

Citizens in Training

How institutional youth participation produces bystanders and active citizens in Finland

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An article in *Helsingin Sanomat* (Färding 2021) tells the story about a school in Vantaa where students had been promised half a million euros for improving the learning environment. The students had all kinds of ideas but two years later the only visible change was the construction of a couple of canopies in the school yard. When the school students started asking about why their suggestions had not been realized they were told some of their ideas were not practical to realize, that some of the money was used to renew kitchen equipment and that there wasn't enough money to cover all the suggestions.

This is a typical example of an all-too-common outcome of citizen participation on any level, but especially so when it comes to youth participation. Often participation is a black box into which individuals through

various procedures submit their positions. The students in Vantaa were in the dark in terms of knowing how the process proceeded after their participation was concluded. No one informed the students that some suggestions weren't possible to fulfill, until the students started asking questions, and they did not have a chance to reformulate their claims together with someone who could have adjusted them to fit the scope of possibilities.

Participation in decision-making processes has become everyday as authorities are struggling to find ways of sustaining democratic legitimacy amid low turnouts and plummeting engagement in traditional civil society stakeholders.

For a long time, it's been acknowledged, that young people are particularly receptive to political socialization. That is, the experiences of participating in politics one has at

a young age are formative for behavior and attitudes when one grows older. In line with this insight, where democratic societies used to refer to young people as the leaders of the future, instead they are increasingly treating them as citizens now.

The UN charter on the rights of the child established that all children should be heard in decisions that affect them. The Finnish municipal law reiterates that municipalities have the responsibility of doing this and the youth law expresses a commitment to advance the participation of young people, and to improve their means to affect decision-making by offering the conditions necessary to learn and exercise civic skills with respect of cultural diversity, internationalism, and sustainable development.

But do institutional approaches to participatory democracy produce better citizens, do they correspond to the expectations of those participating and do these structures offer the participants opportunities to realize their objectives?

In some ways the events in Vantaa remind me of what I saw as I conducted participant observation of institutional youth participation in the Helsinki metropolitan area for almost three years, from the fall of 2015 until spring 2018. I followed the now legendary advice of sociologist Robert Park, to get the seat of my pants dirty in real research and headed out to observe a youth council and a process of participatory budgeting with lower-secondary school students in a couple of neighborhoods. Youth councils are the most typical form of institutional youth participation in Finland and they are based on the practices of parliamentary decision-making and representative democracy. Contrarily, the process of participatory budgeting offered by the city of Helsinki gives young people the opportunity to affect local budgetary allocations of the city youth department through participatory democracy.

What I saw did confirm some of the expectations I had, based on previous research and my own experiences, but observing how interaction shaped these processes and their outcomes gave me a deeper level of understanding of what these processes achieve and what they mean for their participants.

One of the key findings of my research is that existing institutional practices for participation and civic engagement of young people are not responsive to the diversity of needs and interests of young people.

I identified four central individual level outcomes of institutional youth participation. Firstly, a group of participants had a deep and fundamental experience of empowerment and transformation. This represents the classical Toquevillean view that participation makes for better citizens. Quoting John, a member of the youth council:

Before joining the youth council, I really didn't know anyone. Now I have so many friends. Because of the youth council I decided to go to a school with a focus on economy and politics. I have learnt so much, for instance speaking to groups.

This is a text-book example of what institutional youth participation is hoped to achieve, a transformative experience that “spills past the boundaries of the occasion to matter in the later lives of those attending” (Goffman 2018:15).

Secondly, a group of socially privileged participants strengthened their position by accumulating influence, capacities, and experience. Eloquent, socially skilled participants, with a developed understanding of political process often managed to make their way into the core of decision-making. These participants networked with politicians and civil servants and gained skills they could later use to further their individual life projects. None of them were in the risk of becoming

marginalized or voiceless to begin with. Of course, they have every right to engage in these processes, but sometimes an unintended consequence of this is that those less adept at making themselves heard have a hard time finding a space for themselves in institutional youth participation, if these spaces are dominated by youth with higher capacities for public functioning.

Thirdly, some participants left the process of participation to find different outlets for their civic engagement. Peter, a member of the youth council told me:

I got interested in a kind of politics that youth council members don't care about. I joined the youth wing of the true Finns. Already before that my opinions were quite different. I might be prejudiced but I expected that I wouldn't be welcome any longer.

Likewise, following participatory budgeting in a wealthy neighborhood and one that is disadvantaged, it became obvious that small scale projects at the local youth center hold attraction to those that have very little, but hold no appeal to young people with opportunities to do anything they'd like to. To give an example of this misrecognition, youth in the disadvantaged neighborhood dreamed of movie nights while young people in the well to do location, after thinking very hard about free time desires that were not yet fulfilled, concluded they would like to play lacrosse, a sport largely unheard of in Finland. For Peter or young people living in a wealthy neighborhood, leaving a process of participation because they don't find it useful for their interests will not decrease their trust or adherence to democratic values, instead they find other outlets for their engagement.

Finally, for a group of participants, the position of being a spectator or bystander to politics and society at large was further reinforced through their participation.

When nothing tangible resulted from all the time they had invested, participants started dropping out. Attendance at youth council meetings decreased with almost two-thirds halfway through the term. Likewise, during the participatory budgeting, a participant leaving the school vote laconically stated: "*The café proposal was already there last year, and it didn't lead to anything*".

Summarizing these four outcomes of participation, where some participants found a haven for their burgeoning interest in civic action, transforming them into engaged citizens or strengthening their privileged social position, others found these scenes and the corresponding styles of engagement less useful, opting to leave the participatory process, either with a strengthened sense of externality or in search of a more resonant scene of engagement. This observation nuances the previously common suggestion that the merit of participatory policies can be described on a dichotomous scale of empowerment versus domination.

Furthermore, I found that these outcomes were contingent on the 'style of interaction' on one hand and the 'resonance of the scene of participation' on the other. What does this mean? Well, simply speaking different participants have different desires and needs, and in order for young people to commit themselves to institutional youth participation, it has to be useful to them and it needs to happen in a way they can relate to. I identified two central styles of interaction in the processes that I was observing: an individualist style and an empowerment style.

The individualist style of interaction is a personalized form of political participation that is not based on the shared goals or ideologies of a collective movement. It is characterized by transient engagements for the benefit of self-actualization. Although this style was not exclusively employed in the youth council, it was most visible there.

Despite its similarity to a city council, the influence of the youth council is largely restricted to communicating the needs and desires of young people to politicians and civil servants. They are great training grounds for future politicians but the style of participation limits engagement to those that are interested in party politics, public administration, and parliamentary practices. This repertoire of action excludes many groups of young people with different objectives, desires, and conceptions of politics.

The other style of interaction that I identified, the empowerment style, was mostly present in the participatory budgeting events. It was shaped by an ethos of training young people to become active citizens in a safe, family like atmosphere of intimacy, transforming the identities of the participants by giving them a sense of competency and confidence. By coupling a youth work approach with an offer to all school students in lower-secondary school to suggest initiatives, that can be realized at a youth center for 3000€ or less, the participatory budgets seemed to be able to empower and engage young participants without much prior experience of political participation. Nonetheless, subjecting all participants to this style misrecognizes the desires of those who have highly developed capacities for public functioning. Moreover, the benefit of participation is limited to those who visit youth houses while young people with interests that are not directly tied to local youth work find little or no benefit in participating.

These findings highlight the limited utility of implementing a specific style of participation on a citywide scale without accounting for differences in the target group.

One method of participation in municipal youth work is not enough, if the objective of youth participation in public decision-making processes is to offer non-formal training in active citizenship to all, and to guarantee

opportunities to participate in accordance with current legislation.

In a way my dissertation is a collection of both happy and sad stories. I will never forget how stress turned into relief and then pride of their accomplishment, when a group of girls successfully argued in favor of more funding for their project in front of dozens of people they had never met before. On the other hand, some of the mismanagement I observed was so hair-raising I couldn't even write about it.

A main concern when organizing and evaluating democratic participation has been the legitimacy of the process, less attention has been paid to studying why some people commit themselves to these forms of political participation while others fail to be engaged. This dissertation has contributed to the knowledge on these more substantive aspects of democratic participation.

In conclusion, youth workers, politicians and civil servants are good at inflating the expectations of participants, but when they don't deliver on their promises, participants are left feeling frustrated over the time and effort they have wasted while participating. It would be better all-around to be forthright about what can be achieved through a particular process of participation rather than claim that it can make your wildest dreams come true.

References

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