



# MEASURING THE MAGIC?

Evaluating and researching  
young people's participation in  
public decision making

Perpetua Kirby with Sara Bryson



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## About Carnegie

The Carnegie Young People Initiative is a research project that aims to improve the quality and increase the breadth of young people's (aged 10-25) participation in public decision-making. We have been doing this in three stages, by mapping what is happening, promoting the evaluation of good practice and finally developing standards for the public and voluntary sectors at national and local levels to involve young people. The Initiative was set up in 1996 by the Carnegie UK Trust and actively involves young people in its own work as well as other partners.

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# Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Summary	<b>5</b>
Introduction	<b>9</b>
Evaluation and Research Findings: Impacts	<b>15</b>
Evaluation and Research Findings: Processes	<b>29</b>
Future Challenges for Evaluation and Research	<b>53</b>
Conclusion	<b>63</b>
Gaps in Evaluation and Research	<b>65</b>
Useful Contacts and Publications	<b>68</b>
References	<b>69</b>
Appendix One:	<b>73</b>
Summary Details of Evaluations and Other Research	



# Summary

## Introduction

There is a fast growing literature about how and why to involve young people in making public decisions, but very little evaluation and research about how best to do so and what impacts can be achieved. This report examines the evidence for what works.

The quality of existing evaluations varies and, even when high, most studies are localised and may only apply to a specific group of young people and adults, within specific contexts and at a given time. This report identifies what issues need to be examined further and examines future challenges for evaluation and research in this field.

### **Evaluation and Research Findings: Impacts**

#### *Public Decisions*

Whilst young people are increasingly being involved in participatory projects, the evidence from existing evaluations is that they are still having little impact on public decision making, although this varies across contexts and between different types of organisations. Few evaluations have looked at the quality of the decisions made (or influenced) by young people.

#### *Wider Community*

Little attention in evaluations is given to how adults (facilitators as well as decision makers) benefit from their involvement in participatory projects. There is some evidence that good youth participation work helps increase dialogue and relations between young people and adults, and between peers. Undertaking participatory work can help to promote the importance (and means) of involving young people in the community.

#### *Young People*

There is substantial evidence that good participatory work benefits the participating young people, but that token involvement may not. This includes confidence, self-belief, knowledge, understanding and changed attitudes, skills and education attainment. Young people also benefit from having fun and making friends. Very few studies have sought the views of young people who do not participate in public decision making.

### **Evaluation and Research Findings: Processes**

#### *Which Young People are involved?*

It is not clear exactly who is getting involved in participatory activities. Older young people and girls have been found to participate more. Some differences in ethnicity and affluence/deprivation have also been found.

Only a minority of young people get involved in public decision making and these are not always representative of young people in the target population. The reasons why young people get involved are varied. Far less is known about why young people do not want to get involved, although there is evidence that this includes cynicism about how much adults will listen.

#### *How do Young People Participate?*

There is a consensus within evaluations that it is beneficial to use a range of consultation methods for involving young people, as each has its benefits and limitations. It is not always clear how much power young people have in relation to adults, and how and when power shifts within projects. Very few evaluations have examined integrated daily participatory practice, but where they exist they are generally positive.

### *How are Young People Supported?*

The literature on participation emphasises the importance of ensuring young people receive appropriate support. Evaluations have found the importance of having clear objectives, capacity building, formal training, on-going worker support (particularly youth work support), plus adopting different support roles and shifting these to fit the context and young people.

Barriers to involving young people in area-wide strategic planning are formality, complexity, and bureaucracy. Adult verbal and nonverbal communication is important for enabling or preventing young people's participation in making decisions. Time constraints and output requirements act as barriers. Young people are not always given feedback following their participation.

### *How are Adults Supported?*

Facilitating young people's participation in decision making is a challenging and demanding undertaking for adults, yet few receive specific training.

The negative attitudes of community adults (including parents) have acted as barriers to young people's involvement. Few studies have researched the views of parents or adult decisions makers.

### *What are the Organisational Context Issues?*

There is a little research on how to establish a culture of participation within an organisation or across a community. To develop participatory work organisations benefit from having committed senior and front line staff, fewer institutional demands, formal systems for feeding in young people's views, good multi-agency and team working, dedicated participation workers, adequate staffing and resources, and high quality staff.

## **Future Challenges for Evaluation and Research**

More evaluation is needed to ensure young people are meaningfully involved in public decision making. To do this, programmes need to develop clear aims and objectives for their work.

Evaluation and research into young people's participation should be youth focused; include young people's views, redress power imbalances and use appropriate methods. Other stakeholders' views should also be included.

All organisations involving young people in public decision making should self-evaluate their work. Evaluations can be undertaken by clients, organisations and/or professional researchers. Training and support (including toolkits) need to be made available for practitioners on how to evaluate young people's participation. Independent evaluation is also needed for some programmes, to ensure the application of rigorous research methods and to make comparisons across different programmes and contexts.

A participatory evaluation approach, mirrors the ethos of participatory development work, in which young people and/or other stakeholders are involved in implementing the evaluation. The appropriateness of this approach will depend on the context, the young people, available resources and the purpose of the evaluation. Whether using conventional or participatory approaches, all evaluators should examine power relations within evaluations, rather than ignore or assume effective participation.

Evaluations and research should adopt a mixed-method approach. Qualitative methodologies are currently most used, which are particularly valuable for localised studies. Other approaches are also needed, including quantitative, longitudinal and control studies. Most existing evaluations examine programme outcomes, but nearly all rely on stakeholders' perception of change rather than other objective measures. Whilst it is clearly important to ask young people and adults their views about participation in public decision making, their subjective views need to be balanced with other measures.

There is currently insufficient theorising about how programme processes and contexts inter-relate to produce outcomes. Further debate is also required about the goals, nature and effects of widening the participation of all citizens within a representative democracy. We need to examine how systems can change to accommodate young people's participation, rather than expecting young people to participate in predefined ways.

More funding is needed for the required evaluation work. Given limited resources it is important to prioritise what to evaluate independently, possibly focusing on the higher quality and established programmes. Self-evaluation needs to be established as good practice within evaluations and research.

### **Key Gaps in Evaluation and Research**

Some key issues that could be explored further in future evaluations and research on young people's participation in public decision making have been identified as follows (more suggestions are detailed in the full report):

- The effectiveness of different participatory methods for influencing decisions.
- How young people's views can be used to inform decision makers.
- The extent to which youth participation affects adults' attitudes.
- Whether participation practice ever results in negative outcomes.
- The long-term impact of involving young people in public decisions.
- What outcomes are specific to involving young people in public decision making compared with other types of initiatives.
- Compare organisations with an integrated participatory culture and practice, with those that undertake on-off, irregular or no consultation.
- A cost-benefit analysis of different participation approaches/methods.
- Which young people are not getting involved and why.
- Young people's competencies to participate in public decision making.
- How young people make decisions and what influences these decisions.
- Differences in gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other equality issues.
- The importance of youth – adult relations for facilitating young people's participation.
- How adults can best enable young people's involvement and the support they need to do so.
- Parents' views about young people's participation in decision making.
- The importance of organisational culture and institutional demands.
- How best to establish a culture of participation across an organisation or within an area/community.
- How staff already working with young people can develop more integrated participatory practice with existing staffing and resources.





# 1.0 Introduction

Participation has... become an act of faith in development, something we believe in and rarely question. This act of faith is based on three main tenets: that participation is intrinsically a 'good thing' (especially for the participants); that a focus on 'getting the techniques right' is the principal way of ensuring the success of such approaches; and that considerations of power and politics on the whole should be avoided as divisive and obstructive. (Cleaver, 2001: p.36)

This report examines the evaluation and other research evidence on involving young people in public decision making to identify how much we know about what works and what more we need to find out.

Across the UK (and internationally) there is a fast growing commitment to involving young people in public decision making. There is an increasing expectation and demand that young people be involved in shaping decisions about the planning, delivery and assessment of services (as well as personal decisions in their own lives). National legislation and policy guidance now requires young people to have a say about their neighbourhoods, education, health services and social services, as well as many other local authority and national policies and services.

A welcome development is that young people's participation has become widely valued and respected as a right. For some time legislation has demanded that looked after children and young people be consulted about personal decisions by social services (Children Act 1975; Children Act 1989). The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the United Kingdom in 1991 signalled the growth of involving young people in public decision making, particularly article 12 which emphasises young people's right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. At the same time there has been a shifting view that children and young people are social actors in their own right, and agents of change rather than passive recipients of others' intervention.

Supporting young people to participate in public decisions is a relatively new area of work, and the rapidly growing literature promoting young people's participation is filled with anecdotal evidence and untested assumptions about what works. It focuses primarily on the process of involving young people rather than on achieving outcomes and this work is often inexplicit about its goals.

The limited available evaluation and research evidence suggests that listening to young people has positive outcomes for them and their communities. A commitment to involving young people is not enough for ensuring positive outcomes however. Evaluations have identified a number of barriers to involving young people in making public decisions and some possible negative impacts if this work is undertaken inappropriately. There is still so much we do not know about how best to involve young people in public decision making (or indeed personal decision making). If we are to improve our practice, and persuade others to involve young people more fully, then more research and evaluation is needed in this area.

Evidence based practice is a common requirement of funders and government. Therefore we need evidence to say what works. Programmes are also accountable to others, including trustees and service users, and need to demonstrate what is being done. It is recognised as good practice to review and reflect on interventions, even when they appear to be working, to ensure we develop our work further. Evaluation is an ethical issue. If some practice is leading to negative impacts, then this infringes young people's rights. There are only limited resources available for supporting young people to participate in public decision making, and we need to spend the money wisely to ensure it benefits as many young people, as much as possible.

## **Purpose of report**

This report examines what evidence exists about young people's participation in decision making, and identifies what more needs to be researched. We discuss how future research and evaluation work might best be undertaken.

This report focuses on evidence rather than untested assertions and assumptions. It focuses on evaluations undertaken by academics, independent researchers, as well as self-evaluations in the UK. Where relevant, findings from other research are also cited (including research by young people). It does not draw on the mass of other literature that exists in this area, such as manuals, discussion papers or promotional materials.

The aims of this report are as follows:

- Provide an overview of existing evaluations and research undertaken on young people's participation in public decision making.
- Identify what issues have been evaluated and researched already within youth participation in public decision making.
- Identify gaps in existing evaluations and research, and recommend key areas and questions that need to be evaluated further.
- Examine issues that need to be considered when planning future evaluation research work in this area.

## **Who is this paper for?**

This paper is intended for the following audiences:

- Researchers, and commissioners of research (including evaluation), who want to find out more about what needs to be examined in this area and the issues specific to evaluating young people's participation.
- Practitioners and decision makers who involve (or plan to involve) young people in public decision making, who want to find out more about what practice issues work. Plus those who are interested in knowing more about self-evaluating young people's involvement.
- Young people who want to find out more about what works in youth participation.

## **Definitions of Terms**

### *Participation*

For the purpose of this report, participation means 'taking part' in making public decisions. There are different levels and types of involvement in public decision making, and we look at all of these, to examine their relative benefits and disadvantages and what issues cut across all approaches and which are specific to particular types of involvement. We therefore include one-off consultations in which young people express their views and share experiences (e.g. surveys, focus groups); regular or extended programmes of involvement at both the organisational (e.g. school councils; students as researchers) and area wide strategic level (e.g. council youth forum; social action youth groups); as well as integrated daily participatory approaches (e.g. democratic schooling).

### *Public Decision Making*

This paper is solely concerned with how young people are involved in making public decisions.

That is young people's participation in organisational and policy decisions that affect young people (and possibly others). These are collective decisions that organisations and public bodies make which govern their policies and practices and consequently the quality of services they provide for young people and others. This might be an organisation making decisions about how to provide services to young people; a local community, village, town or city planning its services; or a government institution, including a parliament or government department.

Young people's involvement can be initiated either by organisations or by young people. We are interested in how much, and in what ways, young people influence policies or practice, and/or raise awareness of issues within their local, regional, national or international communities.

### *Private Decisions*

Young people make private or personal decisions on a daily basis, such as what clothes to wear, what food to eat or which friends they want to spend time with. Many personal decisions are made in the context of organisations and public bodies, with the support of an adult on a one-to-one basis. For example, with a teacher about a choice of subject, with youth workers about a choice of expedition, with a doctor or dentist about a course of treatment, with a careers adviser or tutor about training or further education or with a social worker about where to live.

Some research has examined the ways in which young people make personal choices, within various aspects of their lives. This research has found that young people want to be involved in making decisions, although they may not always want to be solely responsible for their choices. For example, research has been carried out about making decisions within families (e.g. 53; 41; National Stepfamily Association, cited in 46); in care (e.g. 62), and legal care proceedings (for review see O'Quigley, 2000). This research is **not** the focus of this report.

### *Young People*

This report primarily focuses on young people aged 10 to 25 years, although most research and evaluation focuses on young people aged 12 to 18 years. Where we have identified relevant evaluation work with younger children this has been included. Within this paper the term 'young people' has been used to refer to those aged 11 or over and 'children' to those who are younger. This is to help the reader distinguish between evaluations with different age groups, as the issues are sometimes distinct.

### *Evaluation and Research*

There are many different definitions and types of evaluation, but we have taken Patton's (1997) definition which usefully focuses both on the **process** of how evaluations are undertaken and their **purpose** (see below). We take the word 'programme' in this definition to include specific 'methods' of involving young people (such as forums and surveys) as well as organisational initiatives for involving young people.

Program evaluation is the **systematic collection of information** about the **activities, characteristics, and outcomes** of programs to **make judgements** about the program, **improve programme effectiveness**, and/or **inform decisions** about future programming. (Patton, 1997: p.23)

There are debates about what makes 'evaluation' different from other 'research'. Fundamentally, however, evaluation is different because of its 'distinctive purpose', which is the assessment of value in order to improve practice (44). Occasionally findings from other types of primary research are cited within this report, which examines youth participatory work but does not judge the effectiveness of programmes or aim to inform future action.

## Overview of Existing Evaluations and Research

Very little work involving young people in public decision making has been evaluated to date in the UK. This paper draws on the relatively small number of studies that we sourced. There may be others, but we could not find them. Some organisations undertake internal evaluations, which prevents others from benefiting from this learning, and arguably puts organisations' interests before those of young people. There is a need for improved ways of disseminating learning in this area of work.

### *What type of participatory work has been evaluated?*

A range of different types of participatory work with young people have been evaluated. For the purpose of this paper we have categorised these evaluations under the following theme headings:

- **Geography** – Young people are involved in making strategic decisions about area-wide planning of services (e.g. small local area, borough, city, county), such as local councils and regeneration initiatives, mainly involved through area-wide youth forums and other consultation.
- **Themes** – Youth groups are involved in running their own community or issue based projects, including social action, arts projects, health promotion, websites, environmental improvements.
- **Organisations** – Young people are involved in making decisions about the organisations (for example, voluntary youth organisation, school, or health organisations) whose services they use, or about the grants given by funding organisations to youth projects.
- **Methods** – Different methods for involving young people in making decisions, including surveys, interviews, forums, peer researchers.

The type of participatory work most frequently evaluated (at least those sourced in this review) is area-wide strategic involvement, followed by involvement in schools and consultation methods.

### *How was this evaluated and researched?*

The evaluations and research cited throughout the report are summarised later in the report (see pages 73-79).

Most of the cited evaluations and research were undertaken by academics and some were carried out by independent consultants (some of whom are associated to universities). Only a few of the evaluations were done by or with young people (although without exception they included young people's views as stakeholders). Most of the evaluations are small scale and localised, focusing on one or a few programme initiatives. Very few are large-scale, national or longitudinal. Nearly all the evaluations are qualitative, although some also undertake quantitative surveys using a small sample. There are very few examples of large-scale quantitative studies, using either primary or secondary data analysis.

Some of the evaluations are designed to be **formative**; to identify a programme's strengths and weaknesses with a view to improving the programme, some are **summative** and judged a programme's overall impact or effectiveness, but many include a combination of these approaches. Most of the evaluations examine programme outcomes, but nearly all rely on stakeholders' perception of change rather than other objective measures.

In the evaluations, more focus is given to impacts on young participants than adults or services, and more on intended rather than unintended programme outcomes. Far more detail is given to the processes involved than outcomes; the different practitioners' and other stakeholders' views have proved key to understanding how (and why) programmes were undertaken.

We have not attempted to rate the quality of cited evaluations in any systematic way, but it is clear that quality varies. Many of the studies are rigorous, present clear evidence for the assertions being made, are sufficiently detailed, and rooted in theory. In others, sometimes the objectives for the evaluated programmes are unclear (as well as for the evaluation), sample sizes are small, there is insufficient analysis, and participants' perceptions are accepted rather than cross-checked with other sources of data. None of the reports provide information about the evaluation budgets (or for the programmes being evaluated), but there appears to be an association between the higher quality evaluations and more researcher time spent on fieldwork and, it can be assumed, analysis and report writing.

The evaluation findings presented in this report must be treated with some caution. Even where evaluation work is of the highest quality, most studies are localised and may only apply to a specific group of young people and adults, within specific contexts and at a given time. More evaluations are needed, both large-scale and localised studies within different contexts, before we can build a clearer picture of what can be generalised and what is specific to geographical, institutional and spatial locations, as well as different ages and abilities, and culturally and socially diverse groups.



## 2.0 Evaluation and Research

### Findings: Impacts

This chapter examines what impacts have been identified in studies of young people's participation in public decision making. The chapter is divided into six sections, as follows:

- 2.1 Do young people influence public decisions?
- 2.2 How are decisions improved by involving young people?
- 2.3 How do organisations benefit from involving young people?
- 2.4 How does the wider community benefit from involving young people?
- 2.5 How do the participating young people benefit?
- 2.6 How do other young people benefit?

The factors that contributed, or acted as barriers, to achieving these impacts are explored in the next chapter on 'processes'.

#### 2.1 Do Young People Influence Public Decisions?

This section examines what types of decisions young people influence and how much they influence these decisions within:

- Geography: area-wide strategic planning
- Themes: youth community/issues-based projects
- Organisations

Whilst young people are increasingly being involved in participatory projects, the evidence from existing evaluations is that they are still having little impact on public decision making, although this varies across contexts and between different types of organisations. The small size of this section relative to others in this report illustrates how few impacts have been demonstrated. To date evaluations have focused more on the process, or on impacts for young people, than on how much young people have influenced public decisions.

##### 2.1.1 Geography: Area-wide Strategic Planning

The most frequently evaluated type of youth involvement is within area-wide strategic planning of services and policies, although young people seem to be having least impact on decisions in these environments.

A survey of local authorities found that over three-quarters of those that responded were working with young people to involve them in decision making, and seven out of ten felt young people have some influence on decisions made within the local authority (36). Almost 90 per cent said they involved young people in identifying problems and issues of concern within the community and around three-quarters said they involved young people in developing ideas on new policies/services. It is not known to what degree young people influenced decisions and the sample is likely to be biased by those who feel they are doing most in this area of work (the survey got a 55 per cent response rate).

Other studies have found that young people do not have much influence at the strategic level. Adults involved in consulting young people criticised youth forums as 'ineffective in influencing decisions, unless they were given power to hold officials to account' (Borland et al, 2001: p.5).

In-depth studies of regeneration initiatives have found that young people have little influence on creating change. In a review of the Durham County-wide initiative 'Investing in Children' the author concluded that 'There is, as yet, little evidence that young people's views have an influence on the decisions that are made' (p.8; summary report).



Another study found young people had a 'minor' impact on regeneration initiatives, and these were 'limited to youth-specific issues rather than matters affecting the community as a whole' (Fitzpatrick et al, 1998, p.28). This study found that in only two out of the 12 initiatives studied had young people succeeded in changing the focus at the strategic level. They did, however, find that young people were involved in the following ways:

- Making minor contributions to regeneration bids already being developed
- A few concrete examples of young people changing existing projects, but more so influencing the development of new project initiatives.

Similarly, a national three-year project that aimed to involve young people in strategic regeneration decision making achieved little impact at the strategic level (31). Because of the difficulties of involving disadvantaged young people at this level, the programme staff shifted the focus of work on to involving them more in designing and implementing their own small-scale environmental improvements.

A recent on-going study of young people's involvement in a New Deal initiative found that within the first year recommendations from a large consultation with local young people were unanimously accepted by the regeneration board, and some services have been initiated that meet these recommendations (30). The young people appeared to influence priorities, rather than introduce new agendas; the planned projects had already been identified, but the young people's consultation work 'focused the mind' on ensuring they were implemented.

A qualitative study of three youth participation initiatives at a city council level found that young people are consulted about a range of issues and 'influence some decisions' (Geddes & Rust, 1999: p.13). In another study, around a quarter of young people on four different city councils felt that 'good ideas are never carried out' and that youth councils are 'tokens' (Matthews, 2001: p.308).

Where young people do influence strategic decisions they appear to have most impact on youth-related services, such as leisure facilities (38; 18). In a survey of local authorities most (over 90 per cent) said young people were involved in youth work, and around three-quarters said they were involved in education, leisure and community safety (36). There is limited evidence of young people influencing areas that are not traditionally youth areas, such as health and transport (30; 38; 15).

### **2.1.2 Themes: Youth Community/Issues-based Projects**

When young people undertake their own community or issue-based projects they usually make many decisions about the direction of their own projects. Often they appear to achieve some small gains, although not always. Sometimes this is difficult to measure if they are campaigning or undertaking health promotion, and in some evaluations there is little focus on the decisions influenced.

Young people can be successful at achieving outcomes for the community when they provide these services/initiatives themselves (with support). In a programme that gave small grants to groups to run their own programmes, young people succeeded in producing a number of outputs, for example: video, manual, CD, youth café, accredited community relations trainers, peer educators (23). In another project, young people were supported (and paid) over a year to develop their own community initiatives, and from the initial summary of the evaluation it appears that they succeeded in undertaking numerous initiatives (including a young people's assembly for Wales, music studio, drugs awareness programme, website, video and support groups) (57).

An evaluation found that young groups succeeded in getting some small environmental improvement projects (e.g. youth shelter, site clearance, BMX track, anti-racism leaflets), although there were often barriers to doing so and usually resistance from the local community and therefore planning departments (this is discussed further in the 'processes' chapter), and some groups did not succeed in getting any physical outcomes (31). In one area an erected youth-shelter was soon taken down due to complaints from the community.

Influencing public decisions is not always the primary focus for some projects. One evaluation found very few impacts on services (youth leisure cards and feeding their views into how mental health teams operate), but even these were 'unintended consequences of the project' (Tooke, 2002: p.17). The author recommended that 'perhaps greater attention could be paid to such possibilities during initiation' (p.17). In another scheme designed to get children involved in community health projects, there was sometimes too much emphasis put on children's learning and not on achieving community health outcomes (29). The young people achieved some small outcomes for community health; they took direct action (visited elderly people perceived to be lonely) and promoted health messages (anti-racism leaflets and posters) to many thousands of local people, however they did not, for example, attempt to influence those who made decision about these areas of concern.

### **2.1.3 Organisations**

#### *Schools*

The evidence from evaluations within schools suggests that the extent to which young people influence decisions within this setting varies widely between the different schools.

In a large scale survey of schools just over a quarter (28 per cent) of young people thought their council 'good at sorting out problems' and slightly more (39%) felt it helped 'to make the school a better place to be' (2). Another study found very little evidence of young people being able to bring about changes within their schools through school councils and few young people could remember when the last meeting had taken place (59).

In a study of 12 secondary schools known to be highly participatory, none of the school councils or committees were regarded as ineffective or entirely 'tokenistic' by students, although one was less well regarded than others. Young people who were not council representatives could describe things the councils had done for the benefit of the school. The author concluded that there was still an 'aspiration gap' between the vision that some headteachers had for the councils and the reality of the existing practice (24).

One study gave examples of how secondary and primary schools councils achieved some change on issues identified by pupils (e.g. toilets, catering, wet weather provision, bullying policies and lockers), plus those introduced by school staff, including management plans (e.g. new build programmes, alterations to school days and curriculum issues) and policies (e.g. bullying and homework) (10). Both teachers and pupils identified gaps between the roles that they thought councils should play and current practice (e.g. homework policy, raising achievements, evaluation of teaching and learning). There were some differences in opinion about what should be the role of councils, both between headteachers, and between them and young people. For example, in three out of 12 primary schools pupil council representatives thought they should be involved in appointing staff, but none of the primary or secondary headteachers thought so.

The study of the democratic school Summerhill illustrates children and young people being fully engaged in community self-government (including non-compulsory lessons) together with staff (1).

Children supported within schools to undertake their own community projects have been found to make far more decisions during the class time spent on their community projects than during other class-time lessons (29), which they valued, although this did vary between schools.

## *Health Organisations*

A survey of health service initiatives undertaking youth consultation found that just over half reported at least one change in service provision and/or priorities as a result of this work (37). The most common were improvements to the service environment (seven out of 27) and food quality (four out of 27). Others included clinic times (two) and ward routines (two). In this study, however, less than half the consulted adults (nine out of 20) said the immediate purpose of the consultation was to find out the children's views. Around a quarter (six out of 20) said it was to benefit the participating children.

### **2.2 How are Decisions Improved by Involving Young People?**

- Increased knowledge about young people's views and needs
- Improved quality of decisions

#### **2.2.1 Increased Knowledge About Young People's Views and Needs**

There is an often-cited assumption in the participation literature that services will be better if they involve young people in planning, partly because they will best respond to young people's needs (as identified by them). This assumption has rarely been investigated.

Consultation work inevitably produces information about young people's views, although the quality of this information depends on how the work was undertaken. The appropriateness, depth and validity of using different consultation methods has been assessed by some authors, although few have undertaken in-depth comparisons of methods. The advantages and disadvantages of using different methods are explored further in a later section. Studies have found that children and young people are able to express thoughtful, clearly held opinions and are generally willing to give their views (5; 35).

One evaluation of consultation work found that the information gained through large-scale consultations was often not new to those who already worked with young people, although it was new and made an impression on others involved in making decisions (30). The latter study also questioned how accurately the presented information represented the views of those consulted and noted the analysis had not included all collected information (particularly visual information produced by younger children). Another study found that staff reports on consultations with young people sometimes only gave limited information about what young people think (35). Conventional reports were found to 'lend themselves more readily to communicating to a broader audience' (Laws, 1998: p.14) than simply using creative methods (e.g. visual arts).

The ways in which information about young people's views can help inform adult decisions has not been investigated in any depth, including how that information should be presented.

Whilst young people's views are important for assessing their needs, other sources of information may also be valuable. The merits of information about young people collected from parents and professionals, and how this compares with the views of young people, has not been fully explored. One study found that parents can be more forthcoming than younger children about the children's behavioural problems (Reich and Earls, 1990; cited in 58) but another has found that younger children self-report more depressed symptoms that their parents are aware of (Tizard, 1986, cited in 58). Some project staff do not feel it is appropriate to consult parents (35). The scope and limits of young people's understanding about their own needs have not been identified, nor what may influence their understanding, including their expectations and access to information. For example, research with adults has found that local knowledge does not necessarily structure services, and the opposite may be true; the local need identified by community participants was shaped by their perceptions of what the agency in question could provide (42). Actions and choices are not solely determined by conscious will, agency or intent; there are also influential unconscious processes that impact on young people's actions and views which have not been explored in this area (65).

## 2.2.2 Improved Quality of Decisions

Few evaluations have looked at the quality of the decisions made (or influenced) by young people (or the action taken by them). More work is needed to identify indicators for measuring the quality of decisions, which will be specific to different contexts, but might include for example, the extent to which they:

- Are based on careful consideration
- Are informed by accurate information
- Accurately reflect the needs of young people
- Are practical and affordable to implement

Where young people have been found to achieve outcomes through their own community action, there are barely any attempts to analyse how the young people's work is similar or different to the way adults (trained professionals or community adult groups) would undertake similar work. Similarly, there is little comparison of how young people of different ages, and with different competencies, experiences and interests, and in different contexts, undertake projects.

There is some evidence about the quality of decisions made by groups and by young researchers, outlined below.

### *Group Decisions*

Participatory projects usually involve young people in making group decisions, which means they are subject to group dynamics, as well as external influences. One study of young people's community health projects identified a number of factors that influenced their decisions, including peers, personal experiences and adult intervention (29). This evaluation identified that young people were not always given sufficient information to make informed decisions, and therefore did not benefit from existing knowledge about achieving change through community action and health promotion, as workers were keen to be led by children's own views (although adults did assert their power in other ways). It raised the dilemma about how much support adults should give to ensure young people do not go down blind-alleys or re-invent the wheel when making decisions, whilst also allowing them to make choices.

An evaluation of a reference group of young people (many of whom were under 16) that assessed which youth projects would receive small grant aid, found them to be an 'impressive group of young people' who demonstrated 'maturity and good sense'. Their position as young people was said to give them insight into the 'experiences and perspectives of groups whose applications they were considering', although no evidence was presented of how this was assessed (23).

The level of debate by young people involved in a citizens jury was noticeably different from the debate engaged by resident adults (4). The young people's discussion was characterised by questions and answers with the facilitators seeking to engage jurors by asking them questions that prompted little debate. The young people drew to some extent on their own experiences, but not much on witness evidence that had been presented to them. In comparison, the adult jurors engaged in lively group deliberation and drew on both witness and personal input when considering the topic under discussion. It was felt that other ways of involving young people would be more appropriate, although it is worth noting that the identified difficulties may have been as much to do with factors specific to the context and participating young people as with the method of consultation. Whilst some young people (and adults) may be good at engaging in group decisions others may need a lot of support to be able to do so (see section on 'young people's support' in the 'processes' chapter).

## Young Researchers

Evaluations of involving young people in research have asserted several benefits, these have primarily been to the young participants (see below) but also to the research. Young researchers have been found to be able to critically and reflectively discuss the techniques and principles of research (16). Young people and staff involved in these projects often say that research tools (e.g. questionnaire) designed by or with young people are improved (63), partly because they know what language will appeal to their peers. Another assertion in evaluations is that young people have improved access to their peers (63; 16) although this has not always been found to be the case (32; 35). Young researchers' surveys have been found to get low response rates, similar to adult surveys (32). There is currently some, but little, evidence that young people will be better able to interview their peers, because of their shared language and understanding (32). They have been found to experience similar problems to adult researchers, such as perceived status, lack of interest, biased replies and low response rates in surveys (32; 35) and interviewers' gender impacting on interviewees (16). It can be difficult for young people to interview those they know or who are from the same area and those 'who lacked confidence to interview struggled with this part of the research' (France, 2000: p.21). In some situations it has been found to be unsuitable (or even dangerous) for them to interview peers about particularly sensitive issues, or to interview adults (32).

The assertions that young people design better tools, have better access to their peers or make good interviewers are usually based on the views of participating young people and workers, and rarely do evaluators give an independent assessment of these. No study has yet asked other young people whom they would prefer to be researched by. There has been little analysis of what characteristics make a good young researcher other than (or even instead of) their youth (54).

A detailed study of peer research on transitions concluded that it offered 'little new knowledge or understanding to these debates' (France, 2000: 31). This was partly because the project 'focused more on the research tasks rather than theory building' although the evaluator concluded that theory building (i.e. highlighting and explaining social phenomena) would not have been outside the capabilities of the peer researchers.

Young people are rarely engaged in the analysis stage, which they often find boring and/or difficult (particularly statistical analysis) (16; 32). It has been suggested that young people could be more fully involved in supporting adult researchers to analyse data collected by young people however, as they have 'shared knowledge' with their peers (16). Other research has found that young people find it hard to engage in the process of interpretation of data (11; 32).

### 2.3 How do Organisations Benefit from Involving Young People?

- Changed knowledge and attitudes about young people
- Increased knowledge and skills to undertake participatory work
- Changed commitment (and practice) to young people's participation.

Little attention in evaluations is given to how organisations benefit from their involvement in participatory projects. The focus of existing evaluations appears to reflect a current bias within participatory projects to consider the impact on young people (discussed below) rather than on organisations (including the adults within organisations, such as facilitators and others making decisions about services) and this is reflected in the evaluation questions and the different methods used with adults and young people.

An earlier section examined the extent to which participatory work increases knowledge about young people's views and needs through undertaking consultation work. Here we explore the ways professionals learn more about young people's competency to participate in decision making, plus their role and organisational commitment to facilitating young people's participation.

### **2.3.1 Changed Knowledge and Attitudes About Young People**

Adults involved in supporting young people are sometimes reported to be ‘surprised’ and ‘impressed’ by what the young people are capable of doing and achieving (e.g. 24; 23). There is some evidence of perceived changes in attitudes towards young people. For example, Shenton (1999) found a ‘great deal of evidence of changes in attitudes’ (p.23), including both personal and professional attitudes towards young people’s involvement and participation. This included beginning to see young people as part of the solution and not part of the problem, a gradual recognition of the need for adults to change and of the need for dialogue with children and young people which is based on the principle of equality. In another study adults facilitating children’s participation identified numerous things they had learned about children’s competencies (29).

In one organisation young people felt that they were initially viewed with some scepticism but by the end of programme they felt the adult youth team developed respect for what young people are capable of (23).

### **2.3.2 Increased Knowledge and Skills to Undertake Participatory Work**

The assumption might be that through their experience of involving young people adults develop their knowledge and skills in this area, although few studies have specifically examined this. One study identified that by involving disabled young people workers learned how to overcome the challenges involved (63). Another found that staff had learned about how to involve young people (59). In one project the adults developed more appropriate participatory work with children when they had high support from a participatory worker compared with those who had low support (29). (Adult support is discussed further in the ‘processes’ chapter.)

### **2.3.3 Changed Commitment (and Practice) to Young People’s Participation**

Several studies have found that those undertaking participatory work develop an increased commitment to undertaking further similar work.

Some have found that organisations establish systems and mechanisms for the regular involvement of young people. Even where opportunities increase for young people to play a role in making decisions, these are still few, and ad hoc, rather than universal (e.g. 59).

Several health organisations expressed a greater commitment to empowering children, both at the individual level (by providing more and better information) and through extending opportunities for children’s participation in decision making about service development (37; 21). Other studies have found that partner or parent organisations that supported young people to undertake their own projects took active steps to ensure higher level of participation by their own service users (31; 23). A funding organisation involving young people in assessing grant aid applications also became committed to ensuring further grant funding for young people’s projects would include a young people’s decision making group (23).

Adult learning was found to be important for sustaining commitment to implementing future participatory work (29). The adults that felt they had learned most in facilitating children’s participation were most committed to undertaking future participatory work. One teacher was found to translate some learning from facilitating a participatory class project into her other classroom practice.

Being asked their views is insufficient without action. In one study young people felt that they were asked their opinions more often than in the past, however, very few felt that adults genuinely listened or that their views made any difference (59).

## 2.4 How Does the Wider Community Benefit from Involving Young People?

- Increased dialogue and improved relations between adults and young people
- Improved relations between young people
- Improved links between organisations and the wider community
- Promoting young people's participation

Earlier sections have examined the ways in which young people have (and have not) influenced services in their communities, some of which will also benefit the whole community, not just young people. This section examines the other ways in which involving young people can benefit the community: by helping to improve community relations.

### 2.4.1 Increased Dialogue and Relations Between Adults and Young People

By enabling young people to meet with adults, participatory projects have been found to help increase the dialogue between young people and adults. This includes community residents, businesses, parents, professionals that work with young people, other professionals and those who make decisions (e.g. 29; 59). The young people get to meet those who they would not otherwise have had access to, and sometimes young people leave the confines of their school building and go out to meet others within the community. One author commented that youth councils 'appear to be invigorating experiences' for many young people, providing them with 'opportunities that connect them both to their peers and to other members of the community' (Matthews, 2001: p.308). Young people also go home and discuss the issues raised with families and friends (29; 4).

Relations (i.e. perceptions and interactions) between adults and young people in areas where participatory work is undertaken are often poor. There is some (although little) evidence that increased dialogue helps improve these relations by changing attitudes and interactions. Adults (including parents, community professionals, decisions makers) have been found to be impressed by young people's views and action (29; 23). In highly disadvantaged areas where relations between young people and adults were particularly poor, some project work focused on resolving conflicts between adults and young people and the evaluation found this helped relationships to improve 'slightly' (31).

Within schools, students' involvement in participative activities has been found to bring 'real benefits to relationships between students and teachers' (Hannam, 2001: p.7). In this study, the large majority of students (82%) felt the participatory work had helped them to 'get on better with teachers' (Hannam, 2001: p.32). In an evaluation in which teachers commented that they had better relations with pupils (particularly young school councillors), they described more democratic relationships rather than those based on traditional, passive relationships (27). In another study of school-based projects, using before and after comparative data, children were found to increasingly feel more valued by their class teacher, parents and peers (29).

Good participation work can improve relations between young people and adults, but conversely token consultation has been found to be associated with poor relations. For example, a quantitative study of school councils found that young people who are satisfied with their school council (i.e. they thought it made school a better place) are most likely to think their teachers listen to them and will believe what they say, and that their rights are sufficiently respected in school (2). Those who felt dissatisfied with their schools councils were more likely to think teachers do not listen to them, do not believe what they say and that their rights are not sufficiently respected, when compared with both those who are satisfied with their school council and those who do not have a school council. The author concluded that 'The survey suggests that a council that is seen by students as token has a more negative impact than having no council' (Alderson, 2000: p.133).

National qualitative research found that when children and young people are not listened to (by parents, siblings, friends, cousins and teachers) they have an immediate negative emotional response, including sadness, frustration and anger (53). Children and young people indicated that this lowered personal esteem (feeling their views are not important), increased perceived barriers and reduced their willingness to speak out again.

Another study found that the level of participation is not only associated with the quality of adult-child relations, but directly impacts on them. A small-scale qualitative study of school-based projects found some evidence (using pre and post project comparisons) that where children had made most decisions (and taken action) they increasingly felt able to tell their teachers their views about 'problems that kids face in the school'. Whereas in the project where children felt they had not made decisions (and adults had made false promises about how much they would be able to do so) they were less likely to feel able to tell teachers their views after the project (29).

In a very few evaluated projects, parents (and other resident) volunteers are involved in facilitating the young people's work. Parent volunteers have been found to develop improved perceptions and closer relationships with their children through taking part in participatory projects (29).

### **2.4.2 Improved Relations Between Young People**

Much participatory work with young people involves them working together in groups and also meeting with other young people (e.g. peer research, consultation events), but there is little investigation into how participatory work impacts on relations between young people. Some studies have found that young people develop their group work skills by working together on participatory projects (e.g. 63; 29; 24; 31; 23).

The importance of developing good team working is stressed for group projects, including the value of friendships and peer support within groups (e.g. 16). Young people make new friends when they come together to work in a group with other young people, but also develop closer friendships with those they already knew. One study of pupils involved in school-based projects found that following their project pupils felt more valued by their peers, both their friends as well as 'other kids in the class' (29). This study also found that the project helped to break down gender divisions at times as it encouraged children to work and interact together in mixed-sex groups.

### **2.4.3 Improved Links Between Organisations and the Wider Community**

Many organisations undertaking participatory work with young people do so in partnership with others. Almost 90% of local authorities involve voluntary and other groups in their work with young people (36). Most (16 out of 27) participatory initiatives in the health service are carried out with one or more partner agencies, most commonly with local authorities and/or voluntary organisations (37). Whilst the importance of good partnership for facilitating young people's participation has been identified (see 'processes' chapter), the impact of working in partnership within this context has been investigated.

One evaluation found that schools and after-school clubs facilitating children's community projects made increased links with other community organisations and individuals (29). As a result one agency wanted to do more work with primary schools in future and parents overcame negative perceptions of schools to help co-facilitate the children's projects.

### **2.4.4 Promoting Young People's Participation**

Some projects have found that by undertaking participatory work, they have helped to promote the importance and means by which to do so to others in the community. Peer research projects have been found to gain much interest from others about the methodology, although often less so about the research findings (16; 11). One organisation working with disabled young people found it important to involve them within their organisation so that they could act as a role model when promoting inclusion to other organisations (63).



## 2.5 How do the Participating Young People Benefit?

- Confidence and self-belief
- Knowledge, understanding and attitudes
- Skills
- Education and employment
- Aspirations and plans
- Fun and other benefits

An assumption underlying participatory work is that it is of benefit to the participating young people and there is substantial evidence to support this claim. There is some evidence however, that if participation is tokenistic, then there are fewer benefits and possibly some negative consequences for young people. Evidence for outcomes tends to rely on the perceptions of young people and adults.

Most evidence centres on benefits to the participating young people, rather than other young people in the community, and it is these benefits that are often cited more frequently than evidence for other impacts. It is questionable why so much focus is given to this outcome, over and above others, when their participation is a right not just a learning exercise. Having said that, it is important to ensure that these processes are at the very least positive experiences for participants. They also provide opportunities for learning (for young people and adults), and in some contexts (e.g. schools and youth work settings) it will be an important aim that young people learn through their involvement.

### 2.5.1 Confidence and Self-belief

Several evaluations indicate that participation increases young participants 'confidence', as reported both by young people and the adults working with them. Some mention general confidence whereas others identify in which ways young people have gained in confidence. Most of these are related to their confidence to participate in a group or to talk with others, including confidence to approach people (63), to assert their views, challenge and ask questions (59) and express themselves to adults and peers (24; 31; 3; 23). One school-based study found that participatory activities helped a large majority of students (84%) to feel more confident in school (24). One study reported that workers felt confidence was related to the length of time young people were involved in participatory activities (3: 17).

The authors of the study on Summerhill (the democratic school) were 'struck by the remarkable self-assuredness, maturity and openness of comparatively young people, allied to what seemed to be a sense of integrity and responsibility' (Ainsworth et al, 2000: p.20).

Taking part in decisions can help to make young people feel that their views are important, that they are listened to and can change things in their lives and their communities (e.g. 63; 38; 59; 57; 27). In a sample of over 200 students, most said participatory activities had made them feel they can 'improve things' (94%), made them feel proud of their 'achievements' (97%) and made them feel 'more independent, trusted and responsible' (98%) (Hannam, 2001: p.32). The author of this study found that headteachers and other senior managers also viewed student participation to impact beneficially on self-esteem, motivation, sense of ownership and empowerment and that this in turn enhances attainment. There was evidence (mainly anecdotal) that this increased their motivation to learn and their engagement with learning (24).

Some adults felt that consultation work with children with chronic illness or physical disability had potential therapeutic benefits in enabling them to vent their feelings, develop confidence, feel cared for, and perhaps improve compliance and service-take up (37). Qualitative interviews with young women (18 to 27 yrs) were found to have a range of positive impacts: recording information; clarification of their views; review of their position; and discovery of something new. There was also evidence that some interviewees actions outside the interview were influenced by their participation (51).

Young people have reportedly felt greater ‘ownership’, and control of the process, when they make decisions (e.g. 57). Young people involved in school councils have been found to increase their involvement of pupil initiated extra curricular activities; pupils started coming forward with their ideas to improve all aspects of school life (27).

There is some evidence to suggest that the impact on young people is related to how much they influence change. One school-based study (27) stressed that positive outcomes were achieved because young people’s issues and ideas regarding school life are discussed, tackled and implemented with relative success. Another qualitative study of school-based participation work found that where young people had been involved in making group decisions and taking small-scale community health projects in which they achieved some modest outcomes they increased their self-efficacy (measured using a number of indicators, including feeling valued and being listened to, as well feeling able to take action), but where they had not then there was no change or sometimes a negative impact (29). In another environmental regeneration project, when no outputs had been achieved this was thought to impact negatively on a few young people’s self-esteem and on their desire to get involved in future projects because of their disillusionment that so little had been achieved (31).

### **2.5.2 Knowledge, Understanding and Attitudes**

Some research has found that by taking part in participatory activities young people develop a greater understanding of equality and discrimination issues and change negative attitudes towards other members of the community. This includes, for example, an increased acceptance of people from other traditions, challenged stereotypes, increased understanding of racism and disability awareness, greater tolerance and learning about rights (e.g. 57; 29; 23). Young people living in highly disadvantaged areas have also been found to develop more positive attitudes towards their own area, their peers and adults (31). Almost three-quarters (71%) of young people attending a one day Youth Event found it ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’, primarily because it made them think and they learned new things (3).

Young people learned factual information about the issues they explored in their group projects. Some become more informed of local issues, available services, funding and political processes (e.g. 38; 16; 23). In one study many young people said participatory activities made them more interested in the world generally (28% said a lot; and 52% quite a lot) (24). Another concluded that by gaining knowledge, this increased young people’s confidence to move on and learn more (63). Those involved in citizen juries learned new information and increased their understanding of the debated topic being discussed, became aware of different views, and a couple read or watched media reports on the related topics (4).

Understanding the barriers to change is important for all those engaged in community action. Young people have been found to become more aware of what they could achieve, including what possibilities exist and what might realistically be achieved in which ways (3). Children aged nine and ten have been able to identify barriers to action and the need for adult assistance; in other words, they have knowledge and understanding of their competence, efficacy and agency in dealing with community problems (29).

### **2.5.3 Skills**

A number of studies have found that young people develop their skills through participating in decision making, and this varies depending on how they were engaged (although this variation is probably also due to differences in how ‘skills’ were measured). These included learning how to make decisions, group skills, group facilitation and communication skills. Young people involved in running their own groups said they developed a range of skills and confidence in project management and administration, teamwork and budgeting (23). Almost all those consulted were most proud of the new skills in financial management. Peer research projects develop young people’s research skills. Few studies have used before and after measures (33).

Some skills are not specific to participatory work, and could possibly have been developed using other types of project work, such as group work and creative skills (e.g. drama and video making).

The number of young people who feel they have developed skills varies across projects. Only around a quarter of young people involved in four youth councils said they had developed their skills (38). In other projects, many young people said they had learned new skills. For example, the majority of students involved in participatory activities (91%) said their involvement had helped them to express themselves more clearly (24).

#### **2.5.4 Education and Employment**

Two studies have compared young people's GCSE scores to examine how participation impacts on educational attainment. Both have produced positive results. One compared 12 schools known to be highly participatory with other similar schools (based on percentage of students on free school meals) and found that the former had higher than expected GCSE results and this gap tended to increase year on year (24). The other study was of the Summerhill democratic school, in which attendance at lessons is optional. The pupils' GCSE figures at Summerhill 'compared favourably' with the national figures for all maintained secondary schools (Ainsworth et al, 2000: p.13). This was despite the fact that the school has a majority of students for whom English is a second language, the students had often had prior negative experiences of schooling and the school does not prioritise GCSE results as their highest outcome of educational success.

The above mentioned study of the 12 participatory schools also found that the overall rate of permanent exclusions for the studied schools was significantly lower than for other less participatory (but otherwise similar) schools and attendance was slightly higher in the 12 schools (24). The anecdotal evidence was that the attendance of less academic and potentially alienated students, particularly boys, was improved through involvement in participatory activities. Some students reported that participatory activities had helped them to 'learn more in lesson' (15% a lot; 42% quite a lot), to 'concentrate better in lessons' (11% a lot; 45% quite a lot), and made school a 'more interesting' place to be (33% a lot; 51% quite a lot). The participatory activities certainly did not have an adverse affect on their education. They did not feel these activities took 'too much time from other learning' (45% not much; 53% not at all) or caused teachers to say they are 'falling behind' (12% not much; 86% not at all).

In another small scale study, some primary school children involved in participatory school projects enjoyed them more than other lessons, as they learned to be 'kind' and 'to make other people happy' whereas in lessons they learned 'boring', 'stupid' things (Kirby et al, 2002: p.98).

A few studies report that the benefits gained by young people can help them to gain future employment (e.g. skills, confidence, peer support, accreditation etc) (e.g. 18).

#### **2.5.5 Aspirations and Plans**

A few studies have found that young people plan to continue getting involved in similar participatory initiatives in future (e.g. 23; 31; 59). One study found that whilst the young people's initial expectations were fairly low they became keen to participate (59). One study found little evidence that young people involved in local government initiatives are more likely to become involved in political parties because of their experience of democratic initiatives, and that the reverse may be true, although they remain concerned about many areas which impact on their lives (18). Studies have not examined how participation impact on young people's aspirations.

### **2.5.6 Fun and Other Benefits**

Many studies found that young people had fun and enjoyed their participation, particularly going on excursions, residential and having food (29; 31; 16; 3). In some projects young people receive payment. Young people working in groups also get to develop friendships and peer relations, and benefit from the opportunity to chat and talk with their peers. In evaluations these other benefits are sometimes examined as process factors that encourage young people's involvement, rather than as valid outcomes in themselves (for further discussion see chapter on 'processes'). (57; 29; 31; 16; 3)

### **2.6 How Do Other Young People Benefit?**

Many young people are not involved in participatory processes at all. Few studies have sought to ask their views. One study found that whilst young people involved in the process saw improvements, those not closely involved were less positive: they were not regularly consulted and did not participate in decisions making processes about issues which they perceived to be important in their daily lives (59).

Young people involved in participatory groups often come into contact with young people, by providing peer support or peer research. No studies have examined the impact on those being researched by their peers, so it is not known how they experience this interaction. One study in which young people ran their own community projects (including support groups) found 'significant impact' on the young people joining in groups: including confronting difficult issues, confidence in helping to run projects and the confidence to confront issues in their communities (57).



## 3.0 Evaluation and Research

### Findings: Processes

This chapter examines in what ways young people are involved in public decision making, and the internal dynamics of programmes that contribute to their impacts. It presents the available evidence about how best to facilitate this work to achieve positive outcomes. The size of this chapter, relative to the previous chapter, illustrates how much more evidence there is about processes than impacts. It is divided into the following sections:

- 3.1** Which young people are involved in decision making?
- 3.2** How do young people participate in decision making?
- 3.3** How are young people supported?
- 3.4** How are adults supported?
- 3.5** What are the organisational context issues?

#### 3.1 Which Young People are Involved in Decision Making?

- Who gets involved?
- How representative are the participating young people?
- Young people's motivation and expectations?
- What stops young people from getting involved?
- Adults' rationale for involving young people
- Recruiting and accessing young people

##### 3.1.1 Who Gets Involved?

It is not clear exactly who is getting involved in participatory activities. Few studies give detailed breakdowns of participants and there are no comparisons with those who choose not to get involved. Most consultation work involves quick, short-term involvement from young people (e.g. surveys, conferences). Greater levels of participation in decision making usually requires young people to join groups and meet regularly. The types of young people who want to get involved in groups may well be different from those who do not.

Schools provide a setting in which it might be possible to involve many diverse groups of young people in participatory activities, although in practice often only a minority get involved. Only three out of 12 schools considered to be highly participatory were found to involve large numbers of pupils in participatory activities, and only one involved all students (24).

Most area-wide and organisational initiatives involve relatively few young people, but appear to target a diverse range of groups. This includes young people from disadvantaged or hard to reach groups. Projects involving only a small numbers of young people make efforts to ensure the sample is representative of the local population with respect to gender, race and social background (38; 16; 15), although the most disaffected young people may not get involved (15). Seventy per cent of consulted local authorities said they involved one or more hard to reach groups of young people in participation activities, most often those who are looked after, excluded from school and from minority ethnic groups (36).

Other initiatives focus specifically on targeting more disadvantaged groups in the community, including those who experience health inequalities, care leavers, and those living in areas of multiple deprivation (e.g. 31; 3; 37).

There appears to be a tendency for more girls to become involved in participatory activities than boys. In 11 mixed schools, more girls than boys were found to get involved in participatory activities; the sample ratio was approximately 4.0-4.5 boys to 5.5-6.0 girls (24).

This study also found that girls more strongly viewed participatory activities as benefiting their confidence, collaborative skills, communication skills, and sense of efficacy, than boys (24). The authors gained the impression from student interviews that some boys judged being too enthusiastic as 'uncool'. In another study young women were happy to have forum meetings and discuss issues, whereas young men were more interested in doing practical outdoor pursuits (31).

A national survey asked young people and adults how important is it for adults to listen to children and young people (53). Females of all ages tend to feel that listening is more important than males. Among the young people, 72% of females and 55% of males said it is 'very important'. Amongst the parents, the comparative figures were 88% and 78%. Female children and young people wanted to be heard on more issues than males.

In a citizen jury, five of the six young people making the most frequent contributions were young women (4). Another study found that girls dominated groups, by outnumbering boys and being more verbally assertive and skilled at inserting their comments into the topic in hand (5). Although in some special needs group, the pattern of gender interaction reversed – boys outnumbered girls and were much more verbal (this raises the question as to whether it is to do with numbers or gender?). Minority ethnic young people (Asian Moslem) were also found to be less vocal in groups (5). But both boys and young people from ethnic minorities proved as able as the white girls to articulate their ideas when given a chance by the facilitator (5). Gender and ethnicity issues differ across contexts. Overseas work in Nepal has found that more boys than girls, and higher caste children, attend community decision making meetings (52).

It is not always possible to accommodate the interests of both males and females within the same group, which has occasionally meant that with limited resources, workers have had to choose to work with just one sex (31).

Older young people are also more frequently involved. For example, local authorities are most likely to involve those aged 14-16 years olds (93%) or 17-18 years olds (86%) in decision making, than those aged 10-13 years (66%) (no figures are available for young children) (36). Older students have been found to be livelier than primary school groups who were relatively quiet and needed encouragement to participate (5) although anecdotal evidence has found the opposite. The authors commented however that the younger pupils still often contributed as many ideas as the older groups. Most evaluations have focused on work with young people over 12 years old, reflecting the fact that most work in this area is with this age group. Some evaluations have also examined work with younger children (e.g. 29; 30; 53; 5; 37), although rarely with under fives (5).

Some groups get over-consulted, although it is not known which groups are most over-consulted and what impact this has on young people. In one study an Asian Moslem group had been over-consulted in the past, and they were very busy, so interview time with them was limited (5).

### **3.1.2 How Representative are the Participating Young People?**

There is a debate in the participation literature about the importance of ensuring young people involved in public decisions are representative of all young people in the target population. Some question why we should demand representative youth involvement when the adults involved in making public decisions (volunteers, professionals and even elected members) are rarely representative of the whole community? On the other hand, there is a danger that decisions will be influenced by small groups of young people that exclude large sectors of the population and are frequently unaccountable to others.

Children and young people have said that they want participation to be representative, and to reflect the views of young people as a whole rather than just a small sample (5).

Whatever method of consultation used they have argued that it should involve fairly large numbers of as many different kinds of young people as possible. They suggested ways of doing this, including picking young people for consultation on a random sample basis rather than at the discretion of adults; involving whole schools in consultations; rotating consultations round different schools and areas, encouraging young people to take part through publicity (for example, television advertisements) as well as informing them why the consultation is taking place and explaining why it is a good idea (5). One school realised that the same faces were appearing time again on the school council so the children voted to pull names out of a hat, which ensured that unlikely students get a go (24).

Rarely do consultations or other participative projects ensure representation by involving every young person or using statistical rigour (5). In practice, most organisations equate representation with inclusion and targeting marginalized groups. In some areas young people are often selected or self-selected to participate in 'democratic' forums (15), whilst in other areas they are elected. There are also differences between schools in how pupils are chosen. No comparison has been made of different selection processes.

Often-cited criticisms of methods that only involve a few young people (e.g. youth forums) are that they are unrepresentative. For example, one evaluation found none of the youth forums studied to be genuinely accountable to a broader group of young people (15). They concluded that youth forums can disempower young people if they only represent a certain section of the youth population. Another study of young people involved in youth forums found that around a fifth (19%) felt their councils do 'not represent the views of people like me' and slightly fewer (16%) believed 'all the members come from the same background' (Matthews, 2001: p.308). As youth councils cannot alone represent all views, it has been suggested that a range of methods have to be used (e.g. 18).

### **3.1.3 Young People's Motivation and Expectations**

Little research has examined to what extent young people want to participate in decision making and how. The impetus for involving young people in public decision making appears to be an adult-led agenda: 'Little of the pressure to participate is coming from young people themselves' (Shucksmith and Hendry, 1998; cited in 5). Adults' choice of favoured approaches, such as youth forums, does not rest on evidence of effectiveness or popularity with young people.

Young people do not necessarily expect to have the final say on public decisions but they want to 'have a say' and have their views heard and taken into account (5). A study of young people involved in social action groups has looked at the perceptions of achievement and success (55) which ranged from being heard (e.g. speaking at an event or getting an organisation to listen) to creating some change, however small (e.g. improving facilities and impacting on an individual).

The reasons why young people get involved in public decision making are varied:

- Have a voice, talk freely (3; 12; 15)
- Create change to services/policies (55; 63; 29; 31; 3; 30)
- Change adults' attitudes to young people (e.g. 16; 15)
- Boredom, wanting to 'do something' (e.g. 31; 4; 15)
- Incentives (payment, trips) (63; 13; 30; 15; 4)
- Make friends, meet new people, social reasons (55; 63; 13; 16; 4)
- Educational / self-development (e.g. learning information, skills, provoke thought) (55; 63; 13; 3; 12; 16)



- Therapeutic: personal-development and overcoming problems (e.g. express personal feelings/empathy/self-confidence/identity/self-understanding) (55; 3; 12)
- Attention, responsibility and ownership (15)
- Break from education (i.e. time out from class) (12)

The factors that influence young people's motivation differ across groups and contexts. One study found that differences in age and affluence/deprivation were related to how children and young people perceived getting involved in research (12). Young people develop their own perceptions of the projects we present, depending on their home/family culture and the cultural context where they are being accessed.

Influencing decisions and creating change is just one of the factors that motivates young people, and sometimes it is far less important than other factors. Those involved in issue based groups, for example, are driven by their commitment to the issue, as well as other reasons such social and personal development (55). Other groups are driven more by wanting 'something to do'. Fifty young people involved in environmental regeneration projects in disadvantaged areas, with no or few youth facilities, were asked what they wanted to get out of their project, and most were interested in having fun (68%), and just over a third (36%) wanted to help improve their environment and very few wanted to learn about how decisions are made or meet adults who make important decisions (31).

Consultation with several groups of young people in Scotland has found consistent agreement that they primarily want to be consulted about matters that concern them closely, including the education system (curriculum developments, exams, financial priorities, organisation issues e.g. length of day); working conditions in schools; more leisure provision for young people; public transport; health education and advice (5). This and other research has found that young people are also interested in other issues, including youth-related and other topics (18). A large-scale national survey (53) found that around half or more young people believed they should have a say on a range of personal and public decisions:

- How schools could be improved (73%)
- How to have more fun as a family (63%)
- How the council could improve local services (61%)
- How police treat young people (62%)
- How we could improve our home life (56%)
- How the government sets the policies that affect young people (49%)
- How we talk together at home (49%)
- How we could all take action on big issues likes the environment (44%)
- How shops look after young people when they come in (48%)

Qualitative research accompanying the above survey found that younger children (aged 5 to 8 years) particularly want to be heard and talk about themselves (53). Young people (11 to 16 years) particularly focused on societal issues.

### **3.1.4 What Stops Young People from Getting Involved?**

Very few studies have consulted with young people who choose not to get involved in public decision making. In a local survey of young people carried out by peer researchers in a deprived area of London, over half (53%) said they did not want to get more involved in making decisions about what happens in their area (cited in 30) although uninvolved young people have not always been dismissive of the idea of participation (15).

Researchers working with different groups of young people identified three main reasons why young people have not previously got involved in community projects:

- Young people do not expect participation to be available to them, so they do not acknowledge that it includes them,
- Young people are not aware of their rights and procedures and do not demand opportunities to participate, so unless invited they do not know they can contribute,
- Some young people feel an underlying apathy and cynicism towards participation, arising from the assumption that their ideas will not be taken seriously and acted upon (Percy-Smith and Malone, 2001: p.21).

Cynicism (i.e. distrust) about how much adults will listen and act on what young people say has been found in several studies, even amongst those who have participated in decision making. One author concluded that 'cynicism is a real barrier to be overcome' (35). In a national survey, only 47% of young people believe that adults (parents and others) listen to young people and act on what they hear (53). Most young people rated friends (89%) and parents (87%) as good listeners, but fewer rated doctors (67%) and teachers (58%) this highly. Just over a third thought the local council or government are good at listening.

One barrier to involving young people more in public decision making is their belief that nothing will change if they do. Interviews with 12 young people on the street who were not involved in decision making felt scepticism and disengaged. They believed decision makers do not care, will not listen and they felt that a one-day youth consultation event sounded boring (3). Just a few of those who attended the youth event also felt it was not useful because professionals and decision makers would not listen (3). Another study found similar views from those not participating, plus the belief that adults consult because they are told to by their bosses or the government or an attempt to encourage people to vote (59).

Whilst the majority of those taking part in qualitative consultation activities reportedly feel positive about getting involved, citing positive benefits for themselves and future generations of young people, some participants have found the research intrusive and others who refuse to take part have been found to be disinterested and cynical; feeling the research has no direct benefits for themselves (12; 17).

In schools many of those who have participated in consultations felt adults say one thing and do another (5). A study of young people involved in area-wide strategic decision making however, concluded that there is 'far less cynicism among young people than expected' and that even when frustrated by aspects of decision making, they did not appear to lose faith (15). There is evidence that young people start off sceptically, but if convinced that decision makers really want to hear their views and respond, then over time they became more aware of the possibilities for change and what might realistically be achieved (3).

There is some (little) evidence that those who have had negative past experiences of participation may be less likely to get involved again, although more research into this is needed. Students that had felt ignored, frustrated, manipulated and excluded in previous consultations were cynical about future consultation, whereas those with past positive experiences were more open to future consultation (5). A small-scale study found that school children who had only token involvement in a class project were less likely to take future action, when asked about imagined scenarios, compared with before the project (29). Whereas those who were highly involved in making decisions about their project became more likely to ask professionals to help them sort out future problems.

It takes a considerable time commitment to get involved in forums, which can make membership difficult to sustain. Two-thirds (67%) of those involved in area-wide forums expressed concern about how their obligation to a council was difficult to balance against other interests and expectations (38). Another barrier to involving young people in forums, is a lack of confidence and interest in these types of formal meetings (15). Taking part requires a degree of confidence, communication skills and an understanding of complex and varied issues. One study found that the most successful forums involved a high calibre of core youth activists (15).

Workers engaged in highly participative on-going group work have been found to expect young people to be involved throughout the different stages of their project, when young people sometimes only want to be involved in some stages (31). Alternatively, workers who act as gatekeepers to young people with mental health needs tend to be protective of their clients, so consultation workers need to assure them that young people will benefit (or at least not be harmed) by the activity (35).

### 3.1.5 Adults' Rationale for Involving Young People

Organisations involve young people for a number of different reasons. In a consultation with a range of organisations involving young people, some stressed the value of consultation to young people's personal development whereas others cautioned against justifying or judging the value of consultation on this basis; instead they emphasised obtaining young people's views and effecting change (5).

In area-wide strategic and organisational decision making (other than in schools) a common cited reason for involving young people (in those projects that have been evaluated) is that it will benefit services; making them more appropriate for young people's needs, ensuring sustainability because young people will be more committed to these services, and encouraging young people to the service (63; 36; 15). Adults also commonly focus on benefits to young people: giving them a voice in decision making; self-development (skills, knowledge, self-esteem), socialising problematic youth and training for citizenship (15). Youth organisations have also mentioned that it gives young people greater ownership of their projects and enhances sustainability by transferring skills to young people, which leaves a 'legacy' (63). Some health services also mentioned improved compliance with treatment regimes (37).

In schools one of the main rationales for involving young people is to develop personal learning, including developing their self-efficacy and preparing them for active citizenship. Some school-based work stresses the importance of children's current active engagement in their communities and others emphasise creating positive school environments. Some stress the importance of making their school better to meet the needs of students (29; 24; 10; 27). One evaluation of school based work defined 'student participation' in terms of students' learning, rather than influencing change: 'students having the opportunity during their time at school to learn through experience the skills of participating and responsible action' (Hannam, 2001: p.10).

Another cited reason for involving young people is valuing the 'principle' of listening to service users and children's rights, mentioned both by the youth service (63) and health organisations (37) amongst others.

Evaluations have not examined the impact of legislation that requires organisations to consult young people, and the impact this has on adults' attitudes and practice to involving young people, both positive and negative.

This section has so far only include the views of adults consulted in evaluations. The far larger literature on young people's participation includes several other rationales for undertaking this work:

- Ensuring young people's rights
- Empowering young people
- Encouraging citizenship (and reversing young people's disengagement and cynicism with democratic participation, including voting)
- Preparing young people to be future citizens
- Valuing what young people say as important
- Improving relations between adults and young people (including redressing power imbalances)

- Ensuring inclusive practice
- Meeting the demands of national legislation
- Recognising young people as social actors.

### **3.1.6 Recruiting and Accessing Young People**

Workers have sometimes found it hard to contact young people for consultation exercises, as they are at school or work during the day and often out in the evenings and they do not always respond to written communication and cancel arrangements (5; 23; 35). An evaluation of involving young people in mental health consultations found that the most successful initiatives were taken in well-established youth projects, which offered a service as part of the pack of the consultation process (35). These projects had the least difficulty recruiting young people to their consultation work, as they had direct, informal access to them and they were already trusted.

When recruiting a group of young people it has been found to be important to advertise as widely as possible – but also to undertake outreach to youth organisations – to reach diverse and representative groups of young people (16). Having a clear process, including interviews, enabled young people to have information about the project and make informed decisions.

Recruitment strategies are important for involving young people in group work. Recruitment has worked best when on-going, to allow for young people's drop out (31). Where recruitment strategies have not been in place, then membership of youth forums has reduced enormously over a two year period (38). Some councils have recruitment strategies in place, for example annual elections in each secondary school, arts days used to raise awareness and encourage recruitment of new members (38).

## **3.2 How do Young People Participate in Decision Making?**

- On-going group work
- One-off consultations
- Integrated participatory practice
- Levels of decision making
- Voluntary versus compulsory participation

There is a consensus within evaluations that no one method of involving young people in decision making is the best. Ideally a number of methods should be employed: to ensure representation, accuracy and confidentiality, and to enable young people get involved in the methods that they prefer. Most evaluations examine one-off methods (e.g. surveys) or on-going small group consultation approaches (e.g. forums).

Evidence about the effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) of different consultation methods, and comparisons of these, are rare. Borland et al (2001) provides a good over-view of the research evidence.

### **3.2.1 On-going Group Work**

On-going group work methods (potentially) enable young people to become more fully involved in making higher level decisions, although these can only include a few young people and exclude those who do not want to join groups. When young people were asked which consultation methods they preferred, forums were one of the least popular methods (5). Another study found that demand for forums never came from young people themselves (15).

The evidence about schools councils is varied. Whilst studies have found some councils provide effective opportunities for students to participate (24; 5), there is also evidence that they do not always work well (5; 2). Problems with councils include: older pupils dominating, agendas set by teachers, nominal rather than influential, they only involve a few young people, and others feel excluded. One positive study concluded that more work was needed to enable all students to be involved through more effective tutor group discussions (24).

The most common mechanism for involving young people in area-wide strategic planning is youth forums; over three-quarters of surveyed local authorities use this approach (36). Difficulties identified with these include: being unaccountable if not elected, high turnover of active membership, many forums dissolve and not much is achieved (5; 61; 15).

Young people with experience of area-wide forums have mentioned a number of positive benefits. Sixty per cent said forums provide opportunities for focused discussion by young people on issues related to their lives, and they have valued how forums mimic adult representative structures and feed into decision making bodies (38), adults are encouraging and listen, and young people get to know others in the group so the experience is more comfortable (5). Young people who are not on forums can feel resentful (5) and it is particularly difficult for more marginalized young people to join these groups (5; 31).

### **3.2.2 One-off Consultation**

One-off consultation methods allow more young people to have a say, although only to have minimal input into adult-led agendas. When young people were interviewed about which consultation methods they think are best, they favoured small group discussions and surveys (5). On-line surveys were least favoured. One study found that children prefer to say rather than write, and to talk in groups rather than alone with researchers (Morrow, 1999; cited in 5).

The research literature on different consultation methods (reviewed by Borland, 2001) highlights the high quality and accuracy of interviews, but also that their inherent power imbalance can influence results. Questionnaires are a popular method with young people, particularly with younger groups and quieter young people, and in appropriate circumstances young people will complete long questionnaires, although some do not like them and they exclude those with literacy difficulties (5). Group methods are also popular, particularly when with classmates or friends, and they can spark ideas and provide a range of candid responses. However, those not taking part can resent them, a minority of young people dislike groups and power issues exist within groups (see section below on 'group cohesion'). One-off consultation events had a mixed response from young people, whilst some were very positive others were entirely negative (5). They can be fun, but difficult for more shy young people and resented by those not involved.

Some consultation work involves young people in collecting data from their peers (peer researchers), as well being the subjects of research. Some schools involve students as researchers in which young people are involved in researching learning and teaching practice. It provides a positive experience for those involved, which 'combines enhanced individual learning with overall school improvement' (Hannam, 2001: p.58).

### **3.2.3 Integrated Participatory Practice**

Evaluations have rarely examined how participation can be imbedded into organisational daily practice, such as participatory or truly democratic schools or after school settings in which all (or the majority) of young people can regularly influence both personal and public decisions. (e.g. 39; 24; 1). The evaluation of Summerhill was overall very positive of the democratic approach to schooling (1) and the review of participatory (but not democratic) schools was also positive (24).

One study identified an 'elective programme' as a positive model for schools to involve all students in participatory activities (24). There is currently an ESRC funded Network Project, with six research projects into 'consulting pupils about teaching and learning' which will be completed by April 2003.

Chatting is a consultation method used by professionals to find out the views of their own service users. The informality of this approach may be of benefit although there are concerns that young people may not always want to be open with non-independent workers. No research was found that examines how young people can informally engage in making decisions.

### 3.2.4 Levels of Decision Making

A number of models of participation have outlined different levels of young people's decision making (e.g. 25; 60).

Using Shier's (2001) model, it appears that in much existing consultation work young people are 'supported in expressing their views' and sometimes their 'views are taken into account'. When young people are on forums or school councils that influence change, then the young people are 'involved in decision making processes' although rarely do they 'share power and responsibility for decision making', except when young people are involved in running their own group projects (including peer research). In the latter example, young people may make the decisions within their group, but this does not mean they have influenced public decisions.

Models of participation are useful for comparing different levels of participation between programmes, but they fall short of examining how young people's level of decision making within programmes may shift between tasks, in different sessions and even from moment to moment, and between young people.

It is not always clear how much power young people have in relation to adults, and how and when power shifts within projects. There has been uncertainty about forums' power and responsibility and there was a tendency for them not to be taken seriously (15). Sometimes young people are cynical about how much power they have. For example, 44% of surveyed young people on youth forums said the forums 'have no power' and over a quarter (27%) said they are tokens (38). Young people in one school-based community project felt adult promises that they would make decisions were unfulfilled, whereas other children felt they had made all the decisions and were unaware of how much adults had influenced the project (29).

One-off and regular group consultation approaches are invariably initiated by adults, whereas integrated daily participatory approaches enable young people to introduce their agenda as and when they want, which means adults have to be more responsive to their agenda. Young people on some area-wide forums have complained of adults trying to steer the agenda and process (25%) (38). The requirement to consult can be led by adult and organisational needs and concerns that bear little relation to those expressed by young people (59). Adults' and young people's priorities within regeneration initiatives have been found to overlap, but also include some striking differences (e.g. 31; 15). Young researchers have felt it important to be involved in deciding the research agenda, questions and methods and want to be involved early on in projects (16).

In few of the evaluated projects were young people supported to manage their own budgets. In one programme that gave grant aid to youth groups, managing money was found to be the most important factor in making them feel trusted, responsible and motivated (23). Many said this made the difference between 'token responsibility' and 'real responsibility'. None of the projects over-spent, no money went missing and most underspent mainly due to a lack of experience. The funding body required an adult to sign a form to confirm that the money had been spent as the young people claimed. Many of young people (and youth workers) found this undermining and incongruous with the spirit of a programme that was about giving young people complete responsibility.

Some Scottish young people have said they want votes, rather than a youth parliament, and suggested lowering the voting age, referendums, and a young people's representative in the Scottish parliament (voted by young people) (5).

### 3.2.5 Voluntary versus Compulsory Participation

One of the often-cited rules of good practice in participatory work is that it should be voluntary rather than forced. Young people should give their informed consent and they have the right not to participate. In most of the evaluated settings young people decided themselves whether they wanted to participate. This was mentioned as important by the peer researchers in one study; eight out of ten young people stayed involved in the project for two years, which they said was because it was their choice. Not being forced to participate and being in control of situations was very important and helped keep them involved (16).

Some participatory projects in schools are compulsory however. In one study this fact was found to be 'crucial' in distinguishing school based projects from those in an after-school setting, in terms of how the projects were delivered and experienced (29). When young people's participation is voluntary this makes workers more accountable to the young people's needs whereas when it is compulsory they can be more directive. In another study workers found consulting children in schools easier because the children were a captured audience, compared with after-school contexts in which they could come and go as they pleased (30). In voluntary settings workers have to remain flexible to allow for some turnover in the projects, and for young people to drop out for a while. In a peer research project, for example, seven young people had brief periods when they stopped coming as they had other things going on in their lives (16).

Even in compulsory school settings children can withdraw their consent at times, for example by withdrawing their attention, expressing resistance and refusing to participate in group activities (29).

### 3.3 How are Young People Supported?

- Clear objectives
- Group cohesion and peer support
- Training
- Facilitators' roles: range of support
- Facilitators' roles: levels of support
- Setting
- Adult communication and presence
- Timescales
- Keeping in contact with young people
- Talking to outsiders

The literature on participation emphasises the importance of ensuring young people receive appropriate support. This section outlines the types of support that studies of participatory work have shown to be important.

#### 3.3.1 Clear objectives

Ensuring young people understand the purpose of the participatory work has been stressed as important. Young people involved in youth forums without a strong sense of purpose or clear sets of objectives quickly experienced a sense of disempowerment (44%) and tokenism (27%) (38). In regeneration, youth forums were found to work best when they had specific set of objectives (15).

#### 3.3.2 Group Cohesion and Peer Support

An important stage in capacity building young people to participate in group based decision making is developing their group skills and team building.

This includes learning how to negotiate shared decisions, demonstrate respect, provide support, resolve conflict and feel comfortable expressing feelings (e.g. 63; 16; 29). Group work methods bring young people together and help construct a group identity that creates feelings of obligation and commitment to each other and the project (16). Managing the early stages of group building can be difficult where the young people do not know each other (16). Fun activities (e.g. residentials) are useful for team building (e.g. 63), including building friendships and create a shared history and common identity (16).

Diversity within groups has sometimes worked well. For example, in a Northern Ireland group, it was perceived to be a strength that it included young people from diverse backgrounds, including different geographic urban and rural areas, those from both sides of the religious divide and different ages (12 to 25 years) (23). The different age groups were occasionally split into two groups but mostly worked together well. In other studies diverse groups have been found to be problematic if some young people have challenging behaviour, as this can be intimidating for others and may require a lot of adult intervention (29; 30). Territorial rivalries have sometimes made it difficult for youth workers to get young people from different neighbourhoods to participate together (15).

Young people in groups can develop very close relationships. This is important to help them work well together, but can be an obstacle to enabling other young people to join the group. Nearly a fifth (19%) of young people on area-wide councils suggested they felt like 'outsiders' when attempting to take part (38) and youth forums have often been regarded as 'elitist' and 'cliquey' rather than open organisations, which puts off others (15). A review of school councils found that the most dynamic developed a group with a strong sense of identity and mutual support (amongst other things), but where groups bonded well and enjoyed their own company, they lost touch with their electorate (24). To avoid this, sensitive staff input seemed to be crucial as well as a good structure of meetings and time, and effectively trained tutors, that allowed every tutor group to do its own bonding and develop its own democratic dynamic.

Where groups have worked together for a long time, and had their capacities and needs 'awakened', they may want to continue working together and need exit strategies to help them move on if they have become dependent on the group, this can be difficult and take time (40; 16; 32). Children who have been consulted in short term projects, who are not used to being asked their opinion, and wanted more opportunities have also asked 'what happens next?' (e.g. 40).

Sometimes it has been important for young people to know others in a group before joining (4). Mainstream school students said they were more able to open up in groups where they knew the others. Not knowing the other young people may be an advantage at times; one group said that not knowing other participants within a group helped them to be more open about sensitive personal topics (5).

A review of different consultation methods highlighted the power issues within groups and how these can constrain young people's voices (5). Both adults and young people identified that not all young people will feel able to participate equally in a group. The research itself highlighted this fact, as some young people expressed different views in the groups and in their individual self-completion forms. Whilst peer support is important within groups, some young people have been critical of sessions led by young people and some older teenagers have been dismissive of the perspectives of those who are younger than themselves (3).

One study found that peers influence each other when making group decisions; they appeal to each other and popular children can influence how others vote (29). Head teachers and students in a few schools have mentioned the importance of having popular students as council representatives (24) and youth workers have stressed the importance of involving 'cool kids' in groups to give them credibility (15). At the same time, there was no evidence that young people involved in area-wide democratic process were considered 'uncool' by their peers because they participated in initiatives (15).



Peer support is clearly valued by young people. When asked what would help young people to talk more about the things that matter, their highest priorities were help in school from people their own age (49%) (53) and an internet site for young people (47%). This compared with over a third who said more adults taking time to talk to young people (38%) and help in school from teachers/other adults (38%).

### **3.3.3 Training**

Formal training has been found to be effective for young people's participation, in school councils (24), area-wide forums (38; 61; 18; 15) and particularly important for peer researchers (e.g. 16; 32) and those managing budgets (23).

Many young people do not receive training. A survey of local authorities found that only four out of 10 provide training for young people to participate (36). Most youth representatives in another study received limited or no training because this had not been thought through or due to insufficient resources (15).

Authors have mentioned that training should include: communication skills and becoming versed in debates about citizenship (38), and is most effective when it takes an active, problem solving approaches, not traditional classroom-based methods (15). Young researchers need substantial investment in building confidence and research skills, including practice in piloting interview schedules (16; 32). Research training however was found to be too school-like for younger, unpaid young people (30).

Geddes and Rust (1999) identified different training that was usefully provided for young people involved in democratic structures: chairing meetings, understanding structures, presentation and negotiation skills, recruitment/selection, agenda setting, review and evaluation. One study identified that young people are generally unfamiliar with the realities of political processes and the 'art of compromise' (Fitzpatrick et al, p.24-25), and this may be another area where training could help.

### **3.3.4 Facilitators' Roles: Range of Support**

On-going worker support repeatedly has been found to be essential to enabling young people's participation, particularly youth work support.

In an evaluation of several community youth projects, in which young people had a high degree of control, it was found that youth worker involvement 'proved to be the key ingredient in the success of many of the youth groups' (Greer, 2000: p.49). Groups with no adult support or organisational backing, or where adults leave, experience substantial problems including the collapse of the group (55; 23).

The range and type of support needed to develop young people's ability to take action inevitably varies across groups, but might include developing young people's skills (communication, group work, developing opinions, negotiation and conflict resolution, practical skills e.g. computing), knowledge (rights, services, systems, debates about citizenship) and self-belief (confidence, aspirations, self-efficacy) (e.g. 38; 31). Peer researchers require substantial personal and group development support from youth workers, as well as research support from professional researchers (16; 32).

A few studies have stressed the importance of spending considerable time developing young people's capacity to take part. This may be more the case with some young people than others, particularly disadvantaged young people (e.g. 63). It is not always straightforward to enable young people to take the lead in making decisions; building their capacity takes longer than for adults, because they have not had prior involvement in community activism (15). A small minority of young people with experience of running projects have been found to succeed without an adult support worker, although they have required the support of a host organisation (23).

Workers have found that they sometimes have to fulfil a generic youth work support role, particularly where little or no other local youth work practice exists and when working with disadvantaged young people (31). This can take up a substantial amount of time. In one programme, as the need for youth work support was so high this became a priority, and involving young people in regeneration decision making sometimes became a secondary focus. Workers often have to provide emotional and practical support to enable young people to deal with personal issues in their lives, such as homelessness and poverty, in order for them to participate in decision making (63; 31). One project provided young people with access to volunteers to address any specific needs or required advice and support (16). Some projects working with young people at high risk of mental distress involved counsellors, and projects that worked from an existing practice base could rely on built-in support within their projects (35). Conversations about apparently irrelevant subjects (i.e. chats, banter and gossip) have been identified as important opportunities for providing youth work support (31).

It is important for workers to build young people's trust in them (5; 31; 3; 35). It can take time to build up a degree of trust with young people so that they do not simply say what they believe is expected. It is important for workers to demonstrate to young people that their views are respected and valued, thus enabling them to engage in dialogue and share opinions within the group and with workers. Young people have said they are only interested in giving their views to those who are open and honest and genuinely wanted to hear what they have to say (5). When staff leave this can severely disrupt groups' progress (31; 23).

Young people have been found to make considered choices about who they ask for assistance. They discern how well others will be able to answer their questions (i.e. their relevant knowledge, availability and proximity) and assess their relationships with the adults (i.e. how well they know the adult, how much they like them, how supportive they are perceived to be and how empathetic) (29). A national survey found that there is a strong preference among young people to talk to female figures and to those who have contact with children or have children of their own (53). Young people who were more confident in relations with trusted adults had no problem asking for help when needed (3).

Ensuring groups have fun is important for keeping young people engaged in the process. Residentials, trips, food and social outings appear to be highly valued by young people (e.g. 16; 31; 3; 15). This is especially the case when the required work is difficult, as in peer research (16). More disengaged young people and school children (8 to 12 years) have said they least like the 'work' elements of group projects, including writing (e.g. 29; 31). Whilst in other one off consultations children have asked for more time to finish writing their comments (30). Some managers have not always recognised the importance of fun for young people, and workers have faced the dilemma about how much emphasis to place on fun and whether to allow young people who only turn up for fun events to remain within groups dedicated to involving young people in public decision making (29; 31).

### **3.3.5 Facilitators' Roles: Levels of Support**

Workers supporting young people's participation have to adopt the level of support to the needs and interests of the different individuals and groups. This will have to vary in part depending on the age, ability, and interest of the young people, as well as the context. The amount of support offered will also need to vary within projects, between different tasks and across time, and between different young people.

Different young people may be able to participate to varying degrees and they may require support to take on more and more responsibility over time (63). For some, workers define the appropriate level of participation as simply 'turning up'. To begin with young people may not want to 'take the lead' in running groups, preferring instead to let workers do so that they can 'learn by watching'. At the same time however, it was stressed that it is important not to 'get complacent about always seeing 'turning up' as participation'. Some young people first need to be supported to make small-scale decisions about their own group (and get used to the informal setting in which they are encouraged to express their views) before being able to

engage with decision-makers at the strategic level (31). The danger with this approach is that if other methods of engaging them in strategic decision making are not used (e.g. one-off consultation methods), then they continue to be excluded from important decisions.

In a study of community projects run by groups of young people, an evaluator identified a number of different models of worker support. The ideal was when they were available for advice and provided information, and were constantly encouraging and confident in the young people's abilities (23). For some young people, however, more worker input was required. For example, some groups needed a 'collaborative' or 'participative' model in which the youth worker took on a more prominent role but was guided by young people's ideas and needs and delegated many of the organisational tasks to them (23). In other models youth workers offered too much or too little input. This included those who had unrealistically expected the group to operate too independently too quickly (23).

Sometimes the roles offered by workers are inappropriate and insufficient for the required task and the participating young people. In a peer research project there was a 'passive culture of partnership' in which the professional researchers saw themselves as being responsible to the young people, rather than acting as consultants and advisers, and therefore failed to recognise that at certain points the researchers had a role in taking young people and the analysis to a higher level (16). Workers have a role to play in acting as intermediaries between young people and planners/managers, as well as encouraging young people to meet decision makers (35).

One study identified (primarily through observation) seven facilitation roles that adults adopt when supporting children's participation (29). These ranged from the less directive roles (observation, facilitation) to offering input (challenging and developing ideas, advising, providing information) to more directive input (instructing and undertaking tasks on behalf of children). Each of these roles was important at different times, and the roles sometimes had to change from moment to moment. The challenge for adults was knowing when best to adopt these different roles. Similarly, in another study mentors and host agencies found it 'extremely demanding and challenging' maintaining the appropriate balance between offering supervision and guidance to young people undertaking their own community projects, whilst also allowing the young people to be innovative and creative (57). This required skill and commitment from workers.

It is often important that workers define an appropriate structure to enable young people to participate in ways that best meets their needs and abilities. Where this happens young people can be enabled to challenge and test the boundaries (16). The structure will have to vary depending on the young people and the context. For example, a six-step approach to involving children in community health projects (Child-to-Child) was considered an appropriate structure for a school context but overly-structured for an after-school context in which young people were used to doing leisure activities (30).

Payment to young people can also change the relationship between workers and young people from volunteers/youth worker to employee/employer and this can shift workers' expectations of what work young people will do and what the young people are prepared to do (32).

### **3.3.6 Setting**

Barriers to involving young people in area-wide strategic planning are formality, complexity, and too much paper work (30; 38; 15). For example, 40% of young people on youth forums said they are too bureaucratic and eight per cent said too much time is spent in fundraising (38). Meetings that are formal, intimidating and long are particularly a problem, and the venues and meeting times can determine level of attendance (38). Some young people have found community forum meetings more welcoming than environmental partnership boards (15).

Formal meetings have been improved in a number of ways. For example, adjustments to board procedures included keeping meetings focused, ensuring minutes are short and easy to follow, and enabling young people to leave the meeting for the more ‘boring’ discussions such as staffing and financial issues (5). Having an agreed, pre-circulated agenda, and clear guidelines to inform action (rather than no structured agenda and unclear officer roles), meant considerable achievements could be made (38).

### **3.3.7 Adult Communication and Presence**

Adult verbal and nonverbal communication is important for enabling or preventing young people’s participation in making decisions. The ‘manner’ in which they engage with young people demonstrates their ethos and understanding of young people (23). One study identified over ten ways in which adult communication constrained children’s voices and influenced their choices (e.g. expecting a right answer, false choices, leading questions, push words) and even the most committed of workers fell into using deeply socially entrenched language that reinforces their position over children (29).

One project found language a huge stumbling block to attracting young people to consultation workshops on mental health (35). Young people did not identify with the term ‘mental health’ so the project subsequently avoided using the term in all publicity material. Other projects already working in the field of mental health found it important and possible to be upfront about the mental health agenda (35).

Another study found that a well-meaning but strong-minded local councillor left young people feeling manipulated and a lack of ownership of their council meetings. Whereas when adults could only attend if invited, young people appeared more confident and open (38).

The presence of well-known adults was also shown to influence young people’s responses. During a group discussion young people became more open and confident in their responses when known adults left the room (5).

This interaction between young people and adults requires more research as it is at the heart of their relationships and therefore fundamental to enabling young people’s participation in decision making.

### **3.3.8 Timescales**

It takes time to involve young people and realistic timetables need to be set. For example, Walsall Youth Congress spent almost three years planning and preparing for their launch, ensuring that young people were involved at every step and developed at their own pace (61) and they can take much longer than anticipated (35). Two-thirds (67%) of young people on youth councils said there is not enough time to get things done (38). Schools also need to allow more time for class discussions to take place during tutor groups (24).

Time constraints and output requirements can put pressure on workers to get things done; as a result young people sometimes do not get to make as many decisions or take as much action (16; 18; 59). In one example, staff did not allow children to finish their project as it over ran and there were concerns about taking too much time out of the national curriculum, which meant fewer positive outcomes were achieved (29). An example was found of how the pressure to produce outputs, particularly to get additional funding, meant staff ‘coached’ young people when doing presentations (16).

Decisions made by adults can take far too long for young people who need fast results, partly because there is a high turnover of young people in projects, but also because their lives move on quickly and their timescales can be different (15; 38; 31). The longer it took to implement environmental regeneration outputs in one programme, the harder it became to keep young people interested, particularly in locations that had been “consulted to death” and former promises unfulfilled (31).

Young people's needs, interests and aspirations can change quickly. Some initiatives have therefore recognised that ideas/policies may become outdated. Workers need to remain flexible in how they work in order to accommodate these changes. (15; 31)

Projects are sometimes designed without due regard for young people's and organisations' timetables (e.g. school holidays, going off to university) (16; 23). If young people are unable to attend at certain times, then workers have had to take on the burden of work. Schools that allow councils to meet during lesson time have been found to be more successful as they enhance the group's status and increase councillors' motivation (24).

Youth-led social action groups change rapidly, several collapse, although some may start up again (55).

### **3.3.9 Keeping in Contact with Young People**

Giving young people feedback following their participation is considered good practice, but this does not always happen. The most common complaint from children and young people in one study was that they had no ideas what happened after they were consulted (5). In health organisations undertaking consultation work, just under half gave some sort of feedback (37).

Young people usually want their suggestions to be taken into account and acted on, but will understand constraints if these are explained (5). Good practice was observed in several youth councils where unsuccessful outcomes were fully explained to young people (38).

### **3.3.10 Talking to Outsiders**

Research has found that young people are generally reluctant to talk to 'outsiders' about family issues during legal cases, as this is seen as disloyal and liable to lead to an escalation of problems (46). When being consulted about public decisions, however, there is evidence that young people do not mind talking to outsiders (i.e. those they do not know already). Children and young people are often keen to take part in research.

Consulted young people unanimously said that school is the best venue for consultations as 'everyone is there', but as long as it is conducted in a private room away from teachers, and led by an outsider (5). They even felt surveys should be administered by outsiders, rather than teachers, to avoid their influence and/or censorship (5). Pre-school children (aged three) have been found to talk openly to an outsider (5).

Studies have found that young people often do not feel listened to by teachers (e.g. 29; 53; 2). It is not clear how much young people's desire to talk with outsiders rather than teachers is related to their experiences of being listened to (or not) by teachers. It may be that when young people feel listened to by the professionals they know, then they may not require outsiders to consult them.

Some young people have expressed concern that researchers/reporters may not pass on their views accurately to decision makers, and therefore it is better for those decision makers to meet directly with young people (5).

## **3.4 How are Adults Supported?**

- Facilitators' support
- Support for community adults (families, residents, businesses)
- Support for decision makers

### 3.4.1 Facilitators' Support

The skills of workers are central to the chances of a project's success (35). Facilitating young people's participation in decision making is a challenging and demanding undertaking for adults, as it requires a radically new way of working with young people; to be nondirective, flexible and responsive. In one study, for example, researchers found it difficult handing over power to young people (16). Adults involved in youth participation have diverse personal experiences and professional backgrounds (28) which impact on how they engage with young people (29). Enabling young people to make decisions can be a new way of working even for those trained in youth work. Workers can therefore need support to be able to facilitate young people's participation.

#### *Training*

Very few workers undertaking this type of work appear to be trained or well supported to do so. A recent survey of participation workers in various sectors found that just over half (57%) had received any specific training for their jobs, and this included all types of training not only that related to involving young people (28). Another survey found that only one in four local authorities in England provide training for staff on involving young people (36). In just under half the health initiatives surveyed, had staff received support, most commonly time and training on children's involvement (37).

Evaluations have found that even youth workers with experience of working with young people can benefit from specific training on participation in decision making (e.g. 63; 29). Some youth workers have been found to be more skilled and have a clearer understanding of their role in facilitating participation than others (23). Training can also benefit council officers with little or no experience of working directly with young people (18).

The most frequently wanted training by existing participation workers is participation techniques and strategies (92%). Many also require a range of other related training, training led by young people (81%), children's rights and law (75%), group work with young people (74%), working with young people (70%) and organising young people's events (68%) (28). Other research has found that adults confuse conceptual issues, such as consultation, involvement and participation (59). Studies that have examined the interaction between facilitators concluded that more training was required for facilitators (including teachers) on the different roles that adults need to adopt when facilitating children's involvement (from directive to non-directive), including the ways in which adults' verbal and non-verbal behaviour enables and constrains young people's voices (29; 30).

Within schools, staff training and development is 'patchy', even in the more participatory environments (Hannam, 2001: p.21). Five out of 12 participatory schools highlighted the need for training to improve the effectiveness of their student democratic structures and processes. Teachers also needed more support to develop their role as tutors for engaging all students through effective tutor group discussions (24).

As well as training on facilitating young people's participation, more thought needs to be given on how best to involve them in area-wide initiatives. For example, one study found that interviewed adults commonly accepted the validity of involving young people in regeneration, but had yet to translate this into an understanding of how best to achieve their meaningful involvement (15).

#### *Adult Peer Support and Reflective Practice*

The large majority (90%) of consulted participation workers said they would be interested in getting support through a Participation Workers' Network/Forum (28). Evaluations have found that staff lack opportunities to meet with those in different agencies to share experiences (63) and that this type of peer support can be crucial (18).

Reflective practice in which staff teams spend time reviewing and questioning the way they work was found to be very helpful in a number of studies (63; 29; 24; 3). Another important factor was establishing a dialogue between workers and young people to monitor and evaluate progression (3). One teacher said he had been hostile to all ideas of student involvement but getting feedback about his teaching from students had done more to help his teaching than any other staff development (24). Another study found that whilst children were encouraged to self-evaluate their project work, this varied across settings; only in an after-school club, but not in schools, were children encouraged to criticise the adults' facilitation (29). The latter evaluation also found that having a dedicated participation worker to offer support (including training, advice and co-facilitation) to staff in host organisations proved essential for ensuring more participatory work, as it kept them focused on the aims and principles of the work and encouraged staff to reflect on their practice.

A study looking at young people developing their own community projects found that it was a challenge for staff having young people working alongside them with equal status (57). Staff had to reflect on their own attitudes towards young people, recognise different perspectives and the approaches young people have to offer. Difficulties were particularly acute when young people had different attitudes or approaches to those generally accepted as good practice. Where organisations did rise to the challenge, this reportedly had considerable benefits to young people and organisations.

Young people feel that adults can learn from young people (56%) and around a third believe that adults would enjoy listening more (38%) (53).

### *Research Support*

Consultation exercises require research skills, and an evaluation of several projects concluded that it may be helpful to involve someone with a research background to assist in the recording and analysis of young people's views (35).

### **3.4.2 Support for Community Adults (Families, Residents and Businesses)**

Poor relations often exist between young people and adults. The negative attitudes of community members (parents, other residents and businesses) have acted as barriers to young people's involvement (57; 23) and one study found this to be the biggest barrier to involving young people more meaningfully in undertaking environmental regeneration in their communities (31). Adults (including parents) were sometimes hostile or undermining of young people and their work. Local adults have objected to young people's ideas or shown their resentment at opportunities for young people (31; 23). Where conflicts exist between different groups of adults, these tensions have also prevented them on together agreeing young people's projects (31). These studies concluded that it is important to undertake on-going community development work with adults, including conflict resolution (between adult groups and between adults and young people), in order to address young people's issues.

Very few studies have researched the views of parents, and none appear to have included other family members, about children's participation in public decision making. In an overseas context parents have been found to have an important role in deciding whether children are able to participate (52). One research project identified that it may not be easy to recruit parents to work in study support centres (39).

A national survey asked adults about listening to children and young people generally (i.e. for personal and public decisions) and found that whilst 83% of parents agreed it is very important to listen, only 57% agreed that adults do listen and act on what they hear (53). Mothers were generally more in touch with children and young people than fathers and were more positive about the benefits of listening to children and young people. Parents from AB socio-economic groups expressed stronger views regarding the importance of listening to children and young people. Also, older adults (60-65 years) were slightly less likely to perceive the importance of listening to children and young people.

Personal correspondence with practitioners in the UK suggests that parents are sometimes against young people's participation, particularly younger children, in making decisions on 'adult issues' although this needs to be researched further. In one evaluation a parent was found to have made her child sign a petition against a youth facility, which the child personally supported (31). In another, young people said they felt their parents were positive about their involvement (59) and parents were successfully involved as volunteer facilitators in one project with primary school children (29).

### **3.4.3 Support for Decision Makers**

Little evaluation work has studied the views and practices of adult decisions makers. There is evidence however that negative attitudes to young people and youth participation, and unchanging practices, act as barriers to involving young people further in decisions. One of the problems is that young people's views do not carry the 'same status and significance as adults' views' (Shenton, 1999: p.8)

In urban regeneration initiatives, there was a general lack of awareness of the changes that adults may have to make in their work practices, attitudes and behaviour to 'let young people in' (Fitzpatrick et al, p.25). Some key actors openly believed that young people could not or should not be involved, some felt young people lacked the capacity for involvement, some felt young people are uninterested and some paid lip-service to involving young people. The adults in power could be untroubled by youth workers speaking for young people, although youth workers themselves are not always comfortable doing so. Most seemed to expect young people to adopt their language and norms of behaviour. The authors concluded that adults require training.

In a survey of local authorities, it was found that only 12% of councils provide councillors with training on involving young people (36). Decisions makers on a New Deal regeneration board (which includes local residents and professionals) have been resistant to 'training' on any issue based topic, including (but not specifically) youth issues (30). Those who are in positions to effect change also have little time to find out about young people's participation issues; there have been difficulties getting time to meet with those on regeneration boards (30) and head teachers (29). Another study found too little was done to support decision makers to consider how to change structures to incorporate young people's views. It concluded that the skills required to engage with decisions makers to enable them to involve young people are different to those needed to engage with young people, and that these roles may best be divided between different jobs (31).

Young people have also experienced problems engaging with adults in the private sector. Some youth groups have had difficulties being taken seriously when opening bank accounts, purchasing large items (as they have needed cheque authorisation from youth organisations) and there have been examples of them being 'exploited' in financial arrangements with private organisations (23).

### **3.5 What are the Organisational Context Issues?**

- Organisational culture and context
- Formal structures
- Workers and organisational Motivation
- Team and partnership working
- Champions of participation
- Staffing and resources



### 3.5.1 Organisational Culture and Context

Young people's participation is being undertaken in two types of contexts, listed below, and the issues for implementing this work in both are likely to be different:

- Organisations that work directly with young people on a daily basis (e.g. schools, youth service, health organisations, social services)
- Organisations that are involved in providing services for all community members and have little or no direct contact with young people (e.g. local authority departments, regeneration boards)

Most evaluations in both types of organisations have focused on one off or irregular consultations mechanisms, such as youth forums, school councils and research methods (e.g. questionnaires and focus groups). Very few have focused on how organisations that undertake direct work with young people have developed ways of working so that young people can participate in decisions (both personal and private) on a daily basis (1). More work is needed to examine truly participatory organisational cultures, and compare these with those that undertake infrequent or no consultation, particularly examining the relations between adults and young people in those contexts.

A cost-benefit analysis of undertaking one off consultation exercises compared with supporting organisations to develop more participatory cultures is also needed, as there is a danger that large amounts of money are being pumped into short-term and one-off initiatives when these resources may be better utilised supporting those who work directly with young people to develop their practice. For example, youth forums may receive a disproportionate share of youth work resources in their area, so making other initiatives that involve young people less likely (15).

Working participatively with young people requires a radical cultural shift for most organisations, including those who work regularly with young people. For example, setting up an effective democratic school council involves related changes to routines and relationships throughout the school (2). The authors of one evaluation suggested that, as with mainstreaming equality issues, the participatory cultural change cannot happen overnight (18). There is a lack of research on how to establish a culture of participation across an organisation or within a community and how participatory organisations would look in practice.

Most evaluations focus on isolated local initiatives and do not examine how a culture of participation can be achieved across an area (estate, borough, village, city, region). An on-going evaluation has found that a dedicated youth participation worker is having some initial success at trying to establish a community culture of participation by supporting many local organisations working with young people to involve their clients more in making decisions (30). The aim is for young people to be consulted in any organisation that they use, and for youth organisations to support young people's involvement in the area-wide regeneration strategic decision making. Another borough-wide initiative found that its strength lay in the 'intensely localised' foundations, although there was a tension between incorporating a localised practice into an area-wide strategy (63).

For organisations to develop participatory practice senior staff need to be committed to this work. In schools the support of the head teacher and other key senior and middle managers is crucial for developing effective student participation (24; 29). Legislation alone will not make schools participatory. For example, in Denmark recent legislation requiring democratic structures in schools has not resulted in all being participatory. An official evaluation found that the reforms are only being effectively operationalised in around 25% of upper secondary schools and creating change in other schools was felt to be a slow process (Monsen, 1999; cited in 24). The democratic practices were quickly taken up by those schools with headteachers and a core of staff who were already disposed to work democratically (Hannam found a similar pattern in Norwegian schools; cited in 24).

Different organisations make varying institutional demands on adults and young people and this impacts on how participatory they can be. One study compared participation work with children in schools and an after school context (29). Within the schools teachers had a specific role to ensure large classes of children achieved learning tightly defined by the national curriculum, which resulted in a more directive teaching approach adapted to delivering these attainment goals. In a school which had worked hard to succeed in raising children's test score performance, there was a pressure not to take too much time out of the curriculum and to fit the expectations demanded within the school by doing lesson-type work within the participatory activities (such as writing everything in an exercise book and doing homework), whereas another school with higher test scores did not feel this same pressure. In the after school context there were fewer institutional demands and an informal approach to education which lent itself to engaging young people in making decisions.

Schools are now required to undertake citizenship education as part of the national curriculum (a statutory requirement in secondary schools, but not primary schools), and the ways in which this is implemented needs to be closely followed in the future.

With area-wide initiatives, it is necessary to influence those who need to support corporate strategies and initiatives. Within local authorities it has been found 'essential' that officers, particularly Chief Officers, see the benefits of involvement to the department (18) and within area regeneration initiatives, that staff teams are supported to implement board recommendations and that young people are involved within this work (30).

As most departments and services are split by profession, one study concluded that this has resulted in young people's issues being marginalised or seen to belong only to youth service/education or leisure provision (18). A survey of local authorities found that in almost all, it was the education department that initiated young people's involvement exercises (IPPR/LGA, 2001). In 50%, a corporate unit was responsible for leading on young people's involvement activities.

### **3.5.2 Formal Structures**

In order to implement young people's ideas there need to be systems by which their ideas feed into decision making forums.

Formal links between school councils and governing bodies of schools seemed to be significant for raising the profile of several school councils (24). Youth forums needed to be linked into adult structures if the views of young people are to influence change in their area (31; 38; 15). This includes arrangements for them to regularly feed their views to adult decision makers.

Where these links are not set up in advance it may be harder to achieve change (63). For example, an organisation undertaking a citizen jury with young people was not in a position to directly implement their recommendations and they did not effect any changes (4).

Most participatory schools have included student participation in their whole school policies and planning documents (24). Less than a third (29%) of surveyed local authorities have a strategy in place for young people's involvement (36).

### **3.5.3 Worker and Organisational Motivation**

Worker motivation is important when implementing projects and this is helped when they are encouraged to volunteer rather than instructed to work participatively. One school, for example, launched a whole staff initiative in citizenship, but this met significant resistance from enough staff that the programme changed to one for willing volunteers (24). In another school-based study the extent to which facilitators had volunteered or were nominated by managers impacted on their commitment (29). Where teachers are motivated then participatory activities can prove a major source of their job satisfaction, despite the additional workload (24).

An evaluation identified a challenge for a highly motivated staff team was avoiding the potential danger of burning out and finding ways to sustain their commitment (3).

It was found that involving young people may be used to promote organisational agendas and goals, so workers need to be open to reflecting and changing organisational goals, direction and practice in response to young people's input (57).

### **3.5.4 Team and Partnership Working**

Evaluations have shown the importance of good multi-agency and team working for involving young people. This includes developing relationships, networking, mutual support and respect, collaboration across different localities, good communication, clarity about roles and responsibilities, shared understanding and commitment to project aims (29; 57; 3; 59). Where agencies work well together then there can be synergistic impacts for young people (57) and help to consult a wide range of young people (35).

One evaluation found that involving school nurses in school based work helped to build links between health and education (29). Other work has found there is greater potential for schools to work with other agencies. Twelve schools studied had links with their feeder schools and several had links with other secondary schools, but there was no collaboration with these schools over student participation issues though several heads said 'on reflection' these should be developed (24). An examination of youth forums found that good partnership support and input is needed from schools and the Youth and Play Services; most groups that have not had school or youth council backing have failed or are struggling (61).

In one study participatory voluntary organisations had difficulties working in partnership with local statutory Youth Services (31). It was felt that youth clubs were only interested in continuing to run their own traditional club sessions rather than getting young people involved in developing their own projects. Also, because youth workers are frequently employed on a sessional basis this meant it was hard to maintain regular contact with them, they were not always adequately informed about the aims of the project and did not have the time to develop their practice and thinking.

### **3.5.5 Champions of Participation**

Barriers to implementing youth participation include the view that it is someone else's job and inertia (59). Dedicated participation workers or others who are committed to promoting young people's involvement have been found to be instrumental in achieving project successes (e.g. 30; 29; 59). They have a role to play in supporting those who already work regularly with young people, as well as those who do not, to adopt more participatory practices. Dedicated participation staff are costly, however, and can also become isolated in their task (18).

An on-going evaluation has found that a dedicated youth participation worker is having some success at establishing young people's participation in a local regeneration initiative, impacting both on strategic decision makers and local youth organisations (30). Another study found that a school given high support from a participation worker developed more integrated long-term participatory practice than another school which only received low level support from the participation worker (29).

When the role of the participation worker is to support those who do not normally work with young people on a daily basis (e.g. council officers and regeneration staff teams) questions about sustainability arise if the post is short term. One regeneration staff team, well supported by a participation worker, did not see how they could undertake participation work to the same level without that support (30). They felt they were already working to capacity and did not have the time, knowledge or skills to also involve young people.

A study on young people's democratic involvement in three local authorities concluded that when working within local authorities, it may be best to have a combination of dedicated staff and corporate champions, and for these to be officers placed around the authority, preferably

in each department and some at a senior level, to push forward the corporate initiatives/strategies (18). The authors concluded that these champions should be nurtured and involved at every opportunity to maintain their enthusiasm. Another study of an area-wide initiative found that whilst participating organisations were committed to identifying champions within their individual organisations, the impetus and momentum for the initiative was almost entirely driven by the initiative coordinator (59).

A couple of projects have found that there is danger if participation workers or champions become perceived to be too closely aligned with certain people on one side of a political divide (31; 18).

### **3.5.6 Staffing and Resources**

Undertaking specific one-off consultation activities or supporting an on-going group requires adequate staffing and resources. Youth forums, for example, need to be well-resourced. They are most successful when they receive generous funding and dedicated staff (15; 61; 38). Access to funding for participatory work is not always available; in health service initiatives under half those surveyed received dedicated contributions to their costs (37).

High quality staff is an important factor for facilitating young people's participation (15). High staff turnover has been found to disrupt work with young people, particularly if they are not replaced immediately (e.g. 31;38).

School based community health projects required additional adults (three to five) to facilitate whole class projects, but this included parent volunteers, school nurses and learning mentors, but the class teacher then went on to develop more participatory classroom practice that did not require more staffing (29). More research is needed to examine how staff already working with young people can develop more integrated participatory practice that does not require (much) additional time, staffing or other resources.



## 4.0 Future Challenges for Evaluation and Research

This chapter explores some of the issues that need to be considered when thinking about evaluating young people's participation in public decision making. It discusses who should be undertaking evaluation, how, and the resource implications and barriers to doing so. It is divided into the following sections

- 4.1** Prioritising evaluation
- 4.2** Clarifying Goals
- 4.3** Involving Young People's Voices in Evaluations
- 4.4** Who should evaluate?
- 4.5** Participatory evaluation
- 4.6** A mixed method approach
- 4.7** Examining context and theory
- 4.8** Adequate resources for evaluations
- 4.9** Evaluating evaluations
- 4.10** Recommendations for future evaluation and research

### 4.1 Prioritising Evaluation

Despite the growing amount of consultation with young people and government legislation and policy that requires young people's involvement in public decision making there is still very little evaluation of this work and little evidence about what works.

The independent evaluations that do exist tend to be small-scale and localised rather than large-scale national studies, and there appears to be little self-evaluation. Only three out of ten surveyed local authorities evaluate the impact of initiatives involving young people in decision making (36) and only seven out of 27 health initiatives formally evaluated their work involving children, just two of whom did so formally (37).

Whilst there is the clamour of government departments for evidenced-based practice in community initiatives, and a subsequent growth in the evaluation industry, many types of programme work are still not well evaluated. Youth participation is a new area of work, so there has been relatively less time to evaluate practice compared with more established areas of work. As youth participation is based in the principle that it is the right thing to do, there is perhaps less wish to question it. Examining practice does not infer a challenge to the principle; it is essential for ensuring young people are meaningfully involved in public decision making, rather than in tokenistic ways.

Evaluation is inherent to the development 'programme cycle' which involves regular learning and change. The need to monitor and evaluate is often stated as good practice, but all too rarely happens in any formal and planned way. Evaluations are seen as an add-on to development work: a burden rather than integral to a learning culture. If we are to develop our practice of involving young people in decisions, then we have to challenge and change existing cultures of practice. For programmes to improve we have to be open to the fact that involving young people is as much about our adult learning, as it is about the personal development of young people. We all have to be open to new ideas, new ways of working and improving our relationships with young people.

### 4.2 Clarifying Goals

Evaluation can only be as good as the clarity of the intended outcomes and processes employed by programmes. Often the purpose of youth participation is unclear. Programme aims are frequently broad and undefined, particularly the commitment to 'empowering young people'. It is not always clear whether programmes are trying to improve the quality of public decisions about services and/or to enhance democracy.

Broad programme aims are often not translated into objectives, or the objectives are unclear, unspecific and un-measurable. Many professionals require support on how to write clear programme aims and objectives and more training is needed in this area. When evaluators are involved at the start of programmes they can play a useful role in helping to clarify aims and objectives, but policy makers, practitioners and project users may want to question how appropriate it is for evaluators to influence programme development in this way (19).

Another problem is writing aims to fulfil fixed funding criteria, when staffs' hoped for outcomes are less ambitious or different to that written on the funding bids. Funders need to grant projects greater flexibility in defining their aims, and allow these to change over time, so that project users (both young and old) can have greater influence on programme planning.

### **4.3 Including Young People's Voices in Evaluations**

Participatory programmes are based on the principle that young people should be involved in decisions that affect their lives. Asking young people what they think of participatory programmes (and acting on what they say) is therefore integral to involving them in making decisions. Evaluations of youth participation should therefore take a youth (or child) focused approach in order to bring 'children to the foreground, so that their lives can be as clearly seen as adults' (Boyden and Ennew, 1997: p.11). This means consulting young people as stakeholders and using an approach (and methods) that helps redress the power imbalance between researcher and young people to encourage and enable their fuller involvement in the research:

When undertaking primary research into young people's participation the following minimum requirements are suggested:

- Include young people's views: as the objects of research and sources of data.
- Redress power imbalances: for example, demonstrate respect and interest, inform young people about the purpose and outcomes of the research, gain informed consent (and allow for dissent at any time), consider young people's needs (including communication), use clear and appropriate language, enable young people to choose the setting and to introduce their own agenda, facilitate the use of independent support (peer or adult), and give feedback.
- Use appropriate methods: use appropriate methods to enable young people to participate more fully in evaluations by encouraging them to take part and making it easier for them to communicate their views. These will vary depending on the evaluation aims, the young people and the context. Techniques that are creative, visual (rather than text based) and fun may at times (but not always) be the most appropriate methods.

It is also important to include the views of other relevant stakeholders. Young people's agency is expressed through their relations with others, and studies need to include the perspectives of peers and adults.

### **4.4 Who Should Evaluate?**

All programmes engaged in youth participation work should be evaluating their practice. There are different options for who can undertake evaluations, listed below. The different stakeholders can undertake evaluation individually or collaboratively:

- Clients (including young people)
- Organisations (front-line staff and/or management)
- Professional researchers

Young people can be supported to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects themselves; to identify whether they have achieved the outcomes they aimed for, and what helped or hindered the process.

Most organisations have established monitoring and other organisational learning processes, and are therefore already engaged in reflecting and learning from their practice. To translate this learning into self-evaluation may require formally recognising these processes, or possibly introducing different questions and methods into existing systems. There are some useful resources for those practitioners wanting to manage and undertake their own research (e.g. 34; 64; 66), but more guidance is needed specifically on evaluating young people's participation. There is an urgent need for training; 83% of surveyed Participation Workers said they wanted training on evaluating young people's participation (28). There is scope to develop evaluation toolkits for organisations supporting young people's involvement in public decision making, and training on how to use these toolkits.

Self-evaluation needs to be balanced with quality controls that ensure the data is meaningful and useful, reflecting the views of all the young people and other stakeholders that the research claims to represent. There is a danger that organisations reflecting on their own practice may perceive it to be better than it is and to overstate the positives, especially if this process is not well facilitated. For example, one evaluation found evidence that some agencies and individuals claimed to work participatively with young people, whilst this was not the experience of the young people (59). Young people may not feel able to be open and honest with staff supporting them or not be invited to criticise their services (e.g. 29).

Professional researchers have an important role to play in evaluating young people's participation. They can provide valuable expertise to those undertaking self-evaluations and are also needed to undertake independent evaluations and other research. This is to ensure the application of rigorous research methods, a level of independence and to provide the distance needed to make comparisons across different programmes and contexts.

Not all programmes require independent evaluations, but all programmes should have some level of self-evaluation built into their planning. The next section examines further how organisations and young people can be involved in evaluating programmes.

#### **4.5 Participatory Evaluation**

The term 'participatory evaluation' usually refers to involving practitioners and/or other stakeholders more fully in planning and carrying out programme evaluations, for example developing the evaluation framework, data collecting and assessment.

Participatory evaluation is a methodology rather than the simple application of different research methods. It is inevitably a political intervention, rooted in a commitment to participation, which mirrors the ethos of participatory development work. The aim is to promote self-reliance in decision making and problem solving, in order to strengthen people's capacities to take action and promote change (13).

There are numerous definitions, with varying degrees and types of participation; some highlight involving just some stakeholders (e.g. project staff and management) whereas others include the representation of all stakeholders (including young people). The following definition illustrates the high value placed on the knowledge of all stakeholders in shaping the evaluation process and subsequent decisions.

Participatory evaluation is a process of collaborative problem-solving through the generation and use of knowledge. It is a process that leads to corrective action by involving all levels of users in shared decision making. (Narayan, 1993: p.9)

The participatory approach is in many ways different to conventional independent evaluations, as outlined in the box overleaf, although in practice there is a wide continuum across the two approaches (13). For example, many participatory evaluations develop indicators with stakeholders but some may use pre-determined indicators; participatory evaluations may use quantitative methods; a professional researcher may undertake the bulk of the analysis or all stakeholders may be fully involved.



## Differences between Conventional and Participatory Evaluation

	Conventional	Participatory
<b>Who</b>	External experts	Community members, project staff, facilitator
<b>What</b>	Predetermined indicators of success, principally cost and production outputs	People identify their own indicators of success, which may include production outputs
<b>How</b>	Focus on 'scientific objectivity'; distancing evaluators from other participants; uniform, complex procedures; delayed, limited access to results	Self-evaluation; simple methods adapted to local culture; open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation process
<b>When</b>	Usually upon completion; sometimes also midterm	Merging of monitoring and evaluation, hence frequent small evaluations
<b>Why</b>	Accountability, usually summative, to determine if funding continues	To empower local people to initiate, control and take corrective action

(Table from: Narayan, 1993: p.12)

Criticisms have been made of participatory approaches to evaluation and highlighted obstacles to participation. Oakley (1991), for example, identified political environments, administrative and planning procedures, a cultural dependence on experts, as well as participants' lack of experience, interest and time. Laws (1998) identified a key dilemma for participatory consultation, which is finding the balance between collecting the required information and achieving a positive process for young people.

There is concern that evaluators adopting a participatory approach will contaminate what is being evaluated. Any research in which adults ask young people for their views, listen to them non-judgementally and respond to questions will echo other participatory activities and may influence some of the outcomes for the participants. Encouraging young people to comment on their participation can become a vehicle for reflection and social education in itself (3). Research is always a social process, and rarely are researchers simply passive observers. The more evaluators adopt participatory practices, the more they become part of the context being observed; participatory researchers blur the rigid divisions between research and practice (29). Traditional 'scientific' evaluation is not necessarily more objective than participatory approaches however, nor necessarily more rigorous.

Debates about participation within evaluation should not be restricted to approaches traditionally considered participatory. A review of evaluation approaches concluded that participation is critical across a range of methodologies, including those not typically thought of as participatory (e.g. Pawson and Tilley's Realist Evaluation, 1997; Patton's Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 1997) and concluded that the 'evaluation literature is lacking in guidance on how to conduct participatory evaluations' (21). The author identified power to be the 'critical determinant of the level and effectiveness of participation' (Gregory, 2000: p.197). She suggested evaluators explicitly examine oppression to understand power relations within evaluations, rather than ignore or assume effective participation. To ensure research strategies involving young people are indeed empowering, researchers have to 'face up constantly to the possibility that they might become disempowering' (Dyson and Meagher, 2001: p.67). As well as exploring differences in power between stakeholder groups, there is also a need to examine differences in influence and status within stakeholder groups (14).

Young people do not have to be involved in developing every stage of the evaluation or research process. It may be more appropriate to involve them in just one or a few stages. For example, young people may simply be asked (as respondents) to identify indicators of programme success and failure in a pre-interview and then asked to judge how much these have been achieved in a follow up interview. In other evaluations they may become more fully involved in several or all stages of the design and analysis.

The degree to which young people are involved in participatory evaluations will vary depending on the context, the young people, available resources and the purpose of the evaluation. Some projects may choose to prioritise the process of involving young people as an end in itself, to enable them to express their views, for their ‘empowerment’ and development. Whereas others will be interested in using the evaluation findings to influence change more widely and maybe more concerned with ensuring the robustness of the research. The decision about when and how much to involve young people requires a balancing of the values of participation against the rigorous requirements of traditional research. The appropriate trade off will need to be determined on a project-by-project basis. The following table produced by Dyson and Meagher (2001) helps to identify the relationships between the aims of research (which can include evaluation), the tests it has to pass to meet those aims and the nature of young people’s involvement.

Aim of the research	Tests to be Passed	Nature of Involvement
Generating ‘safe’ knowledge about young people	Traditional tests of ‘trustworthiness’ (validity, reliability, objectivity, etc)	Young people can be involved only insofar as this does not compromise trustworthiness
Enabling the voices of young people to be heard	Authenticity: the extent to which young people’s voices are free of professional mediation	Young people’s views are central – though professional researchers may need to offer support in eliciting and articulating these
Impacting on decision-makers	The extent to which young people are heard by and influence decision makers	Young people are involved in communicating findings directly to policy makers
Empowering young people	The extent to which young people are enabled to take control of aspects of their lives as a result of the involvement	Young people control as much of the research process as possible, using it to explore issues of concern to them

(Table from Dyson and Meagher, 2001: p.70)

There are a few innovative examples of involving young people in participatory evaluation (e.g. 57; 7; 59). Earlier chapters in this report have examined the evidence for what works when involving young people in research. There are some remaining questions that apply to involving young people in participatory evaluations:

- In what ways do young people want to get involved in carrying out research/evaluations?
- What capacity and skills do young people have to participate effectively in carrying out research/evaluations?

- How can young people's participation be balanced with the demands for rigorous research criteria?
- In what ways do power issues between young people and adults, and between young peers, impact on research/evaluations?

There is over twenty years experience of undertaking participatory evaluations within overseas development contexts, and UK researchers and practitioners have a lot to gain from the growing literature in this area (eg 13; 14; 26).

#### 4.6 A Mixed-Method Approach

The evaluation literature continues to be filled with debates about the virtues of different evaluation approaches, including quantitative versus qualitative evaluation, the appropriateness of randomised control trials in social care, experimentalists versus non-experimentalists, and participatory versus independent evaluations. These paradigm wars have meant that evaluators rarely collaborate (44).

Different methods and approaches are best suited to evaluating different aspects of young people's participation, in different contexts and for different purposes. A mixed-method approach both within and between different evaluations will help to ensure we develop a far broader understanding of what works in youth participation. No one approach or method should be privileged above others, for there is no one way of knowing; we need to utilise all our ways of understanding (22).

Whilst it is clearly important to ask young people and adults their views about participation in public decision making, their subjective views need to be balanced with other objective measures. Participatory approaches will often be appropriate for evaluating young people's participation, but it is possible to undertake both participatory and conventional evaluations on the same programme. Forming links between the programme staff and external evaluations may help to overcome resistance from ground staff, who may perceive the evaluation as a threat and additional work.

Most of the existing evaluations of young people's participation in public decision make use of qualitative techniques. These methods are often the most appropriate for the majority of existing evaluations, which tend to be small-scale and localised. They are particularly valuable for investigating the *processes* involved in involving young people in public decision making. They also help to develop a deeper understanding of young people's and adults' lived experiences of engaging in decision making and their self-perceptions of change.

In some instances studies have also used varying levels of participatory approaches, involving young people as advisers, self-evaluating their own work and using participatory appraisal methods. There is still relatively little participatory evaluation with young people.

There is room for more quantitative studies of involving young people in public decision making. Some localised studies combine qualitative approaches with quantitative surveys, although generally the samples are small. More quantitative approaches in localised studies are needed, but also large-scale, coordinated programmes to synthesise results and identify common processes and outcomes across different contexts (8). Most existing large-scale quantitative research (including primary and secondary analysis) has been undertaken in schools, where it is easier to access the target youth population. It is harder and more expensive to undertake large-scale surveys of young people in the wider population, as they are often hidden and hard to access, although it is still possible (e.g. 53). More survey work would be particularly useful to find out how much young people currently engage in making decisions (both personal and public), and to compare contexts in which young people do and do not participate in making decisions.

There is very little longitudinal research and use of control groups. There is still little evidence of change that can be directly attributed to participatory programmes. Whilst some formative evaluations follow the progress of the programmes over time, there are almost none that undertake baseline and follow-up comparisons or investigate the long-term impacts of participatory initiatives on services, young people and the wider community. Back et al (2000) stressed the need to examine the ‘career’ of young people’s on-going involvement in public decision making (perhaps using video diaries); to record their aspirations and thoughts at all points along this pathway, to identify how they develop through their involvement. This approach could also be applied to adults.

We also need to examine and compare the cost-effectiveness of different programmes and methods, in order to determine not only what works but, given limited public resources, to prioritise ‘what is to be done?’ (Glass, 2001: p.18).

Some conventional research techniques may be inappropriate for contexts that aim to engage young people meaningfully in making decisions. For example, traditional self-esteem ‘tests’ (e.g. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, 1965; Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale, 1969) are arguably contrary to an ethos that aims to work *with* young people rather than do things *to* them. Evaluators applying such approaches may choose to ensure young people understand and support the value of examining outcomes, whilst also being careful not to bias results, and enable respondents to have some ownership over their ‘data’. For example, young people can be involved in comparing their pre and post-test results and interpreting changes.

Evaluations need to have well defined aims, be clear about what is being measured, what can be deduced from the findings, and be open about their limitations. The appropriate methods will be determined in part by the focus of the research. The table below illustrates the various methods that may be most suited to address different research and evaluation issues related to young people’s participation in public decision making (developed from Chawla, 2001).

Focus of the research	Research methods
Cultures of youth and childhood  Existing community practices of involving young people in decisions  What happens during participatory processes in different settings	Ethnographic methods Observation
Children’s and adults’ perspectives of processes and outcomes	Interviews Focus groups Questionnaires Participatory monitoring and evaluation
Outcomes	(Quasi-) experimental designs using controls: - randomised controlled studies - externally comparable groups  Baseline and follow up comparisons (e.g. pre- and post-test questionnaires)
Long-term outcomes	Longitudinal designs

(Table developed from Chawla, 2001)

## 4.7 Examining Context and Theory

Many evaluations include an analysis of processes and impacts, but there is insufficient theorising about how processes and contexts inter-relate to produce outcomes. For smaller studies in particular, it is necessary to uncover the workings of the processes involved in the programmes, so that they can have a more general application to other contexts. To understand relationships between context and processes, the programme contexts must be explored in some depth. Also, the underlying assumptions about why programme goals are desired, and how they will be achieved, need to be identified.

The social structures within which young people are being supported to make decisions are little analysed. Whilst evaluations sometimes describe the structures, and outline barriers and opportunities for young people's participation within these, still 'the linkages between the individual and the structures and institutions of the social world they inhabit are ill modelled' (Clever, 2001: p.39).

As mentioned in an earlier section, the political intentions of empowering young people are rarely defined, and the scope and limits to achieving change inadequately explored (9). Radical theories of empowerment are about collective action and transforming oppressive structures. Young people's political involvement however has become individualized and about encouraging them to participate in existing structures. A common concern, for example, is the decline in voting amongst 18 to 25 year olds. Young people are being encouraged to become a greater part of institutions', mimicking their formal processes (e.g. school councils, council forums), but the institutions themselves are not questioned. Empowerment appears to have lost its radical and transformatory edge, and the concept has become 'depoliticised' (Clever, 2001: p.37). Ultimately participation is about establishing democracy and this raises questions about what are the most appropriate democratic structures for all community members, young and old. More debate is required about the goals, nature and effects of widening the participation of all citizens' within a representative democracy (4), and to examine further the issues specific to young people, including the possibilities and limitations of involving them in making public decisions.

Percy-Smith and Malone (2001) have argued that authentic participation should be *inclusion*, in which the systems change to accommodate young people's participation and values, rather than *integration*, in which young people participate in predefined ways in predefined structures. For this to happen, we need to 'extend our understanding of children's participation to include children's cultures and social practices in everyday life' (p.18), which includes finding out more about how they already participate within their communities.

More work is needed to understand the non-project side of young people's lives to understand how (and why) they engage in participatory programmes, how an impact in one area may impact on other areas of their lives and also to examine unintended consequences of interventions (9). We need to find out more about personal, social, economic, cultural and other contextual factors that impact on how young people participate in decisions. Their role as social actors cannot be understood in isolation from their relationships with peers, adults and the structures that occupy their worlds. The personal characteristics and experiences of young people are also likely to impact on their views about participating in decision making. Authors of a study on how young people perceive research (a form of consultation) concluded that we have to 'grapple with differences among our "audience" which may then affect their understandings and hence their decisions about participation' (Edwards & Alldred, 1999: 279). Understanding more about the participating adults' lives and cultural influences may also cast light on how they do (and do not) enable young people to participate in decisions. A challenge will be to encouraging decision makers to participate in evaluations, particularly if they are busy or if they perceive risks associated with involving young people.

Human relationships are integral to involving young people in public decision making. To increase their access to decision making means improving community relations, by increasing dialogue between young people and between young people and adults. These relations are rarely explored. Programmes involving young people in public decision making, and evaluations of this work, focus almost exclusively on formal organisational mechanisms and formal consultation methods. Focusing too much on methods of involving young people leads to the danger that we ignore the other ways in which young people will have access to increased power in making decisions. Our current attention to formal structures ‘ignores the fact that many interactions of daily life may be more important in shaping cooperation than public negotiations’ (Cleaver, 2001: p.42). For example, the classroom interaction between teacher and student, rather than school councils, are likely to shape young people’s and teachers’ experience of school life and also their roles in shaping the school environment as it is experienced by young people and staff.

#### **4.8 Adequate Resources for Evaluations**

Policy makers are sometimes unsure of what evaluation means and therefore unrealistic about what they want (44). This results in inappropriate and short timeframes, limited budgets, prescriptive views about methods and some confusion between evaluation and accountability monitoring.

Currently somewhere between one per cent and ten per cent of total community initiative budgets are spent on evaluations and at the lower end this is usually inadequate (19). There remains the question of who will pay for more evaluation?

Whilst we call for more evaluation into this area of work, we are also aware of the cost burden that this places on projects. We need to think carefully about how to prioritise which projects to evaluate; cost effectiveness is as much an issue for evaluations as it is for programme work. There is little point undertaking independent evaluations of poor quality initiatives, except perhaps to investigate negative impacts. Nor should newly established programmes be the subjects of costly evaluations, despite the frequent focus on ‘pilot’ initiatives. Formative self-evaluations should certainly be encouraged within these contexts. It may be best to put greater resources into fewer evaluations of high quality, and to focus specifically on those programmes considered to be most promising and well designed (19).

Sufficient resources also need to be made available to adequately disseminate evaluation findings. Including paying for time and resources to tailor the findings to different audiences, as follows:

- Workshops and dissemination events for project staff and management.
- A summary, video, audio recording, or other product and a feedback event for young people.
- Papers, articles and seminars for different professional audiences.
- Media work within communities to promote the importance and effectiveness of involving young people in decision making.

There is currently too much emphasis on the data collection and analysis stages of evaluation, and too little on ensuring the learning feeds into practice. This takes more than just disseminating findings; it requires collaborative work with practitioners to support them to develop their practice.

#### **4.9 Evaluating Evaluations**

Evaluation is itself a mechanism for involving young people (and others) in public decision making. The issues discussed throughout this report – about young people’s motivation to participate, how best to involve them, and what impact this has – also apply to evaluations. Some researchers ask young participants to reflect on the research/evaluation process. This needs to become established as good practice within evaluations and research, to ensure researchers improve their own practice of listening to young people and involving them in making decisions.

#### 4.10 Recommendations for Future Evaluation and Research

The following recommendations are for future evaluation and research into young people's participation in public decision making:

- More evaluation (and research) is needed of young people's involvement in public decision making.
- Participatory programmes need to develop clear aims and objectives. Support and training should be made available to do this.
- Research into young people's participation should be youth focused; include young people's views, redress power imbalances and use appropriate methods.
- Adults' views should also be included in evaluations.
- All organisations involving young people in public decision making should self-evaluate their work.
- Training and support (including toolkits) need to be made available for practitioners on how to evaluate young people's participation.
- Independent evaluation is also needed for some programmes.
- All evaluators should examine power relations within evaluations.
- Participatory evaluation with young people needs to be developed further. UK researchers can benefit from overseas experience in this area
- A mixed-method approach is needed including qualitative, quantitative, participatory, longitudinal and control studies.
- More theorising is needed about how programme processes and contexts inter-relate to produce outcomes.
- Further debate is required about widening the participation of all citizens' within a representative democracy.
- More funding is needed for evaluation work.
- Self-evaluation needs to be established as good practice within evaluations and research.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Whilst there is a large literature on youth participation and a growing commitment to involving young people in public decision making there are few attempts to evaluate and research this practice. This report provides an overview of the existing evidence about what works in youth participation within the public realm. It examines both the *impacts* of involving young people and the *processes* involved.

The cited evaluations and research illustrate some common themes in existing practice. They highlight, for example, that whilst young people are being consulted, they are having little impact on public decisions, although this varies between contexts. We know much more about how to support young people to express their views, than we do about how to ensure those views affect change. Programmes and their evaluations focus most on young people, examining how they benefit and how they are supported. Getting involved in public decision making has diverse benefits for the participating young people, but very little is known about why other young people do not get involved. Too little attention is given to organisations and adults, including the challenges they face and the support they need, to ensure they are able to respond to young people and develop more integrated cultures of participation within organisations and across communities.

More evaluation and research is needed to ensure young people are meaningfully involved in public decision making. This needs to examine further the effects of involving young people in public decision making and to explore how outcomes are related to contexts, including organisational structures, and young people and adults' wider lives. Existing evidence is starting to build a picture of how to involve young people and some of the benefits (and costs), but most studies are localised, and without more and large-scale evaluations it will not be possible to generalise beyond the local contexts.

In order to effectively evaluate existing work, programmes need to be clear about the aims of their work. More debate is needed about the goals, nature and effects of widening the participation of all citizens, including young people, within a representative democracy.

All organisations involving young people in public decision making should self-evaluate their work and independent evaluation is also needed for some programmes. A range of methodologies can be used to generate different kinds of knowledge, including (but not exclusively) participatory evaluation. More evaluation requires additional resources, including training for practitioners in self-evaluation and funding for independent research. Given finite resources it will be important to prioritise which programmes get evaluated independently.

Researchers have to develop their practice, as do programme staff, to ensure young people are meaningfully involved in evaluation and other research in ways that benefit the wider community, as well as participating young people. We need to measure the magic and find out from young people and others what works.





## 6.0 Gaps in Evaluation and Research

This chapter identifies research questions and issues that could be explored further in future evaluations and research on young people's participation in public decision making.

### *Impacts: Services*

- Examine and compare the effectiveness of different mechanisms (e.g. on-off consultations, on-going forums and councils) for influencing strategic decisions.
- Identify how information about young people's views can be used to inform decision makers, including how (and to whom) the information should best be presented and disseminated.
- Examine whether the views of just a few young people can ensure services meet the needs of all young people.
- Examine how involving young people in making decisions impacts on the quality of the decisions made (i.e. in what way does it improve services?).

### *Impacts: Organisations and the Wider Community*

- Examine the extent to which youth participation affects adults' attitudes and commitment to involving young people, and whether this has a lasting and sustainable impact on organisations' participatory practice.
- Examine to what extent are impacts on organisations related to the methods of participation and level of impact on services? For example, are attitudes about young people adversely affected when few or no service outcomes are achieved?
- Identify the impact on the parents of children who become involved in public decision making (e.g. perceptions and relations with their children).

### *Impacts: Young People*

- Examine whether participation practice ever results in negative outcomes for young people. How does inappropriate practice impact on young people?
- Examine whether consultations impact on young people's privacy and whether collected information is ever used to exert greater control over their lives.
- Identify if harm is ever caused by asking young people about sensitive subjects, and the extent to which they want to discuss these topics.
- Examine the long-term impacts of involving young people in public decisions, including their future active citizenship.
- Identify what outcomes are specific to involving young people in public decision making compared with other types of initiatives (e.g. a football team or drama group).
- Examine the extent to which young people's personal outcomes are related to their perception of their influence on public decisions. How much are positive outcomes related to being 'listened to' and how much to creating change?
- Examine how the impact of participation work in one area of young people's lives (e.g. school) impacts on other spheres of their lives (e.g. family and home).

### *Processes: Types of Participation*

- Research the benefits and limitations of different approaches to involving young people in public decision making, including conventional and informal methods (e.g. chatting).
- Research organisations with integrated participatory culture and practice (i.e. those that involve young people daily in making decisions), and compare these with those that undertake on-off, irregular or no consultation.
- Undertake a cost-benefit analysis of different participation approaches and methods.
- Examine how young people and adults could together make decisions (i.e. partnership approach).

### *Processes: Who Gets Involved?*

- Identify which young people get involved in different types of participation methods (e.g. one off consultations, on-going group processes), and their motivation for getting involved.
- Identify which groups of young people do not get involved in public decision making and identify barriers to their participation.
- Examine whether projects reach the young people they aim to target and how they are recruited.
- Identify which groups of young people are over-consulted and what impact this has on them.
- Examine and compare different procedures for selecting young people (e.g. voting, random, self-selection, staff selection).
- Examine differences in gender, age, ethnicity, class, disability and other equality issues.

### *Processes: Young People's Support*

- Research young people's competencies to participate in public decision making, and identify what factors contribute to differences.
- Examine appropriate ways of involving young people of different ages, competencies, experiences and interests within participatory programmes in different contexts.
- Examine ways of involving children under ten years old, including those under five years.
- Research how young people make decisions (both personal and public), as a group and alone. Identify what influences these decisions and how best to support young people to make decisions.
- Identify how young people's experience and competency to make personal decisions relates to their competency to engage in public decision making.
- Examine how young people cope with varying levels of decision making power within different contexts of their lives (e.g. at home, school, youth club and health services).

### *Processes: Supporting Facilitators and the Wider Community*

- Examine the importance of youth – adults' relations for facilitating young people's participation.
- Examine how adults can best support young people's involvement, including different roles and levels of support.
- Examine how to support adults to facilitate young people's participation.
- Research parents' views about young people's participation in public decision making, including their role in enabling their children's involvement.

### *Processes: Organisational Context*

- Examine how contextual factors are related to involving young people effectively, including personal and organisational commitment, organisational culture and demands.
- Identify how local participation projects can be effectively linked to national initiatives.
- Examine the processes and impacts of partnership working for enabling youth participation.
- Examine the impact of legislation that requires organisations to consult young people, including the impact this has on adults' attitudes and practice of involving young people.
- Research how best to establish a culture of participation across an organisation or within an area/community.
- Identify the role of 'champions of participation' within different contexts and how to ensure sustainability where these workers exist.
- Identify how staff already working with young people can develop more integrated participatory practice that does not require (much) additional time, staffing or other resources.

## Useful Contacts

- UK Evaluation Society [www.evaluation.org.uk](http://www.evaluation.org.uk)
- The American Evaluation Association [www.eval.org](http://www.eval.org)
- European Evaluation Society [www.europeanevaluation.org](http://www.europeanevaluation.org)
- Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex [www.ids.ac.uk/ids](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids)

### Organisations which carry out evaluations:

- British Market Research Bureau International
- Charities Evaluation Services
- Centre for Applied Research in Evaluation
- DETR
- Kings Fund
- OFSTED
- Market and Opinion Research International (MORI)
- National Centre for Social Research
- NOP Research Group Ltd
- National Children's Bureau
- National Youth Agency
- PK Research Consultancy
- Trust for the Study of Adolescence

### Useful Publications

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## Appendix One: Summary Details of Evaluations and Other Research

The tables below provide a summary of the evaluations and research that explore young people's participation in public decision making. The boxed numbers in the first column refer to the number of the full publication cited in the above 'References' section.

GEOGRAPHY: Area-wide Strategic Planning							
Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders ?
Back et al (2000) [3]	University	Borough-wide young people's participatory initiative (including outreach, events workshops, forums) (Lewisham)	Evaluation Retrospective Localised	Process: organisational and youth work support, multi-agency work. Impacts: young people, adults	Qualitative Quantitative	Semi-structured interviews. Focus groups Questionnaire.	Young people (120+) Adults – range of stakeholders (23)
Fitzpatrick et al (1998) [15]	University	Urban regeneration initiatives	Evaluation Snap-shot National (12 case study sites)	Impact: Extent to which young people's needs addressed (and in what ways) Process: Extent to which young people involved in making decisions.	Qualitative	Interviews	Young people (80+) – participants and non-participants Adults. (100+)
Geddes & Rust (1999) [18]	University. Local Government Officers.	Involving young people in local government and local democracy (includes youth forums, youth strategies)	Evaluation Snap-shot Regional: (3 boroughs initiatives: Bury, Manchester, W'hampton)	Impact: cultural change. Process: organisational support and staffing, young people's support, young people's turnover and representation.	Qualitative	Interviews Documentation	Young people – participants Adults – including LA officers and councillors.

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
Kirby (2002) [30]	Independent consultant	Young people's involvement in New Deal regeneration initiative	Evaluation Longitudinal Localised	Impact: strategic planning and services, New Deal and local organisations' commitment to involving young people, young people.  Process: types of participation, support for young people and adults.	Qualitative Quantitative	Interviews Focus group Questionnaire (postcard) Documentation	Young people: participants (non-participants planned)  Adults: project staff, New Deal staff/board, local organisations.
LGA/IPPR (2001) [36]	Research organisations	LA involvement of young people in decision making	Research Snap-shot National	Process: Measure current activity of involving young people in decision making	Quantitative	Questionnaire	Staff in 266 local authorities, England and Wales
Matthews (2001) [38]	University	Youth councils (East Midlands)	Evaluation Snap-shot Regional: 4 youth councils in the East Midlands	Process & Impacts: Perceived strengths and weaknesses of youth forums from the perspective of youth delegates.	Qualitative	Interviews (semi-structured) Focus groups	Young people (63)
Shenton (1999) [59]	University Young people	County wide multi agency initiative (Durham)	Evaluation Retrospective Regional (including in-depth study of 8 projects)	Impacts: on professionals, organisations, services.	Qualitative Participatory (Young people's advisory group; peer researchers; PA methods)	Interviews Focus groups Questionnaires Observation Documentation PA	Young people (300+) – service users.  Adults (50+) incl. strategic decision makers and project staff
SYPC (2000) [61]	Young people	A group from a youth project researched youth forums with aim of setting up a local forum	Research National (but small-scale)	Process: setting up youth forums, attendance, support.	Qualitative	Documentation. Visits to two forums.	

## THEMES: Youth Community/Issue Based Projects

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
Greer (2000) [23]	Independent consultant	Funding programme for Peace and Reconciliation youth-led projects (Northern Ireland)	Evaluation Snap-shot Regional (Northern Ireland)	Impact: Effectiveness of small-grants on social inclusion, peace building, funding organisation. Process: Role of young advisory group. Support (youth workers and funding body).	Qualitative	Interviews. Observation Monitoring forms Eval residential Questionnaires	Young people – advisory group, participants in funded projects. Adults: grant assessors, funding organisation staff, host organisation staff.
Kirby (2001) [31]	Independent consultant	National voluntary sector project to involve young people in environmental improvements and wider regeneration decision making	Evaluation Longitudinal National (4 areas across England)	Impact: strategic planning, services, wider community, young people, host organisations. Processes: recruiting young people, support, involving local adults (residents/businesses)	Qualitative Quantitative	Interviews Focus groups Questionnaires Documentation	Young people: participants Adults: project staff, local adults Young people: participants (aged 9 to 13 yrs)
Kirby et al (2002) [29]	Independent consultants	Children's community health projects in schools and after school settings (Lewisham)	Evaluation Longitudinal Localised 3 projects in south-east London (2 in primary schools and 1 in an after-school club)	Impact: self-efficacy, children and adults relationship, peer relationships, adult and organisational learning, community health. Processes: type of participation, adult facilitation, organisation support/context. Context: compare school and out of school projects, and high/low participatory support worker input.	Qualitative Participatory (PA methods, self-evaluation)	Interviews Focus groups Self-evaluation Session monitoring forms Observation Documentation	Adults: facilitators (including parent volunteers), head teachers, external professionals.

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
RBA Research Ltd (2002) [53]	Market research organisation	Extent to which young people listened to (as perceived by children, young people and parents)	National (urban and rural)	Current behaviour and attitudes to listening to ch&yp. Barriers to views being heard. Areas where most need to e heard. Issues ch&yp feel it is crucial to be heard.	Quantitative Qualitative	On-line survey (children & young people) Door to door survey (adults) Paired interviews. Class and focus group interviews.	Children and young people (5 to 16 years) (1387) Parents (1480)
Roker & Eden (forthcoming) [55]	Research organisation	Youth social action projects (youth wings community, forums, support, campaign)	Evaluation Longitudinal National (20 groups)	Processes: why got involved, role of adults, use of IT, change and stability, definitions of achievement and success. (full information about research not yet available)	Qualitative	Interviews Group discussions Observation Diaries	Young people: (74)
Save the Children (2002) [57]	Independent consultants	National voluntary sector project to involve young people in running community projects.	Evaluation National Longitudinal	Impact: on young people, wider community. Processes: how young people involved. (formative evaluation) (full information about research not yet available) Impact: young people and services.	Participatory (young people involved in reviewing objectives, indicators, progress and challenges)	Range of methods, including PA.	Young people. Adults – range of stakeholders.
Tooke (2002) [63]	Young people University	Participatory youth projects incl. care leavers, peer research, play, disability, sexual health, website (London)	Evaluation Retrospective Localised (7 projects)	Process: e.g. rational, forms of participation, time, support, relationships.	Qualitative	Interviews Focus groups Observation	Young people – service users. Adults: project staff.

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
Hannam (2001) [24]	University	Participatory practice in schools (national)	Evaluation National (12 schools studied)	Impact: student participation on educational attainment; self-esteem, motivation and willingness to learn , exclusions and attendance, GCSE results.	Qualitative Quantitative	Interviews Secondary data: attendance, exclusions and GCSE results Informal discussions	Young people (237) Adults: managers (15) and teachers (38)
Khaleel (1993) [27]	Independent consultant	Borough-wide school councils (Liverpool)	Evaluation Localised (7 schools)	Impact: pupil behaviour and learning, school relations. Process: council roles, adult support.	Qualitative	Interviews Observation Documentation	Young people: school councillors, other pupils Adults: teachers, parents
Kligour (2002) [28]	Voluntary sector (CYP)	Participation Workers across different organisations and sectors	Research National	Training, support and development needs of Participation Workers.	Quantitative	Questionnaire	Participation Workers (186)
Lightfoot & Sloper (2001; forthcoming) [37]	University Young advisers	Health Authorities and Trusts - involvement of young people with chronic illness/physical disability.	Research and Evaluation National survey and six case studies	Research: Describe existing NHS activity to involve young patients Process: Identify factors which can support and promote such involvement (full information not yet available)	Quantitative Qualitative	Questionnaire Interviews Focus groups	Staff in health authorities and Health Trusts. Young people (23) Local project and Trust user involvement staff (13)
Mayall and Hood (2001) [39]	University	Out-of-school centre	Evaluation Localised	Process: children's participation rights within the centre (formative evaluation)	Qualitative		

## METHODS

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
Barnes (1999) [4]	University	Citizens' Juries	Evaluation Localised (2 sites)	Impact: on witnesses and jurors, policy making, citizenship. Process: Who took part, deliberative process its. Comparison: adult and young people juries	Qualitative	Observation Interviews	Young people (jurors) Adults: jurors, witnesses
Borland et al (2001) [5]	University	Research into different consultation methods	Evaluation National (Scotland)	Process: techniques and tools for consultation on policy and legislative proposals. Evidence for efficacy of methods.	Qualitative	Literature review Interview survey Focus groups	Young people (3-18 years) Adults: professionals in 30 organisations.
Edwards and Alldred (1999) [12]	University	Young people's participation in research on home-school relations	Research Regional: (6 schools in south-east England)	Young people's positive and negative views about the research when deciding whether to take part (rather than post hoc reflections). Comparison of age and affluence/deprivation.	Qualitative	Questionnaire (two open questions)	Children and young people (142); 3 primary and 3 secondary schools.
France (2000) [16]	University	Peer research project	Evaluation Localised	Impact: young people, research quality. Process: why young people got involved and remained involved, research skills, influence on project decisions	Qualitative	Interviews Project documentation Interviews	Young people Adults: project facilitators (coordinator/professional researchers).

Reference	Who did the study?	Project/Method	Description of study	Study Focus	Methodology	Methods	Which stakeholders?
Kirby (1999) [32]	Voluntary organisation (Save the Children)	Peer research projects. Presented as a manual, but based on large internal evaluation of Save the Children's work (Kirby and Pettitt, 1998), plus interviews with other agencies involving young people as researchers	Evaluation National	Impact: young people, research quality. Process: Involving young people in all stages of the research process	Qualitative	Interviews	Young people Adults: project facilitators (youth workers/ researchers), funders, external agencies.
Proctor & Padfield (1998) [51]	University	One to one interviews	Evaluation Longitudinal	Impact: the effect of interviews on the interviewee.	Qualitative	Interviews	Young people (women aged 18-27)
Laws (1998) [35]	Voluntary research organisation (Mental Health Foundation)	Methods of consulting young people on mental health services	Localised Evaluation National (5 projects)	Impact: young people, services. Process: consultation methods; young people's control of process; support.	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown









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