Who Really Has a Say? Rethinking Youth Work, Participation, and the Role of Governance and Research in Shaping Educational Power

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Introduction: Who Really Has a Say?

Formal schooling continues to dominate how education is framed and valued. However, young people learn, build agency, and contest power far beyond the confines of the classroom. Youth work is relational, community-based, often informal, and offers an alternative vision of education rooted in participation, co-creation, and everyday agency (Batsleer, 2008; Coburn, 2011; de St Croix, 2016). It creates everyday spaces where young people are listened to, supported, and treated as capable agents.

Alongside this, growing attention has been paid to youth participation in governance and research. In governance, this includes attempts to involve young people in decision-making through advisory boards, consultations, or participatory budgeting. In research, participatory approaches have invited young people to shape research questions, methods, and findings. These developments signal a broader discursive shift toward recognising young people's rights to influence the systems that affect their lives (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Fine & Torre, 2021). However, in practice, many initiatives fall short. Without structural commitments to share power, governance, and research efforts can reproduce the hierarchies they aim to challenge (Bovill, 2020; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Youth work, while often more participatory in practice, remains undervalued in both policy and educational discourse.

I argue that supporting meaningful youth participation requires addressing the intersections between youth work, governance, and research. Rather than positioning one space as the solution, I explore how power is negotiated, and often constrained, across these domains. Recognising youth work as a legitimate educational space and examining how governance and research structures can be made more accountable to young people is critical to moving beyond tokenism. While this discussion draws primarily on UK and European contexts, the tensions it explores resonate globally, raising questions about whose perspectives shape decisions that determine

young people's futures. It also considers how their influence can be embedded in institutions and policies, and what accountability is needed to ensure their participation leads to lasting change.

Youth Work: Learning Beyond the Classroom

Youth work refers to informal, community-based educational practices that prioritise relational engagement, co-creation, and young people's agency (Batsleer, 2008; Coburn, 2011; Mackie, 2019). Unlike traditional schooling, which often emphasises standardisation and measurable outcomes (Ball, 2012), youth work creates flexible, youth-centred spaces that allow for critical exploration of identity, power, and community (Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Ord, 2016). This approach resonates with Freire's (2000) conception of education as an emancipatory process, where learners become active agents rather than passive recipients. Through youth work, young people develop social awareness, build leadership skills, and engage in collective action, often while navigating structural disadvantages and social marginalisation (de St Croix, 2016; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Ord, 2016).

Young people's access to and experiences in youth work are influenced by intersecting factors such as race, class, gender, and disability (Gaventa, 2006; Mackie, 2019). Recognising these intersections is vital to ensure that youth work genuinely supports all young people instead of perpetuating existing inequalities. Despite its transformative potential, youth work remains undervalued and underfunded within policy and academic discourses (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Mackie, 2019). Recognising it as a legitimate, well-resourced space for learning is essential for expanding educational equity and fostering more inclusive models of youth development. However, youth work does not operate in isolation. The language of participation now extends across multiple fields, including governance and research, each presenting unique tensions, opportunities, and risks for young people.

Participation: Between Symbolism and Substance

Participation is widely promoted as a democratic ideal, yet its practical enactment often falls short of its promises. In educational contexts, participatory approaches encourage students to become co-creators of knowledge rather than passive consumers (Biesta, 2007; Bovill, 2020; hooks, 1994). In research, participatory methodologies invite young people into meaningful roles as collaborators, shaping research questions and design (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Fine & Torre, 2021). In governance, youth involvement is frequently limited to advisory boards or consultation exercises (Kallio & Häkli, 2015; Percy-Smith, 2010; Sinclair, 2006). As Hart (1992) describes in the ladder of participation, these forms of engagement often risk becoming tokenistic, appearing inclusive while reinforcing adult control. This tension is not limited to schools or political institutions. Even in youth work settings, where relationships and participation are often more embedded, constraints on time, funding, and political will can limit participation in decision-making. Lundy's

(2007) model, emphasising space, voice, audience, and influence, provides a valuable lens to assess whether participation initiatives move beyond symbolism to genuine impact. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) critique of the 'new tyranny' of participation highlights how power is frequently kept at the top, with participatory processes serving as symbolic gestures rather than mechanisms of shared governance. Some analyses emphasise that even so-called "co-created" spaces can inadvertently reproduce inequalities if not supported by structural shifts (Checkoway, 2011; Lundy, 2007; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020).

Youth-Led Governance and Power

Youth-led governance can create opportunities for substantive participation when young people are embedded meaningfully in decision-making structures, though institutional power dynamics often constrain such efforts. Participatory budgeting initiatives, for instance, invite young people to help allocate local resources, ostensibly empowering them as community stakeholders. However, studies reveal that their recommendations are often diluted or overridden due to financial and political constraints (Bovill, 2020; Williams et al., 2017; Young et al., 2023).

Grassroots youth movements, such as global climate strikes and anti-racist organising, illustrate more radical models of youth-led governance and collective action. These movements show how young people can articulate demands, mobilise peers, and challenge dominant policy narratives, even in the face of significant institutional resistance (Majid & Zainullah, 2023; Pickard, 2019).

While limited participatory experiences can build political literacy and confidence (Checkoway, 2011; Majid & Zainullah, 2023; Wong et al., 2010), truly transformative participation requires institutional structures that enable all four dimensions of Lundy's (2007) framework: (1) creating safe, supportive spaces to express their views; (2) enabling communication in their own ways; (3) ensuring appropriate audiences hear them; and (4) enabling them to influence outcomes meaningfully. Without this, even well-intentioned initiatives risk reinforcing power imbalances rather than dismantling them.

Bridging Research and Practice: Interdisciplinary Opportunities

Bridging research, practice, and policy can support efforts toward more meaningful youth participation, but only when such collaborations attend to structural power and recognise the lived realities of young people. Social science researchers, youth work practitioners, and policymakers can collaborate to co-produce knowledge and develop policies that reflect the lived experiences and priorities of young people (Fine & Torre, 2021; Mackie, 2019; Thomson, 2008). Participatory research methods, including visual and arts-based approaches, can help shift knowledge production toward young people's terms, though this depends on how power, ethics, and follow-

through are handled (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Thomson, 2008). Interdisciplinary collaborations that bring together perspectives from education, youth studies, policy research, and community development are critical to creating models that support genuine youth leadership and transformative change. Practical strategies could include (1) establishing youth policy councils with decision-making power; (2) co-governance models in schools, universities, and communities; and (3) long-term partnerships between academic institutions and community organisations (Ross et al., 2018; Young et al., 2023). While these approaches may support structural embedding of participation, their impact depends on sustained partnerships, youth leadership, and institutional willingness to share power.

From Tokenism to Transformative Participation: Shifting Power and Practice

To move from tokenism to transformative participation, change must focus on how power is distributed and enacted across systems that shape young people's lives. This means not only involving young people in conversations but also ensuring they have real influence over decisions, structures, and outcomes. Transformation here refers to a shift from participation as symbolic inclusion to participation as a structurally embedded, youth-led practice. Lundy's (2007) model offers a concrete guide for this shift, highlighting the need for space, voice, audience, and influence, while also drawing attention to the institutional and cultural changes required to realise those conditions. This involves:

1. **Embedding Youth-Led Governance:** Establishing structures that give young people real authority and resources to influence decisions.
2. **Bridging Research and Practice:** Creating partnerships that centre young people's knowledge and ensure research and practice inform policy and institutional change in accountable ways.
3. **Recognising Informal Education:** Valuing youth work as an integral, well-resourced part of the educational ecosystem, not merely supplementary.

These steps demand policy change, cultural shifts, and sustained investment in youth leadership (Bovill, 2020; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Without these changes, participation will remain an empty promise rather than a means for social justice. Transformative participation, then, is not simply about being heard; it is about young people shaping the systems that define their experiences through mechanisms that are resourced, sustained, and accountable.

Conclusion: Reimagining Participation and Power

Youth participation is shaped and constrained across three interrelated domains: youth work, governance, and research. While discourses of participation are increasingly widespread, young

people's actual influence over decisions remains uneven and often symbolic. This analysis highlights that youth work provides vital everyday spaces for agency and relational support, yet is frequently undervalued in formal education and policy settings. Although governance initiatives and participatory research methods can strengthen young people's influence over decisions, embed their perspectives in policy and practice, and challenge existing power hierarchies, their impact is limited when structural change does not accompany them. Meaningful participation requires critical attention to how power operates across systems. Participation must move from presence to influence, not only in youth work spaces but also in the ways institutions govern, generate knowledge, and make decisions that affect young people's lives. Addressing these dynamics involves recognising young people as political actors and centring participation as a practice of shared power, not symbolic inclusion.

Recommendations: Implications for Practice, Research, and Policy

To support more meaningful and equitable forms of youth participation, I offer the following recommendations:

- **For youth work practitioners**: Continue to foster relational, dialogic spaces that support young people's agency, while advocating for structural recognition of youth work as a legitimate site of education and participation.
- **For researchers**: Engage young people as co-creators of knowledge, ensuring participatory methods are not tokenistic but linked to influence, representation, and action. Manage expectations transparently and build longer-term partnerships where possible.
- **For policymakers and governance actors**: Move beyond consultation models toward forms of youth governance that embed decision-making power. Support structures such as youth councils, participatory budgeting, or advisory boards only when they are resourced, sustained, and accountable.

Across all domains, this work must be underpinned by critical reflection on how adult institutions enable or limit youth voice, and by a commitment to shifting participation from rhetoric to reality.

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