



ReThink Urban Spaces

What is Youth Participation?

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Abstract

Youth participation strengthens personal and social development, provides expertise for children and youth programs and services, and promotes a more democratic society, but questions arise about its most fundamental phenomena. Lacking agreement on its basic content, however, youth participation as a field of practice and subject of study will be limited. This paper examines what we know about youth participation, general propositions which are substantiated by research or practice, and unanswered questions or unresolved issues which remain for future work. It draws upon various academic disciplines and professional fields, in order to contribute to knowledge development and advance the field.

1. Introduction

What do we know about youth participation? What are some general propositions which are substantiated by research or practice? What are some unanswered questions or unresolved issues which remain for future work?

Youth participation is important, because when young people participate, it draws upon their expertise, enables them to exercise their rights as citizens, and contributes to a more democratic society. It also promotes their personal development, and provides them with substantive knowledge and practical skills.

Youth participation is important, but questions arise about its most fundamental phenomena. What is participation, who are the participants, what do they do, and with what outcomes? When we say that someone participates, is it about "community service," or "social action," or "civic engagement"? Lacking agreement on its basic content, a field of practice or subject of study will be limited. The question is not whether there is consensus or conflict, but rather whether there is a measure of mutual understanding about what to discuss.

The purpose of this paper is to address questions like these by pulling together information from disparate sources, making sense of general propositions, and identifying unanswered questions about youth participation. It represents an exercise in the "scholarship of integration," an approach which draws upon various academic disciplines and professional fields in order to contribute to knowledge development and advance the field (Boyer, 1997).

2. General Propositions

Following are some general propositions about youth participation which are substantiated by research or practice. They are not the only propositions, but among the important ones.

2.1. Youth participation is a right protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The first declaration of rights was adopted by the International Save the Children Union in Geneva in 1923, and endorsed by the League of Nations General Assembly in 1924, as the World Child Welfare Charter. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1959, and was the basis for the Convention of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989.

Article 12 states that children have the right to participate in decision-making processes relevant to their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard, especially in schools or communities. It affirms that children are full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and requires that those views be heard and given due weight. It recognizes the potential of children to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change.

This right is related to the right that children should have the necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options so that they can make informed and free decisions. Providing information enables children to gain skills, confidence and maturity in expressing views and influencing decisions.

In addition, Article 15 states that children have the right to create and join associations and to assemble peacefully. Both imply opportunities to express political opinions, engage in political processes and participate in decision-making. Both are critical to the development of a democratic society and to the participation of children in the realization of their rights.

2.2. Youth participation is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives

Participation is a field of practice and subject of study which includes initiatives involving young people according to their race, ethnicity, class, gender, or other social identity; in education, environment, housing, or other issues; and in rural areas, small towns, suburbs, or neighborhoods of cities in nations worldwide. As any approach to social practice, youth participation presumably differs from group to group, a proposition whose evidence is growing (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2009; Levine, 2008; Su, 2009; Wray-Lake, Syvertsen & Flanagan, 2008).

It includes efforts by young people to organize around issues of their choice, by adults to involve young people in community agencies, and by youth and adults to join together in intergenerational partnerships. It varies in its expression from one area to another, but as long as people are involved in the institutions and decisions that affect them, it is participation (Checkoway, 1995; Rajani, 2001; Rajani, 2000a,b; Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010).

2.3. Youth participation refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people, not to their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies

The quality of participation is measured not only by its scope, such as the number of people who attend a number of activities, but also by its quality, such as when people have real effect on the process, influence a particular decision, or produce a favorable outcome. The issue is not necessarily whether the effort is youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational, but rather whether people have some effect (Checkoway, 1998).

Defined this way, participation is about the power of young people as a group that is usually underrepresented in the political process. It is the strategy by which they are involved in goal setting, resource allocation, and program implementation. It is the means by which they influence the opportunities and outcomes of the larger society. This definition paraphrases Arnstein (1969), who constructs a ladder of participation in which each rung corresponds to peoples' power, and who contrasts empowerment with information, consultation, and other constructions, and also Hart (1992, 1997).

Community organization is a vehicle for people seeking to participate. Organizing brings people together and enables them to generate power to accomplish their purpose. It is a process that builds their own sense of power, their perceived or actual power with others, and their ability to affect power relationships in the community. Adult political organizations learned this lesson years ago (Checkoway, 1997; Delgado & Staples, 2008).

2.4. Youth participation assumes that young people are competent citizens, rather than passive recipients of services

This assumption is consistent with the view of "youth as resources," which contrasts with news media portrayals of youth as "victims of poverty" and "problems in society;" social science studies of youth as "alienated from community" and "withdrawn from participation;" and professionals' focus on youth deficiencies and services. When adults view young people as "troubled and troubling," and youth accept these adult conceptions, this weakens rather than strengthens the roles of young people (Finn, et al., 2009; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Kurth-Schai, 1988). When adults allocate resources to policies that focus on deficits rather than assets of young people, it further institutionalizes this view into programs that perpetuate the phenomena that young people have potential to change.

Because "youth as resources" challenges the "youth pathology industry" of adult authorities, it is not surprising that adults question such views, that young people accept adults' conceptions of them as deficits, and that they do not view themselves as a group that can create change (Finn, 2001). However, young people are experts on being young people, regardless of what others think.



2.5. Participation has various objectives, outcomes, and assessment criteria

Participation studies evaluate the effects of participation on the personal and social development of the participants themselves, such as their knowledge and skills; or their academic achievement or performance in school; or their sense of direction, self-confidence, social connectedness, and psychosocial well-being; or their critical thinking, public speaking, and civic competencies (Cheadle et al., 2001; Dessel & Rogge, 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Flanagan, Syvertsen & Stout, 2007; Sherrod & Spiewak, 2008; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008; Youniss, Bales & Christmas-Best, 2002). Studies also evaluate the effects of participation on organizational development, such as their relationship to administrative structure and resource allocation; leadership, management, and institutional sustainability; and external collaborations and coalitions with other organizations. (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007).

Other studies evaluate the effects of participation on society. These outcomes are often difficult to document, but changes in personal, social, and organizational development are themselves societal outcomes, and individual and institutional participation are always instrumental to changes in education, environment, housing, urban development, and civil society (Morrisey, 2000).

Yet other studies evaluate the simultaneous effects of participation at multiple levels, from initial consciousness-raising to gaining in confidence to building organizational capacity to taking action to creating change. These phenomena are observable, although scientific studies of them are scarce (Checkoway, Allison & Montoya, 2005; Checkoway, Figueroa & Richards-Schuster, 2008; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007).

Finally, studies show that some community agencies use participation for administrative purposes without transfer of power to the participants. These agencies use participation to provide public relations, or legitimate decisions that already have been made, or build support for program implementation. They favor participation that serves administrative ends and oppose participation that results in control by people over key aspects of programs.

2.6. Participation has several strategies

There are young people who mobilize around issues, organize for social and political action, plan local program, advocate in school boards and city councils, and develop services of their own. They serve on municipal agency boards, pack public hearings, or demonstrate outside meetings. They conduct community-based research, evaluate agency programs, make policy presentations, and hold public officials accountable for their actions (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Frank, 2006; Checkoway, 1995; Mullahey, Susskind & Checkoway, 2000; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009). There also are studies of their involvement in student council, volunteering, basketball, marching band, and debate clubs which are beneficial, but not necessarily related to quality participation as defined here (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hall, 2008).

There is no lack of information on participation activities. There are publications that identify stages, steps, and specific activities, and provide empirical examples of youth action, youth development, or neighborhood-based youth initiatives. There also are workbooks with tools and techniques for observations, interviews, drawings, photographs, surveys, workshops, policy summits, community conversations, town meetings, protest demonstrations, and others too numerous to mention (Driskell, 2001; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Midratta, Shah & McAlister, 2009; Su, 2009).

2.7. Young people have limitless issues, including schools and education

Young people care about war, poverty, racism, health care, housing, homelessness, violence, sex and pregnancy, adultism and ephediphobia, diversity, discrimination, drugs, clean water, nutritious food, employment, and money. They care about gentrification of neighborhoods, unsafe living conditions, drugs and safety in the streets, paint poisoning on the walls, and the right to freely assemble in public places.

Young people especially care about schools and education. This is not surprising, because schools are places in which they spend substantial time and have a strong stake. Our studies show that young people are concerned about academic and curricular issues, such as when they question teachers about inaccurate or unrepresentative curricula; school facilities such as unsafe buildings and unsanitary bathrooms; and school practices, such as unjust attendance policies or dress codes. They are aware that their schools are segregated, express concern about diversity, and see that teachers are not prepared to handle racial issues in the classroom (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006).

Too often the issues expressed by youth are the ones given to them by adult authorities who care about them, such as parents and teachers. Adult caring is a precious resource worldwide, but it does not necessarily translate into youth participation. When young people identify their own issues, however, it can awaken their spirit and move them into action.

2.8. Many young people are uninvolved or minimally involved in public affairs, and small groups of people are extremely active

Studies show that the most active participants are not representative of the general population. Income, education, and socioeconomic status all correlate with individual participation and contribute to personal characteristics and social attitudes that support further activity. Thus differential levels of participation are "normal" in society.

Such studies tend to assess "formal" activities, such as voting in elections, rather than other activities such as organizing grassroots groups. They ignore that some lower-income people have better things to do with their time, and do not believe that their participation will matter (Levine, 2007; Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, Delli-Carpini, 2006).

Recent studies document patterns of nonparticipation by middle- and upper-income young people, which they attribute to technology, telecommunications, and decline in social capital. "Withdrawal from participation" and "disengagement from democracy" are common images of these youth today (Zukin et al., 2006).

2.9. Lower income people participate less than higher income people in formal politics, but instead participate in ways that are appropriate to their present situation

Our studies document increasing involvement by low-income youth of color in educational reform, including initiatives by low-income youth of color to document inequities in school suspension policies and prevent cuts in youth services, conduct campaigns for new school curricula responsive to racial diversity, and work to reduce class sizes and increase after-school programs.

These efforts address broad structural issues of discrimination and poverty, and also everyday experiences in schools and communities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2009).

Differential participation by low-income youth does not mean that they are disengaged from democracy. On the contrary, they do participate in public affairs, but rather in activities which are more appropriate to their situation, and which mainstream social scientists find difficult to document (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2007; Chawla, 2002; Checkoway et al., 2008; Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006; Johnson, Ivan-Smith, Gordon, Pridmore & Scott, 1998).



2.10. Youth participation is facilitated by youth leaders and adult allies

Participation is affected by race, gender, age, income, education, national origin, family and community context, rural or urban residence, residential segregation, religious tradition, cultural beliefs, mass media, television watching, social science, professional practice, civic knowledge, extracurricular activities, community service, public policies, legal constraints, institutional barriers, school disparities, parental and teacher encouragement, adult attitudes, and other factors (Duke, Skay, Pettingell & Borowsky, 2009; Hart & Donnelly, 2007).

Our own studies show that youth leaders and adult allies are instrumental to participation. Our observation is that in high quality initiatives, there are youth leaders who arise in their schools and communities, where they participate in youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational activities, in which they serve as bridging persons across generational boundaries. They might be motivated on a personal level, such as when they experience discrimination. Or they are drawn to opportunities for personal achievement which prepare them for higher education or employment (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat, 2007).

We also observe that some youth leaders pass through discernible developmental stages in which they become aware, gain experience, receive encouragement, grow in confidence, develop practical skills, emerge as leaders, and move on to adulthood. Each successive stage enables them to grow in their abilities, before moving on (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006).

Youth leaders do not operate in isolation. On the contrary, adults play various roles in the process, from reaching out to young people, nurturing their ideas, and building support for their work (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 2002; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Larson & Camino, 2005).

In *Lifting New Voices*, for example, adult allies included “personal allies” like parents and neighbors, and “community allies” like teachers, coaches, or youth workers, and “institutional allies” from public life or mass media. Together these adults were a presence in their everyday lives, take them aside for personal conversations, and serve as mentors who encourage them. They also are bridging persons between youth and the adult world (Checkoway et al., 2003).

These findings lead to the conclusion that youth leadership development, as an educational effort to prepare young people for community participation, can be expected to benefit from a concurrent form of leadership development for adults whom young people take as their allies (Dudley & Gitelson, 2003; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008).

2.11. There are obstacles to youth participation, and also opportunities for strengthening their involvement in the future

It is difficult to involve young people when they do not view themselves as a group that can create change, or when they have ideas but are unsure how to proceed, or when they take action but lack resources for implementation.

It is difficult when adults view young people as deficits rather than resources, or show “adultism” which flows from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon them without their agreement because of their age. Adultism can cause young people to question their own legitimacy or “internalize the oppression” of adults and the limitations that they place upon them.

Adultism is a mild form of ephiphobia, a condition described as an abnormal or persistent fear or loathing of teenagers or adolescence. This condition is attributable to media, politicians, social scientists, and professional practitioners who perpetuate its tenets with reinforcement by marketing of safety, such as home security systems, metal detectors and closed-circuit television increasingly sold to schools on the premise that young people are not to be trusted. The fear of youth by adult authorities can undermine public participation and affect the health of democracy, in the absence of intervention to the contrary (Astroth, 1994; Giroux, 2003, 2004; Grossberg, 2005).

Despite the obstacles, institutional resources for youth initiatives are available from private foundations, and government agencies which fund participation at the local and national levels. Institutional resources make possible part-time or full-time opportunities for people with career commitment to youth participation, such as full-time agency administrators who promote participation as part of their professional roles, and part-time youth workers who are employed by agencies. Foundation officials, university professors, and school teachers who themselves were once youth leaders continue commitment through the next generation.

Educational opportunities for youth participation abound. Civic education is part of secondary school curricula, governmental and non-governmental institutions care about civic education, as do for-profit and non-profit institutions. There are secondary schools which center on social justice, although these are exceptional, such as the Coalition School for Social Change or Community High School for Social Justice. There also are apprenticeship programs which have internships, community-based groups which prepare youth to become organizers, and youth organizing projects which train youth to facilitate campaigns (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Corngold, 2007; Dudley & Gitelson, 2003; Levine, 2007).

3. Unanswered Questions

I conclude this review of youth participation by asking a few questions that cannot be answered from examination of available work.

3.1. What is age appropriate youth participation?

Social practice should be culturally competent and age appropriate, in which a group's distinct characteristics affect their participation practices and the roles of allies who work with them. It should show knowledge of particular popular groups, demonstrate understanding of their distinct characteristics, and function in accordance with their situation. The notion is that there are no single best forms of participation; instead, the rules should be adapted to the group (Rivera & Erlich, 1998).

What are the characteristics of young people, and how should practice be fitted to them? For example, what sets them apart? What are their beliefs and behaviors? What are their preferred ways of participation, orientation to power, styles of conflict, and forms of communication? How do they meet together, make decisions, and formulate program plans? If practice were age appropriate, what would it be?

3.2. Which strategies of youth participation have the most potential to empower young people?

Empowerment is a multilevel process which operates at the individual, organizational, and community levels. Individuals participate, organizations develop, and communities change. Empowerment is when people participate at all three levels (Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman & Checkoway, 1995).

Strategy is a resource for participation, but should people organize, advocate, or develop services? Does it make a difference if young people are of African, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, or Latin American descent; male or female; low or high income; conflictual or consensual; or concerned with social services, social action, or social policy? If strategy is a resource for practice, which one has the most potential for empowerment?

3.3. What competencies will prepare young people for active participation in a democratic society?

Who has responsibility to prepare people for democracy? Is it the family, school, government, business, media, or community? If everyone shares responsibility, then who has primary responsibility? What competencies does democracy require, and what pedagogy will take them there? These questions often lead adult advocates to conclude that everyone has responsibility, without thinking that when everyone has responsibility, then no one has responsibility, thus no one.

What about preparation for diverse democracy? If democracy is about the participation of the people, and the people are diverse, then will their preparation look different in a more diverse democracy and, if so, what will it be?

Education for pluralist practice can be expected to emphasize information about the social characteristics, cultural heritage, and common customs of particular groups. This might include the perceptions of the group and its place in the community, how group members perceive themselves, how they perceive other groups, and how they perceive they are perceived by others. Education for democracy is a responsibility of society which changes over time and which raises questions that normally have no single answer.

3.4. What difference does it make if youth participation is multicultural rather than pluralist or monocultural?

Youth participation operates at the community level, but what happens when participation is constructed as multicultural. What activities are appropriate for a multicultural community? In a multicultural community, how should meetings and decisions be facilitated? What roles will participants play, and how will they be prepared? (Checkoway, 2009; Quiroz-Martinez, HoSang & Villarosa, 2004; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler & Adena Cytron-Walker, 2007).

Multicultural participation is important in democratic societies whose populations are becoming more socially and culturally diverse, and whose changes challenge communities to develop their capacities. Indeed, the future of these societies will depend in part on their ability to recognize differences and build bridges across group boundaries (Boulden, 2007; Farmer, 2006; Lepischak, 2004; Quiroz-Martinez et al., 2004).

“Multicultural participation” differs from “monocultural participation” in communities whose people are relatively similar in their social characteristics and who share commitment to a common purpose, and from “pluralist participation” in communities whose people form distinct groups which compete – but which also might coalesce – with other groups. Assuming that diversity will characterize democracy in the future, how will youth participation look different from a more multicultural perspective? (Butler, 2000; Checkoway, 2007; Farmer, 2006; Levine, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2007; Wray-Lake et al, 2008)

4. Conclusion

Young people participate in institutions at the community level. Their participation has various forms, strategies, and activities for initiatives that affect young people and their communities. There are obstacles to participation, and also opportunities for development in the future.

Young people participate, but their participation is uneven. Some youth participate with fervor in formal politics, others might or might not depending upon the situation, and yet others are uninvolved or minimally involved. The most active participants in formal activities are usually higher in income, education, and socioeconomic status, than the general population.

Lower income young people participate less actively in formal politics than those from higher income groups, but there are explanations for this, and also evidence of their organizing around issues important to them — in disinvested and segregated areas. They might not vote at the same rate as other groups, but they do take action on unsafe schools and dangerous neighborhoods.

Youth participation can always receive more study, but which conceptual framework or epistemological structure will provide direction for thought and action? If field development were to result from strategy, then what should it be?

Will it be “youth services” that respond to problems, “youth development” that promotes problem prevention, “positive youth development” that creates supportive communities, or “youth leadership” that enables them to take leadership? Or will it be “community service” through which they help the homeless, or “social action” that enables them to organize action groups against homelessness, or “civic engagement” that involves them in housing policy, or “neighborhood development” that develops housing programs at the local level? Which paradigm will prevail?

The present paper draws together evidence from various disciplines and fields, in the hope that by identifying their general propositions and unanswered questions, people will have more clarity for moving forward.

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