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Generating Authentic Understandings of Participation:
Working with Young People

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Abstract

Young people's right to participate has intensively been the subject of law, policy and practice at supranational, nation state and devolved administrative levels. Although often constructive in nature, the rhetoric of 'participation' is largely controlled by adults. As a concept, participation is associated with a number of potentially positive outcomes. However, as research with young people aged between 11-18 years in Swansea, Wales, suggests, significant problems exist concerning the definition and understanding of participation. In this article, what young people said when they were asked to explain what participation meant to them is presented and explored. Critically, through the research, new understandings of participation that pose profound challenges, notably concerning the very nature and operation of participation, were offered. For instance, eschewing traditional concepts, young people revealed that, to them, participation was founded on: understandings of their intention and communication when participating; the importance of relationships; and the reality that participation is located within everyday decision making. Drawing upon research findings, it is argued that young people not only offered better than current understandings of participation, but that what research participants said is transformative and has serious implications, suggesting the need for changes in legislation, policy and practice.

Keywords: Young people's participation; Children's rights; Decision making; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

‘Oh yeh, they go on about it [young people’s participation] saying it’s this, that, and everything. It’s like the world’s gonna end if we don’t get involved in certain things. And we are like, uh?⁹ It’s not like that. But there’s no use arguing... it’s not what they [adults] think.’

(David¹, Young Person)

David’s view, filled with frustration, reveals an interesting reality. The reality that David exposes is one wherein he and, as will be discussed below, other young people, whilst relishing and desiring opportunities to be involved in decision making, believe that their conception and practice of participation varies greatly from the ways that adults understand that right. David’s opinion offers a challenging lens through which ‘participation’ as a concept and an action can be seen. Much literature exists concerning young people’s ‘participation rights’: these being located at supranational², national³, and devolved governmental levels⁴. Certainly, young people’s participation remains topical, and the continuing emphasis upon pertinent law, policies and frameworks (for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) seems unlikely to abate. Pragmatically, often innovative approaches to promoting young people’s participation in decision making are designed and implemented across a range of governmental and NGO activities. Yet, arguably, these focus upon largely structural, civics-orientated and legalistic understandings of participation and result in the offering of opportunities that are designed to ‘slot’ young citizens into formal types of decision making (Taft and Gordon, 2013). It can nevertheless be argued that the generation of conceptual and definitional frameworks, allied to the provision of structural opportunities, are valuable, and can lead to positive outcomes for young people (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013). However, there is limited evidence to suggest that young people consider adult-inspired definitions of participation, and provision that flows from these, to reflect their personal and lived understanding of decision making (Charles, 2012).

That young people’s participation in decision making may be understood as a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon is not, in itself, controversial (Hopkins, 2013). It might be expected that lateral understandings of ‘participation’, as defined by the UNCRC for instance, necessarily include both formally defined and informally created understandings that embrace the spaces, places, audiences and actors that are involved in its evocation (Lundy, 2007). Despite this, throughout the proliferation of laws, policies, strategies and local initiatives, participation of a certain flavour, namely that which is institutional and processual, does appear to be predominant. This is not to level undue criticism at those who seek to promote young people’s participation, sometimes in formal ways: such action can have beneficial outcomes. However, when young people have been asked about what constitutes participation, discordance between adult and young people understandings becomes visible. Possibly, the ‘good

¹ In this article, a number of quotations from the young people who took part in the research which is described are included in the text. To protect the identity of the children, pseudonyms have been used.

² European Commission (2010) EU Strategy for Youth 2010-2018. Strasbourg: European Commission

³ Cabinet Office (2013) Positive for Youth - Progress since December 2011. London: Cabinet Office

⁴ Welsh Government (2014) Children’s Rights Scheme. Cardiff: Welsh Government

intentions' of adults have led to the inadvertent obfuscation of young people's views. Certainly, an examination of the historical legacy of child-rights development does suggest that, somewhat ironically, young people's participation in the development of critical rights-related policies and strategies is sometimes an afterthought. The case of the UNCRC's development helps to illustrate this point (Lundy et al., 2015).

The structural emphasis on young people's participation, both definitively and via processes such as national policy fora and local governmental schemes, is often accompanied by statements which use a language of partnership that focuses on constructing conduits through which voices can be heard (McEvoy, 2015). In themselves, these are constructive. However, the virtual embedding of young-people-focused participative mechanisms and policies which inform these create two consequences for young people which are, as yet, unresolved. These are, namely, that definitive statements that underpin the participation agenda are created by adults. This adult-driven 'agenda' is evidenced by a significant corpus of policy declarations that aim to promote young people's participation in decision making: declarations that young people did not create. In practice, these enable adults to claim that young people's right to participate in decision making is being respected and supported⁵. The interface, in this context, between policy and practice becomes somewhat linear and auditable; i.e. policy-derived definitions 'clarify' what is meant by participation, and formal, frequently adult-initiated processes create 'participation delivery' structures. Furthermore, and perhaps unintentionally, the deployment of structural authority to create specific spaces, places and audiences for young people's participation can result in the inveigling of young people's participation (c.f. Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003). By this it is meant that the utilisation of a specific language of participation which is inextricably linked to process and structure may obviate exploration of other key foci which matter to young people, thereby reinforcing a type of participative orthodoxy which is antithetical to those for which it was initially designed (Rinaldi, 2005). These points are important, not least because participation in decision making has multiple impacts upon young people and, as an arguably impactful concept and activity which is regularly undertaken by them, it is arguable that the 'orthodoxy' of participation should be challenged by those for whom it has been designed. This is something that Article 12:1 of the UNCRC would appear to endorse, since the decision to adopt specific understandings of participation is something that affects many young people. According to the UNCRC, this is a matter about which they should be able to express a view.

This article seeks to understand young people's views, and, in doing so, challenge the 'habit' of adults to define, without reference to young people, the concept of participation. Additionally, the largely structural manifestation of 'participation' and its embedding within process will be explored, with young people offering radical and powerful alternatives to the current participative orthodoxy. Drawing directly upon research undertaken in Swansea, this article reports what happened when young people were asked to share their views, opinions and experiences of participation. Also, the views of young people regarding what they

⁵ See for instance, Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *Sitting on their Council, standing up for their rights: School Councils in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government

deemed to be an appropriate definition of participation, one that was grounded in their real-life experiences, and the primary location of their decision making, are considered. Reflecting upon what young people said, it is argued that the new understandings of participation which they offered are not only important, but are capable of transforming participative policy and practice.

1. Giving young people a voice: Enabling participants to shape and lead research

Messages from research suggest that there is indeed discordance between what adults and young people understand concerning ‘participation’. Reflecting this, an innovative research process which situated young people as leaders of that process was constructed. Rather than create a piece of research which merely tested or compared understandings of participation, a different approach was adopted. Moving away from types of research where adults dictate methodology, and young people are passive participants, an alternative process was enabled. Drawing upon a lateral application of Article 12 of the UNCRC, a methodology was enabled that unashamedly sought to accord young people key roles in the research (Pinter and Zandian, 2015; Graham et al., 2015). The research from its inception was founded on a desire that young people should be situated at the heart of the inquiry process. In fact, and to ensure young people’s meaningful participation, a multi-stage process was created consisting of: a concepts and design development stage that was comprised of two main types of activities. Firstly, there were exercises through which young people could explain and explore what ‘participation’ meant to them, and next, young people led a methods-generation process to design research instruments and determine how levels of young people’s participation could, in their view, best be measured; the concepts and design development stage was followed by a larger scale stage of research, the methodology of which was co-designed with young people, using, for instance, research instruments designed by them, and which was addressed to sample groups identified by young participants. It should be noted that this article focuses upon what young people said when they were asked to explain and explore what participation meant to them. Other aspects of the wider research process described above are considered elsewhere.

In a very real sense, the research was child-focused and exploratory, and was intended to acknowledge that young people are experts in their own lives (Clark and Statham, 2005), can be active and invaluable research participants (Van Blerk and Kesby, 2013), and are capable of offering cogent and incisive views concerning critical aspects of their social and personal lives (Iwasaki et al., 2014). The approach adopted and the viewpoints taken concerning young people were considered to be important because they were underpinned by the need to listen to young people, situate young people at the heart of research, and could safeguard against the imposition or development of adult-centric understandings of participation (Jacquez et al., 2013; Kellett, 2003). Within the research, the role of the adult researcher was limited to being that of ‘least adult’ (Mandell, 1991): one that expressly required partnership working with young people, support for their active participation in the inquiry (in a variety of roles) and constant protection against adult domination of the process (Morrow, 2009).

The research documented in this article was a qualitative enquiry process, and one which sought to understand young people's views, opinions and lived experiences of participation. This stage of research was intended to offer a range of young people aged between 11-18 years an opportunity to consider, reflect, articulate and lead discussion in response to the following key questions:

- What is participation?
- Who is involved in your participation?
- Where does your participation occur?
- How does your participation occur?
- What effects flow from your participation?

Two groups of young people were, via gatekeepers within institutions, invited to participate in the research. The first group of young people were students at a local secondary school aged between 11-16 years. The second group were individuals who were working with local youth justice and resettlement and aftercare services aged between 11-18 years. These two groups represented an attempt to engage with individuals who could be considered 'mainstream', and 'less easily accessible'. The decision to seek the views of young people with different experiences was considered to be critical, since decision making, as the literature indicates, can manifest in often diverse manners, depending upon the environment, location and expectations that are placed upon young people. In order to understand participation in an holistic way, a broad range of participants needed to be involved in the research.

Within school, regular engagement with non-streamed classes occurred, ensuring that a mixture of young people participated in the research. This type of engagement mechanism was not simply convenient: rather, it facilitated the bypassing of the tendency for an 'academic achiever'-centric approach which sometimes characterises research with young people (Kirby, 2004; Matthews et al., 2000). Research took place 'on site' at the school, with teachers sitting in class as observers, but not active contributors.

For those young people who were 'less easily accessible', an individualised approach to participation in the research was adopted, to recognise and accommodate the vulnerable nature of many participants. Support workers accompanied the young people to research sessions, which took place in safe locations that were preferable for them such as rugby clubs or community centres. Rather than being tokenistic, these engagement opportunities were offered so that young people with often very different experiences of participation could take part in the research. School students in particular felt that this was important because:

'Like, I know one boy who looks after family members, his parents are in trouble with the law and he's getting a hard time from the family and his school. He probably makes bigger decisions than most of us. So, it's really important that people like have a say... You can't really talk about participation and then leave some people out.'

(Linda, Young Person)

The principal methods used during this aspect of the research were:

An initial stage of group discussions, lasting one hour each that were spaced across a school year, beginning in the autumn term. In these group sessions, there was a focus on young people generating, explaining and contextualising their views regarding the questions which were posed to them. As indicated above, for the less easily accessible participants, individualised engagement occurred, and sessions took place during the same timeframe within which school pupils participated in the research. These sessions varied in length, from approximately half an hour, to in excess of an hour, depending on the topic and willingness of the young participants. Within group discussions and during individual sessions, young people were encouraged to interpret the questions that they were offered: for example, ‘where does participation occur?’ and to ground their responses not in what an adult might want to hear, such as reflections on how their school promoted rights, but rather, their experiences. During sessions, individual young people were invited to write down their thoughts using sticky notes, offer vignettes (if they considered that these were relevant) to further illustrate these, and to engage in discussion so that a broad range of thoughts and experiences could be shared. Thus was generated a large corpus of data concerning what particular aspects of ‘participation’ meant: on a practical basis, the visible representations of the sticky notes, together with the vignettes were complemented and expanded by group discussion, during which further sticky notes and vignettes were offered. This element of the research was characterised by robust discussion and challenge from peers about why certain views were held.

Ecological modelling was then used to facilitate a process of relationship discernment and prioritisation. For example, when talking about ‘who’ was involved in their participation, young people defined layers of relationships flowing from those most closely associated with them, to those who were distant (Figure 1).

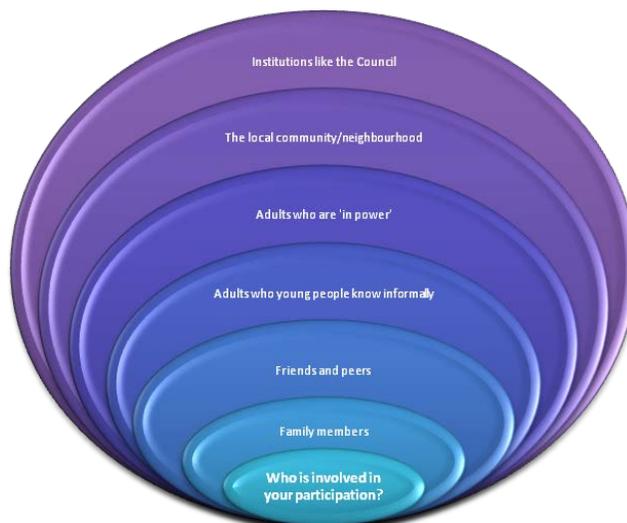


Figure 1 - Output from ecological modelling concerning ‘who is involved in your participation?’

Following group discussions that promoted the generation and sharing of ideas, further engagement with the young people took place. During this engagement,

feedback from different groups was offered to young participants. For example, students in Year 7 considered what those in Year 11 said. This part of the methodology was reflexive and resembled a 'House of Lords' approach to the consideration of the views of others (Palgi, 2007). Hence, the views of young people across the school years were shared with each other, and then with those who were 'less easily accessible' (and vice versa). Reflection occurred, with a process of scrutiny, refinement and the posing of questions taking place. Importantly, this process resulted in a spectrum of ideas, experiences and opinions being shared, debated and sublimated into clearer understandings of participation in its various dimensions.

Young people's participation in this stage of the research had powerful consequences. Not only was a significant corpus of data created, but, and crucially, the operation of the 'Lords' effect deepened the quality of data and the ways in which it was understood, contextualised and appreciated. For example, whilst it may have been anticipated that young people would err on the side of generating more policy-styled definitions of participation, they instead followed a path which was arguably (to adult policy makers at least) heterodox. Also, the in-building of reflexivity achieved something else, and this was that the often very different life experiences of young people were shared, enriching discussion. Further, the blending of views and on-going process of challenge and discussion led to the articulation of often consensual, informed opinion. A particularly noteworthy facet of the research process, directed as it was by the young people, was that less easily accessible participants, who often had had to make quite different decisions to most school pupils, were able to offer their views, inspiring further discussion and encouraging lateral thinking. As Richard commented, his experiences, whilst sometimes painful, could be used to positive effect:

'I mean, I could so make a difference, I really could. I'm not dumb. Yeh, I've gone through the system a bit, but that's made me a stronger person... I know what it's like not to be allowed to do things, even the simple stuff and it's hard. But it doesn't have to be that way...'

(Richard, Young Person)

In total, 99 young people, aged between 11-18 years old participated in the concepts and design development stage of the research. More detailed information regarding the sample group is contained in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Details of the young people who were engaged in the concepts and design development stage of the research

	Number of young people	Sub-Total
<i>School pupils</i>		
Year 7	25	25
Year 9	26	51
Year 10	23	74
Year 11	19	93
<i>'Less easily accessible' young people</i>		
Youth Inclusion Project attendees	2	95
Resettlement and Aftercare Programme participants	4	99
Total		99

Reflecting upon the role of young people within the research process, it is noteworthy that, given the 'least adult' role of the researcher, young participants were encouraged to organise and facilitate leadership of their discussions. During the research, a fluid approach to leadership swiftly became evident. For example, in group work, a democratic approach to electing leaders was adopted (without reference to the researcher); provision of space for those who had specific contributions to make (especially when they had poignant personal experiences to share) was consensually determined; and robust but respectful discussion took place, with young people, including those who might not usually have participated, making contributions: such was the passion that the research evoked in them. Beyond leadership, a variety of roles were performed by young people, amply evidenced when some of them sparked debate about what should be focused upon within exercises, and group work that concerned the ways that data could be presented, ranked and made sense of. A critical facet of this research was that, whilst an adult researcher developed a 'skeleton' framework for inquiry, this was fleshed out, contextualised and applied by young people in ways that were meaningful to them. Although the research process possessed a framework, an organic, young-person-led approach to engagement occurred: young people played a powerful and determinative role in the research. The contrast between the role of the young people and the adult researcher was not forgotten during discussion and, as Wyn accurately noted when new understandings of participation were being developed, the researcher as an adult did not:

'... know everything. You might work at the University, but you still need us: that's why you're here!'
(Wyn, Young Person)

2. How young people understand ‘participation’

It is impossible, within this article, to relate the full spectrum of views that were offered during the research. However, and for the purposes of this article, the clear views offered by young people concerning the following issues are presented:

- Talking about young people’s participation: Adults have their own views
- New understandings of young people’s participation

In the narrative below, key messages articulated by young people are offered. Such messages were discerned via a process of thematic analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002; Aronson, 1994). By analysing young people’s data through thematic analysis, their voices were heard, and a framework for understanding participation applied without the need for data to be restricted by a pre-existing lens (see Smith and Firth, 2011). This type of analysis was adopted since hearing young people’s voices was pivotal, and, since the research was exploratory, with young people not, for instance, evaluating existing materials such as participation-related policies, nor being asked to think about participation in a specific way (they made choices about particular emphases), such an approach allowed the things that they considered to be important to become visible.

2.1 Talking about young people’s participation: Adults have their own views

A critical facet of the research within which young people engaged was that it sought to provide a conduit through which they could articulate their understandings of ‘participation’. The range of data generated in response to the question of, ‘what is participation’ was significant and, in terms of adult-generated definitions, generally critical. Repeatedly, young people expressed the view that statements and practices which were allegedly participation-focused did not actually reflect the realities that they experienced. There was a perception by young people that, effectively, two understandings of participation currently existed: that promoted by adults; and that experienced by young people. This reality was explained by the young people; for instance, Ben said that:

‘Let’s be clear about this yeh? Is this about our participation or the participation that they [teachers and adults] talk about to us? C’mon, do you want us to be us when we answer or say what others have said? If it’s us, we might not say something you like...’
(Ben, Young Person)

Whilst Ben’s statement is laden with pessimism, his opinion reflected that of many other young people. However, beneath the pessimism of young people, a counter-view was voiced; one that reinforced the centrality and unique capacity that they had to create an authentic definition of participation. This counter view was tempered though by a resentment which coalesced around the standpoint that adults were subtly, through, for instance, ‘participation initiatives’ (Sloam, 2016; Coyne and

Gallagher, 2011; Lansdown, 2010) trying to embed specific understandings of what form young people's decision should take (this normally being structural), and the rationale that underpinned participation. Young people's tolerance of this adult-inspired agenda was evident, but, for many, adults' use of their power to impose this agenda (even subtly) was having an adverse effect on the fabric of participation itself:

'They don't see what they're doing, the adults... You can't have it both ways. You either want people to get involved... or you don't. The best we get given is that older people sort of look down on you and say, 'That's what you have got to do. Play the game.' We either have to play by their rules or we don't get any say. How is that right?... We're putting up with them for now...'
(Adrian, Young Person)

Enthusiastically arguing that their participation in decision making was an omnipresent aspect of everyday life, young people said that existing definitions of participation 'locked' them and the very practice of decision making into a limited space, whereas it was pragmatically much wider. When explaining what participation meant to them, young people suggested that explanations needed to move away from traditional foci and instead be more holistic:

'Do we discuss what we do in school, or can we talk about when we're at home, when we're with our friends around the village, or somewhere else? Or, do we talk about it all? There's so much we could say.'
(Alys, Young Person)

Demonstrating an ability to discern and explain the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of their decision making, young people made it clear that new understandings of participation were needed. Adamantly and repeatedly, young people research participants claimed that existing definitions of participation were sterile and devoid of interactional reflexivity. In the view of young people, statements and policies developed by adults did not capture nor reflect their experiences of participation.

Challenging the status quo, young people argued that three central problems exist concerning extant and largely adult-inspired understandings of participation:

- Adults control how participation is understood, and such understandings do not accurately reflect how it is actually lived and experienced by young people.
- Current understandings of participation tend to relate to the actions of individuals rather than acknowledging the more complex social fabric of peer groups, friendships, families, interest groups, political movements and communities.
- Appreciations of young people's participation in decision making concentrate largely on processual and formal engagement opportunities whilst, in reality, most decision making occurs in the mundane or, to use research participants' terminology, the 'boring' space of everyday life.

The problems identified by young people were unexpected, yet revelatory. What young people said concerning the concept of participation revealed the critical importance that they attached to their decision making and the necessity for appropriate understandings of participation to be created.

3. New understandings of young people's participation

Through research, young people articulated new and potentially deeply impactful understandings of their participation in decision making. Three new and complementary understandings were offered and these were, in the view of young people, crucial to appreciating how they participated in decision making and illustrated the importance that they attached to this aspect of their lived realities.

3.1. Actually making participation happen

Young people were very clear in articulating the view that, in order to understand their participation, adults had to understand how it 'actually' happens. At a first glance, the term 'actually' may seem a little odd. However, and to ensure that what is reported from the research remains authentic, this term is used because it flows directly from what young people said. Repeatedly, young people adopted a specific type of language when they described what they thought 'actually' happened when they participated, and what participation 'actually' meant to them. Rebecca usefully explains why this terminology matters:

'You wanted us to talk about participation. This is *actually* what it is. You asked us, and now we are telling you, from what we know, this is *actually* it, and this is *actually* what we understand about it.'
(Rebecca, Young Person)

The term 'actually' was ascribed specific meaning by the young people and, throughout the course of the research, they repeatedly explained that their use of 'actually' meant that they were relating a truth that they understood. 'Actually' was not a slang term, but a value-laden and powerful descriptive tool.

Two 'actuals' were identified by young people: intention, and then communication. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

3.1.1. You must actually intend to participate

Young people believed passionately that participation could not occur unless there was an actual intention to participate. Participation was not something that could happen by accident or proxy: instead, young people stated that they had to use their free will to participate. Thus, participation sprang directly from the young people themselves. The necessity of intention was deemed to be fundamental by young people. Interestingly, this 'actually' was understood in somewhat abstract terms when

the outcome of participation was considered, eschewing an adult notion that participation is a beneficial activity because it creates positive outcomes⁶. When asked whether intention and outcome were linked, young people suggested that they were not necessarily intertwined:

‘We all make decisions all the time. But, we don’t always know what’s going to happen when we do make them. Other people can get involved and they might change things, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. All we know is if we want to do it. We haven’t got crystal balls we can look into, so sometimes you’ve just got to get on with it.’
(Christine, Young Person)

Such an understanding might appear self-evident, yet a nuanced, underpinning argument buttressed this ‘actually’: intention was the lodestone of participation, and, whilst specific participative outcomes may be desired, the simultaneous reality that other people intend to make decisions too can commute or amend decision making outcomes. Whilst the final outcomes which flow from participative acts might not necessarily be absolute, nor even positive, the critical importance of intention is, since without it, decision making, according to young people, does not meaningfully take place.

Young people recognised that they could be forced to participate in something and that, sometimes a type of complicity occurred within the process of participation: yet, this had consequences. If, for instance, a person was coerced into making a decision, it was adamantly argued that the quality of that decision would be lower than if a purer application of intention had occurred. Developing this argument further, ‘best’ and ‘worst’ quality types of participation were defined, based upon the ability of a young person to act upon their intentions. These typologies were linked to the quality of participative outcomes. Therefore, if forced to make a decision, young people suggested that this would represent low quality participation and would, in their view, most likely result in a poor quality, if not negative, outcome. The possibility of intention being usurped by coercion was taken very seriously by the young people who claimed that adults engaged in types of activity which were hypocritical. Whilst adults might promote a rhetoric of participation, they often, in practice, instead sought to limit participation and themselves direct what young people should do. Michael’s frustration in this respect was clearly visible because he felt, at various stages in his life that he had:

‘... been robbed. It’s a bit rich them [adults] telling us to more for ourselves then robbing us of being able to do it. What’s that saying?... Yeh, that’s it, giving with one hand then taking away. But they can’t take away me wanting do something, that’s mine.’
(Michael, Young Person)

⁶ HM Government (2011) Positive for youth: A new approach to cross-Government policy for young people aged 13-19. London: Department for Education.

Reflecting upon the interplay between intention and coercion, young people felt that whilst it was rare for adults to directly compel them to participate, a more subtle approach was frequently adopted, which was a form of manipulation (Hart, 1992). The perceived willingness of adults to manipulate young people's use of their intention to participate generated strong reactions. At times indignantly, young people felt that interference by adults in their intention to participate was unjust and could impact not only on decisions which were made, but also on the ways that they understood and practiced decision making:

'This is where the adults get it so wrong. If you try to force someone to do something, that's not participation. Even when it's really subtle like in the class when a teacher sort of persuades you, that's not participation. You see? You don't make that decision, it's taken from you... To participate, you have got to want to do it. End of.'

(Kyle, Young Person)

There was an aspect of reflection within the process of a young person actually intending to participate. Young people asserted that once they had decided to make a decision they internally, and sometimes without overt thought, clarified what that decision would be. Explaining this further, young people said that once an intention to make a decision occurred, this naturally proceeded into thought about what this could entail in practice. Intricately, young people described how intention operated, and this involved the exposition of significant detail. Hence, when Daisy described how intention became a reality when she wanted to visit friends, she said that:

'You don't go just, 'oh I'm off there' do you? No, you run through how it could all work... Like me, I wanted to see my friends, they live about 5 minutes away on the bus. I decided I wanted to see them, do you see that? Then, I had to think of all the little things that I needed to do before I could see them. It's like you take that next step in your head.'

(Daisy, Young Person)

The views of the young people concerning this aspect of their participation were powerfully stated. Across age ranges and both the mainstream and less easily accessible groups of participants, the centrality of intention was reinforced, sometimes in very strong terms. The power of a young person to make a decision was something that excited passion and, without reference to seminal documents such as the UNCRC, the understanding of young people that they possessed, inviolably, the right to intend to participate, was repeated frequently during the research. Rather than reflecting more processual or mechanical approaches (which is arguably what much policy currently promotes), this more abstract understanding of what actually happens in decision making goes further and provides a new and interesting lens through which participation can be seen.

3.1.2. Participation must actually be communicated

The young people also identified a second, and equally important understanding of how participation ‘actually’ happened. This was that participation had to be communicated. Building upon their use of intention, young people said that they then had to actually communicate this. It was interesting that young people, whilst being very specific and precise concerning what intention meant, were more flexible in their understanding of communication, and identified a range of forms for this, for instance, e-communication or via physical means.

Communication was understood to be much more than a mere act of notification. Rather, for the young people, ‘communication’ had two components: engaging with others; and secondly, actually making their participation operational. Marissa provided a practical scenario which revealed the rationale of this understanding:

‘You know, I might want to go and hang out with my friends after school. So, I can make a decision, but just sitting there knowing I can make a decision’s nothing. I have to get up, tell my friends to meet me and that I’m going out, then tell my parents I’ve decided to go out and then go. So there’s lots of telling people going on. What’s the point in keeping it to myself? You’ve got to tell someone else otherwise the decision doesn’t work.’

(Marissa, Young Person)

The two components of communication which were associated with participation deserve further explanation. With regards the need to engage with others, young people stated that participation was not something that a person did on their own. Opposing notions of individualism, participants instead emphasised communities, networks of friends, families and wider society in a narrative that reflected social capital discourses which coalesce around, for instance, social networks, trust and attachment (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004; Morrow, 1999). Juxtaposing the centrality of intention with the need to engage with others, young people expanded and layered what happens post-use of intention. Since decision making normally involved other people, communication became a part of the internal process of participation, leading individuals to think about and conceive of what they were doing, as well as focusing their attention upon how their intention would manifest itself. This process was described by Rhys:

‘Yeh, I can decide some things, but you know, you’ve got to know what you’re doing too... So, when I want to go to town I’ve got to tell my Dad, then sort out who I’m going with, what bus and where we go. So, there’s a few things there I have to think about. It’s not as simple as just saying, ‘I’m off to town’. So when you tell someone, you’ve got to have thought about what comes next.’

(Rhys, Young Person)

Uniting the ways in which they understood participation to actually happen, young people dissected the process of participative interaction, revealing a systematic

cycle of participative ‘actuality’, i.e. that was what they understood actually happened. The cycle is presented in Figure 2 below.

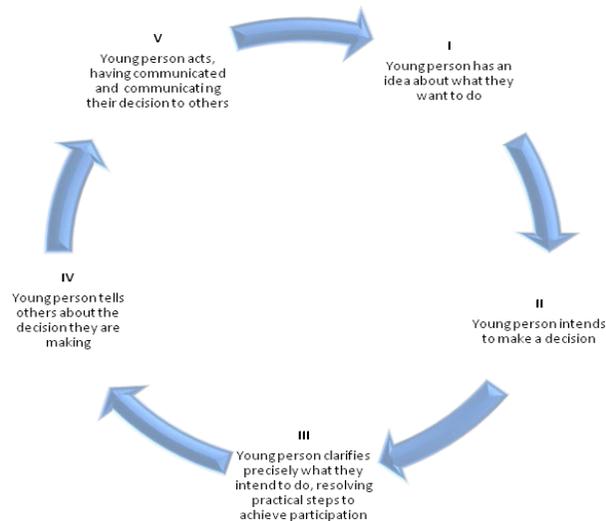


Figure 2 - The cycle of participative ‘actuality’

In Figure 2, points I and II constitute what happens when intention is used, points IV and V relate to communication, and point III is the bridge where both understandings meet and synergise. The cycle of participative actuality is important, because it makes visible, important aspects of young people’s understanding of participation, namely that it is grounded within and created by the individual and those around them. As stated by Matt:

‘Making a decision starts in you, then you go somewhere else with it... You can’t just pass something like a law and make people make decisions. Nah, it’s about you, what you think about, what you want to do, who’s gonna be there as well, who you tell: really, how you go about it...’
(Matt, Young Person)

The articulation of new understandings about young people’s participative intention and communication, and the ways that these enable decision making to actually happen is striking, and moves beyond traditional, policy-focused discourses. Such understandings offer a unique and (for adults) challenging way of understanding participation.

3.2. Participation is a relationship

Young people’s views regarding intention and communication, and the ways in which these enable participation to actually happen are concerned with how the decision-making process occurs. The young people identified through a second

understanding of participation: that it is a relationship. Echoes of this reality became evident when young people spoke about communication; i.e. communication had to occur with someone, and it was, in the view of those who participated in the research, the case that relationships were deemed to be fundamental to the working of participation (Spencer et al., 2000).

Rejecting the importance of individualised forms of decision making, young people said that relationships within participation had positive value:

‘Well, you don’t just go and say I’m doing this on my own, even if you don’t like it when you are in a group. People will tell you pretty soon what they think of that. You have to work with people to get a decision, you see, it’s a sort of shared participation.’

(Gethin, Young Person)

Rebuffing a neo-liberal type of emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, sharp criticism of dialogue that spoke of ‘me’ was voiced. Rather than accept the importance of the individual, young people instead promoted collegiality, families and neighbourhoods (Putnam, 2000). This narrative was, by young people themselves, acknowledged as contrary to contemporary debate, but yet, possibly transformational:

‘They [politicians] are on telly all the time, saying young people should do this and that... They make out that by doing stuff on your own, you can make a difference. That’s not really the truth though is it? You don’t really make a difference on your own. You can do some stuff, but when you do it with others, your mates, the people you know and even your families a lot more happens. Why don’t they talk about that?’

(Jacob, Young Person)

Offering a strong case for a more relational type of understanding of participation, young people hinted at a type of proportionality, which they suggested was inherent in participative activity (c.f. Article 12:1, UNCRC). What the young people stated was that, although individuals may possess the power to make decisions (they reflected, for example, on the power of intention which they possessed), there was a corresponding need for constraint. As Steven helpfully reflected:

‘There is no ‘I’ in team. We all live with other people and mix with others, so you know, whatever you decide to do can affect everyone else.’

(Steven, Young Person)

Constraint in this context was not seen as a ‘brake’ on participation, but a natural consequence of acknowledging that individualistic types of decision making could be hurtful, selfish or damaging to others. Whilst not articulating specific constraint mechanisms, young people mooted that there was a need for individuals to reflect on the consequences of their actions. The deeply reflective approach to participative constraint advocated by young people was seen to be in contrast to the actions of some adults, who, when discussing decision making, promoted a strong

concept of individualism. Such a view was rejected by young people and received, unsurprisingly, much criticism:

‘It’s like they say you should be selfish. It’s like the Pot Noodle advert, it’s all me, me, me. Well, they [adults] can say that, but we don’t think it. If you want to make things better, you have to get other people to work with you. It’s really hard if others are against you and you don’t get anywhere. No wonder they [adults] are never happy if they behave like they tell us to.’
(Aled, Young Person)

Expanding their explanation of the cycle of participative actuality, young people proposed that a balance between the participative potential of individuals and the need to work within a communal framework was necessary. Explicitly, it was recognised that participation was a constant and multi-layered phenomenon: at the same time, many individuals made decisions and there were consequences from each of these. This constant state of participative activity was like:

‘... a spider’s web, you knock one bit and all the bits know about it...’
(Menir, Young Person)

To promote relationships and to embed decision making within them, it was suggested that individual participation should be seen in the context of it being a type of co-equality, in which a form of subsidiarity exists. Individuals can make decisions, but these should be operationalised in partnership with others. Such a communal pooling of participative power could create beneficial impacts, notably a higher quality of decision making (where individuals inform and support each other), shared knowledge of participation techniques, and a broader use of participation to create positive outcomes. Elizabeth’s views here are helpful:

‘I’m a member of my youth club. You get to choose what sort of things you can do there. But sometimes, even though you’ve decided, you’ve got to talk to the worker and run through things. They don’t normally stop you, but you get little comments and things. They help you to understand things you hadn’t thought of...’
(Elizabeth, Young Person)

It is interesting to note that, although often critical of adults, the young people, as Elizabeth demonstrates, still believed that relationships with adults were, in participation terms, important. All relationships, between young people, their peers and adults were seen as critical, both for individuals and society as a whole (Morrow, 2005). Poignantly, even though the young people believed that adults sought to manipulate their participation, they nevertheless saw the power of participative relationships as being potential opportunities for the refining of understanding and the evolution of future decision-making partnerships. In that context, a strong, yet sometimes tension-filled conception of relationship was described: one that reinforced the need for adult recognition of young people’s power to participate, based on the

exercise of their intention, communication and through relationships, and not affected by the corrosive effects of coercion.

3.3. Participation is found primarily in the mundane

The third understanding offered by young people reflected their belief that their decision making is located primarily in the mundane. By ‘mundane’ is meant types of decision making that concern everyday life and existence. Mundane participation was differentiated by young people from formal and structural opportunities for engagement⁷. Through exploring different types of decision making and their locations, young people gave a low priority to formally constituted participative spaces such as school councils (Wyness, 2009). Such a conclusion was reached because, in their lived experiences, young people infrequently participated in formal decision making. Whereas it was tacitly acknowledged that formal types of participation could play a significant role in helping them to get their voices heard, young people felt that, to properly understand and situate their decision making, the primary focus of that understanding should be on the mundane.

The demarcation between formal (or what young people called ‘big’) and ‘boring’ (the term young people used to refer to mundane, but nonetheless important) decision making was considered to be important. Broadly, young people exhibited a cynical view of formal decision making. Lucy, for instance, said that:

‘I am part of a committee where I live which wants to make a difference for kids in the area. To be honest, it’s interesting, but I don’t see it as changing much for anyone... perhaps those of us in the group.’
(Lucy, Young Person)

Reflecting upon the emphasis by adults on formal types of decision making, young people stated that most of their decision making was ‘boring’, yet often profound (Chawla and Heft, 2002). Rejecting the perceived orthodoxy that participation needed to be linked to formal structures, young people believed that the power and practice of participation resided mainly in what could be described as unimportant decisions, such as how young people should spend their time at home:

‘I choose to do loads of stuff all the time and to me, that’s ‘participating’. When I get home from school, I can go on my computer or just lie on the bed or, I don’t know, ring my mates. Does anyone else really care? Doubt it! But I do...’
(Stephen, Young Person)

Rejecting an overt emphasis on formal decision making by adults, young people highlighted the discordance between adult-promoted participative rhetoric which

⁷ National Assembly for Wales (2016) Llywydd commits to establishing a Youth Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, 19th October 2016. Available at: <http://www.assembly.wales/en/newhome/pages/newsitem.aspx?itemid=1632> (accessed 19th October 2016)

suggested that structural decision making was something that should be encouraged. In fact, it was argued that this type of promotion obfuscated the true meaning of participation and created instead a much more limited discourse concerning participation (Hart, 2013). This, in young people's views, skewed discourse and diminished the reality of an omni-present state of decision making by young people. It was suggested that adult-favoured formal approaches to participation also led to the perpetuation of a misrepresentation; one that, ironically, could exclude rather than embrace and develop, young people. Conversely, mundane decision making was seen as an instrument that reinforced participative power and opportunity and which actually enhanced young people's lives. Commenting on his own life, Osian, when asked about his own engagement in decision making said that it was largely:

'... boring. Yeh, that's it, most of it is just boring when you think about it. You know, I get up and I decide to have a shower, then I have breakfast, and I get ready for school. That's me making decisions all the time, but really, it's boring... just what we do all the time.'

(Osian, Young Person)

Unequivocally, preserving a focus upon mundane or 'boring' decision making was the young people's priority and was deemed to be central to understanding their participation. It was noted too that in reality, mundane decision making had transformational impacts upon young people's lives and often enabled them to make a difference. For example, Patrice said that:

'I look a lot after my granddad. He's really ill and lives with us. So, as well as making decisions about me, I help him too. So, I have to decide, when he's bad and my parents aren't about when he needs some things, when I need to call my parents or someone else for help, or just when me and him should just sit and have something to drink. I have to make lots of decisions. Some of the decisions aren't really big and I think that most people wouldn't think they are important: I doubt many adults count that as important. But, they are important to him and me. That's what counts.'

(Patrice, Young Person)

Patrice's example of mundane participation makes a critical point. Whereas much decision making may be mundane, this does not mean that it does not matter. Instead, and perhaps radically, the young people suggested that mundane decision making matters a great deal, but since adults have rationalised understandings of participation, this essential and life-changing aspect of decision making is ignored.

Interestingly, young people believed that the emphasis, in policy and within structures, on formal, or 'big' decision making, was intentional, and negative. Through formal, adult-created and controlled structures, young people's participation could be regulated and conformed to adult expectations. Partly, it was suggested, this happened since adults did not know how to respond to young people's decision making because they were scared of its effects:

‘They [adults] are like, ‘Come on, get involved’. When you do, it’s not normally something you can do much about. They [adults] plan everything and then you have to do as you’re told. That’s not getting involved, that’s just doing as you’re told. They [adults] just go up the wall when you actually do something you feel you should, or even just want to... it’s almost like they are afraid and don’t trust you...’

(Pedr, Young Person)

However, although cynicism was expressed, young people suggested that if adults listened to young people’s views about participation, they would, rather than wishing to regulate engagement in decision making, celebrate what happened in relation to mundane matters. There was space for formal decision making, but this should build upon the much more frequent and important reality of mundane participation. Certainly, the skills, practice and experiences created through involvement in mundane decision making itself could give birth to potential that, instead of being ignored, might actually enhance structural forms of participation.

4. Reflections and conclusion

Young people’s understandings of participation sit at the heart of this article. As indicated above, there is an almost universal acceptance by governments, NGOs and activists at supranational, national and local levels that young people’s participation is important and should be promoted. However, what the research described in this article demonstrates is that, for all of the fine rhetoric, young people consider adult-inspired understandings of participation to be deficient. The key reasons for this conclusion are that:

Adult-devised understandings were, in the view of young people, made by adults and for adults, not young people. The reasons for this appear various, but include the convenience of compliance with an adult-driven participation agenda, the retention of power, and a misunderstanding of what young people’s participation means and can achieve.

Participation is not something that can be constrained or fully explained within policy or legislation. The young people eloquently spoke of the personal and transformative power of participation and the reality that it springs directly from them, through their use of intention and communication, potentially enhancing their relationships and everyday lives. Certainly in terms of public policy, there is little recognition of this. Such power matters, and could have profound impacts upon young people’s development, the formation of future civic society and the direct participation of young people in differing types of participation initiatives.

Clearly, the research suggests that in order for young people’s participation to be meaningfully appreciated and comprehended by adults, new understandings of this topical concept are required and this article forms a solid foundation for future examination of this reality. Importantly, the new understandings of participation offered by young people sit very uneasily with more traditional and contemporary policy and ‘participative’ practice. Despite this, what the research undertaken in partnership with the young people found was that a more sophisticated understanding

of participation exists: that which flows from individuals to the relationships that they have, and is exercised frequently in everyday life and circumstances. These understandings offer governments at global, European, British and local levels a pathway for developing new and meaningful responses to young people's participation. In Wales certainly, with the impending re-launch of a national young people's assembly, the type of insight offered by young people will play a critical role in informing future government policy.

Whilst it is emphasised that this article does not seek to denigrate or undermine efforts by adults to promote young people's participation, its tentacles are far reaching, offering adults, especially decision makers, better understandings which can transform opinion and practice. Furthermore, the findings cannot just inform, but radically change debate concerning young people's participation. In particular, the implications of the findings offer an invaluable opportunity for governments, NGOs and pan-national partnerships to respond directly to what young people have said, and, drawing upon their views, to transform the very essence of contemporary debate concerning participation as a global priority, thereby creating a new and vibrant vision of young people's decision making. This vision, which would necessarily be grounded in partnership, could constructively be used to bring about the revision, re-alignment and enhancement of existing approaches to what is a popular and often-promoted facet of young people's lives.

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