

Young people on the margins

What works in youth participation

Current Australian public policy has a strong focus on youth and young people. In particular, the policy discourse and the initiatives that are emerging in support of this discourse advocate young people's active participation in their communities. Drawing on a PhD study being undertaken with the Australian Youth Research Centre, this paper considers the nature of this policy discourse and its implications for young people's participation. It also describes the findings of a recent report released by The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), which shed light on the way in which this policy agenda is being enacted by young people.

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Over the past decade, Australia has seen a proliferation of local networks and place-based initiatives designed to increase community-level participation and generate locally based solutions to social issues. Increasingly, these initiatives seek to engage young people in the work of community building and what is frequently described as active or responsible citizenship. These initiatives and the policy discourse that surrounds them have become so pervasive that, as Bessant observes, "it has become a policy cliché to say 'increased youth participation' will 'empower' young people, help build community and remedy a range of social problems" (2004, p.387).

A new PhD study indicates that, cliché or not, this discourse continues to gain authority within Australian public policy (Black 2010a, 2010b). At the time of writing, Australia had a federal Minister for Youth and an Office for Youth; and similar positions and agencies existed in a number of states and territories. The Australian Government has a National Strategy for Young Australians that articulates its vision that all young people "engage in community life and influence decisions that affect them" (Australian Government 2009, p.3). It has launched a series of initiatives that include the Prime Minister's Australian Youth Forum Challenge, which funds projects through which young people engage other young people in the community to address local needs, and the Youth Development and Support Program,

which is designed to support young people's "active participation in the community as respected young citizens" (Office for Youth 2009, p.4). These policy declarations and initiatives provide an important imprimatur for young people to have an active role in their community, but there are multiple challenges to their ability to assume such a role, some of which stem from policy itself. These challenges are particularly experienced by young people who are already marginalised (Harris 2006; Pavlidis & Baker 2010).

Despite the growing policy trajectory we have described above, young people's community participation remains most commonly interpreted by policy and public institutions as a form of extended consultation, as "having a say" in relation to issues, locales and areas of service provision that are directed towards them (Percy-Smith 2010). The notion of youth participation has strong roots in critical theory, which positions it as a means of critiquing and addressing social injustice and inequity (Freire 1994; Giroux 2009a; Walsh & Salvaris 1998), but the trend within policy is to invite young people to participate in their communities without necessarily shaping those communities, let alone challenging the status quo within them.

This is one aspect of a deficit discourse that continues to be applied to young people's community participation. Translated into policy, it encourages and expects young people to participate as active citizens without endowing them with the rights and recognition due to full, current citizens. Instead, the implication is that young people are not yet citizens (Biesta & Lawy 2006; Raby 2008) or possibly "not-good-enough citizens" (Smith et al. 2005, p.425). The language used by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) illustrates the persistence of this discourse within Australian policy contexts. In response to the question of whether the right to vote should be extended to 16-year-olds, the AEC suggests that they are "too distracted by adolescent interests to become responsible and informed voters". It concludes that "they are still growing up and need more time to learn about the world before they take on the responsibility of voting" (AEC 2007, p.72).

This type of language perpetuates the notion that youth is a transitional stage on the way to adulthood during which young people are unable to fully participate in society. Research undertaken by the Whitlam Institute indicates the degree to which this overlooks young people's existing will and capacity to participate and leverage real change in a range of social settings including the local community (Arvanitakis & Marren 2009; Collin 2008; Horsley & Costley 2008). This research suggests that "young people are already active ... just in ways not always understood" (Arvanitakis & Marren 2009, p.6). It also shows that some groups of young Australians have little exposure or access to a genuine experience of participation. This is hardly surprising in a wider policy environment that is distrustful of these groups. Describing the social exclusion of young people in the United Kingdom, Williamson notes that "the 'warm' debate about young people and participation and citizenship has, on the other side of the coin, a 'cold' debate about 'feral jobs' who require regulation and control" (2007, p.25).

This is what Giroux has called the "assault against youth", which views young people in general, and marginalised young people in particular, as "troubling, reckless and dangerous persons" (2009b, p.3). Bessant has suggested that this same discourse is in operation within Australian policy. This discourse positions the participation of socially excluded or marginalised young people as a "remedial or preventative" strategy that encourages such young people "to 're-connect' or become more 'integrated into society'" (2003, p.88). Seen through this Foucauldian lens, participation becomes less a means of enabling or empowering young people than a governmental strategy aimed at their control.

An important aspect of this governmentalisation of youth participation is its inference that such participation bestows agency upon the young people who participate. A decade ago, Rose (2000) described the way in which the policy values of community participation and responsible citizenship communicate a set of behavioural norms that include "choice, personal responsibility, control over one's fate, self-promotion and self-government"

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(p.324). These norms promote and propagate a specific identity for young people that is consistently framed in terms of personal power. It encourages them to internalise a sense of themselves as “active, competent, self-reflective, self-expressing, self-sufficient, communicative, social, constructive, independent, self-reliant, actively participating, problem-solving, planning experts of their own lives” (Masschelein & Quaghebeur 2005, p.61). This constructed identity overlooks the routine exclusion of many young people (Furlong 2009; Wyn 2009).

It also overlooks the Foucauldian suggestion that the power to participate or the power that arises from participation only exists when young people perform the action of participation. If they do not participate, then participation remains an “unrealised capacity, or a potential, not a power” (Gallagher 2008, p.397). The inference of research such as that conducted by the Whitlam Institute is that in too many instances, this unrealised capacity or potential is more evident than its actualisation. There are, however, examples where this appears to be untrue. This is often attributable to the role of supportive organisations and intermediaries that work with excluded young people to help them develop and execute their own particular form of participation in ways that have the potential to generate lasting community change. The next section of this paper describes three of these examples.

What works in youth participation

One of the implications emerging from this PhD study is that there is a continued need for research that can illustrate the relationship between the rhetoric and reality of youth community participation and its implications for young people who are consistently marginalised or excluded. This research should also enable the identification of what youth participation looks like when it works well. The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) has released *What works Australia*, a research report in three parts, which documents successful youth-led projects from around the country and identifies the preconditions for success in the planning and delivery of future initiatives.

The report is the result of a national research project conducted for FYA by the Australian Youth Research Centre. The first stage of the research methodology involved inviting the Australian youth sector to participate in an online survey to determine the criteria that its practitioners use to identify good practice in youth participation as well as the best means for effective information transferral within the sector. A total of 162 practitioners completed this survey. The second stage of the methodology involved the compilation and analysis of the survey results. This yielded a number of themes. Information was then sought about case studies of practice that fitted these themes. The third stage of the methodology involved inviting organisations around Australia to nominate their own or other initiatives for inclusion in the study. Over 300 expressions of interest were received in response.

Each potential case study was then considered in light of a set of good practice principles. This process sought to identify organisations, programs or projects that demonstrated the active participation of young people at all stages of the project and a sense of project ownership by young people; demonstrable outcomes for both young people and the community; a mechanism for ongoing evaluation and improvement; and sustainable and replicable practice. Potential case studies were also selected for their ability to document practice from a wide variety of geographic and socioeconomic settings as well as across different youth populations including young people from Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people; and young people with a disability. The shortlisted case studies were then further investigated through internet research, phone interviews and word-of-mouth references from state-based peak bodies or local organisations. This process sought to move beyond the rhetoric of projects’ intentions to the reality of their achievements, based on the assumption that successful projects gain some degree of local acknowledgement.

The final report takes the form of a three-part series of web resources. One of

these, *Young people active in communities* (Taylor 2010b), showcases the work of young people aged between 12 and 25 years who have taken on the role of community changemakers or activists. The case studies described in the resource provide valuable insights into forms of youth participation that are focused first and foremost on what young people want and how they understand their role in the community. Another resource in the series, *Inclusive approaches with young people* (Kimberley 2010), showcases youth-led organisations and initiatives that involve excluded young people. It emphasises what works in organisations, programs and projects that adopt inclusive approaches with these young people. The final section of this paper describes three initiatives from the series.

Building Bridges

Building Bridges: Hanging out in the north is an initiative developed by the Centre for Multicultural Youth in Melbourne. The centre was established to assist young migrants and refugees to settle successfully in Australia and participate fully in community life. Its mission is to influence both the social policy agenda and the social services network in Australia to ensure that young people from diverse cultural backgrounds have every opportunity to succeed in Australian society.

Building Bridges focused on the City of Hume in Melbourne's outer north, an area that is known for its cultural diversity, but also prone to strong racial tensions. Previous studies showed that young people in the area suffered from feelings of exclusion, isolation and loneliness; regular and pervasive experiences of bullying and discrimination; the loss of the sense of community that they had had in their country of origin; and a sense of boredom due to a lack of access to local events and activities for young people. Building Bridges set out to counter this situation by fostering positive relationships between young people from different cultural backgrounds and encouraging them to initiate social change within their communities. This approach was based on the recognition that discrimination can be tackled by bringing

affected groups together with members of the wider community to work on activities that are mutually important.

The project began with consultation with local service providers and schools, both to gain their support and establish an understanding of the local context. This consultation was seen as an essential step in laying down strong foundations for the project. Service providers, school staff and youth workers all expressed a strong desire for a mechanism to bring young people from various cultures together. In particular, many commented on the need to break down the divide between mainstream and ethno-specific service providers and to establish better service delivery partnerships in the area.

This emphasis on communication continued throughout the implementation of the project. Regular group development workshops were held with all participating young people to establish group norms, help participants get to know one another and to explore the key factors that prevent connectedness between the community's different cultural groups. These workshops were held weekly or fortnightly, depending on young people's school and work commitments. Project highlights included a three-day camp that brought together 19 young people from six local schools and six different cultural backgrounds and a youth-led community festival that attracted 200 young people in a celebration of cultural diversity and tolerance.

A key feature of the initiative was the strong guidance and support that it provided for the young people who participated in it. Two project workers from similar cultural backgrounds to the young people provided ongoing support and served as role models for the work of building bridges between different cultural groups. The importance of this guidance and support is evident in a comment made by one young person:

I think Building Bridges was really effective because we set goals and were working towards achieving them. With some groups, you don't really know what you're meant to do, so when we set goals and were going step by step into achieving them it was really useful. (Kimberley, 2010, p.15)

Western Young People's Independent Network (WYPIN)

WYPIN was established in 1989 by a group of refugee and migrant young people in an inner-western suburb of Melbourne that has been a key site for the settlement of refugees and migrants over the past 60 years. Twenty-one years later, WYPIN continues to be guided by principles of youth empowerment and advocacy, running programs and activities designed and implemented by and for young people.

WYPIN's guiding vision is to foster a multi-cultural Australian society with understanding between young people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. In pursuit of that vision, it conducts activities designed to:

- break down ignorance and bridge understanding between young people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds;
- enable young people to stand up for their interests and rights when decisions are made that negatively affect them;
- encourage young people to accept responsibility for their own actions;
- empower young people to develop skills that enable them to successfully overcome their problems and achieve their full potential;
- provide young people with the opportunity to feel better about themselves and more positive about their lives in the western region of Melbourne; and
- address structural and personal racism and discrimination (WYPIN 2010).

Through the WYPIN process, young people identify issues of concern within the local community and develop an action plan to address them. They identify the stakeholders who need to be involved in this plan and form partnerships with them. This may include seeking needed funding for projects or linking up with organisations running similar projects.

WYPIN actively involves young people in its Committee of Management and provides intensive training in decision-making processes. In recognition of the sophisticated skills required for community activism, it also conducts leadership camps and courses.

In addition, WYPIN creates a space in which young people feel safe to share their experiences and ideas with others facing similar issues. This is an important outcome in itself, given the diversity of backgrounds of the young people involved in WYPIN. One young person described the experience of participation in this way:

Just knowing that we're doing something for some young people, that's the best feeling. That we actually are using what we know and giving it to other young people so that they know and get to give it to their families and spread it all around. (Taylor 2010b, p.127)

Zaque

Zaque is a support group run by and for same sex attracted young people in Ballarat, a regional city of Victoria. Its goals are to provide a supportive social network for young gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in the community and to develop community awareness of their experience. It is funded by the state government through the Office for Youth and is supported in kind by local government. Zaque grew out of several initiatives to address homophobia, violence and isolation in the area. It now serves a number of functions.

First, as a supportive social network, Zaque boosts the social connectedness of its members. Many same sex attracted young people feel rejected by their family, school and community. In the face of this rejection, it is important that they have a place where they belong and feel accepted and respected. As one young person notes, "I can meet people who are like me and won't judge me" (Taylor 2010b, p.38).

Second, as a community development and awareness agency, Zaque runs workshops about homophobia and bullying in schools, universities and other education settings. These outline the work of the group, break down misconceptions about same sex attraction and discuss how both homophobia and bullying in general affect the community.

Third, it develops projects that evolve out of issues identified by the young people it supports. Zaque's slogan is "youth making a difference". It has been involved in numerous

community action projects including a sexual health expo and HIV/AIDS awareness walks. In response to advice from its young members that many same sex attracted young people struggle to find housing, it has produced survival packs to assist all homeless young people in the area.

Finally, Zaque builds the skills and confidence of the young people who participate in its programs and initiatives. It provides these participants with rich opportunities for skill development in areas as diverse as media presentation and the creation of funding submissions. This is how one young person has described the benefits of involvement:

I've gained confidence and skills of how to run an event, and learned how to organise projects – and organise them well. The confidence to be able to do those, involves skills we can take into the workplace. (Taylor 2010b, p.38)

Conclusion

Each of these three initiatives focuses on young people who are, for various reasons, located on the periphery of their communities but who may be said to be challenging the nature of those peripheries. The initiatives are successful despite organisational limitations of the kind that are all too familiar to the youth sector: limited resources, funding uncertainties and time constraints. They succeed because of the dedication and skills of the people involved in them and because of their demonstrated commitment to a number of fundamental principles for working successfully with young people on the margins.

The report suggests that the first of these principles is a clear and conscious focus on young people's strengths and a commitment to fostering these strengths. As an adjunct to this, they suggest that best practice in working with young people is that which enables them to address issues in ways that respond to their own priorities, interests and needs while maintaining a safe environment for their efforts, particularly where the issues being addressed through these efforts are personally confronting or challenging.

The report posits that youth participation projects should provide opportunities for young people's self-expression and creativity and

include activities that are both purposeful and enjoyable. The second ingredient required for successful projects is the creation of supportive relationships and connections from the outset of the project and, ideally, beyond its life.

Ensuring appropriate and adequate support from skilled workers and effective role models is particularly important in working with young people in vulnerable or marginalised contexts. The report concludes that mutually respectful relationships are essential at all stages and all levels of the initiative (Kimberley 2010; Taylor 2010a, 2010b).

The *What works* series is an attempt both to celebrate young people's participation and to add to the collective evidence base in regards to the kind of practice that is most effective in enabling it. The report indicates a burgeoning of youth-led, issues-based activities at the local and grassroots level of a kind that has been shown to deliver greater agency for young people (Arvanitakis & Marren 2009). At the same time, as the early findings from the PhD study indicate, policy continues to be ambivalent in its response to young people and their capacity to participate in civic society. While this is the case, individual initiatives such as those documented by *What works* may be limited in their impact. They may make a needed difference to the experience of individual young people and groups of young people. They may make a needed difference at the level of the local community. They are unlikely, however, to bring about wider social change of the sort that could address the marginalisation and exclusion experienced by too many young people or shift the way that young people are understood as current citizens and members of society.

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