



Youth Workers: Treading the Participation Tightrope

Youth Workers across the UK are treading a difficult tightrope. On the one hand, they work with vulnerable young people, seeking to keep them safe and support them as they struggle with poverty, poor parenting, low levels of educational success and limited employment prospects. On the other hand, they are being asked by government agencies and funders to show how those same young people are involved in planning, implementing and evaluating projects.

As any youth worker knows, trying to hold this balance is challenging. Just getting vulnerable young people to believe that they can change things in their lives, that they can take action, that they have the confidence to speak in public and give their own opinion can take many months or years of intensive work. Yet how can this work be done when most funding for youth participation projects requires the young people affected to be involved in planning and implementation, tasks that many marginalized young people are unready for?

“Why should we participate?” young people sometimes ask and sometimes it’s hard to see what is really in it for them. Do young people really want to spend their time sitting on youth boards and attending meetings? Do they really want to get into the nitty gritty of proposal writing and project evaluation? Some young people clearly do, signing up to Youth Councils or the UK Youth Parliament, but are these young people representative of the 3.6 million children and young people living in low-income households?

However, vulnerable young people are missing out if they don’t have an opportunity to make their voices heard and have their say. They miss out on meeting new people, experiencing new situations and developing valuable life skills such as planning and public speaking. Youth organisations miss out on learning from the perspectives of those most at risk and those most in need of their help. And funders miss out on the opportunity to fund projects that could really catalyse social change.

Approaches to try

So how can youth workers encourage vulnerable young people to participate, yet keep them safe and not push them too far? And how can youth organisations get funding for the work needed to build young people’s confidence and self-belief that they can make a difference?

The first thing youth workers could do is to take a close look at the young people they work with and find out how they see themselves: do they really believe they can make changes in their lives and deal with their own problems themselves? Or do they see themselves as reliant on others’ help?

Armed with this information, youth workers can then focus their efforts on increasing the self-belief and confidence to act of the young people they work with. Participating in activities such as redecorating the youth centre or painting a community mural can be a good way to give young people some responsibility and prove to themselves that they can make a positive contribution to their local community.

Example 1: Starting where young people are at

Peer Support Project (www.peer-support.org.uk) is a small voluntary organisation based in Manchester that offers support to LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning) young people. Many of the young people they work with are experiencing severe bullying, some have mental health and learning difficulties, and others are self-injuring. Encouraging these young people to take on a public role in promoting the organisation is extremely challenging.

Instead, Peer Support Project starts where young people are at, valuing whatever contribution they can make, from creating a magazine to supporting other young LGBTQs. Building on this work, they also wanted to formally involve young people in their Project Coordination Team, to start to plan sessions and to play more of a role in the organisation's direction. ICA:UK worked with a small group of young people and staff to look at different elements of participation, such as being involved in the LGBTQ community, considering their rights as young people, and exploring youth-adult power relationships. The series of sessions ended with young people planning and implementing their own media project, designed to highlight issues facing LGBTQ youth.

The next step is for youth workers to identify young people who now seem ready to take on some leadership in the organisation. There are many easy methods that youth workers can use to promote participation - www.iac.wur.nl/msp has a useful list on its Methodologies and Tools pages and www.iaf-world.org/files/public/FacilitatorMnl.pdf offers a free manual on facilitation. Youth workers may want to consider taking some facilitation training or finding someone to shadow who's good at getting young people to step up and take action. Participating in the Carnegie Participation Workers Network for England is a good way to find out what others are doing: www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi/participation_workers.

People concerned with youth participation may also find it useful to read up on the theory. Some useful books are:

- Louise Chawla, *Growing Up in an Urbanising World* (UNESCO)
- Roger Hart, *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care* (Earthscan Publications)
- Victoria Johnson et al, *Stepping Forward: Children and young people's participation in the development process* (Intermediate Technology Publications)

Through increasing their knowledge of the theory and practice of youth participation, youth workers can begin to support vulnerable young people plan, implement and evaluate their own activities and groups.

Finally, youth organisations should engage in conversations with their funders, so that they are aware of the complex challenges organisations face in preparing vulnerable young people for participation and can discuss what is feasible.

Some potential stumbling blocks

Young people are unique and need unique approaches to encourage them to participate. Youth organisations should be wary of one-size-fits-all strategies. Do incentives such as paying young people to attend meetings really work for the young people they work with?

Would occasional rewards for making a positive contribution work better? What will spur their young people into participating? Organisations need to develop their own creative and individual solutions.

Participation should not only be limited to young people within an organisation but should also extend to staff. Do staff feel empowered and able to contribute their opinions? Staff who feel undervalued may be wary of helping young people participate if they feel that their opinions will also not be listened to. Youth organisations need to work out how to make participation a value that spreads throughout their organisation.

Example 2: Developing unique strategies

BARCA-Leeds (www.barca-leeds.org) delivers health, education and personal development services to young people and adults in West Leeds. Despite having some young people involved in running individual clubs and programmes, they felt that not all of their staff were on the same page as to what youth participation actually meant and entailed. They wanted to develop a shared vision for youth participation within the organisation.

At an Away Day, ICA:UK facilitated conversations between BARCA's young people, staff, managers and trustees about the meaning of youth participation, its benefits and dangers, and what it currently looked like in the organisation. Then, participants created their own, shared vision for youth participation in BARCA in the next five years, finishing with individuals stating how they would take this vision forward in their own work. Six months later, one group of young people has received funding to implement a gardening project at a local sheltered housing centre, and BARCA is in the process of organising a review of the progress they have made so far.

In summary ...

- Working to encourage vulnerable young people is extremely challenging. Youth Workers need to balance keeping young people safe with encouraging them to take on leadership roles and responsibility. Increased training and support around facilitating young people's participation effectively is needed.
- Youth organisations need to find their own solutions, working from where their staff and young people are. Strategies advocated by external organisations should be carefully considered in the light of their own situation and young people's needs and abilities.
- More communication is needed between funders and youth organisations working with vulnerable young people, so that there is increased understanding of the work required to support marginalized adolescents make their voices heard and take action.



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For more information on the support that ICA:UK offers to youth organisations concerned with youth participation, please visit www.ica-uk.org.uk or email anne@ica-uk.org.uk.