

The Theory of Participation

‘Youth work supports young people and works with them to become partners and leaders in their own learning, to help them gain influence over issues they are concerned about and to engage them with democratic processes.’

The Theory of Participation

Participation is seen to be key to good youth and children’s work. If you look at the National Youth Agency Curriculum, they identify four cornerstones of youth work which should inform the outworking of everything in that document, and they are:

- Education
- Empowerment
- Equality
- Participation

They say of participation:

“Youth work supports young people and works with them to become partners and leaders in their own learning, to help them gain influence over issues they are concerned about and to engage them with democratic processes.”

So an understanding of participation is key to good children’s and youth work. Now, there is quite a lot of theory that could be gone into when we think about participation! I’m going to try and give you a whistle stop tour of the key points and, if you’d like to read up more about any of these, we’ll add relevant documents in the resources section of the website.

Models of participation:

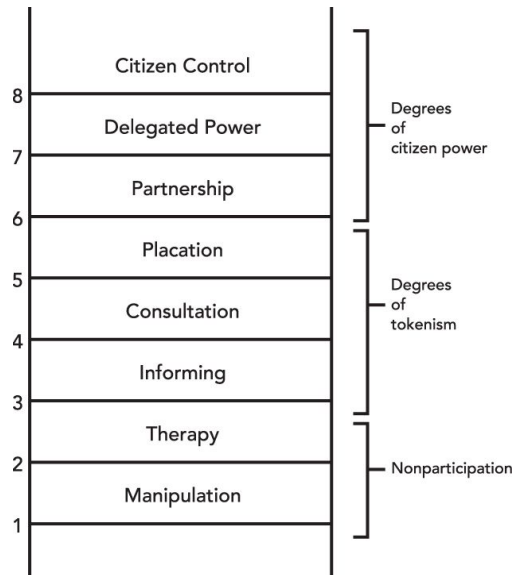
Sherry Arnstein – The Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)



“Citizen Participation is citizen power”

Learning Point 1

There are different levels of participation and participation cannot be had without sharing and re-distributing power (Your power!)



Sherry Arnstein – Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)

We're going to start our whistle stop tour of participation in America in 1969 where Sherry Arnstein developed one of the early and influential theories of participation. Sherry explored various levels of citizen participation in society, noting that “Citizen Participation is citizen power”. Her work focussed around the redistribution of power from the “haves” to the “have-nots”. For her, citizen participation “...is the means by which [the have-nots] can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society”. (Arnstein, 1969)

Let's have a brief look at the ladder...

Learning Point 1 – There are different levels of participation and participation cannot be had without sharing and re-distributing power. (Your power!)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)



Article 12:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child

Learning Point 2

Participation for children is understood to be a right

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

We jump ahead 20 years now to 1989 and the UN General Assembly. One of the key drivers of child and youth participation in general, has been the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, later ratified all over the globe by all but one state. This makes it the most ratified human rights treaty in the history of humankind. (Kiilakoski, 2020)

Article 12: States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989).

Learning Point 2 – Participation for children is understood to be a right.

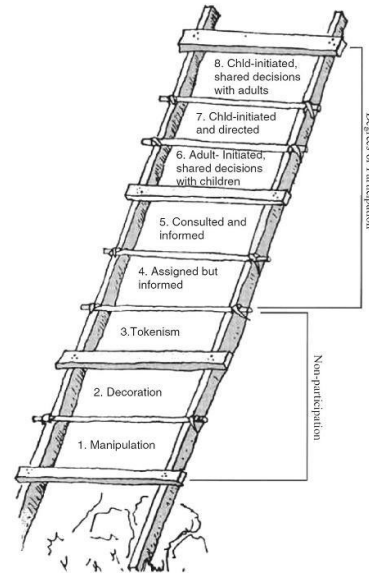
Roger Hart – The Ladder of Youth Participation (1992)



“The important principle again is one of choice: programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability.”

Learning Point 3

The child should have a choice to be able to participate at the highest level at which they are able



Roger Hart – The Ladder of Youth Participation (1992)

3 years later we meet Roger Hart who, writing for UNICEF in 1992, builds on Arnsteins work in the context of children and young people.

“Recognising that a democratic society depends on the active involvement of its citizens”, he said there needs to be “gradually increasing opportunities for children to participate...” in the democratic process. In his following exploration of participation, he outlined what is now generally called the ‘Ladder of Youth/Children’s Participation’. (Hart, 1992)

The ladder outlines 8 levels of participation. From non-participation in the lower three levels, to varying degrees of participation in the upper five levels.

Let’s look briefly at the levels...

- **Manipulation** - children don’t understand the reason they are participating or the role they are playing in it. E.g. asking children “to make drawings of something, such as their ideal playground,” after which “adults collect the drawings and in some hidden manner synthesize the ideas to come up with ‘the children’s design’ for a playground. The process of analysis is not shared with the children and is usually not even made transparent to other adults. The children have no idea how their ideas were used.”
- **Decoration** - children and youth are put on public display during an event, performance, or other activity organized for a specific purpose, but they do not understand the meaning or intent of their involvement. E.g. occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an

- event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion.
- **Tokenism** - “those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions.” E.g. “How children are sometimes used on conference panels. Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent.
- **Assigned but informed** - children and youth “understand the intentions of the project, know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why, have a meaningful (rather than ‘decorative’) role and volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.” E.g. children acting as Pages to accompany delegates at the UN.
- **Consulted and informed** - children act as “consultants for adults in a manner which has great integrity. The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.” E.g. an adult-led survey of youth perceptions in which the youth are informed about the purpose of the survey, consulted about appropriate questions before it’s developed, and given an opportunity to provide feedback on the final survey before it is administered.
- **Adult-initiated shared decisions with children** - Adults initiate participatory projects, but they share decision-making authority or management with children. One example Hart describes is a youth newspaper. In this case, the newspaper may be an adult-initiated project, but children can manage every aspect of the operation—from reporting, writing, and editing to advertising, printing, and distribution—with only guidance and technical assistance from adults.
- **Child-initiated and directed** - children and youth conceptualize and carry out complex projects by working cooperatively in small or large groups. While adults may observe and assist the children, they do not interfere with the process or play a directive or managerial role. There are not many examples of this as adults find it hard to let it happen!
- **Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults** - children—though primarily teenage youth in this case—share decision-making authority, management, or power with adult partners and allies. E.g. students partnering with adults to raise funding, develop and run a school program, or lead a community campaign. A major advantage of this form of youth participation is that it can empower young people to have a significant impact on policies, decisions, or outcomes that were traditionally under the exclusive control and direction of adults, such as legislative or political processes.

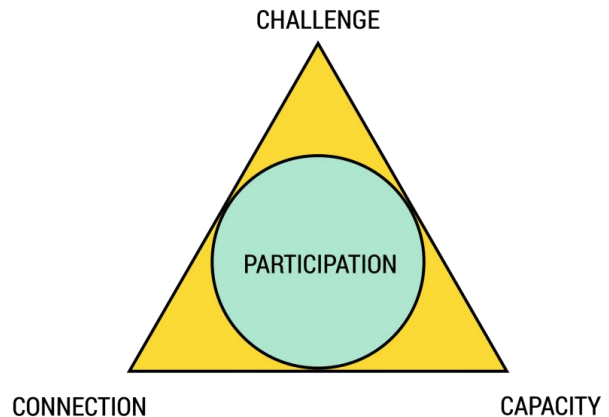
If we look at the ladder, you’ll notice that its not until the 5th or 6th rung that we actually

meet the threshold for Article 12. If we continually work below these levels we're potentially contravening the human rights of the child!

It is important to note that different factors (age, ability, cultural impacts and the choice of the young person) will influence at what level on the ladder children participate. Hart says, "The important principle again is one of choice: programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability."

Learning Point 3 – The child should have a choice to be able to participate at the highest level at which they are able.

Jans & de Backer – Triangle of Youth Participation (2002)



Learning Point 4

The passion the child has for the task, their skills and knowledge and the community around them all play a part in successful participation

Jans & de Backer – Triangle of Youth Participation (2002)

As we just mentioned, providing different levels of participation in a programme doesn't mean children WILL participate! In 2002, Marc Jans and Kurt de Backer considered the conditions required for young people to actively participate in society. They identified three dimensions that they felt need to be held in a dynamic balance for young people to actively participate. These are:

- Challenge - a personal or social theme to which the young person is attracted and for which he or she wants to devote him or herself to
- Capacity - the young child's specific knowledge as well as experiences, skills, insights and strategies
- Connection - the community around the young person which allows them to engage with and feel supported by humans, communities, ideas, movements, ranges of thoughts, organisations,... in order to work together on the challenge

They visualise this in the "Triangle of Youth Participation". (De Backer and Jans, 2002)

Have a look at the model...

Learning Point 4 – The passion the child has for the task, their skills and knowledge and the community around them all play a part in successful participation.

Tim Davies – Matrix of Participation (2009)



“It is through involvement in events; in creative projects; and in short-term activities that many young people can develop the confidence to express their views...

Learning Point 5

A range of short and long-term opportunities for participation in a programme is best for the child’s development.

	Individual complaints or feedback	Surveys & consultations	One-off events or annual participation events	Participation projects - often using arts or media	Peer-led activities such as training, research & evaluation	Youth forum, youth grant-making etc.	Young people involved in governance
Youth initiated - shared decisions with adults							
Youth initiated and directed							
Adult initiated - shared decisions with youth			{ Degrees of participation				
Young people are consulted & kept informed							
Young people are assigned tasks & activities							
Tokenism							
Decoration			{ Levels of non involvement				
Manipulation							

Tim Davies – Matrix of Participation (2009)

Based on Harts Ladder of Youth Participation, Tim Davies produced a matrix which aimed at helping organisations see if they were producing a spread of activities. In the matrix this runs from short-term, one-off or informal activities on the left to more long-term and structured activities to the right.

Let’s look at a few examples from the matrix...

Individual feedback to surveys to projects through to being involved in governance of a group or organisation.

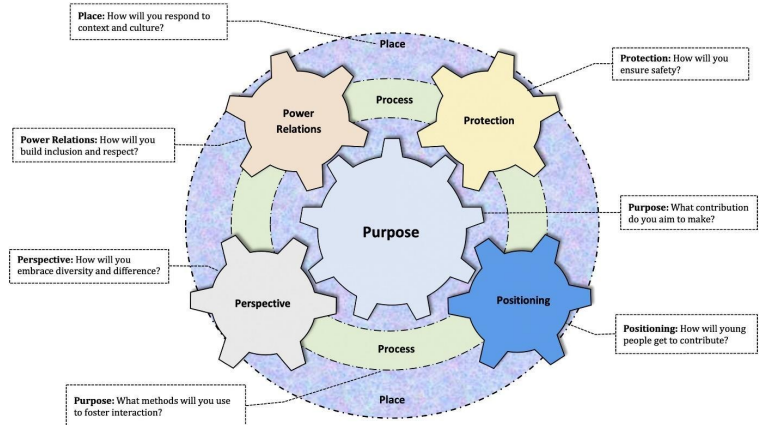
He claims that a mix of both long and short-term approaches is most likely to lead to sustainable and effective youth participation which leads to positive change for young people.

“It is through involvement in events; in creative projects; and in short-term activities that many young people can develop the confidence to express their views and can build the networks with other young people and with supportive adults that enable and encourage them to then get involved in further participation.” (Davies, 2009)

Learning Point 5 – A range of short and long-term opportunities for participation in a programme is best for the child’s development.

Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand – The P7 Model (2018)

Purpose
Positioning
Perspective
Power relations
Protection
Place
Process



Learning Point 6

Different levels of participation aren't inherently 'better' than another and more factors than just 'how high up the ladder' need to be considered when planning for participation within a programme – it needs to be holistic

Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand (2018) - The P7 Model of Participation

Most recently Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand have drawn upon the above models, including work by Andersson which stresses the need for a more 'qualitative' look at youth participation rather than in terms of levels (Andersson, 2017). Informed by current theorists and researchers in the area of youth participation, have come up with what they call the "P7 model of participation" (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018).

Let's have a look at the model...

The advantage of this model is that it doesn't assume a hierarchical progression but recognises that there is a complex relationship between different elements that affect participation. It identifies 7 key elements to consider when developing participation within a programme. These are:

- Purpose – What contribution do you aim to make?
- Positioning – How will young people contribute?
- Perspective – How will you embrace diversity and difference?
- Power relations – How will you build inclusion and respect?
- Protection – How will you ensure safety?
- Place – How will you respond to context and culture?
- Process – What methods will you use to foster interaction?

They hope this will be a thinking tool for visioning, planning, enacting and evaluating youth participation.

Learning Point 6 – Different levels of participation aren't inherently 'better' than another and more factors than just 'how high up the ladder' need to be considered

when planning for participation within a programme – it needs to be holistic.

Learning Point 1 – There are different levels of participation and participation cannot be had without sharing and re-distributing power. (Your power!)

Learning Point 2 – Participation for children is understood to be a right

Learning Point 3 – The child should have a choice to be able to participate at the highest level at which they are able

Learning Point 4 – The passion the child has for the task, their skills and knowledge and the community around them all play a part in successful participation

Learning Point 5 – A range of short and long-term opportunities for participation in a programme is best for the child's development

Learning Point 6 – Different levels of participation aren't inherently 'better' than another and more factors than just 'how high up the ladder' need to be considered when planning for participation within a programme – it needs to be holistic

Questions:

- **How could you develop opportunities for participation in your youth and children's work programme?** (i.e. the programme you have control over)
- **How might it be possible to develop opportunities for youth and children's participation in your church?** (i.e. the wider church programme and community)

So here we are. Up to date with current youth and children's participation theory!

Now I appreciate that is a lot of information given very fast, but I will upload a copy of this presentation with my notes so you can remind yourself of what we have looked at!

The key thing of course is that we take some of this learning and allow it to inform our practice. So what I'd like us to do now is take some time in groups to consider how we may develop opportunities for participation in our individual contexts.

[END]

References:

Arnstein, S. (1969) A ladder of citizen participation. In: Journal of American Planning, Vol. 35, No. 4

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De Backer, K. and Jans, M (2002) Youth (-work) and social participation. Elements for a practical theory

Davies, T (2009): Can social networks bridge the participation gap?

Andersson, E. (2017) The pedagogical political participation model (the 3P-M) for exploring, explaining and affecting young people's political participation, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20 (10)

Cahill, H. and Dadvand, B. (2018) Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 95.

Additional Notes:

Derek Wenmoth – Participation Online

In our current climate, with many of us moving elements of programme online it may also be helpful to look very briefly at how we may understand online participation as well. Wenmoth suggests there are four possible levels of online participation:

- Consumer
- Commenter
- Contributor
- Commentator

Participants in the online environment tend to move through phases as they gain understanding and confidence. Clearly, people will operate exclusively within one of these phases, but there does tend to be progression.

Derek Wenmoth (2006): Participation Online – the Four Cs