Youth Work as a Public Good

Older Teenagers' Experiences of Youth Services in Dublin

Matt Bowden and Kerri Martin Lanigan

Abstract

In the context of consumerism, individualism and the privatisation of young people's leisure, youth work struggles to attract young people, especially those aged 15 to 19 years. Drawing from a study exploring young people's perspectives on participation in youth services, it is argued that youth work offers a type of public and civic engagement that is not on offer from consumption-based activities. While certain activities attract young people *into* youth work, what maintains their participation is the sense of belonging they experience and the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision making. In this regard the youth work sector needs to recognise and promote the value of its own contribution to the construction and maintenance of youth participation as a public good – something the market cannot or will not provide.

Keywords

Youth work; youth participation; public good

Introduction

National and international research has clearly shown the positive benefits youth work can have for the young people involved (Forde et al., 2009; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Merton et al., 2004). However, it has consistently been found that older teenagers participate less in youth services (City of Dublin Youth Service Board, 2008b; Department of Education and Science, 2003; Powell et al., 2010). Consequently youth work has two central organisational challenges: the first is participation and the second is retention once participation has commenced. Recent youth policy has failed, it might be argued, to put young people at the centre of service provision and has led to young people being treated as passive consumers of youth services (McMahon, 2009). It also might be argued that young people themselves play only a minimal, perhaps tokenistic role in the formulation of youth work policy, a view voiced by McAuley and Brattman (2002). In a similar way, the research design in a recent independent national study of youth work provision in Ireland (Powell et al., 2010) did not include direct consultation with young people. Our point here is that young people's experiences are central to developing a critical account of the qualitative value of youth work participation to those who take part directly, and ultimately to the creation of an inclusive society.

The research from which this article is drawn focused on the perspectives of young

people aged 15–19 years old who are involved in youth services, to ascertain their reasons for becoming and remaining involved in such services. The results of the research suggest that once engaged in the youth work process, the young people gained access to a type of public engagement, involving the formation of relationships and civic engagement as a public good, that they may not have experienced through private consumption. A 'public good', much like clean air, is based upon value that is created collectively for all and refers to those goods that the market system of production and distribution cannot or will not produce (Batina and Ihori, 2005). In the current climate, with a focus on outcomes, youth services are under considerable pressure to ensure that young people are engaging in services. The results of the study provide an insight into why young people aged 15–19 become and remain involved in youth services thereby enabling youth organisations to develop policies and programmes which enhance engagement. This is critical as a building block for young people's engagement in the public sphere more generally.

We introduce theoretical concepts throughout the article. These are intended not only as a way of interpreting the data but also as a way of building a critical social practice. We draw in particular on the social scientific tradition associated with Pierre Bourdieu (for example Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) which unites an interpretivist sociology with structural analysis. Bourdieu used the term field to describe how actors' subjective understandings (practical sense) take formation in arenas that shape that understanding. Youth workers and young people are part of the educational field and so young people's voices that emerge through the data are not strictly spontaneous but produced within educational structures and their associated practices. In this paper we adopt a methodological relationalism (Wacquant, 1992) whereby theory is used to relate the experiences of young people to the structures in which they act.

Context for youth work in contemporary Ireland

In the last ten to fifteen years we have seen dramatic economic, political, technological and cultural changes in Irish society. In this period we have witnessed unprecedented economic growth, bringing with it a culture of consumerism and individualism (see Kuhling and Keohane, 2007), followed by severe and steep economic decline, associated with the country's exposure to economic global risk. The problems of youth unemployment and emigration, more reminiscent of the 1980s, have begun to re-emerge as a concern (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2010). In common with other globalised societies, young people in Ireland are more visible as a social group and as objects and subjects of policy concern (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010: 7) yet they continue to be excluded from public spaces (Bowden, 2006; Copeland, 2004). Their personal lives are also more complex, involving a greater range of choices relating to lifestyle, relationships and sexuality (Merton et al., 2004), while increasingly their leisure time and exercise are subject to wider use of surveillance and control (Squires and Stephen, 2004). Youth work has also been usurped into wider domains of governance in the form of behaviour regulation (Bowden, 2006). Wider changes such as these are more typical of the dizzying nature of late modern society: its inclusion-exclusion dynamic best understood as the greater freedom to consume and yet greater control and security in public (Young, 2007).

Changes in the lives of young people, and how they spend their time in this late modern landscape means that youth work, in order to be engaging, and ultimately, successful, must come up with appropriate ways to stimulate the interest of older teenagers in particular (Department Of Education And Science, 2003; France and Wiles, 1997; Smith, 2001; Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005). While on the one hand young people live in families and undergo transitions through education and the labour market, they no longer depend on subcultural affirmation for the construction of their identities … but construct lifestyles that are as adaptable and as flexible as the world around them (Miles, 2000: 160). This idea rejects the assumption of modernisation theory that society is constantly progressing forward. Progress has both positive and negative effects – consumption and waste for instance – and presents opportunities for both self-actualization and risk (see Beck, 1992). To steer their own life projects, individuals and institutions need to be reflexive: a flexible youth work curriculum eschews by definition the one size fits all approach more suited to the modern concern with the march of progress (see France and Wiles, 1997).

Given the demands on young people and the vast range of lifestyles available to them, the voluntary nature of youth work – a central feature as outlined in the Youth Work Act 2001 – presents the challenge of attracting and sustaining the interest and commitment of young people (Department Of Education And Science, 2003). Voluntary engagement is essential in building trust, respect and self-esteem (Merton et al., 2004; Ord, 2009), and interventions with young people will only be effective if the young people allow them to be (Crimmens et al., 2004). In order for youth work to be successful in encouraging the voluntary and active engagement of young people, it needs to start where young people are at, by listening, understanding, and responding to where they are coming from. This involves taking account of the wider changes shaping young people's lifestyles, culture, interests and abilities (Spence, 2007; Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005).

As youth work takes place in a space of engagement that is neither school, family, nor work, it constitutes part of civil society – a public process. As a process it involves the building and sharing of both bridging and bonding social capital through the formation of relationships between young people and adults, young people and their communities and between young people themselves (Bassani, 2007; Jarett et al., 2005; Merton et al., 2004; Scottish Government, 2008; Smith, 2001). Participation in youth work not only relates to 'turning up', but also to having an input into the planning and running of the group (Seebach, 2008; Shaw and McCulloch, 2009; Shier, 2001). The youth work relationship is essential to the meaningful participation of young people in the youth work process (McKee et al., 2010) and youth workers must ensure opportunities are provided for building interpersonal relationships with young people (Galvin, 1995). Informal education is considered to be the learning that flows from the conversations and activities involved in being members of youth and community groups (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 5). The success of the non-formal aspect of youth work, in other words the planned programmes (Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005), is dependent '… upon the informality of youth work relationship building' (Spence, 2007: 7). Opportunities for decision-making, relationship development and informal learning take place in non-formal settings, through young people's engagement in a range of activities (Curriculum Development Unit, 2003; Department Of Education

And Science, 2003). The flexibility and responsiveness of youth work are what make it valuable, so predetermined targets are not necessary in order to achieve outcomes (Brent, 2004). In this way, youth work and any agenda for state surveillance or discipline appear to be incompatible.

Against this backdrop of the nature of late modern society with all its lifestyle opportunities and risks, and the recognition of the need for a changing scope for youth work practice and curriculum, the research study sought to explore two critical aspects of the contribution of youth work as a public good: motivations for opting in; and, once in, experiences contributing to a sense of inclusiveness that ensures that young people 'stay in'. The inspiration for this approach stems from Jeffs and Smith's (2002) critique of the late modern turn in British youth work which they argued has moved on the one hand towards promoting individualism through tailored advice and guidance, and on the other hand toward an intelligence-led model of youth work as a form of policing. Hence, there is a need to value the contribution of youth work to the democratic life of society in its own right.

The research study

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in two youth work sites in Dublin city. Both are independently managed youth services under the aegis of City of Dublin Youth Services Board, whose staff facilitated initial contact with the projects.

A multi-methods approach to data collection was used within a case study design (Bryman, 2004; Gerring, 2007). A review of policy documents provided insights into the context in which the youth work process took place. This was followed by participant observation in each site over a four-week period, complementing the accounts of the young people and written information about the two settings (Patton, 2002). The participant observation also provided an opportunity for impromptu interviewing with key informants.

An online self-completion questionnaire provided descriptive quantitative data relating to young peoples decisions to become and remain involved in youth services. Youth workers within each site were provided with a link to the survey and asked to invite young people to participate while in the centre. Three weeks into data collection, youth workers were asked to forward the questionnaire link to young people who had not attended the centre in the previous weeks. While it was not possible to log the total number receiving the link and thus to calculate a definitive response rate, all those commencing the online survey finished the questionnaire. A total of 44 questionnaires were completed, 23 by males (52%) and 21 by females (48%). Ten respondents (23%) were aged 15, 19 (43%) were aged 16, two (5%) were aged 17, five (11%) were aged 18 and eight (18%) were aged 19. Seventeen (39%) respondents had been involved in youth services for up to a year while twenty seven (61%) were involved for longer than one year.

Finally, in order to explore the issues in further depth, a set of focus groups was facilitated. Morgan (as cited in Cohen et al., 2000: 288) suggests there should be between four and twelve people in a focus group and advises over-recruiting by twenty per cent in order to allow for people not turning up. Although the researcher followed this advice, only three of the eight young people recruited for the focus group in Site

1 turned up on the day. This focus group was made up of two females aged 15 years old and one male aged 16 years old. Each of these young people had been involved for one year or less. In Site 2, the focus group consisted of nine young people, five males and four females. One male was aged 16 yrs old, three females and three males were aged 18 years old and one male and one female were aged 19 years old. Apart from one male who had just recently become involved, the remaining participants in Site 2 had been involved in youth services for more than two years.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data based on a review of the literature and themes emerging inductively from all data sources (Glaser and Strauss, as cited in Charmaz, 2006: 11). The quantitative data generated from the questionnaire was analysed using Survey Monkey, the online software package.

Relationships: young people and their peers

The first of the findings relates to the centrality of peer relationships as a factor in young peoples decisions to become and remain involved in youth services. For the majority of young people surveyed (57%), the most influential factor in their decision to become involved in youth services was having friends who were members, or who joined with them. In focus groups, reasons given by young people for their initial and continued involvement centred on 'friends', 'the people' or 'meeting new people'. This was particularly evident where young people spoke about opting in so as to achieve a sense of belonging:

> ... the reason why I joined is 'cos the rest of them are already in it and then I wasn't in it, and then every Tuesday or probably Sunday and they're all like I'm going off here with [name of centre] or I'm going there and I was just left alone ... (Male, focus group, Site 2)

In addition, the opt-in appears to reinforce a sense of community together with opportunities to make connections with other young people:

> ... for the people that are in the building itself ... as I said there is a good sense of community and you do make friendships from coming up here. (Male, focus group, Site 2)

Young people's sense of identity has been found to change as a result of participating in a youth group (Merton et al., 2004). A common theme emerging in both sites was that young people feel comfortable to be themselves and not be judged. The following comments suggest that through their involvement in youth services the young people appear to feel released from 'role performance', postures and putting on a face. This release appears to contribute to their decision to remain involved;

> ... and like it doesn't matter whether you're eh small, tall, squeaky voice … just be yourself and no one will care or anything, but where on the road like, that's it you're gone … ye have to be the hard man. (Male, focus group, Site 2)

> … you know when you go in the door you're not gonna be hassled, you're not gonna have to like kinda put on a face, you can just go in and that's it, and be yourself. (Female, focus group, Site 2)

The findings from the current study are supported by previous research which has found that being involved in youth services assists young people in developing positive relationships with their peers and can help create a sense of belonging and solidarity through the creation of relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Merton et al., 2004). For young people, peer relationships provide them with support and the space to express their concerns as well as connecting them to community (Harris et al., 2007).

Relationships: youth workers and young people

Much youth work literature has stressed that the success of youth work will largely depend on the quality of the youth worker-young person relationship (Curriculum Development Unit, 2003, Harland and Morgan, 2006; Smith, 2001). The current study found this relationship to be a key factor in retaining involvement. The literature also highlights trust and respect as essential for successful practice and suggests that these are developed through conversation and interaction (Crimmens et al., 2004; Curriculum Development Unit, 2003; Spence, 2007). In the research by Merton et al. (2004) many young people identified a trust and mutual respect in their relationships with youth workers that was lacking in their relationships with other adults. The young people in the current study also spoke in very positive terms of their relationships with youth workers. Most survey respondents (see Table 1) thought youth workers always listen to them and treat them with respect; always give young people advice and information; always give young people 'a say' and can always be trusted.

	Always %	Sometimes %	Never %	Total %
It is easier to talk to youth workers	61	37	2	100
You can trust youth workers	82	18	0	100
Youth workers listen to young people	91	9	0	100
Youth workers give young people a say	82	18	0	100
Youth workers give young people advice and information	84	16	0	100
Youth workers are more like friends	64	29	7	100
Youth workers treat young people with respect	91	9	0	100

Table 1:   *Young people's opinions about youth workers*

While relationships with youth workers and peers are critical, the research found that motivations for initiating involvement and factors contributing to retention emanate from a variety of sources. Both youth work sites in this study have been proactive in creating opportunities for relationship building through the provision of youth

café/drop-in spaces, activities and programmes of interest to the young people and opportunities for participation in decision-making. When a young person enjoyed themselves the first time they attended the centre, they were more likely to return regularly making attendance part of a weekly routine, as the following comment suggests:

> [I]...remember I was like, no I don't wanna go down 'cos I thought it would have been boring...and then when [friend] was saying come down to just see what it's like and then I came down and once I came down, I wanted to keep coming down. (Female, focus group, Site 1).

The contemporary youth work curriculum

According to France and Wiles (1997) youth services in the late modern context should provide carefully tailored services for different groups of young people with different needs and wants. In the current climate, where funding has become more targeted, the youth café model offers youth organisations the opportunity to continue to provide a universal service to all young people (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010) while also providing targeted curriculum in accordance with the needs of young people. In line with Powell et al. (2010) this study found that the provision of a youth café is a contemporary intervention which gives youth workers the opportunity to 'start where young people are at '(Spence, 2007: 13) and which can play a part in progression to more structured programmes and services (Forkan et al., 2010; O'hAodain, 2010). The current research suggests that the youth café is an essential part of the attractiveness of youth work to young people. However it may be the informal drop-in dimension (which has been characteristic of youth work for many years) that they find attractive rather than the 'youth café' model *per se*. This is a matter that merits further research.

The provision of activities and programmes of interest to young people was also found to be a factor in many young peoples decision to become and remain involved in youth services. In the survey, over one third of young people (36%) indicated that they joined 'to get involved in activities' while 39% said that they remain involved because 'it's fun'. In focus groups young people said that they stay involved because of the enjoyment and because 'it gives you something to do that's fun'. This is in line with previous research which found that young people are more likely to be open to, and gain benefits from, programmes that are of interest and importance to them as opposed to being focused on the 'issues' they may have (Crimmens et al., 2004; Halpern, 2005; Merton et al., 2004). The current study suggests that young people are attracted into spaces that act as a hub for a variety of connected activities:

> ... some of us were doing drumming lessons and guitar lessons, Ben is doing cooking classes … Colm is doing media group and there was a make-up course that we were doing as well ... ah there's loads. (Female, focus group, Site 2).

The right to the city and beyond

The location of the youth centres is a critical dimension in creating a sense of the public in the areas studied. Both areas are typically referred to as deprived or disadvantaged as scored on the SAHRU Deprivation Index (CDYSB, 2008a). Scholars have noted the tendency in locales such as these for desolation, despair and stigma (Bourdieu, 1994; Power, 1997; Wacquant, 2008) as they are set adrift and peripheralised. The young people in this study seem to experience both the physical youth work facilities and the relationships within them as constructing a sense of place, emphasising the value of youth work as a public good:

> Basically if you look around [area name], there is nothing there for youth so that would be one reason, this is here, so we may as well use it...(Male, focus group, Site 2)

> ... ye realise that there's actually something here in [area name] that's like, not bad, like ye can go and enjoy yourself and wont have to worry like, there's always a place to go (Female, focus group, Site 1).

Referring to the youth centre, a young woman in one of the fieldwork sites said that she thought 'people don't have to look at [name of area] as a bad place anymore 'cos of places like this'. The young people placed a value on youth work that suggests it acts as a protective factor against the stigma associated with their areas in the city as a whole.

A critical theme emerging in this research study was the connections that youth work provides between young people, the wider city and beyond. This has to do with the way in which youth workers link young people to networks. There has been considerable scholarly and practice interest in social capital and voluntary participation in the last decade (see Putnam, 2001). researchers in the North of England (MacDonald et al., 2005: 885) found that:

> ... while connections to local networks could help in coping with the problems of growing up in poor neighbourhoods and generate a sense of inclusion, the sort of social capital embedded in them served simultaneously to limit the possibilities of escaping the conditions of social exclusion.

In this respect, it is not surprising that commentators have argued that youth work should move beyond the local context (Kirby, as cited in Treacy, 2009: 242). It would appear from this research that involvement in youth services can help to overcome the limits associated with growing up in areas that experience such sustained marginality. While being a hub for local community activities and in-house fun activities, youth workers in Site 2 are involved in the creating of relationships and opportunities over a wider geographical scale. As one young male respondent put it:

> Our main goal was to do kind of activities in our area but since then we've kind of grown and now we are doing it at national and European level as well.

The young people in Site 2 discussed at length, and with great pride, the activities at local, national and European level that their groups have been involved in, ranging from fundraising in their centres, to health promotion activities at national level to cultural exchanges. Three young women commented as follows:

> We do stuff in [name of centre] … we were like doing fashion shows and like talent nights in.

> We'd a week for Haiti as well a couple of weeks ago.

> Where every night there was … with all the kids that do the music so, they put on a night show and there was fun days and there was everything. I dunno how much they raised in the end.

The young people in this focus group also spoke about the different organisations they have been involved with such as the Irish Cancer Society, Habitat Ireland and the National Youth Council of Ireland.

> Were also linked in with the NYCI … we have an annual meeting, only four of us were chosen and we go away with them … just to pilot this thing called One World Week, so that's one of the activities. (Male, focus group, Site 2)

These activities beyond the local level have given the young people a greater sense of confidence for wider participation and they appear to be a factor in their remaining involved in the process:

> It has helped us communicate ourselves better, and advocate for what we believe in and stuff like that, gives us a voice, like we have a lot of session talks like so they give us confidence. (Male, focus group, Site 2)

Focus group participants in Site 2 did not believe these opportunities would be available to them elsewhere and in particular not in school. The following comment was made by a young person who had just received a call in relation to appearing on an upcoming RTÉ television show:

> … I mean to think of the way, how shy I could have been right now like if I'd never have joined here…I ended up getting a phone call and everything about it, which is something I'd never have gotten the opportunity to do or had the confidence to do…(Female, focus group, Site 2).

It should be noted that apart from one male the remainder of the young people in the focus group in Site 2 had been involved with the youth service for more than two years. With the exception of one male, the young people in the focus group in Site 1 were younger than those in Site 2 and had been involved in the youth service for one year or less. These young people had been going to the youth café and from there had become involved in a music group. They had not yet become involved in any other activity or group. Further research might look at the relationship between young people's involvement in youth café/drop in services and their subsequent participation in more structured activities and programmes.

Active participation

Youth services have to adapt organisational structures and processes to sustain young people's involvement as they get older. Powell et al. suggest that older teenagers are particularly interested in the informal structure of the youth café as it gives them a 'place to hang out' (2010: 39). Similarly, in the current study the most common

response given by survey respondents for continued involvement was that it was 'a good place to hang out' (46%). Also in line with Powell et al. (2010), this research found that those young people who were new to youth services valued having a place to go, to meet with and hang out with friends. However this may not be the case for all older teenagers, particularly those aged 18–19 years old. The research points towards an interesting hypothesis: that the longer young people are involved with youth work and as they get older, other factors such as having an input into decisions begin to have a greater impact on their decision to remain involved. Such a hypothesis might be the subject of further research in this field.

Opportunities for active involvement in decision-making processes influenced many young people's (34%) decision to remain involved in youth services, particularly those involved for longer than one year and those aged 18–19 years old. When their responses to other survey questions are considered, it would appear that many of the young people in this study are satisfied with their level of input into decisions. For example over 90% of survey respondents agreed with the statement that 'youth work gives me the chance to have my opinion heard'. This was supported in the focus group discussions:

> Like there's nothing really that doesn't come back to us at some stage...from the times of drop-ins, what goes on in the drop-ins, how to get people in … everything is down to us and our opinions, so it's brilliant that way. (Female, focus group, Site 2).

However, the young people in Site 2 did speak about their current lack of input into the process of recruitment and selection of staff. The following comments suggest that these young people wish to expand their current level of input into such decision-making.

> There's one thing that we haven't got input into...recruitment and selection of people...because it is the people that we are going to be dealing with...on a daily basis.

Another young person explained that this group will have an input into the recruitment process in the near future.

> They are starting up a recruitment process … and [name of group] is going to have the chance to partake in it … not that we will have the final say but we'll have our input on the type of questions that are being asked to the person that's coming getting interviewed.

Although the young people in both sites appear to be satisfied with their level of input into decision-making the research found that youth participation in boards of management remains relatively low: the ratio of adults to young people on the board of management in Site 1 is 8:1 and in Site 2 is 19:2, raising questions about the possibility for young people to have a meaningful role in decision-making. Whether young people's input will have any real impact will also depend on their ability to articulate their views in a confident manner (Shier, 2001). According to Cockburn (2007) projects successful in fostering the participation of young people work towards ensuring equity between adults and young people by embedding young people in the

decision-making processes, by accommodating their everyday informal languages and by changing the settings to accommodate them while also avoiding patronage and tokenism. Increasing participation in key decision-making structures would appear to be a key issue for further policy development if youth work advances as a democratic form of public participation.

Young people's active participation in decision-making has many benefits, including improved quality of service provision, improved sense of ownership and belonging among young people and increased self-esteem (Seebach, 2008; Shier, 2001). Youth workers are in a position to create opportunities and a space where young people have a voice (Shaw and McCulloch, 2009). However, this would require a move away from working *for* young people to the more egalitarian notion of working *with* young people (Barber, 2007).

In this vein, a number of writers have differentiated between consultation and participation (Edwards, 2008; Shier, 2001; Kirby et al., 2003). *Consultation* is most often driven by adults who hold the power to consult and they decide what to do with the information; *participation* refers to young people taking an active part in a project or process, not just as consumers but as key contributors to the direction and implementation of work carried out (Bell, as cited in Barber, 2007: 28). In order to move from consultation to participation there must be a commitment from the adults to share their power with young people (Shier, 2001). A number of participation models have been proposed over the years. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation is often considered to be the most influential model (Barn and Franklin, as cited in Seebach, 2008: 41). It presents 'degrees of participation' ranging from 'manipulation' at the lowest level to 'child-initiated shared decisions with adults' at the highest level. Barber (2007) criticises this model for not addressing how such participation might happen, or taking account of the different levels of ability among young people.

The current survey found that the longer young people were involved (longer than one year) and the older they were (18–19 year olds) the more influence being involved in decision making had on their decision to remain involved in the youth services. As mentioned above, the young people in the focus group in Site 1 were on average younger and involved for a shorter period of time than those in the focus group in Site 2 and despite not having as much of an input into decisions they were satisfied that they could have their opinions heard:

> … 'cos all ye have to do is talk to [youth workers' names] and they'll see if
> they can facilitate it for you. (Male, focus group, Site 2)

Treseder (1997) provides a useful model of participation by children and young people based upon a continuum that ranges from consultation to full direction by young people and children (see Figure 1). The current research found that the decision-making structures in both youth work sites corresponded closely with Treseder's model and appear to be successful at least from the young people's point of view. As young people initiate contact in youth café and drop-in activities they occupy the adult-initiated/shared decision space. With deepening and sustained participation, as they become more involved in regular or structured activities, the young people report that they shift towards the youth-initiated/shared decisions space.

	Assigned but not informed Adults decide – children and young people volunteer; adults respect child/youth views	
Consulted and informed Designed and run by adults with youth consultation – the latter understand the process and have their views considered	**Degrees of Participation**	**Adult initiated – shared decisions** Young people are involved in implementing an idea initiated by adults – enables decision making by children/ youth
	Child/youth initiated, shared decisions with adults Children and youth set up projects and are resourced by adults	**Child/youth initiated and directed** Young people initiate the idea and determine how the project is implemented with adults available to them

Figure 1: *Treseder's (1997) Model of Participation (adapted)*

In line with Treseder's model, the findings suggest that if youth services are to be successful in sustaining the involvement of older teenagers, the age and maturity of the young people must be taken into account to ensure that participation is at the most appropriate level of decision-making. This is the level that matches the young people's wishes and capacities while acknowledging what is possible for the organisation (Barber, 2007). While the task may be challenging, ultimately the opportunity is to invest in the development of a publically engaged social citizenship appropriate to the late modern age.

Conclusion

The results of this study point to the importance of participative space to young people and the capacity of youth work to provide such a space. The young people in this study appear to endorse the idea that youth services provide them with a resource not available to them outside of this involvement. What may appear as ordinary or commonplace to some observers – enabling young people to 'hang out' with friends, be themselves, get involved in activities of interest to them, build relationships with youth workers and have an input into decisions that affect them – are the very things that appear to create and support public engagement. For young people, ''hanging out' is about independence, meeting and being with friends and being in a place where they can see and be seen (Panelli et al., 2002: 38). In this sense, youth work is about building an inclusive space that frees young people from a variety of 'gazes' that govern them during childhood and early adolescence.

The findings are supported by a wide range of literature that has noted the exclusion of young people from public spaces (Bowden, 2006; Copeland, 2004; France and Wiles, 1997; Kiely, 2009). Article 15 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child promotes the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly (United Nations, 1989: 4). However, the late modern inclusion-exclusion dynamic (Young, 2007) and trend towards the privatisation of public facilities and services encourages the exclusion of those who are considered to be undesirable, often young people, and can in turn limit their lifestyle choices to second rate public space and facilities (France and Wiles, 1997: 70). France and Wiles (1997) oppose the neo-liberal ideology that suggests that what is offered by youth work would be better provided by commercial leisure facilities, as they believe this ideology wrongly assumes that the market will provide for all young people while ignoring the exclusion of young people from private/public space. Despite the lure of endless choice, the dominant consumer/market culture does not deliver much choice to young people (Shaw and McCulloch, 2009).

Contemporary youth work must create a space where young people critique and analyse the world around them in order transform it:

> Through engaging young people in programmes which seek to develop their sociological imagination and, collectively, to act on the world around them, they may come to feel they have a stake in changing it for the benefit of all (Shaw and McCulloch, 2009: 13).

The findings from the current research support the argument put forward by a variety of authors in this field (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Bowden, 2006), following a line of thought forged by scholars such as Habermas (1984), that the public sphere is a space for conversation in which actors constitute social life and democracy through reason, relationships and dialogue. This youth public sphere is co-produced by young people and youth workers through the (non-formal and informal) curriculum and through their relationships. To make it real, youth services need to invest in youth participation as a public good by fostering a culture of participation and active conversation. As a result of the changing nature of the public sphere, particularly the shrinking of public space available for use by young people as it is supplanted by consumer culture, the definition of civic engagement has broadened in recent literature to include leisure

activities and non-traditional and transitory association such as online groups (Harris et al., 2007: 19). It is suggested that young people prefer to engage in informal activities that connect them with others and that have not been structured by adults or organisations. Strategies aimed at increasing youth civic engagement and participation must engage differently with young people, taking into consideration the new activities and spaces where they create communities and networks (Harris et al., 2007).

The research that we have drawn upon in this article enables us to explore youth participation in the context of a particular discourse, one that values participation in its own right without serving any external moral, ethical or social control agenda. It is clear that what youth services offer these young people that other forms of engagement do not is a place to go where they can be with friends, get involved in activities of interest to them, form relationships with youth workers and have an input into decisions that affect them. This in turn provides a sense of identity and belonging and, further, a more solid anchoring in local, municipal and public life. We suggest that further research into this topic, locally and over a wider scale, might investigate more rigorously the role of youth work as a form of democratic, purposeful action.

Note

1. Jock Young's argument is that late modernity is characterized by uncertainty and insecurity and he uses the metaphor of vertigo – the fear of falling, relating to the idea of ontological insecurity which Giddens (1990) argued was the spirit of the late modern age.

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