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Participation and Power

Participation

'Participation is a fundamental principle of youth work' (Leicestershire, 2000: 7). Few, if any, of the curriculum documents produced in the field have not incorporated a specific reference or commitment to participation. Historically, Young (2005) notes participation has been a consistent feature of practice, for example all the major post war government reports of Albemarle, Fairbairn-Milson and Thompson contain a commitment to participation.

However, as Smith points out, 'Participation has a long and untidy history within youth work. It is an idea much talked about and much misunderstood' (1983: 17). It is important therefore to be clear about what is meant by participation in the youth work sense. It is much more than merely 'joining in', the ordinary use of the word, though this association often leads to confusion within the youth work. It is one of the four key features of the nationally agreed Statement of Purpose, which offers some clarity: 'Youth work offers opportunities which are: Participative – through a voluntary relationship with young people in which young people are the partners in the learning process and the decision-making structures which affect their lives and their environment' (NYB, 1991).

To fully understand participation in the youth work sense one must acknowledge its four underlying factors:

- Responsibility.
- Decision making.
- Engagement.
- Action.

A prerequisite for one's participation is the need to take responsibility for one's involvement and to be party, where possible, to all the relevant decisions which are taken in relation to the object of participation. These two factors will determine the extent to which one is engaged in the process of participation. Finally there must be some action which results from the participation process – one must actually 'do' something.

The following analogy of 'voting in an election' will illustrate these factors. Firstly, one could turn up at the polling station and arbitrarily put a cross on the ballot paper, or one could vote for the party their family and friends have always done but without paying much attention to the detailed policies. Thirdly, you could have studied the literature from the respective candidates, considered the issues and made an informed choice. Finally, one could encourage others to discuss the election, debate the issues, perhaps even canvass for the particular candidate you intend to vote for. What this analogy shows is that participation is a combination of the above factors. The degree of responsibility one takes for one's actions, the decisions one takes in relation to those actions, how engaged in the process one is and importantly the action one takes as a result of the engagement. Interestingly in the above analogy an informed abstention, thereby 'not joining in' the election, could be more participative than joining in with little engagement or informed decision making!

Participation is perhaps the defining 'procedural principle' of youth work: 'It is an underlying principle upon which the curriculum is based' (Baker, 1996: 51). Responsibility for decisions and the actions young people take should wherever possible be delegated to the young people themselves. This delegation must be done appropriately and sensitively, and judgements need to be made about the extent to which young people are ready to take such decisions. How participative youth worker's practice is, should be a question which continuously interrogates their practice. As Ofsted (2002b) put it, the extent to which youth workers are 'doing things with', as opposed to 'doing things for' young people is a key indicator of the quality of their practice. Everything that is done in and around the youth project or club should where possible be delegated to young people from the simplest of tasks, like the phone call to book a trip or where to go on a residential, to tasks which it is all too easy to think are beyond their reach, like budgeting and responsibility for decisions about the running of the project.

Effective participation must include informal but systematic implementation of participative 'procedural' principles, whereby every aspect of one's youth work is informed by a commitment to communicate, involve and delegate decisions to young people. However, participative practice must also contain the necessary formal structures to maximise involvement and enable young people to be sufficiently involved in all aspects of the club or project. West 13, a youth club in Ealing, West London, shows how effective a commitment to, and implementation of, a combination of informal methods of participative practice and the more formal implementation of a 'running committee' can be. They set up an effective young people's advisory committee and they implemented the 'effective take over' (of the adult's advisory committee) with young people acting as secretary and treasurer of the committee' (Baker, 1996: 36).

The origins of participation can in some part be traced to Dewey:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his (sic) activities in the learning process, just as there is no greater defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying.

(Dewey, 1997: 67)

Participation is much more than securing the co-operation of young people however, which this quote, although not necessarily Dewey himself, implies. Participation is ultimately geared towards self-direction and ownership by the participants. It is not merely concerned with securing the agreement of the educator's plans and intentions' (Shenton, 2004).

The profile of young people's participation has moved up the political agenda in recent years, in part due to the UK's adoption of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1991 and in particular Article 12 which states: 'parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' (United Nations, 1989). In addition, and perhaps more importantly in the UK, is the Children Act (1989) which together with its subsequent amendments have produced a 'recognition of the right for the children and young people to

participate in decision making' (Save the Children and Dynamix, 2002: 5). Whilst clearly these changes are significant milestones in terms of advancing at least structurally the cause of participation, 'to this day consultations with children and young people show that they still feel that adults do not listen to them or respect them. They have low status, little power and almost no control over their lives within family, school, public services or in relation to politicians and policy makers' (ibid.). In some respects therefore the language of one of the fundamental principles of youth work has been appropriated. Although it could be argued that youth workers have been and still are in a better position to work participatively with young people because they create a 'culture of participation' and participative practice is 'built in' to their work, whilst in some other sectors it is at best 'bolted on' and rarely approximates to the genuine article. This is in part because within youth work there is recognition that participation is integrally linked to power.

Power and empowerment

Participation is ultimately about power, if it is to be genuine participation. If it is not, it merely becomes a method of attaining someone's commitment or even a sinister and coercive method of producing conformity. This criticism could be levelled at some of the participative practices associated with the connexions service (DfES, 2002a, 2002b). Much of the emphasis is on 'active involvement' whether that be in a consultation on local services or the election of the new manager or even the chief executive. The question of what, or how much, power the young people have in any of the decision making processes they are asked to be 'actively involved' in amounts to little, if any real, power.

This lack of power is evident in some of the 'newer' incorporations of participation which conceive of participants as 'consumers' rather than as 'genuine participants'. The involvement of the young person is seen as necessary in order for the deliverer of the service to be able to receive feedback on the service and make alterations accordingly. It is not a model founded on equality, mutuality, joint responsibility and empowerment. One should for example be wary of the model of 'participant as consumer' infiltrating the potentially genuine youth forum initiatives.

Interestingly, with the rise of 'active involvement' within recent formulations of participation, empowerment has significantly begun to disappear from descriptions of practice. Active involvement has to a large extent superseded empowerment. For example, in the recent standards on young people's participation published through the NYA's *Hear by Right* (Wade and Badham, 2004) there is little if any mention of power or empowerment, only of the 'active involvement' of young people:

As Shenton correctly acknowledges:

When looking at participative practice, there can be confusion over terms such as involvement and consultation with young people. It is important to point out that they are not the same, and are not the same as participation. (2004: 15)

As Shenton (2004), and Hart (1992) before her point out, without any real power to influence or instigate change, participative practice too easily becomes tokenistic, and not participation.

Participation and empowerment are integrally linked, because power is fundamental to participation. In fact empowerment is best seen as 'the end result of participative practices where each participant gains control and/or influence over issues of concern to them ... empowerment cannot be achieved without having participation as a precursor; and that the level of participation will determine the level, if at all, of eventual empowerment' (Barry, 1996: 3).

Empowerment is central to many curriculum documents. For example, Kingston Youth Service has as its main aim 'To empower and optimise the potential of young people' (2002: 4). Similarly, Davies' manifesto also recognises the crucial role of power in defining youth work: 'Practice proactively seeks to tip balances of power in young people's favour' (2005: 11). Empowerment is also one of the four key elements of the Statement of Purpose (1991): 'Youth work offers opportunities which are: Empowering – supporting young people to understand and act on the personal, social and political issues which affect their lives, the lives of others and of the communities of which they are part' (NYB, 1991).

Models of participation and empowerment

Participation in practice and its relationship to empowerment has been developed through a

number of related models. The first model was created by Arnstein (1969) who utilised a ladder to denote progression. This was elaborated by Hart as 'The Ladder of Participation' (1992). The theme of ladders or steps as a model of participative practice was continued and applied within curriculum models developed in the early 1990s, most notable of which was that developed by Gloucestershire Youth Service (1994) and latterly incorporated into other curricula, for example, Wiltshire (2005). Gloucestershire developed an eight stage step model which moves from levels 1 and 2 at the beginnings of participation, concerned respectively with 'accessing information and opportunity', and with 'making contact and developing relationships' through to level 6 where young people share control and responsibility for action and level 7 where young people 'take control and responsibility'. The Gloucestershire model was then developed a little further by Huskins (1996) into the Curriculum Development Model, where he added 'levels of activity' to each of the stages and linked to the development of youth achievement awards (see 3.1.1). It should be noted that although this model has now become known as the 'Huskins model', in reality it was a model developed by Gloucestershire Youth Service and could perhaps more accurately be referred to as the 'Gloucester model'. Either way it does give a good diagrammatic account of participative progression. This, or related, models are utilised by other services and incorporated into their curriculum documents e.g. Bournemouth (2005), Hartlepool (2005), Bristol (2002) and Cheshire (2005).

One should not think that the model is a prescription for practice. For example, it is not necessarily the case that all young people should or could progress to the top. What they want and need out of the project may well not necessitate progressing to the upper stages. Interestingly as well, it should be noted that in different social settings young people could operate at different levels of the ladder. In their own peer group, a young person may well be a leader taking responsibility for key decisions, but in a more formal setting like school, be considered as not capable or interested in participating at all. It is all too easy to see the ladder as an irrevocable ascent, whereas one could move down the scale as well as up, for example where personal circumstances could necessitate less of an involvement, or one could feel like one's input

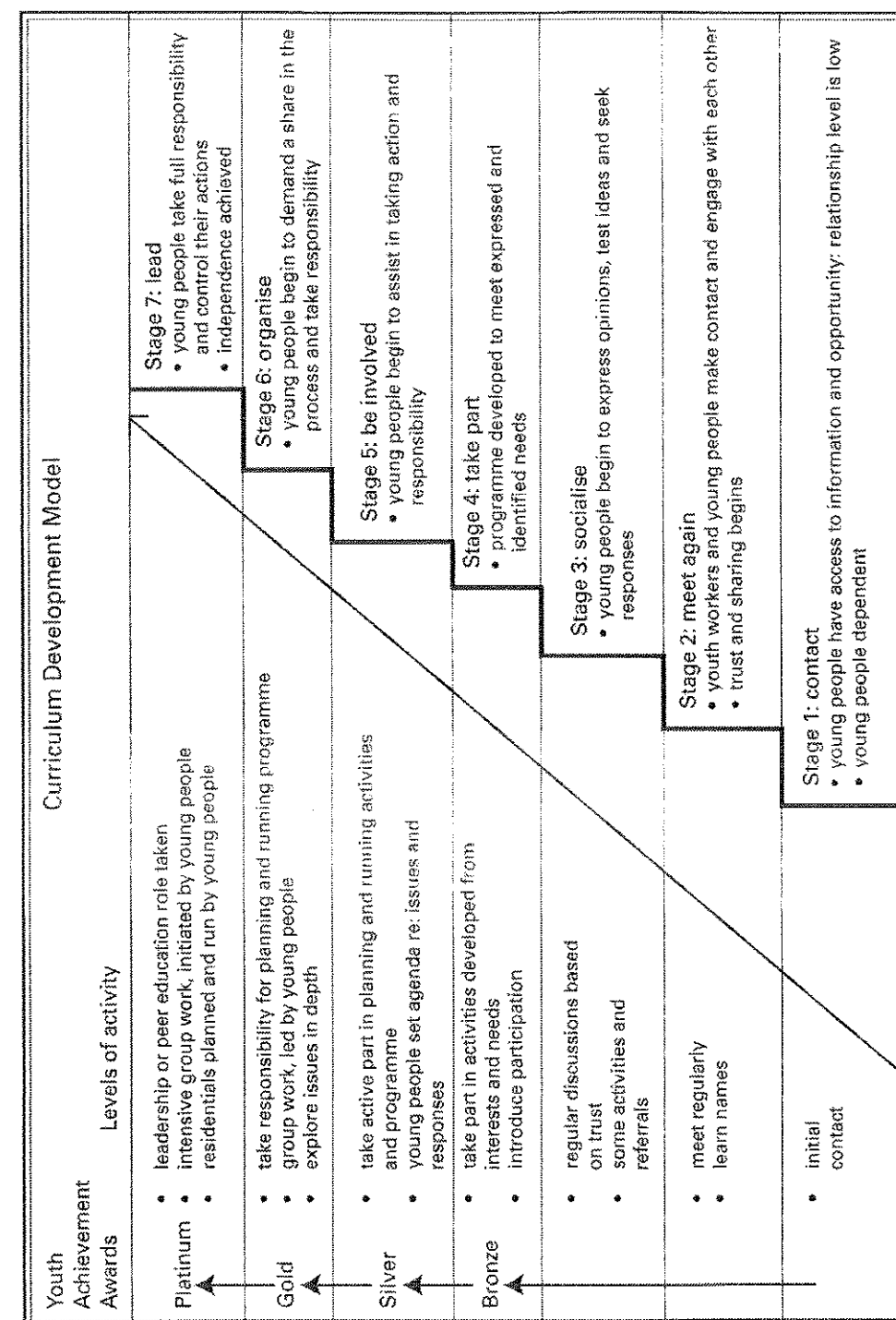


Figure 3.1.1 A progressive model of youth worker involvement with young people (after Gloucester Youth and Community Service) (Huskins, 1996: 13)

has been acknowledged or an issue which prompted one's involvement addressed and the involvement or participation decreases.

Dilemmas in practice

However, with the question of participation, and the delegation of power, comes the difficult question of the young people's 'problematic choices'. There must be potential for young people to choose, and this choice must be genuine and authentic but therein lies the dilemma, as these choices do not take place in a moral vacuum. What if young people choose to access pages on the internet which are sexually explicit or gratuitously violent, or if they choose to exclude other members of the community from their club? Leicestershire recognise this when they describe the '... potential conflict since young people or communities are not apt to make "the right decisions"' (2000: 7). Youth workers clearly have responsibilities in these instances and part of their educational role would be to encourage young people to appreciate their own responsibilities to others, and to enter into a dialogue around what might be considered 'problematic choices'. This limitation on participation and empowerment which the workers must, in their welfare and educational role, administer, is what Jeffs and Banks 'have called "control in practice" and is essential for all good educational practice' (1999: 105). This is the moral framework of the interplay of rights and responsibilities which is played out in participative practice. The tension between young people's choices and actions, and the framework of 'acceptability' is worked through in an on-going dialogue between youth workers and young people, and importantly workers will be required to make judgements.

Equality of opportunity and anti-oppressive practice

Empowerment can be a useful term to describe the certain aspects of effective youth work practice which 'moves young people on in gaining control and influence over their lives'. Perhaps describing the growth and development a young person experiences completing a successful challenge or benefiting from a period of support, they are empowered: to make the

most of their talents and abilities. However, power and empowerment cannot be solely understood, nor can youth work itself be conceived of, as operating solely in terms of the individual. The Statement of Purpose (NYB, 1991) makes this clear, referring as it does to the 'social and political issues' which affect both individuals and communities. The key social divisions and how power operates in relation to them is an important aspect of the youth work curriculum. How practice articulates itself and responds to the oppression that operates in society, which results from inequalities of power, is integral to it. Thompson (2001) rightly alerts us to the cultural and structural contexts within which power operates. The youth work curriculum must acknowledge this and attempt to develop its practice, which as Tomlinson and Trew (2002) suggest 'equalises opportunities and minimises oppression'.

The Statement of Purpose incorporates this commitment and suggests 'Youth work offers opportunities which are:

Designed to promote equality of opportunity through the challenging of oppressions such as racism and sexism and all those which spring from differences of culture, race, language, sexual identity, gender, disability, age, religion and class; and through the celebration of the diversity and strengths which arise from those differences.

(NYB, 1991)

Many, if not all youth work curricula, incorporate a commitment to either equality (Norfolk, 2005) or equality of opportunity (Kingston, 2005; Bradford, 2006) as one of their core values. Work in relation to equality of opportunity takes many forms in the youth work curriculum. It could take the form of specific anti-racist projects such as 'peacemaker' – a voluntary sector project which trains anti-racist peer mentors in Oldham (Redfearn, 2003: 14), or through specific targeted detached work (ibid.). Another important aspect of work in relation to equality of opportunity is in the development of support to vulnerable groups. For example, 'GLYS', the Gay and Lesbian Youth Support group in Halton which appears as a case study of best practice in Merseyside (2004). Their '... main objectives are to provide a safe and confidential environment for young people to meet and discuss issues that are important. Meanwhile, staff aim to identify the groups' needs and educate appropriately' (2005: 48). They claim that 'Young people benefit greatly from this

provision, they feel less isolated by the community they live in and develop new skills through informal learning' (ibid.). In addition, groups who are either vulnerable or likely to suffer from discrimination are also identified as: 'young people with the greatest need' and identified as 'priority groups' e.g. in some curriculum documents such as Buckinghamshire (2004: 3).

Equality of opportunity is however equally important as a procedural principle which informs and interrogates practice on an 'on-going' basis, whether that be targeted work on anti-racism or disability integration, or through generic or project work which does not ostensibly have an equal opportunities focus. Thompson (2001) argues that this aspect of practice is better described as 'anti-discriminatory practice', as this distinguishes it from the restrictive notions of equal opportunities which are exclusively concerned with 'fairness'. Anti-discriminatory practice more broadly acknowledges the embedded discrimination extant in society. Youth workers must therefore critically reflect on their practice in relation to issues of equality of opportunity, discrimination or oppression, ensuring they are alert to their own and others prejudice and challenge this where appropriate. As Thompson suggests: 'Even if we are full of good intentions in relation to anti-discriminatory practice, unless we are actively seeking to eliminate racist thoughts (for example) and actions from our day-to-day dealing, they will filter through from the culture and structure into which we were socialised and which constantly seek to influence us ...' (2001: 25).

Challenge needs to be done with sensitivity, as prejudice inappropriately challenged can all too easily become entrenched. One must be wary of working from a premise that means one is merely attempting to ensure young people hold the 'correct' attitudes and beliefs. As Williamson suggests: 'The rhetoric of valuing "expression" and respecting "difference" has, over the years, become heavily constrained by a reality that only certain viewpoints, conveyed in certain ways were "acceptable"' (2003: 11). Young people need to be given space for 'admission of irrational prejudice' or be allowed to work through 'discriminatory views they needed to reveal' (ibid.).

Citizenship

For some authorities, citizenship is an equally important element which informs and defines their curriculum. It is sometimes seen as a development of the participation, empowerment and equality of opportunity agendas, and one of Hounslow's curriculum themes (2005) is described as 'Citizenship and Participation'. However, subsuming all these debates under one term, which is in itself contested, can be problematic as it confuses a number of the subtleties and complexities of each of the separate concepts.

More recent notions of citizenship in the curriculum have had a distinct emphasis on community involvement and this is linked with the *Every Child Matters* outcome – 'Making a Positive Contribution' (DfES, 2003). For example, Merseyside, who link citizenship with 'young people's rights', argue 'Citizenship is therefore concerned with promoting active participation both in local communities and with wider issues. It encourages young people to have a voice and influence the world around them' (2004: 20). However, with its emphasis on the interplay of rights and responsibilities it can provide a framework for working on issues of community engagement as well as the development of social skills and social relations.

Citizenship appears in a number of curriculum document's designated 'areas', including Redcar and Cleveland (2006) and Hull (2003). It is highlighted as one of ten 'specific issues' in Milton Keynes where it is explicitly linked with volunteering, suggesting, 'youth workers will provide opportunities, training and preparation to enable young people to see the benefits of active citizenship as a part of developing their self-esteem, adding to their future study and employment prospects, and gaining a 'feel good' factor from contributing to society and helping others' (2005: 13).

The notion of citizenship, however, raises as many questions as it provides answers. The concept itself is a contested one. Fundamentally a disagreement exists about the relative merits of rights and responsibilities in the establishment of an individual's citizenship. Hall et al. (2000) and Hall and Williamson (1999) argue that a shift has occurred in the conception of citizenship whereby members of a society no longer automatically have citizenship by right bestowed upon them, instead they earn their citizenship through the

exercising of their responsibilities. This shift in the notion of citizenship now informs policy and can be seen in operation for example within the new right welfare reforms which removed people's 'rights' to benefits. This has, it can be argued, not lessened under New Labour which has directly, with its 'New Deal' for the long-term unemployed, linked the 'rights' to welfare benefits to one's responsibility to society. Thus an under 24-year-old, who has been unemployed for more than six months, cannot receive their benefit for merely seeking work, they must be seen to be making a contribution to society, through, for example, volunteering on an environmental task force (Exell, 2001; Mizen, 2004).

Subsumed and sometimes lost within the citizenship debate is the critical dialogue about what kind of a society we wish to live in. All too often citizenship is thought of merely as a legal

concept defining rights and responsibilities and unifying a social group. In this sense citizenship is reduced to a consideration of how each individual makes a contribution towards the maintenance of the status quo and making improvements within existing social relations. Hall and Williamson suggest that citizenship as a 'lived' concept, that is the reality of people's lives or 'the character of shared life as we experience it' (1999: 4) or citizenship as a 'normative' concept, as an ideal or something to aspire to beyond the existing legal parameters, do offer alternative means of conceptualising citizenship which should not be lost from the debate. This important aspect of the curriculum and its relationship to wider society will be addressed more fully in the final chapter on Curriculum and Culture. We must now consider other essential elements of curriculum.

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