Youth Participation and Youth Work
A Conceptual Review

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Abstract
Young people’s right to be heard on issues that affect them is now generally recognised in democratic societies (Tisdall et al, 2008; Barber, 2009). Recognition of this right is also evident in youth work practice and policy within Ireland and beyond. At the same time, youth participation is somewhat incoherent as a concept and difficult to define as a practice. The source of this incoherence is attributed variously to the fact that youth participation has been developed and embraced by several disciplines (O’Donoghue et al, 2002; Hinton et al, 2008) and to the tendency for youth participation to be incorporated into policy and practice without sufficient reflection upon the variety of meanings and purposes it can have (Graham et al, 2006). This article reviews the youth participation literature that has emerged within several disciplines over the past two decades and relates it to the practice of youth work. Following a summary of the disciplinary sources of youth participation theory, policy and practice, the paper examines the contributions that youth participation can make to realising and reinforcing the key goals and principles of youth work. A number of themes emerging from these two separate but interlinked discussions are explored.

Keywords
Youth work; youth participation

Introduction
Youth work is concerned with young people’s participation in a range of contexts, not all of which are relevant to the discussion here. In the broadest sense participation can refer to the collective involvement and engagement of young people in social, political and economic life (for example through education or employment). In a narrow sense, simply attending a youth group is a form of participation. Here we are concerned with more active forms of participation such as consultation, decision making and public action. This article will discuss youth participation as an activity in which ‘the involvement of young people results in an impact on a process, influences a decision, or produces an outcome’ (Checkoway, 1998: 770).

Youth participation theory has many sources; so many, in fact, that the disjuncture between source disciplines has led to confusion in relation to its meaning and purpose. This paper will attempt to summarise several, but not all, of the disciplines and perspectives that have contributed to youth participation theory, policy and practice in
order to identify and clarify the key themes and concerns that arise. The disciplines reviewed here will be those that can clearly be seen to have influenced youth participation in youth work, and those that have made a major contribution to youth participation theory in general (based on the number of citations of their key theorists). The disciplines and perspectives discussed are: children’s rights (and specifically the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), spatial planning, international development, community work, public administration and youth work itself.

**Children’s Rights**

Of all the articles within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12 is considered to be the most innovative and radical (Lansdown, 2001). Article 12(1) commits States party to the UNCRC to:

... 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, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 12 is particularly notable in that it is a right that applies to even the youngest children: as the Committee on the Rights of the Child has interpreted it, this right ‘begin(s) from the child’s earliest involvement in family and community life’ (Graham et al, 2006: 204). This means that Article 12 ascribes competency and agency to all children and young people. They are regarded as citizens now, rather than possible future citizens. The *National Youth Work Development Plan* (NYWDP), which was designed to provide the ‘blueprint for youth work in Ireland’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: iv) directly connects participation in youth work to Article 12 and the view of young people as citizens:

The emphasis in youth work on the importance of the active and critical participation of young people is in keeping with the view that young people have rights as citizens (Department of Education and Science, 2003a:14).

A further notable feature of Article 12 is that it upholds the child’s right to express a view and have it considered on all matters that affect the child. This must include any area of private life or public business. This means that children have a right to influence decisions about matters which have impact not just directly on their own lives, but the lives of others as well and on the community at large (Alderson, 2007).

Moreover, children and young people’s views are meant to be ‘given due weight in accordance with [their] age and maturity’. From this point of view, Article 12 defines a right that is continuously expanding. It is a right that begins early in life and then broadens as the child or young person’s capacity to engage and understand broadens (Alderson, 2007).

The UNCRC is also a binding international treaty, which Ireland ratified in 1992. In doing so, Ireland committed to making progress towards realising the rights of children and to regularly reporting on its progress towards that commitment. Ireland’s first State Party report on progress was submitted in 1998, to which the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child responded that is was ‘concerned that the views of the child are not generally taken into account, including within the family, at schools and in society’ (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1998).
These concerns gave impetus to legislative and policy efforts on the part of the Irish Government to provide for children and young people to be heard (Pinkerton, 2004). In 2000, it published the National Children’s Strategy (NCS). Goal one of the NCS links directly to Article 12: ‘Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity’ (Government of Ireland, 2000:). One result of this goal has been the development of structures for youth participation including 32 Comhairlí na nÓg (youth councils) under the City/County Development Boards and a national ‘youth parliament’, Dáil na nÓg. As a result of these efforts, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted ‘with appreciation measures undertaken to promote the respect for the views of the child, including through the Children and Youth Parliaments, and progress made to establish effective student councils in post-primary schools’ (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1998). It should be said that the literature on youth participation includes extensive commentary and debate about participatory structures such as youth and student councils. This debate will be returned to below.

As well as policy, the UNCRC has inspired practice in youth participation. Several typologies or models have derived from a concern amongst practitioners to provide guidance in realising children’s right to participate. Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992), with which many readers will be familiar, specifically references the UNCRC. Hart’s work is linked with spatial planning and will be dealt with below in that context. Other models include those of Philip Treseder and Harry Shier.

Treseder’s model (1997) developed out of the context of explicitly rights-based programming in the organisation Save the Children. Save the Children is a rights-based organisation, the founder of which, Eglantyne Jebb drafted the Children’s Charter, the inspiration for the UNCRC. Treseder’s model is unlike either Shier’s or Hart’s in that it is non-hierarchical. There is no suggested correct progression from one type or stage of participation to the next. Treseder resists recommending any particular form of participation; rather he suggests that different degrees of involvement are appropriate in different circumstances depending on the situation and the capacity of the young person (Barber, 2007). Treseder emphasises power sharing and attaining democratic youth participation. This model also validates consultation as an appropriate approach for young people, which is why McAuley and Brattman (2002) suggested in the National Youth Council of Ireland/Children’s Rights Alliance review of consultation and children that Treseder’s model is most appropriate.

Harry Shier’s model, introduced in an article entitled ‘Pathways to Participation’ (Shier, 2001) emerged out of the author’s experience in a consultancy programme that sought to realise the rights of children to play (Article 31 of the UNCRC). The model is based on a table or modified ladder that indicates a ‘pathway’ to participation along five levels:

- Children are listened to;
- Children are supported in expressing their views;
- Children’s views are taken into account;
- Children are involved in the decision-making process;
- Children share power and responsible decision making;

At each level Shier identifies degrees of commitment and emphasises the importance of partnership with adults (Percy-Smith, 2006a). Full participation ‘requires an explicit
commitment on the part of adults to share their power; that is, to give some of it away’ (Shier, 2001: 115) Also distinctive about Shier’s approach is the recognition that participation initiatives take place within an axis of institutional and individual values. Thomas (2007) suggests that this focus has been particularly useful to practitioners who are responsible for youth participation at an organisational level.

**Spatial Planning**

Spatial planning has a long history of concern for participatory processes and has contributed a number of participation models, including Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969) and Rocha’s ladder of empowerment (1997). Most important of all is Roger Hart’s research into the participation of children in the planning and design of children’s environments which led to Hart’s ‘Ladder of Children’s Participation’ (1992).

It is important to point out that Hart never intended the ‘ladder model’ to have had the monolithic influence it has had and rather intended to stimulate debate and discussion. Nevertheless, Hart’s model has been identified as being the most influential typology of youth participation (Barn and Franklin, 1996). This model had an almost immediate effect on youth work as can be seen by its incorporation into youth work curriculum frameworks in the early 1990s (Ord, 2007) and it also had a significant influence on Ireland’s *National Children’s Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2000) which specifically names and presents Hart’s ladder.

Hart’s ladder presents ‘degrees of participation’ ascending up from lower rungs at which young people are ‘manipulated’, used as ‘decoration’ or ‘tokenised’ (these not in fact being participative at all according to Hart), through middle rungs at which they can be ‘assigned and informed’ or ‘consulted and informed’, to the ‘highest’ three rungs where, respectively, ‘adults initiate, and share decisions with young people’, ‘young people lead and initiate action’, and (at the ‘top’), ‘young people and adults share decision-making’ (Hart, 1992).

This model has been criticised for implying that all participation of children and young people should be at the highest rung and suggesting that there is a natural progression from one rung of the ladder to the next (Barber, 2007). Apart from these specific concerns Hart’s Ladder is subject to the general concerns that have been expressed about youth participation models. Youth participation models have been criticised for their focus on the narrow context of the intervention with young people and their failure to attend to the wider social context (Moses, 2008) or to consider who is left out (Hinton, 2008). Youth workers are well placed to appreciate that models also tend to simplify clear-cut categories or types of participation which may not correspond to the chaos of real-world situations. In practice participation may have a dynamic that is much more complex that these models suggest (Barber, 2007: 30).

It has also been suggested that youth participation typologies are insufficiently concerned with the relationship between adult and young people (Hinton, 2008) which can isolate young people’s participation and lead to their further marginalisation (Percy-Smith, 2006a). Models variously place youth acting independently, or in partnership with adults at the apex of the model. Hinton (2008) describes this dichotomy as a ‘zero sum game’. Youth workers likewise need to be cognisant of the implications of choosing one or the other model and as Hinton suggests resist creating a false dichotomy.
International development

Since the early 1980s the active participation of community members has become increasingly prioritised in international development and poverty reduction efforts (Hinton, 2008, Hart, 2008). This movement has promulgated participation as a practice (Couch and Francis, 2006) and has contributed numerous methodologies including participatory action research and participatory learning (Chambers, 2007). International development has also contributed models of participation, including Guijt and Veldhuizen’s (1998) typology which proposed that local involvement in the project stages of development initiatives corresponds to four levels.

The United Nations development agencies are key drivers of development theory, policy and practice as well as of international treaties such as the UNCRC. As such, it is natural that the development of the UNCRC in 1989 would give impetus to practice within international development that realises the right of young people to be heard (Hart, 2008). The result of this acknowledgement is a significant field of youth participation practice, which is typified by its objective of using participation to simultaneously transform children’s lives, their relationships with adults and society as a whole (Hart, 2008). This view of social transformation from the bottom up can be seen to be shared by youth work initiatives such as those featuring in North American youth work literature, which conceive of youth participation as primarily a means for community transformation (O’Donohue et al, 2002; McLaughlin et al, 2001; Checkoway et al, 2003; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster, 2004; Youniss et al, 2002; Villarruel et al, 2003).

The field of international development has also introduced a significant critical theme into the discourse of participation (Singh and Wakeford, 2008, Chambers, 2007). This critique has focused on the common disconnect between local participatory efforts and larger systems, structures and power relations (Hart, 2008). Hinton (2008) has commented on these concerns suggesting that they have influenced the current debates and concerns about youth participation in modern democracies.

Community Work

Community development workers have drawn heavily on Latin American liberation theologians and their efforts to create political consciousness through education for the poor; efforts which subsequently found expression in Freire’s pedagogy (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008). An example of the confluence of these ideas can be found in the community work publication Training for Transformation, which explicitly references both the social gospel and Freireian pedagogy (Hope and Timmel, 1984).

A concern for participatory processes is evinced in community development not just in the empowerment of the poor through Freireian pedagogy, but also through an explicit concern for ‘voice’. Again, Training for Transformation provides an example of this concern: ‘all of us who are involved in community, are immediately confronted with the real life problems of people – people who are caught in a never ending struggle for survival, with … no voice or power in decision making’ (Hope and Timmell, 1984: 3).

The Freireian pedagogy employed in community development has contributed to the development of the concept of participation in international development (Couch
and Francis, 2006) and also to the construction of youth work models such as critical social education (Hurley and Treacy, 1993; Smith, 1982). In youth work Freireian pedagogy provides a practical pathway towards social action (Forrest, 2005). Social action theory has been explicitly referenced in youth work programmes in the United States and the United Kingdom which involve activities such as young people campaigning for social change (Arches and Fleming, 2006). Specific examples of these can be seen in the action research work of Checkoway et al (2003), Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2004) McLoughlin et al (2001).

Public Administration

Public service administration reform is a global reform agenda which encourages accountability in public services through a number of means, including listening to and consulting with service users (Siurala, 2005). Goal One of Ireland’s National Children’s Strategy specifically cites public administration reform objectives and processes.

The Government is committed to delivering better public services under the Strategic Management Initiative. One of the aims of this Initiative is to give increased recognition to service users as clients and customers. This focus is driving improvements in the performance of those public services. Children’s services will benefit from this approach (Government of Ireland, 2000: 30).

A range of commentators view the public administration reform agenda as a co-option of participation in order to achieve public service imperatives rather than the realisation of the right to participate (Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006; Singh and Wakeford, 2008; Arnott, 2008). It has been suggested that a mechanism for this co-option is the emphasis on and resourcing of formal structures for youth participation (Badham and Davies, 2007; Thomas, 2007; Taylor and Smith, 2008). Formal participation structures have been criticised, particularly in the United Kingdom (Tisdall et al, 2008; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008; Hill et al, 2004; Thomas, 2007; Hinton, 2008), though there is also research from contexts such as Australian schools (Harris, 2006) and Norwegian and Slovenian youth parliaments (Thomas, 2007) that reflects poorly on the representativeness and the independence of formal structures. Specific criticisms of formal arrangements are that they often don’t suit the diversity of backgrounds of young people and wide range of skills and capacities (Taylor and Percy-Smith 2008), and children and young people are encouraged to mimic the forms of discourse of adult politicians rather than to find creative ways to have their voices heard (Thomas, 2007).

The literature presents informal and ad hoc participatory social action as an alternative to formal structures. Hill et al (2004) examine informal social action amongst young people in Ireland and the UK and find that such initiatives provide young people with greater independence of action, as well as a greater degree of inclusion. Such actions are similar to the participatory initiatives described in North American youth work and referred to above.

However it is probably over-simplistic to view formal structures as ‘bad’ and informal structures as ‘good’. Certainly, this doesn’t take account of all the experiences of all young people involved in formal structures. Indeed, Pal’s (2008) description of
Indian children’s decision making through elected representatives in local councils presents an account of a strictly representative and yet meaningful formal participation structure. With examples such as this in mind, as well as the need for pragmatism, Prout (2005) encourages practitioners to eschew a dogmatic and polarised view in favour of a practical and considered understanding of which types of participatory structures are most appropriate in any given situation. Moreover, there is evidence (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008) that the greatest potential for impact of young people’s participation is at the interstices between formal and informal space.

**Youth Work**

Youth work is not a well theorised discipline nor is it replete with accounts of practice (Williamson, 2006; Kiely, 1996). For this reason, speaking meaningfully about youth participation as it exists generally in Irish youth work practice is difficult if not impossible. There is no doubt however that youth participation is a core element of Irish youth work theory and policy. Theoretical discussions of youth work models and typologies have included youth participation for some time. Hurley and Treacy (1993) provided the first framework to understand youth work models from a sociological perspective and took youth participation as a key dimension. This is notable as other frameworks do not (see Edjington and Randall, 2005 and Ginwright and James, 2002). As has been noted elsewhere, youth services in the United Kingdom have incorporated participatory models into their curricula since the early 1990s (Ord, 2007). In fact, it is notable that a youth work-based model of participation actually pre-dates Hart’s (1992) model of youth participation: a ‘continuum of youth involvement’ was developed in 1987 by Gill Westhorp of the Youth Sector Training Council of South Australia (Sercombe, 2002).

In Northern Ireland, participation has been central for many years to the development of the youth work curriculum; for example the Participation: Youth Work Curriculum Guidelines were published in 1993. The current curriculum framework from Youth Work – A Model for Effective Practice (2003), identifies participation as one of the three core principles underpinning the personal and social development of young people (Youth Work Northern Ireland, 2003). The discussion of participation in Northern Ireland echoes that of the National Youth Work Development Plan in the Republic in stating that ‘the emphasis in youth work on the importance of the active and critical participation of young people is in keeping with the view that young people have rights as citizens’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: 14; Youth Work Northern Ireland, 2003: 14).

The National Youth Work Development Plan built on many years of policy commitment to youth participation in youth work. The Costello Report (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984) named youth participation as the first of its core values. The Youth Work Act 2001 provides for the active involvement of young people in the governance of youth work through their entitlement to at least one fifth of the seats on Voluntary Youth Councils. Lastly, the Quality Standards Framework for the Youth Sector, which has recently completed its pilot phase, includes youth participation as one of the 18 standards for youth organisations (Department of Education and Science, 2008).
Why Youth Participation in Youth Work?

The following discussion will highlight the range of contributions that youth participation can make to realising and reinforcing the key goals and principles of youth work. To begin with, youth participation in youth work is seen as inherently valuable, not just a means of achieving other goals. In other sectors youth participation is often articulated in terms of its ability to contribute to the key goals of public policy makers (Hill et al, 2004). The National Youth Work Development Plan (NYWDP), however, identifies youth participation as a key principle. It explains that all youth work activities have a common ‘focus on process . . . and – essential for this to happen – on the active and critical participation of young people’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: 13).

Young People’s Safety

The first duty for youth worker is a duty of care for the young people in their charge and youth participation has a vital role to play in realising that duty. The right to be heard is recognised in the Code of Good Practice – Child Protection for the Youth Work Sector, which explicitly references children’s rights as an active principle in child protection.

In promoting the development of young people, youth organisations/groups have a responsibility to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge and confidence to reject any behaviour from their peers or from adults which may threaten them in any way. To achieve this, young people should be facilitated to recognise their rights and obligations to one another and to adults (Department of Education and Science, 003b: 7).

This guideline is grounded in research-based evidence. Practice that makes young people aware of their right to be heard and facilitates that right assists children to report abuse (Lansdown, 2001; Davis, 2007). Conversely, child abuse inquiries repeatedly find that it is the absence of such practice, and environments where children are not listened to, that allows for abuse to take place (Sinclair, 2004).

Moreover, youth participation is a protective factor as it has been demonstrated to foster resilience in children and young people (Couch and Francis, 2006; Werner, 1990 cited in Camino, 2005; Oliver et al, 2006). Resilience is the ability to cope with stress and is one of the key outcomes identified in the Agenda for Children’s Services which is intended to apply to all services working with children in Ireland (Office for the Minister for Children, 2007). Resiliency research has found that young people are better able to deal with the negative impacts of neglect and poverty or other difficult life experiences if they have opportunities to participate meaningfully in their communities and in society through solving problems, setting goals and planning (Werner, 1990, cited in Camino, 2005).

Social Inclusion and Citizenship

Social inclusion is a key concern of youth work in Ireland. Goal 2 of the NYWDP is to ‘enhance the contribution of youth work to social inclusion, social cohesion and active citizenship’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: 17). Youth participation contributes to the realisation of social inclusion; in fact ‘participation can be thought of as the opposite to the process of social exclusion’ (Stevens 1999: 3; cited in Hill et al,
2004). By the same token, the lack of opportunities to make decisions and be heard is, by definition, social exclusion (Davis, 2007, Sinclair, 2004). In promoting young people’s participation in the process of combating social exclusion it is important to note that they define it differently from adults. Children and young people experience poverty uniquely and the solutions to their social exclusion must inevitably reflect their experience (Hill et al., 2004). Evidence from evaluation of participatory initiatives demonstrates that engaging young people in identifying solutions to their social exclusion leads to better services, supports and accessibility (Sinclair, 2004).

Meaningful participation by young people fosters democratic habits of mind, such as tolerance, healthy disagreement, self-expression and cooperation as well as understanding of rights and responsibilities (Graham et al., 2006, O’Donoghue, 2002, Sinclair, 2004, Checkoway et al., 2003). At the same time, the literature suggests that care needs to be taken in how we view young people’s citizenship. Internationally, several authors have argued that many youth participation initiatives amount to a ‘public panic’ that focuses on young people’s citizenship as problematic (Sinclair, 2004, Harris, 2006, Cahill and Hart, 2007). Whether that is a view that informs public policy and practice in Ireland is debatable. The Task Force Report on Active Citizenship found that ‘there is a clear and growing problem about the level of participation in the democratic process, in particular amongst younger people’ (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007:16). It has also been observed that citizenship debate can sometimes generate views of young people as citizens in the making (Davis, 2008; Howe and Covell, 2005). This notion that young people are not full citizens and require maturity in order to take a meaningful place in society is in essence a deficit view which, as discussed earlier, is in contrast to the view of young people held by most youth workers and is contrary to the provisions of the UNCRC.

Closely related to the notion of active citizenship is the currently fashionable concept of social capital. Social capital refers to ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995). The chief contemporary promoter (but not originator) of the concept of social capital, Robert Putnam, believes that decreasing levels of social capital and engagement with democracy, particularly on the part of young people, are endangering society. The active participation of young people in youth work organisations leads directly to their developing social capital and contributing to social inclusion (Jarrett et al., 2005). For this reason, the recent concern within public policy for the generation of social capital should lead to greater public recognition and support of youth participation through youth work.

However, the concept of social capital is limited in several ways. For one thing, young people develop social capital differently than adults do, yet most studies of social capital have little to say about young people (Bassani, 2007). Moreover, an uncritical understanding of social capital does not acknowledge social conflict and inequalities of social and structural resources (Morrow, 1999). To ensure young people’s social engagement, we need to begin with the view that they are citizens and full members of society and acknowledge that they often experience frustration and conflict when they attempt to assert their right to engage in decision making, or to have their voice heard in society (Morrow, 1999).
**Personal, Social and Community development**

Youth work is ‘about adults and young people working together to further personal, community and social development’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a:14). Many researchers have found evidence that active participation in decision-making leads to various elements of personal development, including self-esteem (Morrow, 1999; Alderson, 2008), leadership (Larson et al, 2005; Checkoway et al, 2003), efficacy (Alderson, 2008) and confidence (Checkoway et al, 2003). Most crucially, young people in youth-led programmes report that the skills they have developed carry over into other areas of their lives (Larson et al, 2005). It is in view of the cumulative strength of evidence for the developmental value of youth participation that the UNICEF makes the argument in the *State of the World’s Children* (2003) that youth participation is not simply helpful but is in fact ‘essential to ensuring [children’s and young people’s] growth and development’ (UNICEF, 2006: 9). The same argument can be made in terms of community and social development. There is a substantial literature in which youth participation initiatives are demonstrated to be effective entry points to create positive social change within the community (Checkoway et al, 2003; Hill et al, 2004). The key role that young people and children play in community development becomes clearer when one considers that they constitute 35% of the Irish population (CSO, 2006) and as such should constitute the focal point for service provision in community contexts.

**A Positive View of Young People**

Youth workers and young people are very aware that young people are often viewed negatively in society (Devlin, 2006). News media accounts of young people are most likely to portray them as victims or perpetrators of problematic behaviour. The thinking behind some youth participation initiatives can reflect a similarly dichotomised view of young people, either as active participants or vulnerable and requiring protection (Clarke and Percy-Smith, 2006). Most contemporary youth work policy and practice, however, is based on an unequivocally positive view of young people. This is made explicit in the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: 14). Likewise, the *National Children’s Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2000) takes a view of young people as individuals worthy of respect and dignity (Pinkerton, 2004). Youth participation practitioners and organisations also must have a positive and respectful view of young people in order to engage them meaningfully (Devlin and Healy, 2007; Sinclair, 2004; Checkoway, 2003; O’Donohue et al, 2002; Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006; Cahill and Hart, 2007).

It follows then that negative views of young people limit their opportunities to participate. This happens in various ways. Firstly, negative views have the result of focusing interventions on young people’s deficiencies rather than their strengths (Checkoway et al, 2005). Secondly, by focusing on young people’s deficiencies, negative views weaken the ability of young people to help themselves and empowers the professionals who serve them (Checkoway et al, 2003). Thirdly, such views provide an excuse to delay engagement of young people until they have developed skills require to participate (O’Donohue et al, 2002).
Young people do need support. This however should not serve as a justification for delaying their involvement, or excluding already marginalised young people from participation initiatives. Rather it suggests that young people be given time and space to learn by doing. As the National Children’s Strategy suggests: ‘participation skills will be best learnt by providing children with opportunities to engage and participate i.e. active learning’ (Government of Ireland, 2000: 31).

Discussion
This article has thus far explored two separate, but interlinking topics. The first deals with the sources of youth participation theory, policy and practice. The second examines the contribution of youth participation to realising the key goals and principles of youth work. Within and between these discussions a number of themes are evident and recurring. These include citizenship, the debate about non-formal versus formal approaches, and the link between adults’ attitudes and young people’s perceived skills.

Citizenship
There is a recurring concern with young people’s citizenship in youth participation literature. While there are contrasting views on citizenship and on the closely related concept of social capital, the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003a), the National Children’s Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the UNCRC collectively provide clear guidance for practice and policy; young people are citizens now rather than potential citizens. This principle provides an unambiguous imperative to youth work organisations to counter citizenship discourses which frame young people as citizens in waiting and suggests that the simulation of political involvement is a not a sufficient participatory activity. Rather, citizenship involves having rights and duties and a key element of young people’s participation in Ireland is their active engagement with local and national issues and affairs of importance to them.

Non-formal versus Formal Approaches
Many criticisms have been made of formal structures for their potential to manipulate young people. At the same time, non-formal projects in which young people actively engage with issues in their community have been presented as the ideal form of youth participation. We have seen that the two approaches are often presented as mutually incompatible.

However, it is not helpful to stereotype formal structures as necessarily manipulative. As discussed above, there exist a number of strategies for proofing organisations and participatory activities, formal or otherwise, against manipulation by adults. Not the least amongst these strategies is reflection on the part of adult partners on their own motivations and goals and on whether their formal participatory structures genuinely allow for children and young people to challenge adults’ views (Davies and Badham, 2007).

The view that non-formal social action projects or initiatives are the necessary antidote to tokenism and manipulation of young people appears several times in the literature reviewed. Certainly, social action projects are attractive to those working in youth work contexts in that they usually employ an approach to learning that is
common in youth work and is described in the National Youth Work Development Plan as ‘the ongoing educational cycle of experience, observation, reflection and action, and – essential for this to happen – on the active and critical participation of young people’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003a: 13).

Social action projects are also not dependent on participants possessing a particular skill base, and are therefore much more inclusive and amenable to the various interests and abilities of young people. As such they provide a strategy for engaging with the key concern of social inclusion. Lastly the active engagement with social issues is in keeping with the view of young people as citizens discussed above.

In practice, it may be that a mix of formal structures and social action projects is to be preferred. Certainly, Taylor and Percy-Smith (2008) suggest that the greatest potential for impact on decision-making exists at the interstices between formal and non-formal participation structures.

**Skills and Attitudes**

The skills perceived to be important for participation are closely related to adults’ attitudes towards young people. The link is evident when one considers that the emphasis is usually on the lack of skills on the part of young people, rather than on the part of adults (Larson et al, 2005). As Badham and Davies (2007) point out:

> Adults often emphasise the need for young people to learn effective participation skills. Young people agree, but know from their experience that adults have far more learning to undo to create a climate of mutual respect and develop an attitude and approach that promotes effective participation with a focus on substantial change, not smoke and mirrors (Badham and Davies, 2007: 87).

We need to ensure that our emphasis on skills for participation is not an enactment of a deficit view of young people, or a failure to find creative ways to engage young people as they are. Certainly, it can be argued that with sufficient creativity and innovation active participation is not dependent upon the possession of any particular skills at all (Hill et al., 2004). This is not to suggest the skills deficit, if any exists, is on the part of adults alone. It is, however, adults who must take responsibility for the challenge to engage young people through dialogue and to identify and respond to their needs (Davies and Badham, 2007). In this way youth work can offer a diverse array of participatory activities, appropriate to the interests and needs of young people.

**Conclusion**

Youth work theory and policy have embraced youth participation, specifically referencing Article 12 of the UNCRC as a principle for practice and holding youth participation as a goal in itself, with its own inherent value as well as being a means of realising other goals and principles in youth work. Indeed, as UNICEF (2003) suggests, youth participation is essential in order to realise the personal growth and development of young people, which is one of youth work’s central goals.

Following on from the adoption of Article 12, youth work policy can be seen to view young people as citizens now rather than citizens in the making. This view has a number of consequences for youth work practice, not the least of which is a rejection
(or at the very least a questioning) of youth participation activities which are designed primarily as a preparation for young people to become citizens in the future. Arguably, there are other consequences of this view that have not been considered here. It is hoped however that the discussion above will contribute to debate and discussion about the nature of youth participation within the Irish youth work sector.

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References


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