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Youth participation: Adulthood, human rights and professional youth work

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Abstract

This article argues that the right of young people to participate in decisions being made about them forms the basis for professional youth work practice. The authors consider the nature of ‘participation’ and its relation to human rights, and introduces the concept of ‘adulthood’ and the challenges for youth workers combatting ‘adulthood’ beliefs and practices in the work of participation. The paper considers the benefits and limitations of youth participation models, and addresses the relationship between rights-based participation practice, and critical pedagogy (dialogical) in youth work.

KEYWORDS

adulthood, human rights, participation models, youth participation, youth work

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the relationship between youth participation, the rights of ‘young people’ and youth work. Acknowledging a diversity of definitions, for the purposes of this article, young people are defined as those who are under the age of enfranchisement and/or majority relative to the legislative requirements of the state or jurisdiction in which they reside, and conforming to the Article 1 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNCRC]. The right of young people to participate in decisions being made about them is enshrined in the *UNCRC*. The understanding and application of this right specifically and the *UNCRC* more generally, it

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is argued, clarifies and enhances the practice of professional youth work, providing the basis for decision making on policy, methods, and practice. This article contends that the way participation is conceptualised is variously ideological, cultural, and legal, and its translation into action is mediated through a particular context. The *UNCRC* framework provides a means to structure discussions about youth policy and practice across contexts and provides a basis for dialogue across difference that facilitates learning without privileging a singular context.

BACKGROUND

Young people under the age of enfranchisement (voting age) are politically disenfranchised, treated unequally and often excluded from political and civic decision-making processes and governance structures by virtue of their age (e.g. under 18 years in Australia), irrespective of their cultural background. Some young people are further marginalised by the specific social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which they live. Enfranchisement of young people, by supporting and facilitating their involvement in political and social decision-making, is a practice that youth workers use to promote human rights. For this reason, human rights and youth participation are integral to youth work values, methods, and practices. In youth policy, several governments and non-government youth agencies in the UK (Perry, 2019), New Zealand (Thabrew et al., 2018) and Australia (Blanchard & Fava, 2017) have embraced the role and place of youth participation in the delivery of funded programs and services for young people. Practices 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 sometimes mandated in funding agreements. As governments incorporate such collaborative concepts into program-funding criteria and service agreements, the paper argues that an understanding of ‘participation’, its basis in human rights and an appreciation of the practical application of participation models and concepts are timely, important, and necessary to youth work values and definitions of professional youth work. This recent interest in some aspects of youth participation requires a reflective, nuanced understanding of the theory and practice of youth participation and associated concepts (Farthing, 2010, 2012; Lansdown, 2010), the potential barriers to participation posed by ‘adulthood’, and the relationship between youth participation and youth work practice.

PROFESSIONAL YOUTH WORK AND PARTICIPATION

The inclusion of young people in decisions that affect them has long been acknowledged as important to professional youth work practice (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Corney, 2014; Harrison & Wise, 2005; Jeffs & Smith, 1987; Sapin, 2013; Wood & Hine, 2009). Ord (2007) states that understanding what is meant by participation is essential to good youth and community work practice. Many definitions of youth work present a process that is relational, collaborative, and—in the context of voluntary participation—negotiated by young people (Cooper, 2018; Davies, 2021; Jeffs & Smith, 2005). These aspects of the youth work process necessitate an engaged understanding of young people’s participation and the role of the youth worker.

The conceptualisation of participation is not, however, well developed in youth work (Smith, 1983; Williamson, 2005), and it is frequently contested (Farthing, 2010, 2012). In youth and community work, ‘participation’ has been more commonly understood to mean engagement (in its varying forms) with, and in, the processes that seek to influence decisions and determine

outcomes (Pope, 2011). The understanding of participation is both ideological and cultural, and its translation into action is mediated through a particular context (Reddy & Ratna, 2002). Others (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Sapin, 2013) maintain that enabling the participation of young people in decisions that affect them is a key principle underpinning the practice of professional youth and community work.

Critical dialogue is a common practice within British influenced youth and community work and this practice supports relational and participatory approaches to practice. Critical dialogue, according to Freire (1972), is the proposing of provocative questions and reflecting on them critically, enabling the responses to challenge and inform future action. The influence of foundational youth work texts (for example, Jeffs & Smith, 1987, 2005; Smith, 1988) has shaped much of the underpinning values of British-influenced youth work practice, in particular the concept of youth work as an educational practice (non-formal and informal) and its pedagogy as critical, progressive and emancipatory (Beck & Purcell, 2010; Corney, 2004, 2006, 2019; Freire, 1972; Mayo, 1999). Maunders (1984, 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) and Beck and Purcell (2010). This perspective conceives the youth worker acting as an ‘organic intellectual’ (Gramsci, 1971; see also Chouhan, 2009; Corney, 2006, 2014; Singh & Cowden, 2009; Smith, 1988).

This emancipatory, educational concept of youth work draws directly on the critical pedagogy of Freire (1972) and his use of dialogue. This involves the posing of provocative questions and reflecting on them critically, enabling the answers to challenge and inform future action. Youth work literature agrees on the importance of dialogical conversations as a key part of youth work practice and youth participation and empowerment processes with young people (Beck & Purcell, 2010; Coburn, 2010; Cooper, 1999, 2011; Cooper & White, 1994; Corney, 2004, 2006, 2019). 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 environments in which they live (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) describes as consciousness raising.

In applying these ideas to the issue of youth workers supporting participation, the purpose of the work has evolved from a ‘service-user’ approach, where the youth worker needs to listen to young people to improve services offered to them, to facilitating (and resourcing) processes where young people themselves take action to defend rights, tackle injustice and inspire social change.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND YOUTH WORK— CHALLENGING ‘adulthood’

In everyday life, participation can be described simply as being “actively involved in something” (Kellett, 2009, p. 43). UNICEF describes the participation of young people as a process where “adolescent girls and boys (individually and/or collectively) form and express their views and influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly” (Lansdown, 2018, p. 3). This ‘definition’ is minimalistic and provides neither conceptual sufficiency nor practice guidance. For the purposes of this discussion, the authors seek to move beyond such definitions, to examine ‘adulthood’ as an impediment to young people participating, reinforcing a rights-based perspective

and participation models as helpful frames, and foregrounding critical dialogue (Freire, 1972) as foundational to participatory youth work practice.

Adulthood has been defined as:

A belief system based on the idea that the adult human being is in some sense superior to the child [or young person] or of greater worth, and thus the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth. The term also describes social structures, practices and behaviours based on these beliefs. These beliefs find support in a persistent view of the child as an object, and not a human rights holder (Shier, 2012, p. 9).

Drawing parallels with racism and sexism, adulthood can thus be understood as an orientation that is based in a web of cultural norms that continually and ubiquitously affirms and reinforces the superior position of the adult relative to the young person, even in the face of contrary evidence. This is achieved through processes of 'othering' that are well-described in the sociological literature (Bessant, 2020), beginning, for example, with the work of Garfinkel (1956) and Goffman and Goffman (1986). The affirmation of superiority is not based upon the actual capacities or talents of individuals and is not based upon a neutral assessment of the attributes of each group. Instead, both young people and adults are homogenised and stereotyped. The idealised characteristics of 'adults' provide the yardstick by which young people are judged and a set of dividing practices are derived. These ascribed characteristics are then reinforced socially and through pseudo-scientific generalised explanations (Foucault, 1977).

Fletcher (2015) warns of adulthood being an ingrained anti-youth assumption that young people cannot do things because of their age. In contemporary society, the supposed impulsiveness of young people (Bari & Robbins, 2013) compared with adults is one such divide. Another supposed characteristic is the universal naivety, gullibility and vulnerability of young people compared with adults. In adulthood, adults are characterised as sensible, not impulsive, and capable of making good decisions about their lives. Young people, in contrast, are characterised as impulsive, incapable of making sensible decisions about their lives and easily led astray. Any reported instance of bad decisions by a young person is taken as evidence to reinforce the deficient characterisation of young people, generally. As such, the adultist divide can be characterised as being based in cultural belief rather than a factual observation based upon empirical evidence.

From this perspective, youth participation may be viewed as an on-going struggle against adulthood. Since most youth workers are adults, this begs a question about what steps adult youth workers ought to take to avoid adulthood when they relate to young people. If they fail, youth workers become another adult against whom young people must struggle.

For youth workers to be effective in tackling adulthood, they must learn to identify and then reject the practices of adulthood, as described above, in their interpersonal interactions and in the structure of their work. This requires scepticism about discourses that categorise and homogenise young people to position them as deficient compared with adults (Fletcher, 2015). Rejection of adulthood also requires youth workers to break down cultural practices that support adulthood; recognising that many young people have been socialised to believe the deficient characterisation and, may adjust their actions to conform, and place social pressure on their peers to do likewise.

A rejection of adulthood also requires scepticism about the claimed superior homogenised abilities and capacities of adults (Cooper, 2009). This means that youth workers need a realistic self-awareness of their own strengths and limitations, as opposed to those attributed to them—a process that requires reflective practice (Freire, 1972) and honesty. Consequences of these requirements are, firstly, promoting young people's participation as a means to overcome adulthood;

and secondly, partnering with young people to optimise young people's participation. Rather than 'getting out of the way', as has sometimes been suggested, youth workers have an important role in sharing knowledge and skills with, and alongside, young people's skills and knowledge, in ways that will maximise the effectiveness of their participation. Youth workers become allies of young people. Youth workers have a consciousness-raising role with young people (Freire, 1972), to support them to gain the self-awareness necessary to challenge the idealised, and false, generic representations of both adults and young people.

PARTICIPATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The United Nations *Declaration on Human Rights* (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) and the *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) inform the principle of participation within (and indeed beyond) youth work practice. The principle is strengthened by ratification of the *UNCRC* and enabling legislation, and/or regulatory measures in the international contexts where professional youth work takes place (Lansdown, 2010).

In most countries young people under the age of enfranchisement are 'disenfranchised'; they have limited opportunities to engage with the political process and governance structures of their country, state or province by virtue of their age and thus are often excluded from political and civic decision-making (Corney, 2014; Farson, 1974; Sapin, 2013; Seebach, 2008). Some young people are further marginalised from mainstream society by the social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which they live (Brown, 2010; Cooper & Brooker, 2020; Joseph et al., 2002).

Choice of participation processes vary according to purpose and ideology. Outcome-led funding criteria for youth services for example mean that participation processes will focus upon promoting and improving funder-desired outcomes, irrespective of whether young people are interested in participating in this endeavour. A lack of understanding of the relevance of the *UNCRC* can be an inhibitor and barrier to the facilitation of young people's participation by youth workers, which means that youth worker education, training and professional development are important vehicles for enabling and ensuring an understanding and application of youth participation processes. As Lansdown (2010, p. 12) has said:

If advocacy to promote [young people's 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 [UN] Convention and the obligations they impose (Lansdown, 2010, p. 12).

The Human Rights of young people to participate and the ramifications of this right for youth work practice, particularly through Article 12 of the *UNCRC*, are clear. Beyond rights, the literature confirms that the participation of young people in decision-making is useful in the development and evaluation of policy, programs and services, improving the quality and informing the effectiveness of service delivery and the meeting of young people's needs (Wood, 2015). Participation is also useful for the practice of active citizenship and democracy, and youth work programs have often been described as "laboratories for democracy" (Williamson & Basarab, 2019).

Rights are also important in relation to the words used by youth workers to describe the young people with whom they work, because it is words that shape and inform participation practice. As such, the use of the term 'client' to describe a young person is problematic as it is linked to neoliberal and managerial discourses that disempower young people and prioritise remedial and

deficit-based forms of youth work, individualising and pathologising young people, restricting their participation. Ife (2012, pp. 254–257) asserts that the words we use “frequently have human rights implications” and points out that the term ‘client’ is now so embedded in professional social work discourses that the hierarchical implications and power imbalances assumed in its use (including the economic implications) incapacitate - rather than empower - individuals; removing rather than realising their rights. A rights-based approach, by contrast, identifies young people foremost as right-holders and citizens.

Not all young people, however, are enthusiastic about opportunities to participate. One implicit question is why it sometimes appears as if young people do not want to participate when adults offer opportunities. One answer is that sometimes the opportunities that adults offer are not perceived as the types of ‘participation opportunities’ that appeal to a particular group of young people. This may be because they do not feel comfortable or because they do value the kind of ‘consultation’ that has been offered. However, if young people are offered different participation opportunities that they do feel comfortable with, the same group of young people may 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 (Davies, 2021). This means understanding how young people perceive the ‘participation opportunity’ they have been offered; whether they see the offer as meeting their needs, and/or whether they feel culturally safe in that environment.

PARTICIPATION MODELS (AND THEIR CRITICS)

Since the publication of Hart’s ladder of participation (Hart, 1992), new models have proliferated, all claiming to assist in understanding participation in one way or another. In 2012, Karsten published what he called “A chase through the maze” of participation models, where he described 36 different models (Karsten, 2012). More recently Hussey (2020) has presented a compilation of 60 models, and Abbott (2020, p. 1) has provided introductions to 30 of “the more influential and widely used... models created over the past several decades”. While these models cover public participation in general, most are relevant in some degree to working with young people.

In considering this wealth of possibilities, the words of statistician George Box are apt, “All models are wrong, but some of them are useful” (Box, 1979 p. 201). None of the large number of models available to us can claim to fully represent the complexity and diversity of the realities that they may be applied in. If some have risen to greater prominence over the years (evidenced by citation indices), it is not necessarily because they are more correct than others in describing reality, but rather because scholars, policy-makers or practitioners have found them to be useful tools or because they have aligned with their way of seeing the world. With that in mind, the article will now discuss some of the models that may be useful in youth work practice.

Hart’s (1992) ladder is arguably best known in the field. Hart fashioned his model upon Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), which was the conceptual starting point for many of the models that followed. Hart’s model has eight rungs: (1) Manipulation; (2) Decoration; (3) Tokenism; (4) Young people assigned, but informed; (5) Young people consulted and informed; (6) Adult-led, with decisions shared; (7) Youth-led and directed; (8) Youth-led, shared decisions with adults. Hart highlighted two issues that still concern practitioners today. First, he made ‘Shared decisions with adults’ the top rung of the ladder, situated above ‘Youth-led and directed’. Some argued that it was more empowering for young people to take their own decisions, but Hart defended his position, contending that the capacity to work together, sharing

decision-making power with adults, was a way for young people to have influence beyond their immediate circle and this extended influence builds democracy (Hart, 2008). This contention has parallels in social capital theory where Pope (2011) argues that activities that promote ‘bridging capital’ outside a person’s habitual group have more capacity to develop skills and extend influence than activities that promote ‘bonding capital’, which only strengthen within-group ties.

Secondly, following Arnstein (1969), the bottom three rungs of Hart’s ladder represent three types of non-participation (or false participation); namely ‘manipulation’, ‘decoration’, and ‘tokenism’. Thus, the ladder model draws attention to various ways in which young people are co-opted into subordinate positions to provide legitimacy to decisions that others have made. Despite the subsequent decades of practice and scholarship, these three types of false participation have persisted in some forms of youth work practice.

Hart’s ladder has become popular because it is easy to understand and to apply. These features means that it is still regularly used to support the planning and evaluation of youth participation projects. However, there have been several criticisms of this model including that it tends to homogenise youth and adults ignoring power differences within groups of young people (and within groups of adults), and that unlike Arnstein’s model, Hart’s model is not explicitly linked to political concepts of citizenship and democracy (Cooper, 2009).

Shier’s (2001) ‘Pathways to Participation’ model built on Hart’s ladder, adding an additional dimension to assist adults in reflecting on how their attitudes and positioning play a part in enabling (or limiting) the empowerment and participation of young people. Shier suggests that, cutting across his five levels of participation are three distinct “stages of commitment” on the part of adults, which he calls “Openings, Opportunities and Obligations” (2001, p. 107).

- An opening occurs when one is ready and willing to work at a particular level;
- An opportunity occurs when the conditions are met that will allow this to happen;
- An obligation is created when it becomes the stated policy of an organisation or setting.

One of the common criticisms of both Hart’s ladder and Shier’s pathways is that they are too linear, with sequential and hierarchical levels that follow and build on one another (Cooper, 2009). 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. This, he says, was never his intention.

After Shier published the pathways model, he collaborated with young workers in Nicaragua to develop a very different model. This new model takes a more organic and evolutionary approach, called The Participation Tree, where various factors in families, communities and local organisations combine to lead young people to the position where they can actively assert the right to participate in a range of settings and contexts (Shier, 2010).

Another model that finds a way to avoid discussion of levels of participation is that proposed by Lundy (2007) who identifies four critical elements that are essential for young people’s participation in decision-making to be effective and compliant with their rights:

- SPACE: Children and young people must be guaranteed a safe space, where they can feel free to discuss, share, debate, decide what they want to say and how to say it, and plan their actions.
- VOICE: Children and young people must be provided with the support they need to be able to speak out and express their views. They must have access to the right media to ensure their voice is heard.

- AUDIENCE: Those responsible for the decisions that affect children and young people's lives, concerns and opportunities must be willing and available to hear what they have to say.
- INFLUENCE: Decision-makers must be willing to accept their obligation to give due weight to children and young people's views, and take them into account in decisions affecting their lives.

Alongside Hart and Shier, this model has resonated with practitioners and policy-makers in many settings around the world. For example, in 2015 it was embraced by the government of the Republic of Ireland as part of the national strategy for children and young people's participation (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). This model assists youth workers who are trying to understand a situation of participation, by encouraging them to ask: what is the space, and whose space is it? How is voice produced and expressed within the space? Who is listening? What is the influence, and how does it come about? (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).

Lansdown's (2018, p. 10–11) model is similarly useful since, unlike those models that seek to capture the nuances and complexities of participation, it reduces everything to three basic categories, summarised here as:

- Consultation: Adults ask young people for their views, but the young people are not involved beyond this.
- Collaboration: Adults and young people work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.
- Youth Action (youth-led participation): Activities are initiated, organised or run by young people themselves (adults may provide support, though this is by no means a necessity).

This model lends itself to practical uses, such as prompting discussions about participation with young people to which they can add further elements. It can also be adapted to create context-specific, planning and evaluation tools. Examples include tools developed for evaluating young people's participation in development projects (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014), and another for planning and evaluating young people's involvement in research (Shier, 2019).

A significant aspect of all the models of youth participation is the roles adults play in the process, and the way they address power relations between adults and young people. Most earlier models espoused, or implied, a traditional view of power as something held by adults and wielded by them to control young people (Cooper, 2009). Both Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) talk of power as being shared by adults with young people, or given by adults to young people. Though Arnstein's original ladder had as its top rung 'Citizen control', the underlying concept is that power is something held by the powerful and can be either given, or taken, by others. In recent years Shier et al. (2014) held that this view of power was mistaken since:

Even if adults decide to 'share' some of their power with young people, in itself this is not real empowerment, because power given in this way can just as easily be taken away if the person concerned is not able to take control of this power in their own right (Shier et al., 2014, p. 11-12).

More recent models, by contrast, can be thought of as embodying a different Foucauldian type of power analysis (Gaventa, 2003). Instead of seeing power as a monolithic force that is wielded in top-down hierarchies, it can be conceived as something much more fluid that is enacted within networks of people through their everyday actions. Although, on one hand, this points to the hegemonic

nature of power within systems such as education and the public service through dispersed control of knowledge and discourse, on the other, it also allows for multiple forms of resistance: individual and collective, organised and spontaneous (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Holdsworth, 2020).

Though this section has focused on participation models conceived, developed and implemented almost exclusively by adults, it is important to acknowledge that young people are ‘participating’ all the time in different ways and at different levels, with or without support from adults, and usually without reference to any model of participation (Reddy & Ratna, 2002; Vromen & Collin, 2010). Given this reality, any model, however well-intentioned, can become embedded in an adult-controlled service or system and there unwittingly be used to channel or restrict young people’s organic participation (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002; Malone & Hartung, 2010). Therefore, when youth workers seek out those models they find useful, it must be understood that this means ‘useful’ from the young people’s perspective: including them in decision-making to enhance their experiences and promote their interests, as well as supporting them in implementing their projects and achieving their goals. It does not mean adults exploiting the usefulness of the model to label, constrain, direct, measure, or package the multiplicity, and complexity of youth participation. The role of adults in these participation processes and the limits or constraints on adult power are thus contested, but remain important for the success or otherwise of youth participation models, as does the capacity of young people to take part in them.

SITUATING PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH WORK

The literature suggests 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 (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Sapin, 2013), in order to be sensitive to the diversity of young people. It is important to be reminded of the ‘voluntary association’ principle in youth work (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) and that as soon as young people are mandated or obliged to participate, this undermines the point of participation as well as a key principle of youth work. Farthing (2010, 2012) has written about this paradox that, if participation is made a compulsory process and young people don’t have the choice of opting out, it functions, not as route to empowerment, but as a form of social control.

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, and 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 the benefits for *all* young people are, what the direct outcomes or consequences will be for those who participate in the decisions and who will be affected by them—be these moral, ethical, legal, political or developmental impacts.

From a critical dialogical perspective, youth workers must be open to dialogue with young people who hold different views, which may be opposed to their own. Working with diverse voices and elevating those voices that are often silent, is important and crucial to good participation. This may entail difficult encounters where youth workers disagree with the perspectives

or opinions of young people. The welcoming of ‘convenient voices’ only and the manipulation of participation processes and/or outcomes is always a danger. How to hear (and seek constructive engagement with) inconvenient voices remains contested in youth participation processes. This has implications for how participation models are used in youth work, whether particular approaches to participation exclude some young people who feel uncomfortable with the form of participation and which voices these practices enhance or exclude.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to grapple with how young people’s participation should relate to professional youth work practice. We contend that the *right* to participate does not guarantee participation; it needs to be affirmed and enabled and, in some cases, asserted and defended.

The *UNCRC* can be used to justify the use of participatory methods within youth work and to promote participatory practices with policy makers. The models of participation examined may provide useful tools for youth workers. However, the authors contend that making participatory practice a reality within professional youth work requires more than simply choosing a model. To enable genuine participation by young people who are most excluded, will require youth workers to address adultism and the unhelpful cultural stereotypes of young people. This means working with young people and becoming their allies. This also means challenging other adults who generalise unhelpfully about what young people cannot do. Youth work informal learning and consciousness-raising methods can be used to help young people realistically identify and develop their strengths, and rights-based approaches can enable young people to be viewed as human beings who have contributions to make. This kind of youth work requires a sufficiently educated work force that can apply these methods appropriately. Such an approach is a prerequisite to effective youth participation and will be ultimately beneficial to all.

The right to participate is not just for young people, but for all people. Youth workers’ goals include involving young people in decision-making processes to support their right to participate (or not), to promote their personal development, to enhance civic and community engagement, and to support political education essential for democratic societies. As a by-product, it can be expected that young people’s participation will enhance the quality and effectiveness of youth policies, programs and services, and strengthen democracy.

The article has argued that the values that underpin the participation of young people are both an end with intrinsic value in itself, and a means to enable social and political development—both individual and collective. It is also 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—and that is also their right.

Youth workers must keep asking about which young people are enabled to participate and who is excluded—and challenge divisive, manipulative and exclusionary practices. The pervasive effects of deeply embedded beliefs and practices of adultism, discussed above, mean youth workers must remain ever vigilant in order to recognise these effects and show them up for what they are; so that both the harmful effects, and the prejudices that underlie them, can be tackled and weeded out.

While the article maintains that young people’s active participation is both a human right and a source of multiple benefits (both for young people themselves and for the communities they live in), it acknowledges that there is no one right way of achieving this. Rather there should be different and multiple pathways to and for participation, providing a mosaic of options that cater

to the diversity of young people and communities. It has argued that participation needs to go beyond merely consultation, and has outlined the inherent tension between the principled aspiration of participation and the practical realities of delivering it; acknowledging the constraints that can be imposed by over-reliance on ‘cookie-cutter’ prescriptions such as ladders and other aspirational models of participation.

The ever-changing jargon and terms associated with youth participation have been noted and a warning sounded about the dangers of the corrupting power of language. In particular, there are evolving meanings of associated words and practices by those who may not share the same view of participation or what is in the ‘*best interests*’ of young people. An example was provided of the word ‘client’ and its link to remedial and deficit-based forms of youth work. Another is the tendency to label young people as ‘disengaged’ and needing to be ‘re-engaged’ or become ‘more engaged’. There is therefore further analytical work to be done on the relationship of young people’s rights to the practice of youth work.

In closing, while many governments champion various forms of youth participation there is little evidence in Australia of a move to lower the age of enfranchisement or to provide a legislative voice for those below this age, despite campaigns from youth peak bodies. However, there are powerful movements emerging in many parts of the world such as Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales in the United Kingdom, in Europe in countries such as Germany, Austria, Malta, the Republic of Ireland and Greece, and in the Americas, in Nicaragua, Argentina, Ecuador, Brazil and Cuba. All these countries have reduced the age of enfranchisement (voting age) below 18 years for various levels of government (e.g. municipal or national elections and/or referenda).

While the current practices of youth participation may not be perfect, it is hoped that this analysis will help to refine commitment to it and to temper the warm words with some grounded realities. It is the authors hope that this contributes to a continued debate about perceptions and policies relating to the participation of young people and the professional practice of youth and community work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to report.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Not applicable.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Not applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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