

Promoting ‘Youth Presence’? An exploration of youth participation in the UK and Greece

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Abstract

This paper considers how young people’s participation in projects that aim to give them a voice has been developed in the UK and Greece. It initially explores the particular agendas that may support the promotion of youth participation and summarizes existing criticisms regarding the efficiency of spaces for youth participation. After a brief description of participation developments in both contexts, this paper continues presenting data of current PhD research at the University of Birmingham (UK) that explored young people’s experiences of participation in both the UK and Greece. Underlying argument throughout this paper is that current youth participation is characterized by a focus on individual development goals and a form of citizenship that fosters uncritical socialisation into social norms rather than social change. Finally, it concludes that there is no evidence in any of the countries of this research that youth participation has been used as a means of promoting a form of social development that is based upon embracing youth culture and on involving young people in social processes as equal social actors

Youth participation

The idea of participation is linked with the concern of enabling people’s involvement in the processes that affect them. This concern has been present in the last 30 years with the emergence of the new social movements, the revival of an interest in people’s needs and the reinforcement of the idea of citizenship as well as with a

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general tendency to move from representative to more participatory democratic arrangements. In this context a conceptualization of citizens as recipients of policies, has shifted to one as active and direct participants in governance. For Gaventa (2004:6) there is 'a consensus in both the North and South for a more active and engaged citizenry and a more responsive and effective state'. But for others participation the last decades has served the efforts of government to manage social groups (Beresford, 2002; Newman et al., 2004; Barnes et al., 2007; Arnott, 2008).

Simultaneously, young people's participation and decision making in issues that affect them gained increased prominence and in the last decades has become a key policy initiative on the agendas of most national and international organisations. This shift was supported by concerns over young people's lack of interest in politics and public involvement as well as discourses about 'problem youth', 'maladjusted youth', anti-social activity and social decline (Bessant, 2003). Governments have attempted to deal with the increased individualization of young people through the employment of discourses of inclusion, active citizenship and participation and have attempted to create structures in order to 're-embed' youth in society (Lee, 2005:12).

The potential benefits of youth participation are seen as similar to that of adult participation, but young people are perceived to gain additional direct benefits related to increased personal skills, education, leisure and networking aspects which intensify the rapid psychosocial development they are undergoing. Thus participation is in young people's interests, contributes to the development of a positive individual identity and a sense of responsibility (Kjorholt, 2002). Beyond the development of individual resilience, youth participation is in general seen as a means to achieve 'vital engagement' of youth in community life (Pancer et al., 2002), as the legitimate right to participate in decision making (Frank, 2006) as a form of social justice (Checkoway, 2005) and finally as a means to combat social exclusion (Colley et al, 2001). In addition, there are arguments which stress the significance of youth involvement in the development of democratic societies, since youth perspectives can contribute to a more just society (Matthews, 2003, de Winter 1997).

The above mentioned expectations, by youth participation except that they are ambitious, suggest different ways of working with young people. For example we need different structures and evaluation processes when the aim is focused on developing young people's skills rather than when the aim is to develop citizenship or to the socio-political development. A number of authors question whether there is any impact with youth participation. Tisdall et al. (2004) referring to children's participation in UK, argue that many projects are selective in the profile of the children they recruit and fail to enable decision making. Badham (2004) attributes the low impact of youth projects to the fact that they are 'top-down' and 'adult-led'. Existing criticisms of current practices of participation stress that participation activities have not succeeded in giving real power to young people, that they fail to include certain groups of young people and especially they have been unsuccessful in including the already disadvantaged young people (Thomas 2007). A research by Neary et al. (2006) shows that experience for young participants of youth boards was beneficial but there was no apparent impact on the decision making process.

For Cornwall (2000, Cornwall et al., 2007) it is very important to think how and by whom spaces for participation are opened up, while Croft and Beresford (1996) argue that by clarifying and highlighting the issue of participation is one of the strategies for increasing people's participation. In that way it is necessary to discuss how youth participation comes to be defined and perceived, who participates, then how it is used and finally how it excludes whatever is not part of its discourse. Because the way participatory spaces for youth come to be conceptualized, it shapes opportunities for youth or in Foucault's terms 'fields of possibilities' (Foucault, 1980).

Some forms of involvement may not challenge existing power relations, and indeed, while organisations may co-opt users to give the impression of participation, they can double as a means of keeping power from people and giving a false impression of its transfer (Croft and Beresford, 1996). Taylor (1996) argues that there is more to genuine participation than simply advocating greater user-involvement. Participatory initiatives can be a route to redistributing power, changing relationships and creating opportunities for influence. There is little discussion in the literature about

the social structures within which young people are expected to enact decision making, the barriers and the enablers for youth participation are poorly linked with the general socio-political conditions within which youth lives are developed. As Cleaver (2001:39) asserts 'the linkages between the individual and the structures and institutions of the social world they inhabit are ill modelled'.

Contextualising participation

The dramatic growth of the interest around young people's rights as it was first expressed through the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 was followed by legislation and policies on the national level that would ensure participation for young people. This section will attempt to offer an overview of how participation is institutionalised and enacted in UK and Greece.

In Esping-Andersen's classification of the Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism, the UK is categorized within the Liberal welfare regimes category. This model is characterized by the prominence of the market which is perceived as the main provider for the social needs through employment. The survival of individuals 'is contingent upon the sale of their labour power' (Esping-Andersen, 1989:11) while the state provides a minimal amount of social benefits that are destined to be kept low in order to function as an insurance for people in times of sickness or unemployment but not too high as to keep people out of the labour market.

Arnott (2008) argues that a rethinking of rights in relation to the welfare state took place in the UK as the post-war establishments that informed policy through expert and professional knowledge and allowed limited space for civil society, proved inadequate. This shift of rebuilding the relationship between state and citizens or in Miliband's (2006) words, 'bridging the gap between citizens and democracy' was sparked off both by internal developments regarding reduced state control as well as influences from the UN and the EU.

According to Bessant (2003), governments all over the world, including the UK, adopted through the 1990s, a blend of politics based on neo-liberal economics and a version of social policy that allowed them to utilise terms such as participation, social solidarity, citizenship, inclusion and building community while at the same time they developed policies that ensured increased youth participation, capacity building and increased education. Thus, the discourse of youth at risk and third way politics enabled governments to implement youth policies to govern the ‘problem youth’. Therefore, main representations of youth in the UK policies followed the international trends and were constructed over the concerns about youth as a potential problem. Youth participation in particular was seen as a preventative action, a way to ensure integration in society as well as a facilitator of transitions to adulthood.

Tisdall et al. (2008:350) further describe how there was an explosion of skills training and toolkits for participation across the UK as the New Labour government ‘moved its policy agenda forward through standards and targets’. Young people’s participation advocates promoted the development of mechanisms such as standards that the organisations would ‘judge themselves against’ and ‘performance indicators within publicly funded programmes that require youth participation’. Soon these developments were criticised for focusing on the process and not on outcomes and that they discourage young people to participate by creating a ‘tick the box syndrome’ and promoting ‘tokenistic forms’ of participation.

Regardless of the efforts to include young people in UK conventional politics, they have showed low interest in politics and knowledge about basic political facts (Park et al., 2004) with the turnout in elections falling. The overall turnout of 18-24 year olds fell from 39 % in 2001 to 37% in 2005 (Sloam 2007). Despite this, young people show more interest in wider political matters and agree that they need to have greater influence in matters that concern them and their communities. According to the research published in 2004 by the National Centre for Social Research (Park et al., 2004) regarding the social attitudes of 12-19 years old youth leisure activities, they were far more popular among young people rather than charity work or other forms of civic engagement. The same study concludes that when young people were asked

about people in general seemed to lack social trust. Cunningham and Lavallette (2004) on the other hand assert that despite the lack of interest in mainstream politics, large numbers of young people in the UK are involved in campaigns related to environmental and antiracist matters, child labour and 'third world' debt. They further argue that the antiwar protests of 2003 can be perceived as a sign that young people are active social agents.

Institutionalisation of young people's participation took place mainly through formal structures such as school councils and youth fora and parliaments, showing a rapid growth of participatory activity in early 2000. Participation appears as a main principle in almost every policy paper regarding youth and projects under a participatory focus and it was implemented by an array of actors spanning from the volunteer and private to the public sector. There is a number of government legislation promoting youth participation including The Children Act (2004) which provides the legal framework for the function of children and young people's services and appointed the children's commissioner with the responsibility to promote young people's interests.

Focusing on the Greek context, concerns about deliberative democracy and citizen involvement as they have been developed in the international community, echoed in the society but they never gained such prominence as to motivate substantial change in a wide range of policies. These concerns found expression in the political domain with the adoption of a modernisation agenda that promoted decentralisation in order to make administration 'friendlier to citizens' (Hlepas, 2010), to give local communities a more active role and to make democracy more efficient. In the domain of welfare services changes, in the mental health system, aimed to offer more autonomy to mental health users.

Ferrera (1996 in Aassve et al., 2006) introduces a fourth category of welfare models for the southern European countries which were excluded from Esping-Andersen's initial classification of welfare regimes. According to Karamesini (2008) a South European residual model of social protection and welfare is characterized by: underdeveloped state provision, strong familialism in social protection and service

provision, extreme fragmentation of the social security system, large gaps in social protection and the selective distribution of benefits through clientelism. The role of family includes developing strategies to protect and increase the welfare of its members by means of pooling incomes from different sources, mobilizing clientelistic networks to obtain social benefits and access to public sector jobs and finally by providing income and protection to unemployed family members.

The General Secretariat for Youth is the only state organisation responsible for the development of youth policy and works for the mainstreaming of the youth dimension in other governmental policies. Currently, there is no legal framework for youth participation apart from the establishment of local youth councils. Youth discourses connect with the construction of young people as ‘becoming’ or as ‘democratic citizens in formation’, on the one side, and as in need of protection on the other. Policies that affect youth are implemented through a variety of agents such as state agencies, NGO’s, family, local authorities. Youth participation has been mostly developed as a result of the country’s obligations deriving from its membership in the international community. The endorsement of UNCRC resulted in the establishment of the Greek children’s ombudsman. Concerns about youth at risk and anxieties about its management were reflected in the Greek society but it was mostly the interaction with and the adoption of more neo-liberal policies (as it was the international trend), that promoted ideas of youth participation and active citizenship.

Historically Greek youth has played an important role as political actor, however all the available research on contemporary Greek youth reveals low interest in voluntary activity, low participation in associations and trade unions, less structured leisure activities, high levels of distrust towards politicians (IARD 2001, G.G.S.Y, 2005), and lack of confidence to influence larger social change (Chtouris et al., 2006). Existing participatory arrangements include school councils, youth parliament, national youth council, local youth councils, student unions and political party youth organisations. A number of young people have chosen self-organising in youth-led groups which in many cases are oriented on issues such as the environment, activism, and human rights.

Youth protests are a usual phenomenon, especially in the last decades and often express disagreement with government policy concerning education reforms and the state of schools. But none of these protests has led to an organised long-term opportunity for young people to express their opinions. Society tends to treat them mostly as rite of passage to adult life rather than as a genuine expression of youth voice. In the same pattern the last massive and unprecedentedly violent youth protests in 2008 have been treated, after the initial shock they caused, as an explosion of frustration in relation to youth unemployment and poverty as to be forgotten after a few months. For some analysts like (Vulliamy, 2009) the protests were a statement of presence in society and make us think whether this is a new generation with different perceptions of citizenship, willing to redefine the way citizens communicate with the state and thus participate in public life.

Findings

The findings presented in this section derive from cross-national postgraduate research project that aims to explore the way young people conceptualize and act upon participation in the UK and Greece. The data were gathered through face to face semi-structured interviews and with the use of two short vignettes as additional means of information. Interview schedules covered interviewee's background, the experience of participation, their perceptions of the social status of youth, as well as what kind of participatory opportunities they would like to see developing in future. Vignettes on the other hand had a more practical character as they invited them to express their opinion and to propose actions for hypothetical scenarios. Thus interviewing offered a platform for the participants to comment on their experience of participatory projects, while vignettes provided them with an opportunity to comment on how they would act if presented with a similar scenario and why.

As this research was set out to explore the experience of those taking part in projects aiming to raise young people's agendas, rather than focusing on the mecha-

nisms though which participation is implemented in each country, the data presented here focus mostly on the commonality of experience.

There are strengths and weaknesses of current participation. From the perspective of young people who took part in this research, individual benefits ranged from personal development and resilience to the creation of social networks. A number of barriers for young people were mentioned. Young people in the Greek sample focused on issues regarding access to participation and project management and administration skills while the English sample pinpointed issues of formalism within participatory projects and focused also on structural aspects that affect their ability to participate such as violence, inability to move beyond their local communities, disadvantage in daily lives such as poverty and lack of education.

Projects in both contexts seemed to be contingent upon funding and the decision making and priority setting was highly affected by the principles of policies and funders.

‘every year EU initiates some actions and prioritizes some issues, thus the applications you make relate up to a degree with the issues that EU chooses for these years. Usually the topics span from cultural to social issues... for example xenophobia, youth and violence, multiculturalism, cultural exchange...the breadth is very big.’ (Pavlos, Gr)

‘The central criteria for it is that it does have to benefit young people in the whole and meet the every child matters agenda which is the staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving making a positive contribution and economic well-being. It has to meet at least one of those items and the actual criteria we’ve got is that they have to have answered all the questions correctly, that are in the criteria form.’ (Robin, En)

But beyond the organisational issues, as a peer worker indicates, in England the use of language and the appearances affect the way young people perceive themselves and decide whether they will take up the opportunities that are available to them.

‘some young people are a bit funny about approaching someone who has got suit and a tie on...they (adults) use a lot a really strong English and the young

people in general in (local area)... they are like second class, like...the grammar is not very well but they can still communicate...and the councillors and the people you are supposed to go to when you need...' (Vijay, En)

The above findings raise questions about what counts as a legitimate form of participation, about who is permitted to participate and who is excluded by the way projects operate. They indicate that young people do not have ownership over their projects but they are forced to adapt their priorities and interests within a specific agenda. Furthermore, they need skills to negotiate demands and carry on effective communication.

Lack of structures and appropriate funding was also mentioned as one of the major barriers for young people to participate. Bureaucratic practices and 'civil servant mentalities', in the Greek context, have been related by participants to a failure of the existing state-led participatory activities. According to these accounts existing structures fail because of the lack of trained professionals, short-term arrangements and funding problems.

'I think that some youth centres work well....but because the state is involved... I don't think that a civil servant has got the will to contact...its not the right person.....it's not street tutor to go out and speak with young people or disadvantaged groups. They are 'office people', there is nothing done unless the phone rings ... and I think it has to do with state structures, that they don't inform correctly. They don't know how to do it, they are not in contact... they are office-style people. If you are not out to see how things are nothing works' (Stefanos, Gr)

The creation of deliberative spaces itself cannot address issues of power although they include possibilities for the transformation of preferences, they can also be seen as sites, within which, different forms of power operate in favour of the interests of certain individuals, institutions or social groups.

Youth in both countries has been given a voice, in the recent years, to express their opinions but its impact is still unclear. The participants in this research have been asked their opinion about the impact of their activity, whether they believe that they

influenced strategic, administrative or operating outcomes in their organisation and whether they think they can bring about change in society. The majority of them were disenfranchised, while they recognise that there were some positive steps in the past, they are not convinced that they are taken into account. They attribute the lack of impact to the absence of social recognition over their capacities and the attitude of people with power such as councillors or mayors in the case of councils. The UK youth give as an example labelling through media while the Greek youth complained about lack of access in employment and in the creation of a dialogue for the future of the country.

As it concerns the attitudes of society Manpreet mentions how media moral panics construct a negative image of youth and how this impact on the self-image of young people and how this might constrain their self-esteem and self-initiated activity.

‘young people get stereotyped a lot, if you see the newspapers young people get bad press never good, they speak about jobs they speak about hoodies. Stereotyping is massive, you see a group of young people and you think they are going to do something bad...at some point it becomes very depressing’ (Manpreet, En)

William in the next quote explains how assumptions about age might render young people invisible.

‘when we are in the community people go straight to youth workers to ask what’s going on with the group, they overlook us completely, they blank us, it’s as if we are not there, we are not important to them, they only want to speak to an authority speaker’(William, En)

In the Greek context Faethon describes how societal prejudices regarding youth can affect daily functions and deny young people fair treatment.

‘Youth are not taken into account as they should be ...you see it everywhere, in your contact with public agencies...because young people are differently dressed, speak differently...they don’t treat you with respect. If you want to open a new business, they don’t treat you with the seriousness they should...they just don’t take you into account...in banks for example with loans...they can’t imagine that a 25 year old like you can establish a company...not to mention the bureaucracy...’ (Faethon, Gr)

As it concerns, relations with power structure or figures, participants often mention that official talk to them to 'tick the box', that despite consultation, they act without taking into account young people's opinions, that they support them only when their political agendas coincide.

'In my community young people complain a lot about the changes, about the government laws , like they had to break a little centre to rebuilt an elderly home and everyone was kind of frustrated because they didn't ask the young people their opinion, they just done it. It's not really good making a decision without asking young people what they are thinking, that's making them not so valued in the community so they just end up doing whatever they want' (Janice, En)
'They say they want to involve young people...but if they really wanted they would have done something about it. I don't really believe they do want it' (Kostas, Gr)

For a youth worker in Greece young people are not explicitly excluded from the Greek society but indirectly through lack of decision making.

'Young people are excluded from decision making, not from society, only decision making... and this is very important because they don't have a say on how society is being shaped. Thus you don't exclude them from society but this is not the society they want. As a result they choose to not get involved or better 'self-exclude' because they don't have voice, decision rights...and this is not that democratic'(Achilleas, Gr)

It seems that the way young people are constructed in both contexts and the way in which truth claims about them have been generated, affects the recognition and the kind of opportunities they have. Cornwall (2002) argues the way people perceive themselves and are recognised by others as citizens can affect how and whether they will claim their rights. Young people of this research seemed to think that they have very little or no impact in society to make a difference.

Discussion

Both samples expressed similar apprehension regarding the role of youth in society and the possibilities of bringing about social change. Their concern about the lack of social recognition is closely tied to their concerns about the socio-economic forces that shape their lives. The UK sample, though, seemed to be more satisfied with the mechanisms being in place to promote youth participation and suggestions for future developments in participation were within the existing organisational structures. The Greek sample seemed to be more uneasy about funding and the lack of state arrangements in terms of policies regarding youth.

Comparative research between northern and southern European countries approaches the differences between countries as a result of different socio-economic development and especially attributes disparities in social engagement to the lack of a strong civil society. For example the lack of well developed participatory structures in Greece and the absence of participatory culture in the Greek society could, at a first glance, be attributed to the lack of a strong civil society in the country. According to 2006 CIVICUS Civic society index report for Greece (Sotiropoulos et al., 2006), although there are ‘no major political and legal factors’ that inhibit the development of civil society, there is a widespread lack of civic engagement among Greek citizens with the exception of 2004 Olympics’. Greek society is highly influenced by the legacy of strong political party competition and polarised political culture. Furthermore, a clientelist system of politics that emphasises individual interests and the use of indirect ways of negotiating rights have helped to form specific perceptions of rights and responsibilities as well as the ways in which citizens express demands and take part in social activities.

While one would agree that financial resources and organisational capacity are essential factors that mediate the relationships between state and citizens and enable control over policies, this explanation fails to provide sufficient substance to understand why youth have been excluded from major social processes. In the UK context for example where strong civil society is developed and further initiatives have been

taken to introduce systematic structures and a framework for youth participation, the young people that participated in this research, were convinced that their action has limited or no impact. According to Tisdall et al. (2004) being consulted does not mean that young people influence services, projects or legislation. Cairns (2006) argues that formal structures of youth participation, which have been increasingly institutionalised in the UK, lead to young people behaving as mini-adults, meetings being dominated by the most resourceful youth of the local area and the agendas being set by adults.

The above observations direct attention from the organisational capacities of each country to the underlying moral principles of youth participation itself, the conceptions of youth ingrained within them as well as on issues of power relations and more specifically on how much willingness is out there for real transfer of power towards youth.

For Bessant (2003:88) youth participation 'is presented as a technology of citizenship that has the effect of increasing state sponsored regulation of young people. In other words, it is a strategy for governing the very people whose problems the state seeks to address'. This process enables general truths and expectations around youth's social presence to arise. These truths will affect, in their turn, whether young people are able to raise their agendas or not. If the government made a reasonable suggestion of a route to social inclusion and young people refused it, they would be seen as excluding themselves from society and they would be guilty of moral failure. Participation for young people seems, therefore, only valuable when it corresponds with what power-holders consider a suitable agenda for participation. Taylor and Percy-Smith(2008:382) wonder whether participation can be effective:

'within the current hierarchical institutional framework of local and national government with all the inherent power inequalities and lack of accountability....a paradox exists whereby young people are encouraged to have their say yet when they seek to articulate their values through their actions they are constrained by adult values and priorities'.

This contradiction is clearly highlighted in the case of the UK youth protests against the war in Iraq in 2003, which was seen, by the political and educational institutions, as ‘an unruly excuse to truant’ (Cunningham et al., 2004:259). This example illustrates the type of citizenship expected by young people. While various models of engaging with young people adopt a rhetoric of recognizing them as active citizens with a valuable voice in reality, they are anticipated to act as passive citizens ‘disciplining them thus as potentially anti-social’ (Cockburn et al., 2009).

Barnes et al. (2001) extend the meaning of citizenship beyond the rights and obligations related with being part of a community to the ‘the extent to which space is provided for people to contribute to the creation of their social world’, or in other words, to the extent to which people take part in the development of policies. Political discourses envisage progress and social development in ways that lead to particular assumptions about which groups are about to contribute in it. They also offer important parameters within which welfare regimes and those who might be targeted can be identified as deserving/undeserving and dealt with accordingly. Specific policy departures such as youth participation have to negotiate these discourses and the social priorities embedded in them. It is ambiguous though whether any of the countries of this research has chosen a model of social development that embraces youth culture and a form of participation that promotes social change and challenges structural inconsistencies.

There is little evidence that there is a real commitment to enhance the forms of participation that give young people real power. In contrast there are apparent limits on how much young people can achieve through participation. The barriers that young people face when they try to get involved are rarely considered while the way they are excluded from the public domain is usually ignored. Youth is encouraged to get involved in specific issues regarding personal development but not on issues that would challenge existing power relations or the power of decisions makers and political elites.

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