

# What do young people *learn* in formal settings of youth participation?

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*Formal settings of youth participation such as youth and student councils aim to educate young people into models of citizenships and mainstream politics. The activities developed in these spaces are framed in a way as to allow young people to develop learning activities that enhance their participatory skills and competences. These activities however can result in a set of unintended outcomes, where young people end up learning more than the officially recognised skills and competences. In this article, I use elements from the PARTICISPACE project to illustrate how despite the good intentions surrounding the framing of formal spaces of learning, these spaces can function as a mean for the reproduction of political models of participation that do not only fail to challenge the status quo, but in fact create the kind of citizens that enjoy the cynical and bureaucratic political participation that characterises late capitalism.*

## **Introduction**

The conventional logic behind youth participation is that there is a crisis of youth apathy signalled by young people's retreat from formal politics, and that the solution is adult led political socialisation of youth into formal political processes (Delli Carpini, 2000; Henn, Weinstein & Wring, 2002; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002; Gordon & Taft, 2011). In the words of Council of Europe's former director of youth and sports, Lasse Siurala (2005), "the political alienation of young people has reached a point where increasing numbers of young people are either completely disinterested and ignorant of politics or have gone to extremist political movements" (p. 12). *Participation* has become a catchword to signify the importance for young people to become engaged in broader society (Andersson, 2017; Matthews, 2001; Raby, 2012; Wyness, 2009). In the last two decades, youth participation has been associated with the provision of instrumental support through tailored training, with the purpose of developing skills and competences in young people (Kirshner, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006), the development of young people's identity (Côté & Schwartz, 2002), or to the fostering of a sense of sociopolitical control by encouraging young people to participate in "collective actions oriented to influencing social environments" (Martinez, Loyola & Cumsille, 2017, p. 6). The creation of institutionalised spaces for youth participation stems from a need to provide mechanisms through which the needs and interests of young people can be identified and incorporated in new policies and legislations (Geddes & Rust, 2000; Gordon & Taft, 2011). The European Union in particular has actively encouraged local and regional authorities to promote the involvement of young people in local life and politics, with the youth councils being arguably the most visible examples of these policies (Geddes & Rust, 2000; European Commission, 2001, 2009). The reasoning behind youth participation in formal spaces is one where adults develop the best ways to "train", "engage" and "socialise" youth to become active citizens (Fox, 2013; Gordon & Taft, 2011).

In this article, I explore some of the activities of formal participation observed during the PARTICISPACE<sup>1</sup> project, in an attempt to situate these activities against the background of broader structural arrangements. Despite the good intentions surrounding the framing of formal spaces of learning, these spaces can function as a mean for the reproduction of political models of participation that do not only fail to challenge the status quo, but in fact create the kind of citizens that enjoy the cynical and bureaucratic political participation that characterises late capitalism. In this sense, in such formal spaces, more than learning the official skills and competences to become an emancipated and

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<sup>1</sup> PARTICISPACE: Spaces and styles of participation formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people's participation in European cities. Grant Agreement number 649416, H2020-YOUNG-SOCIETY-2014. <http://partispace.eu>.

participative citizen, young people are also learning a set of unofficial and perhaps unintended modes of believing that are important to address. In what follows, I start by presenting some of the PARTISPACE results concerning the ways in which formal settings of youth participation are run, namely in what concerns the relation between young people and an adult agenda. Afterwards, I draw on elements of the philosophy of Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek to analyse the role that these settings have in the formation of common beliefs about youth participation, and elaborate on the ways in which adults posit youth participation. I conclude with a provocative exploration of what might young people be learning in formal settings of youth participation, beyond the high goals of citizenship.

### **Instances of formal participation: Exploring PARTISPACE results**

The PARTISPACE project contemplates analysis of spaces and styles of youth participation in formal, informal and non-formal settings, across eight European cities (Rennes, Manchester, Zurich, Bologna, Gothenburg, Eskisehir Frankfurt, and Plovdiv). Over the last three years, researchers collected a significant amount of data through analysis of policy documents, expert, group and biographic interviews, and close ethnographies and action research projects with groups of young people representing formal youth participation (parties, student unions and youth councils), as well as alternative, non-recognised, non-formal and informal spaces and styles of youth participation. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the analysis of the settings of formal participation explored during the project, and recently published in the form of research reports (Batsleer, Ehrensperger, Lüküslü, Osmanoglu, Pais, Reutlinger, Roth, Wigger, and Zimmermann, 2017; Lüküslü, Pais, Tuorto, Walther, & Loncle, 2018; Walther, Batsleer, Loncle & Pohl, 2019). In these documents, the reader can find detailed analyses of the functioning of these spaces, including analyses of youth worker interventions, impressions from the young people who participate in these spaces, as well as detailed depictions of the mechanisms that disavow or delay youth engagement. This article takes advantage of this analytical work, by referring to the most important conclusions and use them to illustrate the functioning and the nature of the interactions occurring in these spaces.

Although there is no single model of (formal) youth participation, our research showed how these settings have in common that they are initiated and led by adults with regard to their rules and activities and have a strong proximity to adult institutions. That is, in the formal settings we studied (e.g. youth branches of political parties, student unions, student councils and youth councils, among others), there is a tendency for participation to be co-designed and overseen by adults. “Direct” participation, that is, young people just taking their problems in their own hands and deal with them with the necessary means, becomes difficult to pursue (Batsleer, Ehrensperger, Lüküslü, Osmanoglu, Pais, Reutlinger, Roth, Wigger, & Zimmermann, 2017; Lüküslü, Pais, Tuorto, Walther, & Loncle, 2018; Walther, Batsleer, Loncle & Pohl, 2019). One of the young people in Gothenburg, for instance, described the youth council as “a kind of ‘lapdog of politics’, a box that politicians can cross and say now we have created something and done something for young people” (Lüküslü et al, 2018, p. 41). Instead of autonomously developing their own activities, young people are presented with pre-defined campaigns and structured activities, with timelines and specific topics to be addressed (Batsleer et al, 2017, p. 27, 28, 87, 88).

In nearly all the formal settings we studied, the agenda tends to be filled “automatically” because “they are predefined by regulations, rules and routines with a high share of bureaucracy that inhibits young people from coming up with their own initiatives” (Lüküslü et al, 2019, p. 76). Young people may have a budget, can pose questions, offers suggestions and express opinions, but without any decision-making power. It is hard to miss a certain “pedagogisation” of the discussion, structured by adults and aimed at young people’s engagement (Lüküslü et al, 2018, pp. 24 – 29; Batsleer et al, 2017, pp. 43 – 50, 79, 80; Lüküslü et al, 2019, p. 76). Youth workers tend to lead the process from above, with every activity being framed externally and where pedagogical methods are applied so that young people learn how to participate in the ‘right’ way (Lüküslü, et al, 2019, p. 77). It is as if there was a fear of getting lost in

the discussion if given to young people's own initiative, thus the need to control it by elaborating a set of specific rules that groups have to follow (cover certain topics, make a report, report back to one person in the group, etc.) (Batsleer et al, 2017, p. 150, 151). As a result, as mentioned by one of the young people in Manchester, discussions, although addressing quite relevant issues (e.g. issues of diversity and the social integration of minorities), are often "too sugar coated – we did all that in Religious Education for years and years; we want to talk about when there is not cohesion!" (Batsleer et al, 2017, p. 27).

In the case of Manchester, there was the explicit indication from major officers not to talk with young people about the European referendum or about party politics (Batsleer et al, 2017, p. 151):

“[t]here is meant to be Manchester Youth Assembly on June 8th and the theme is Europe and we were going to invite M.P.’s and M.E.P.’s. To give facts as well as opinions and hear from a normal person what it all means. But ‘We go into Purdah...it means we can’t communicate and we can’t out things into social media. We can’t even talk about politics.’ (Speech of the youth worker addressing young people during one of the sessions of the Manchester youth council, in Batsleer et al, 2017, p. 29).

In the case of Zurich's school student committee, activities are supervised by at least one teacher who interferes when the discussions do not seem to correspond to the tasks and topics of the school committee (p. 151). This regulation aims to prevent “negative dynamics”, that is, to prevent “the discussion of some of the most significant events in school life and hinders a critical reflection of their [students’] situation at school” (p. 151). These formal places of youth participation perform a role in the enculturation of young people into a world of sanitised politics, where polemic, ideological, and economic questions, or, more generally, issues that call into question the totality of the system are foreclosed (Žižek, 2014). Instead, problems are addressed from a perspective of expert management and service provision<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the very idea of youth participation seems to refrain young people from engaging with the problems of the present. It is as if youth participation led by adults serves to disavow or delay the youth engagement with the problems of the present. It keeps young people occupied pretending to play politics while at the same time guarantees that their time and energy is not channelled into more political meaningful activism. These models of civic engagement do not seem to accord any real political power to youth in the present. As documented by Gordon and Taft's research, this is particularly evident in student government (student councils, student unions, etc.), where activities follow “a model of civic engagement designed by adults to “train” students for future participation while estranging them from real political power in the present” (2011, p. 1512).

The logic at work in the youth and student councils we studied presents important elements characteristic of what Lacan (1997) calls the *university discourse*. It is a discourse that seeks consensus (discussion is valued as a mean towards consensus, and conflictual positions sugar coated), avoids polemic issues, follows protocols for each activity, which are evaluated and assessed, and then fed into the apparatus of “policy impact”. It promotes a discourse that is managerial and promotional, rather than political and dialogical; which assumes itself as neutral and for the common good. Engaged subjective stances are not easily tolerated, and tend to be seen as “dogmatic” or “sectarian” (Žižek,

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<sup>2</sup> In his book about the negotiations with the European Union during the 2015 Greek crisis, where Greece was blackmailed into accepting the Eurogroup conditions for a new bailout – thus continuing the politics of austerity and debt that created the problem in the first place – or being kicked out of the Eurozone, Varoufakis (2017) describes how despite the mass support of the Greek people and the simple logic of economic arguments, the technocratic spirit of those in the Eurogroup continuously ignored any attempt to think at a broader level not only Greece but Europe Union's predicament: “it was as if I had not spoken, as if there was no document in front of them. It was evident from their body language that they denied the very existence of the pieces of paper I had placed before them. Their responses, when they came, took no account of anything I had said” (p. 309).

2006, p. 108). Moreover, some of the activities are presented as “cool” “fun” and “enjoyable” as a way to seduce young people into participation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Occupy young people: Interpassivity, dromenon and delegated beliefs**

Young people are new to a world that precedes them. As new, they represent a threat to the same system that strives to socialise them. This is not exclusive to young people – history is full of episodes of people who have struggled against a certain social order. However, because of being new, young people tend to be perceived by adults as in need to be guided towards some general idea of good (democracy, citizenship, religion, etc.). This “guidance” becomes possible through the deployment of an entire scientific and social industry generating knowledge about youth and designing programmes to increment youth participation. It is not enough that young people participate. This participation has to be recognised and registered within the set of available possibilities for participation. When young people want to decide for themselves and take action on their own hands, they are faced with a set of constraints and offered an array of possibilities wherein this action can be pursued. This creates a bureaucratic machinery of rules, pedagogies, guidelines, and regulations that not so much inhibit young people from participating, as they frame participation as such.<sup>4</sup>

Educational researchers (e.g. Lundin & Christensen, 2017; Pais, 2013) have been criticizing schools as places of *interpassivity* (Pfaller, 2014), where adults relegate the task of learning in children and adolescents, thus passively feeling that all society is learning, while students are the ones actually doing the work. Adults delegate consumption (of education) into students – they are the ones charged with the task of “learning of the world” – while students delegate in teachers (and parents, and adults in general) the belief that school is important for their lives. The result is a caricature of education as it is performed in schools, where all the “dromena” (p. 175) – textbooks, exams, teachers (who speak all the time), activities, etc. – are the ones doing the work, thus protecting the classroom from students: “the running dromena occupy a place that otherwise might have been assumed by something threatening” (p. 181). That is, all the dromena that populate schools unable or makes it difficult for students to actually engage with education as a truly transformative and emancipatory enterprise, by learning in ways that are open and unpredictable. Instead, dromena are very useful in making sure that students *do not* have to learn – the teacher, the textbook, the adult-led tasks, and the curriculum, does the learning for them.

One can argue that something similar occurs in formal settings of youth participation: these also exist so that young people do not have to participate. The campaigns, the adult-led activities, the highly structured tasks, the training models, and the youth worker does the participation for them. Also here, all these *dromena* function as to avoid or tame any potential threatening initiative by young people, by keeping them occupied with formal tasks. As mentioned before, this situation was observed during the PARTISPACE project, where groups of young people have to follow a predefined agenda, including step by step guidance to all activities, and a high level of schematisation. Although the discussion is made by young people, the entire structure for the discussion is determined by others beforehand.

Within such settings, there is little space for discord, for raising and discussing polemic issues, to seek out different agendas and activities. Nonetheless, young people continue to participate in them. In as much as schools, where students do not need to believe in the importance of school – it is enough that others (parents, teachers, politicians, adults in general) believe for them – also in formal settings of

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<sup>3</sup> Farthing (2010) notices how attempts to make politics “cool” as to seduce young people result in a cynical attitude by young people.

<sup>4</sup> They also give work to many people.

youth participation the idea of “youth” relies in a “delegation of belief” (Žižek, 2008, p. 136). That is, young people assume a subject supposed to believe the importance of young people for the society, as well as the relevance of all the prescribed activities developed in these settings. This dimension of the “subject supposed to believe” (Žižek, 2008, p. 202) becomes evident in the way young people conceive “participation”. While participation appears in the adult discourse about youth with a high degree of awareness, our PARTISPACE research showed that the great majority of the young people we met show little association with it, and the term is hardly used amongst them. For the European young people we worked with, the term “youth participation” is often an alien one. As noted in one of the project’s public reports (Batsleer et al, 2017):

the idea of “youth participation” derives less from the everyday life of adolescents and more from the conceptual world and the language used by adults or the adult world of the organisations (...) In most cases, they are busy with simply being young, with all the challenges that entails, in terms of education, work, social relations, and future plans in general. (p. 33)

Not only young people do not talk in terms of “youth participation”, they are often puzzled by the idea of “participation” and find it to be out of synch to what they perceive as their concrete life circumstances. This mismatch between the official discourse on youth participation and the concrete life circumstances of young people is rarely acknowledged by researchers and youth workers (Crawshaw et al, 2000). Participation per se tends to be seen as a positive intervention for young people, however, what may be regarded as participation may very well end up in tokenistic and even exploitative activities (Malone & Hartung, 2010; Van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2004). One possible justification has to do with the mismatch between what researchers and youth workers see as an empowering framework and what young people experience as their own interests and needs. Studies have been showing that youth workers’ beliefs and perceptions of their own work, its role and achievements, are not always shared or understood by young people (Crawshaw et al, 2000; Williamson, 1996). It is as if adults know better about the problems of young people than young people themselves. Crawshaw et al (2000) notice how “people within a targeted community may not significantly identify themselves as disempowered or feel the need for change as much as researchers or funding body” (p. 80). In some severe cases, as reported by Crawshaw (2000), the discourse around empowering serves to disguise a certain exploitation of young people, because their involvement is mainly aimed at meeting the needs of stakeholders as youth workers and researchers.

Youth participation is an adult concern, not a youth one. In a way, one can say the entire discourse emphasising the importance of youth participation exists so that adults do not have to participate. Adults delegate participation in young people, while young people delegate in adults the belief that youth participation is a relevant dimension of their lives.

### **Youth and the disavowal of adult responsibility**

When youth is posited as being symptomatic of the wealth of the nation (either because it condenses society’s problems or because is posited as the solution for these problems) an ideological operation is performed by means of displacing the internal and all-pervasive contradictions of society onto an external and contingent group of people. The signifier “youth” quilts together the problems of society and the possibility of a brighter future. It functions as an empty signifier (Žižek, 1989; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) where adults can allocate both the problems and the solutions for their current and future predicaments, thus providing a narrative that conciliates the dangers for society and the possibility of overcoming them. Young people congregate in themselves this tension, quilting the problem and providing the solution. Steedman (1995) refers to the “comforts of narrative exegesis” to signal the significance of a story about youth that responds to the “crisis in democracy” and social instability. As

a result, massive local, national and international programmes are designed to “fix” youth and guarantee the happiness of the species.

This narrative brings comfort because it offers adults a mechanism to avoid facing their own impasses, by disavowing them into an *other* – “young people”. By conceiving adolescence as a distinctive stage of life, not only we make them carry what Cohen and Ainley (2000, p. 89) call a “burden of representation”, where “everything they do, say, think or feel, is scrutinized by an army of professional commentators”, we also create an object where we can disavow our own direct engagement with the world. As such, the category of youth not only allows for the isolation and treatment of a segment of the population, it can also function as a *disavowal mechanism* (Žižek, 2012) for the adult world, by allocating in young people the problems of the world, while at the same time delegating to them the solution for problems that are not youth problems per se. This discourse posits the responsibility of change in the hands of young people, and at the same time disavows adults from direct engagement with changing the status quo. That is, it provides adults with a mechanism to disavow in young people their own role in changing a particular situation. In young people, adults disavow their desire for change.

### **Conclusion: what do young people learn in formal settings?**

As previously described, in most of the formal settings of the PARTISPACE project, there is little space for discord, for raising and discussing polemic issues, to seek out different agendas and activities. The young people who participate in these settings are aware of issues involving tokenism, the sugar coating of controversial topics, and an overall farcical atmosphere, as if they were being staged for somebody else’s gaze (Lüküslü, et al, 2019). Nonetheless, young people continue to participate in them. They might do so because there they find it a good place to be and to fraternise, and to discuss. They might do so because the alternative is being alone. Participating in youth and student councils brings them closer to future positions of influence, to travelling opportunities, to career possibilities. In our research we found that “young people in student and youth councils are expected to play an intermediary role but, apparently, often choose to situate themselves closer to the adults’ world and enjoy the more advantageous position regarding recognition and resources” (Lüküslü et al, 2019, p. 75). Although young people (and also youth workers) might recognise the shortcomings of participation in formal settings, they still do not change their practice because they enjoy being there. Formal settings are important in guaranteeing that the next cohort of citizens will not only perform according to what is expected from them, but also enjoy their performance. As such, what is first experienced as a hindrance to youth participation turns into a source of enjoyment, with young people enjoying playing the kind of tokenistic and performative activities that characterise some spaces of formal participation. They do so in spite of better knowledge, thus showing traces of a *cynical consciousness* that characterises late capitalism (Sloterdijk, 1987; Žižek, 2013). Youth participation can thus be a privileged means towards “adult politics”: to learn how to do and profit from activities one does not believe in.

Another feature of the formal settings of youth participation that we studied concerns the absence of a broader and critical questioning of the kind of society young people is supposed to participate. Rather, they follow a logic of “provision of services”, where regulations and protocols are created to guarantee a smooth assimilation into the big social market. In a weird way, it seems that it is not young people who engage in participation as a way to make a change in the world. Rather, it is participation – as an adult invention – that uses young people to promote and maintain a certain social order. The purpose is not to question or explore alternatives to current societal arrangements, but to devise and implement strategies that guarantee a smooth transition into a healthy and thriving adulthood in a free and productive society and economy (Côté, 2016; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011; Walsh, Black & Prosser, 2018). In the face of an uprising of people, contesting against the status quo or manifesting a pure display of rage, there is a need to exert damage-control “by way of re-channelling a popular uprising into acceptable parliamentary-capitalist constraints” (Žižek, 2014, p. 114). Some instances of youth work function as to guarantee that young people’s time is not “wasted”, but can instead be optimised

within a logic of permanent self-enhancing productivity (Dillabough, 2009; Raby, 2012). In a society of permanent self-enhancing and productivity, activities like protesting, striking and squatting are seen either as a waste or as dangerous. Youth participation has to occur within a certain “productive” frame. Dillabough (2009) calls it the “utilitarian idea of youth” (p. 216), where young people are perceived as owners of a commodity that cannot be wasted but needs to make itself useful and productive. In order to be useful and productive, one needs to avoid raising core questions about broader societal arrangements, and instead following the procedures and rules in place. In formal settings of youth participation, young people are learning that current society is not without its problems, but these could be solved through more and better resources and the work of engaged people. A questioning of the entire system within which participation occurs is disavowed. Young people not only learn to accept the current state of affairs, they also learn how to become a part of it and enjoy it.

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