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Youth and social justice in UK policy: spaces for youth voice and participation or new hegemonic constructions?

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Abstract

Recent UK youth policy, which has promoted the involvement of young people in designing projects and services, in democratic participation and voluntary action, has generated renewed public and academic interest. While the resulting developments indicate a shift towards including young people more in decisions about their lives, the future of many of these projects is now uncertain, as the new Coalition government prioritises a programme of significantly reduced local spending. Despite discussion on these strategies, little research to date has seriously considered young people's position in debates on social justice. This article seeks to do this, drawing on recent research with young people in community-based organisations, to consider young people's perceptions of recent policy initiatives and the extent to which they experience a greater sense of empowerment in the new policy spaces offered.

Youth, social justice and UK policy

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has prompted worldwide activity around young people's voice and inclusion, coupled with the goals of European social inclusion policies in relation to fair and inclusive treatment for young people. However, the extent to which such policies have been addressed and ways in which they have been interpreted are open to question. UNICEF has criticised the UK for failing to address injustices, such as parental violence, the high numbers of young people in custody and the negative impact of poverty on young people's social inclusion. Over the last 5 years, however, UK policy reforms have signalled a more positive, youth-led agenda, including the establishment of youth parliaments; school and youth councils; and local youth mayors - alongside a pro-active citizenship curriculum in schools. In parallel, multiple initiatives in community-based youth centres have emphasised young people's active participation, accompanied by new resources earmarked for youth-led activities.

The evidence on youth as agents of their own destinies and in shaping services has been more encouraging in the UK than in some other parts of Europe, such as in France, where despite decentralisation of youth funds, there appears to be little involvement of young people in deciding criteria for their use or distribution. From the Russell Commission in 2004, with a focus on engaging young people in voluntary action; to 'Youth Matters' in 2006, which heralded the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds for decision by young people's fora; to 'Aiming High for Young People' in 2008, UK policies can arguably be described as advancing progressive goals in increasing young people's engagement in voluntary, political and service activities. Citing the 2008 policy: 'empowering young people to increase their influence' and 'removing barriers to...local opportunities' have been persistent policy themes since 2004.

However, this is a partial picture, and as research in this field demonstrates, the regulation and supervision of young people in every context of their lives have increased over successive generations. This is often linked to the negative characterisation of groups of young people, fuelled by media hyperbole about 'growing youth disorder', poor parenting, and failures by schools and other agencies. Stereotypes of vulnerable young people in need of protection from risks and fear of anti-social youth persist, perpetuating policy tensions. Protection of young people, morphs into protecting society from them, and in both cases encourages increased surveillance, while, paradoxically, young people have gained greater autonomy through access to individualised forms of communication with peers and technologically constructed social worlds. Thus, contradictions are embedded within policies and developments which affect young people

and their positioning in society, leading to ambiguity in ways that young people understand their freedoms, and different perceptions of justice in enacting policy.

Over successive generations young people's deferred access to economic independence, even for those able to access work, has increased frustration, especially among those with limited expectations of schooling. Coupled with a narrowed and qualification-led school curriculum, growing constraints have produced detrimental consequences for young people at the margins of school and society. Recent extension of compulsory schooling and use of school exclusion continue trends visible in the late 1990s' truancy sweeps, the 2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, tagging and curfews, and the rising use of custodial youth justice over some 10 years. Such trends, alongside declining, poorly paid opportunities in the employment market, contribute to disempowering young people, exacerbating their dissatisfaction with adult institutions.

To date youth participation initiatives have successfully attracted more articulate and privileged young people, who can identify voluntary action and gaining political skills as valuable attributes for their future careers. Youth mayors and youth councils deciding on youth funds in 'Beacon' local government areas have been well publicised, while 'V-inspired' and 'Participation Works'¹ websites offer optimistic examples of volunteering and participation: of young people 'becoming' (good) citizens. Such publicity is less likely to appeal to 'hard to reach' groups of young people, whose 'alternative' identities and cultures may anchor peer and self-esteem, and are therefore more likely to question the motivations of different schemes.

Thus, while recent youth policy has sought to redress unrelentingly negative views of youth and to engage 'hard to reach' young people, parallel policies serve to monitor, constrain and punish. Resulting interventions problematise alternative behaviours, exerting pressure on young people and professionals to conform to prescribed practices and outcomes. Conformist elements are also visible in the positive activities and ways of organising recommended in some participation initiatives. Policy implementation then, abounds with conflicting strategies. Different social actors involved and often, poor co-ordination between different policy fields offer countless possibilities for unpredictable outcomes in delivery. However, this also opens ambiguous spaces, spaces for resistance and counter-agency, as well as for accommodating planned policy intentions; but all of these rely on youth projects continuing to exist.

The 'Big Society' agenda of the Coalition government continues to emphasise active citizenship and community action but the discourse around youth is ambiguous, giving prominence to formally structured schemes for school-leavers at 16, in the style of the proposed new citizen

service. In addition the voluntary or mandatory of 'service' is unclear. In practice, with no central government safety-net, other youth schemes are being systematically pared from local budgets as local governments seek to reach targets set for public spending reductions. National youth co-ordinating agencies estimated that some £300 million had already been cut from youth projects by autumn 2010 and that the Connexions careers advisory service for young people could lose 50% of its budget. These estimates can be set against reports of a record high in unemployment rates among 18-24 year olds, with five applicants for every vacancy.

Justice or Citizenship? Motivation for the youth participation agenda

In the UK and internationally, youth participation strategies have been closely allied with discourse on citizenship, democratic participation and social inclusion – debates which ascribe young people a more, or less, active role as social actors, depending on their conceptualisation. Firstly, it is possible to understand young people's participation as gaining access to individual rights to services and facilities. This is a somewhat limited, individualistic model, which implies access to, and inclusion in, existing adult institutions. A second model concerns young people's political participation and civic engagement, and addresses concerns about voting and the wider democratic deficit. Research suggests that young people often regard themselves as 'lacking' citizenship or as non-citizens, because acts, such as voting and employment are the province of adult members of society. This is despite undertaking informal activities, including helping friends and neighbours, which might be considered valuable social participation. Youth and Schools' Councils, organised conventionally to mirror local and national government decision-making structures, provide examples of strategies intended to tackle a lack of political participation. However, there is evidence to suggest that strategies which mirror existing systems fail to problematise structures and institutions which perpetuate the exclusion of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of young people. A third model focuses on community and civil engagement: participation as communal action leads to wider social inclusion and improved community cohesion. This model encompassing a range of recent initiatives concerned with youth volunteering and participation in community endeavours is often conceived uncritically.

Policy discourses concerned with youth participation thus emphasise inclusion, rather than institutional changes: by participating, individual young people will gain the skills and knowledge to access and enter existing social institutions. Strategies which seek to adapt young people to fit mainstream services rarely address the institutional barriers of the services that exclude. Yet institutional resistance often limits meaningful exchange of ideas, obstructing individual and organisational change which could lead to fairer arrangements and outcomes. A

question which my research therefore raises is the extent to which young people's participation could be transformative, overcoming existing barriers to engagement through involvement, not only in individual, socially inclusive activities, but also in forms of action and learning which have a wider impact for changes to existing institutions. If community-based and youth-led projects can create wider developmental aims, can they be understood as sites of constructive resistance, where a more radical collective culture of social participation is feasible? Or, are new youth projects simply creating new sites and forms of young people's accommodation of, and adaption to, normative models of inequitable social and political institutions?

Studies involving young people

The research reported here draws on two studies, which explore the views of young people on the effects of recent changes. A particular aim of the research was to examine their experiences of youth-led activities, the allocation of dedicated youth funds and the role of youth councils. The studies were both situated in socially deprived inner-city areas in England, with diverse, multi-ethnic populations. They used qualitative methods, including interviews, observations and discussion groups with young people, and accessed a range of community-based and youth-led projects via key informants in each area. In one area, the research included some 50 community organisations working with children and young people. This was a shorter, snapshot study. In the other, researchers initially mapped the youth provision and subsequently concentrated on eight projects, involving some 35 young people over 18 months. Both studies included local youth managers, youth participation officers, community organisation workers and young people.

Analysing data was a reflexive process, involving valuable discussion with participants on early findings, especially in the longer study. A brief article can only offer a glimpse of the diversity of the data, and aspects of the findings, including the range of creative approaches that young people brought to designing youth-led projects and constraints on their models from regulatory frameworks, have been discussed more fully elsewhere. In the summary of findings below, I have included illustrations of data from four projects: the Youth Council in one area; a youth-led peer research project; Mediabus, a youth-led mobile resource project; and members of an informal youth centre.

Snapshot of findings

Recent policies focused on youth engagement have generated a multiplicity of new projects but these studies identify contradictions between the frameworks established for new schemes, exerting 'top-down', hegemonic pressures and the rhetoric of participation and empowerment. In

less affluent areas these contradictions appear more marked, where young people are more culturally and socio-economically diverse.

The findings generate mixed messages. Some changes in services and developments in youth-led activities have created spaces in which perceptive and capable young people from diverse backgrounds are gaining valuable skills. They are undertaking research; establishing and running projects; managing decision-making processes and budgets; and sharing skills with other young people. In some cases, youth-led projects have engaged young people with extremely negative histories of institutional engagement, such as in Mediabus, a mobile neighbourhood bus with IT suites, a music studio, café and peer advisory services. However, the most articulate and able young people have often gained most from active participation. As other projects involving voluntary action have found, already privileged young people are more likely to recognise the advantages of participating for their future CV.

Young people are, nevertheless, educating and advising their peers in different community centres and localities; taking on roles as volunteers and youth activists; and speaking at local, regional and national events (and learning from these processes). They are also putting forward their own plans to attract less advantaged young people to participate, identifying alternatives to conventional election processes as more likely to succeed. Josh (aged 19) discusses formal representation and membership as a ‘vexed issue,’ and explains that their youth council has been in conflict with local government officers over this.

‘Way we see it, that excludes people...and there’s more chance to reach people not involved ...than if we limit numbers, have elections. What we do is concentrate on letting people know what we’re doing... it’s more about inclusion and their contribution.’

These contested spaces demonstrate valuable advances in possibilities available to young people individually, and through collective processes of social participation. Such developments are significant following a lengthy period of attrition in informal youth provision in many UK inner-city areas, with residual activities directed towards inclusion and supervision of ‘anti-social’ groups. However, renewed periods of attrition seem likely to reverse the spaces available.

Findings from these studies, however, echo the conflicting strategies reflected in youth policy: those advancing young people’s voice and influence; and those restricting actions through increased supervision or hegemonic forms of inclusion. Young people continue to be othered in the dominant settings of adult institutions; as Temi (aged 19), a youth council member, illustrates, highlighting ways in which their ideas were undermined: ‘They [CYPT²] think we’re

too young, can't see why we have this role. Like we bring an idea or decision, they'll listen but it's discounted... Has it put us off? No, but it's demotivating.'

Akeisha (aged 17) from MediaBus doubted if she would have taken part if she had known, 'how hard it'd be... when mostly people don't listen to young people'. Hajera (aged 17), discussing the peer research project which investigates young Asians' views of neighbourhood facilities, got involved in the project, 'to make a difference, to make changes.' But as Sabia, a co-researcher explained, their research revealed considerable dissatisfaction and they wrote a research report with recommendations, 'but nothing did change, so why we were doing this?' Young people systematically remained outsiders while powerful agencies determined the contextual rules, potentially disillusioning youth goals in participation.

Defining narrow parameters for young people's participation also has detrimental implications for reaching and involving disengaged young people. Temi sceptically comments on the constraints imposed on youth council plans for events intended to attract a wide range of young people. 'When it comes to events, they (CYPT) want just work-based - training and skills... Sometimes it's more about ticking their boxes.' Employment related priorities and individual skills meet short-term (NEET³) targets but obscure understanding of how longer-term cultural changes which could engage marginal young people might be achieved. Trusting adult institutions, when many prior experiences have involved rejection, is problematic and takes time. Kwame (aged 17) from MediaBus, explained young people's mistrust of schemes which would replicate past experiences of meaningless programmes: 'It's hard to trust it's not just a con, making sure we're busy so we can't cause trouble.'

Similarly, across the projects, young people stressed the unlikelihood of more marginal young people being attracted to 'volunteer'. The negative connotations associated with 'volunteering' highlight failures to adopt more youth-friendly language, and perpetuate some young people's exclusion. The discourse of volunteering is associated with 'safe' individual choices, while language such as youth activism implies collective action associated with less predictable, more risky, and more politically challenging outcomes.

In summary, a series of contradictions emerged from these studies, demonstrating a gap between the rhetoric of empowering young people and young people's experiences of how their actions were (or were not) valued. Primarily 'top-down' planning, funding and monitoring processes conflicted with 'bottom up' or grassroots models implied in the goals of youth-led projects and young people's participation. The emphasis was therefore on prescribed and short-term targets

(predominantly vocational skills related) and not longer-term culture changes. Underlying these operating arrangements, was a tendency to prescribe and replicate dominant models of organising, such as through representative democracy, which favours more advantaged and articulate young people. Young people also criticised ongoing changes in funding and performance frameworks, which disregard the time needed to work together and to build projects, which rapidly risk discontinued funding.

Despite the overall project of participation, young people experienced adult power-holders as often not ‘young people friendly’ and lacking trust in their abilities to take decisions, plan and manage projects. Many young people experienced a lack of value attributed to their work and voluntary efforts, which, for some involved in the Youth Council, could mean giving up leisure time at weekends and several evenings each week. This lack of valuing included the limited facilities in community bases with out of date computers on which they were expected to manage budgets and provide strategic plans.

If youth merit social justice, and we are not here simply discussing ‘soft’ forms of social order, then we need to ensure spaces where young people’s voice can be influential, where their proposals and models can generate change and not simply be met by lifeless consultation and pressures to conform to institutional norms. Existing adult institutions need to be open to diversity and risks, and to facilitating different ‘ways of doing things’ more likely to attract diverse young people. ‘Youth activists’: peer educators and counsellors, those running projects, those deciding and allocating youth funding and many others warrant recognition for the enormous amount of time and energy that they invest, for most, on top of their full-time school work. Sustaining the ongoing commitment of young people and engaging those currently outside the reach of many services and projects demands a shift away from the current framework of ‘individualised’ short-term benefits (the skills and employment agenda) towards developing a longer-term and more expansive culture of youth participation.

Spaces for policy resistance?

Community and youth-led projects have both marginal and potentially radical status, and as young people in my studies perceived, endorsement from adult bodies spelled survival. However, these frameworks of endorsement generate requirements for greater formalisation, and pressure to become what the groups are not, or may not wish to be. Participatory work with young people, by opening new youth spaces suggests possibilities for a new radical habitus, an ethos in which young people can create and develop projects which promote change, as well as

remedying institutional inadequacies. However, if the space is colonised by young people with the most advantages, such strategies can do little to redress the barriers to participation of those currently excluded. Similarly, if the space is heavily structured or erased, as new UK government strategies take effect, these possibilities may be lost.

Through young people gaining an understanding of using their collective participation to construct changes to their own and others' worlds, my findings suggest potential for creating fora from which 'less powerful' groups can gain power. Such processes contribute to change in surrounding conditions but generate tensions since they challenge models and space in existing institutions, problematising political, professional and managerial practices and powers. They also illustrate both the unpredictable outcomes of policy delivery and the potential spaces for subverting, rather than simply accommodating narrow policy goals.

Recent policy goals of young people's engagement and empowerment have been encompassed in wider citizenship, community participation and cohesion strategies. However, without the flexibility to risk adopting new approaches, adult institutions and policymakers alike are guilty of institutionalised bad faith. Young people currently seen as threats will continue to be pressured into unproblematised structures and activities; community organisations will continue to grapple with intractable problems as youth unemployment increases; and young people seeking changes will largely remain outsiders. Youth participation initiatives have slowly opened doors; and youth voices have attracted notice; but the status quo of inequities remains unmoved and may well be exacerbated unless adults, as well as young people, contest the loss of these progressive spaces.

¹ 'V' launched in 2006, with UK government funding, to promote youth volunteering schemes. Several ongoing schemes have recently been cut. See <http://www.vinspired.com/vbuzz/>. 'Participation Works' launched by 6 national agencies is an online information site targeted towards young people <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>.

² Children and Young People's Trust: local adult body to which the youth councils are accountable. Multi-agency and cross-sector body, established via local governments.

³ Young people not in education, employment or training: progressive annual government targets to reduce NEETS