis that the greatest resistance to the participation of 'disadvantaged' young people comes, not from the young people themselves, but from professional adults acting as gatekeepers.

This has been the experience of the team at the ReSPECT project I'm currently working with at Western Sydney University. This project was set up specifically to hear the voices and promote the ideas of disadvantaged young people who found themselves users of a variety of state services, including youth justice, youth detention, alternative care, and alternative education settings, by

necessity, not by choice. By the trick of labelling these young people as 'vulnerable', the adult gatekeepers can deny them their right to be heard, by claiming it is in their own best interests. No evidence is needed; the magic word 'vulnerable' is sufficient to act as a gag. The same trick is also regularly played on young people with disabilities by their supposedly well-intentioned adult gatekeepers. I've seen university research ethics approval forms which contain questions specifically designed to discourage researchers from involving so-called 'vulnerable' groups in their research.

**Howard:** This is what I have always meant by categorical participation. Many 'youth policy' questions are focused on marginalised, excluded, troubled and troublesome youth, but the youth representation that contributes to that policy debate, if at all, generally does not reflect those groups of young people, their issues and experience. I've spent my life battling to 'reach' the voice of those groups and to bring them into the debate. But it is hard work, it takes a lot of time, it is a long process and it often meets with opposition, for many different reasons, including – sometimes – from more formalised youth voices, as well as from those who don't take kindly to the critical voices they hopefully end up hearing and the way things are sometimes said. When I was working as a youth worker, one local politician – who was part of a municipal initiative to listen more closely to young people and understand their 'needs' in the city – tried to get me sacked because he held me responsible for the 'in your face' criticism levelled at him by a group of young people – those who would never usually get anywhere near such a public consultation.

**Tim:** Is there a danger here that these young people may feel that their participation is a token gesture? And what if these young people participate but don't get what they asked for? Does that mean that there wasn't genuine participation?

**Katherine:** No, it doesn't necessarily mean it wasn't genuine. To me, that is part of managing the expectations of participation.

**Robyn:** And going to back to young people and respecting their voice and saying, 'This is what we heard'. Even if what you are asking for can't be delivered for whatever reason: we have heard what you have said and we have taken it seriously.

**Katherine:** And also saying; 'This is what we've decided to do, and these are the ideas that we're not going to go forward with now and for various reasons, and if you want to know why, let's talk about it.' I would also say that it's part of a youth worker's responsibility to actually coach young people in the idea that if your preferred outcome doesn't get up, that's democracy, and part of learning to be a functioning citizen in a democratic world is learning to live with compromise.

**Trudi:** In my experience, it is possible to promote participation by young people who wouldn't otherwise get heard, but this often requires pre-existing relationships, the building of trust and a lot of encouragement. Tokenism is a real risk and undermines genuine participation. We should all learn to recognise it and demand better!

**Tim:** Respecting *all* young people regardless of background or advantage, as autonomous human beings, remains an important principle of youth and community work and is consistent with the UNCRRC. As clearly stated;

*“The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognised as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view (UNCRRC, General Comment 7, 2005).*

## **IN SUMMARY**

Contributors agree that finding appropriate mechanisms, structures and processes of youth participation for those whose voices are under-represented remains an important role for youth and community workers. In this regard Matthew (2001) and Turkie (2010) provide critical perspectives on traditional youth participation models such as youth councils and youth parliaments as methods of representation, that don't work for all young people, particularly those who may be disadvantaged. Thus, there is the need for youth workers to be active in working with young people to source alternative methods, mechanisms and structures that allow a broader and more diverse representation of young people in participatory practices.

# Conclusion

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This critical dialogue about young people's participation began with an introduction that focused on young people's 'right' to participate in decisions that affect them, acknowledging that this right is based in broader human rights conventions and government legislation. However, the right to participate does not guarantee participation; it needs to be affirmed and enabled, and, in some cases, asserted. We note that this right to participate is not just for young people but for all people.

We established that participation is a good thing and that, as youth and community workers, we want to involve young people in decision-making processes both from the perspective of their right to participate (or not) and because it enhances the quality and effectiveness of youth programs and services. We briefly referred to the importance of values that underpin the participation of young people and that participation is not an end in itself but a beginning.

We acknowledged that participation has a wider frame than just decision-making and that, while young people should certainly be encouraged to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, they may choose not to.

The discussion acknowledged that young people sharing their experience, knowledge and expectations, informs and shapes better decisions and better policy outcomes. However, it is important to recognise that there are often conditions, boundaries and limits to participation – for all of us. Youth work practitioners responsible for enabling young people's participation should continue to argue for why it is important, but must also keep asking themselves what the best way or model of doing it is, and when, where and how it should be done. We must keep asking about which young people are enabled to participate and who is excluded – and challenge divisive, manipulative and exclusionary practices.

While the participants in the dialogue unequivocally agreed that young people's active 'participation' is a good thing, they cautioned that there is not one right way of doing it, and that there should be different and multiple pathways to and for participation that cater to the diversity of young people. They outlined the inherent tension between the principled aspiration of participation and the practical realities of delivering, acknowledging the tensions and contradictions in 'cookie cutter' prescriptions such as 'ladders' and other aspirational models of participation.

The dynamic and ever-changing jargon and terms associated with youth participation was noted and a warning sounded about the dangers of the corrupting power of language. In particular, there is an evolving meaning of associated words and practices by those who may not share the same view of participation, or of what is in 'the best interests' of young people. The example was provided of a word such as 'engagement' and its link to remedial and deficit-based forms of participation that individualise and pathologise young people, seeing them as being 'disengaged' and needing to 're-engage' or become 'more engaged' and so on.

In closing, it is worth noting that, while governments continue to champion various forms of 'youth participation', there is little evidence of a move to lower the voting age or to provide a legislative voice for those under the age of enfranchisement. While the current practice of 'youth participation' may not make it perfect, it is hoped that this conversation has helped to refine the ideological and philosophical commitment to it and to temper the warm words with some grounded realities. It is hoped that it contributes to a continued debate about perceptions and policies relating to the participation of young people and the practice of youth and community work.

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This critical dialogue on 'youth participation' is a timely contribution to the body of knowledge. It succeeds in illuminating an underpinning rationale while also delivering practical advice on the practice of involving young people in decision making. Dr Tim Corney, as moderator, provides a series of provocative questions to an international panel of experts, and guides the conversation, amplifying and clarifying the arguments at key points in the debate. The concept of 'youth participation', its theoretical methods and models, are examined and current terms such as 'co-design' are explored and critiqued. The editors, Corney and Williamson, are both highly experienced in the field of professional youth and community work, and have skilfully woven together the contributors' responses into a coherent and comprehensive treatment of this important topic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*This book employs, and indeed exemplifies, critical dialogue as both an elucidatory method and an activity that is inherently valuable and conducive to human flourishing. Seven eminent contributors engage in a vibrant exchange of opinions, ideas and insights drawing on their long careers and diverse practical experiences of youth work and youth participation, spanning inter-sectoral, international and intercultural contexts.*

*Full justice is done to the multifaceted and contested nature of participation as a concept and its complex relationship with related ideas like empowerment, engagement, citizenship and agency, but with participation as a right providing a unifying theme and principle. All told this is an exceptionally rich resource and stimulus for youth work students, practitioners, educators and policy makers. I'll be making abundant use of it myself.*

### **Professor Maurice Devlin**

Jean Monnet Chair & Director of the Centre for Youth Research, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

*This book on 'Youth Participation', provides a comprehensive overview of an important topic for those involved in the provision of services to young people. Youth participation is a core practice of Youth Work, but it has been a misunderstood concept. This publication provides detailed critique and analysis of the different models of youth participation and their application in the design and decision making of youth services and programs. I found it an incredibly useful and thought provoking read and would recommend the book to youth workers, students and managers of youth services alike.*

### **Carmel Guerra OAM**

CEO, Centre for Multi-cultural Youth. Chair, Multi-cultural Youth Affairs Network, Australia.

*This publication presents a concise, accessible and engaging conversation about the right of young people to participate in decisions that affect them, and the role of youth workers in assisting young people to develop their own sense that what they think matters. The contributors are deeply experienced youth work, academic and policy experts, always worth listening to. An essential read for those involved with young people in policy or service delivery roles.*

### **Dr Howard Sercombe**

Honorary Professor, School of Education, University of Glasgow

*This is a welcome and thought-provoking series of conversations about the role of youth work in catalysing the participation of young people in decisions that affect their lives. It embraces and models 'critical dialogue' as a basis for meaningful youth work, and youth participation. It explores the role of youth workers as facilitators of youth voice, assisting young people to navigate hostile environments that wish to silence or demonise their dissent. It is good to see these conversations in the youth work sector as it highlights the potential of youth workers to assist in establishing mechanisms for genuine youth participation, including through legislation and policy. This discussion is set firmly within the ethos of youth and community work, that is, as one contributor states "not to explain and instruct, but to motivate and inspire", as this dialogue does. Congratulations to all involved.*

### **Dharshini Seneviratne**

Adviser, Adolescent Development and Participation, UNICEF.