



Enhancing youth Voices: Exploring community participation through youth workers

Mireia Sala-Torrent^{*}, Anna Planas-Lladó

Institut de Recerca Educativa, Universitatde Girona, Girona, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Youth worker
Youth
Youth policies
Local government
Community participation

ABSTRACT

The European Union and Council of Europe (hereafter referred to as the EU and CE) encourage member states to promote and stimulate the active participation of young people through the role of youth workers. However, it is worth noting that the personal perceptions of youth workers may influence the actions they take to achieve this goal. This article aims to investigate the perceptions of youth workers and the characteristics and conditions of their interventions in promoting young people's participation in the community. To this end, six discussion groups were formed, consisting of 51 professionals working in this field in Catalonia, Spain. The findings suggest that youth workers associate the notion of participation with how young people dialogue with the public institutions. Although youth workers have observed self-managed forms of participation among young people, their aim is to improve the relationship between young people and institutions. They also acknowledge that young people are often on the margins of the local political context. Rather than being viewed as active citizens and central figures, young people are frequently seen as being in a learning and development phase towards adulthood. At the methodological level, youth workers use strategies based on socio-educational relationships and identify conditioning factors that limit the development of transformative policies for civic participation in their workplaces. It is recommended that the model for local youth policies be transformed into a more collaborative approach. This would involve collaboration between youth workers, young people and adults to foster innovative public participation policies that help promote the potential of municipalities for change.

1. Introduction

In his book *Bowling alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam (2000) used bowling as a metaphor to show the decline of civic and social participation in the United States of America. Whereas bowlers used to play in leagues, they now play alone, a fact that, according to Putnam highlights the fundamental role that forms of social interaction play in a healthy, democratic society, and how these have become weakened.

Nearly a quarter of a century later, the pandemic has shown how collective solutions to common goals are one way of addressing the economic, social and environmental crises we face. We therefore believe this to be the right time to foster the bonds that have been weakened and work on and for the strengthening of communities. If what makes communities strong are aggregations of people who feel connected and supportive, then we should put considerable effort into creating environments for and with young people, especially as they experience oppression in community settings and are often silent and invisible

unless they are perceived to be causing trouble (Evans, 2007). In such a context, policies that promote youth citizenship and participation are extremely important. Indeed, the EU and CE encourage member states to promote the active participation of young people in their communities, in particular through the promotion of active citizenship policies and the figure of the youth worker.

The aim of this article is to explore how such policies are implemented in local contexts from the perspective of youth workers, given that there is no unique understanding of participation in youth work (Smith, 1983). We suggest that the way these professionals understand the concept of participation and what it means to them to work with young people determines the methods they use to promote participation. In this sense, it is crucial to understand what youth workers mean by participation in order to promote practices that benefit young people's participation (Ord, 2007).

^{*} Corresponding author at: Universitat de Girona, Educació, Plaça Sant Domènec, 9, 17004 Girona, Spain.

E-mail address: mireia.sala@udg.edu (M. Sala-Torrent).

2. Theory

2.1. Community youth participation

Citizen participation is the active involvement of citizens in taking those decisions that affect their community or, to quotesercom Kellet (2009) “to become actively involved in something” (p.44). For children and young people, participation is a right recognized in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are numerous ladder models of participation according to the power given to citizens (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Burns et al., 1994, Shand and Arnberg, 1996; Sheir, 2010; Anderson, 2017). Many of the proposed classifications are based on Arnstein’s eight-level scale (1969), which moves from non-participation, through formal and symbolic participation, to the varying degrees of citizen power. Participation scales have often been criticized, however, since they assess the participation of children and young people from the adult perspective of how they should participate. It is more than likely that the participation schema proposed are not adapted to the way that children and young people see the world (Malone and Hartung, 2010; Hart, 2008), and ignore the many ways through which they can express their ideas and influence decision-taking (Malone and Hartung, 2010). Authors such as Hart (2008) and Adu-Gyamfi (2013) support a model that focuses on children and young people and incorporates inter-generational links, awarding particular importance to the potential of the relationship between young people and adults, mutual recognition and dialogue in which the two groups can share power.

White (1996) noted the intention behind most policies to promote participation, but warned that the word can be misused, since participation may serve a number of interests which do not imply the will to change, transform or share power. More recent studies suggest that in promoting youth participation, adults may use young people as a resource for their own interests, making their role a controversial one (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002; Jansens et al., 2023; Malone and Hartung, 2010). The aim of White’s model is to distinguish between these interests according to the participants and the form their participation takes. It comprises four types of participation: 1) *nominal*, where participation is used symbolically by those with most power to legitimize their plans or programmes; 2) *instrumental*, in which the participation of the community towards a specific aim is often related to the efficient use of the community’s ability to develop a project; 3) *representative*, in which members of a community are given a voice in the decision-making process, or projects and activities that involve them (allowing those with more power to make more sustainable interventions and the opinions of those who have no power to be taken into account); and 4) *transformative*, which results in the training of those agents involved and, if necessary, change to the structures or institutions that cause marginalization or exclusion.

Freire (1970) viewed community participation as a liberating process in which people become aware of their situation and work together to implement change. It has also been posited as an empowering process that allows members of a community to take control of their lives and surroundings, and work together to meet collective aims (Ledwith, 2005). Community participation implies a process of community development based on strengthening social ties and promoting trust and co-operation between individuals (Putnam, 2000). This involvement in collective group processes is associated with experiences that are recognized as opportunities to learn the skills needed for active citizenship (Biesta et al., 2009). Nonetheless, Chambers (2004) warned that certain groups may feel that definitions of active citizenship are of little interest or relevance, and that community policies and organizations may contribute to a worsening of the structural problems that hinder the involvement of people who do not form part of the theory of participation.

Youth participation refers to the active, conscious involvement of young people in processes of community development and implies a

high degree of commitment by young people in the questions that affect their community. When young people participate in community programmes, they acquire skills and resources that facilitate their individual empowerment (Collura et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 1995), since participation increases their self-esteem (Kurth-Schai, 1988) and their personal and social responsibility (Blanchet-Cohen and Cook, 2014; Melchior, 1998), as well as reducing the risk of falling into marginality (Funes et al., 2016). In addition, youth community participation is based on the premises that the opinions of young people are important and that their unique perspective can contribute to improving their community and fomenting a more inclusive and democratic society (Checkoway, 2011). According to Checkoway and Gutiérrez (2006), viewing young people as active citizens rather than passive individuals has increased their willingness to involve themselves in community issues. However, young people are still viewed in a variety of different ways, and this results in different visions of policies and interventions. Cuconato (2020) noted three opinions of young people as a group. They can be seen as: 1) a value, a necessary resource for their country’s development, where their participation represents a means of fighting the apathy and values that characterize the adult population; 2) a problem or threat, where young people range from those who passively wait to become adults to those who fall outside the norm and are inevitably found on the margins of participation; and 3) victims, where young people are unable to resolve their problems due to a lack of self-activation, or the negative effects of the established social system that conditions their lives.

2.2. The practical framework used by youth workers to promote youth participation

Several authors have contributed to the debate on the systematization of youth work models (Batsleer and Davies, 2010; Corney, 2006; Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Sercombe, 2010). However, recent theory has focused more on specific approaches rather than general models, taking Fitzsimons et al. (2011) as a starting point. This author argued that youth work is conditioned by the perspective from which we understand and view young people as a whole. In line with the classic model of youth work posited by Butters and Newell (1978), Fitzsimons links changing conceptions of youth work with the evolution of sociological thought. At the start of the 20th century, youth work complemented the socialization of the family and school in an organic society, in the Durkheimian meaning, in which the socialization of educational facilities enabled the sharing of the morals and values of a society. Within this context, participation was limited to adults, who had the power to decide, while young people were immersed in a learning process. Later, following a more Weberian vision of understanding the essence of daily life, the task of the youth worker was to guide young people in their life pathways. Above all, this implied comprehending, but not questioning, those structures that perpetuated the social reality all young people had to face. The ideas of Karl Marx led to conceptions that had an impact on the vision of working with young people. One of these was that young people are also victims of social injustice, and as this idea gained ground, the practice of the youth worker became one that analysed the causes of these injustices and disadvantages in depth and sought alternatives to the status quo. A significant factor in this perspective is that youth work suggests the transfer of power to young people. The Modernist and post-Modernist movements made further additions to the theoretical debate, among them the belief that there is not one overall truth regarding young people, which complicated the task of working with them.

Butters and Newell’s model has been criticized for its abstraction and disassociation of theory and practice (Smith, 1988). For this reason, Cooper and White (1994) suggested six models for working with young people: treatment; reform; two types of defence (non-radical and radical); and two types of empowerment (non-radical and radical). According to these authors, the first two models assume that the values of a society are both acceptable and desirable. Intervention is, thus,

motivated by a desire to guarantee social stability, and youth work is limited to penalizing non-compliance with the norms, and promoting good citizenship and conventional lifestyles (treatment), or to support programmes of personal development that foment the success of people who form part of disadvantaged groups (reform). In contrast, if we believe society to be unfair, social rights will form the basis of the intervention model, which will aim to guarantee equal opportunities for the most vulnerable young people. In this case, the focus will be on guidance, enabling them to take advantage of legal frameworks and exercise their rights (non-radical defence), or defend values of equality and social justice for all young people, as it assumes that society is unjust in its laws and bureaucracy (radical defence). Finally, the empowering model starts from the idea that society is unjust and controlled by a power-holding elite, and although intervention will not lead the process, it aims to give young people control over their lives (non-radical empowerment) and help them act for themselves and identify factors of oppression in order to overcome inequalities (radical empowerment). In line with this, Bacqué and Bewier (2013) aligned themselves with the radical model of empowerment, which questions the capitalist system and supports social transformation, the recognition of people and groups and the distribution of resources. They argued that, instead of distributing benefits to those who use the service, or helping them, social workers should provide resources than enable these people to develop their own abilities in relation to individual and social transformation.

A number of studies have shown that youth workers have the collective potential to promote the well-being and engagement of young people by encouraging them to recognize themselves as such and to promote their decision-making in matters that affect them (Ord, 2007; Sapin, 2013; Corney, 2009, 2014; Cooper, 2018). Corney et al. (2009) argued that, as opposed to other professionals who also work with young people, the youth worker can develop community work by focusing only on the young. So “if youth workers are not able to find a place where their form of service, knowledge and skills are accepted, young people may not find any service available that acts unequivocally in their interest” (p. 24) (Sercombe, 2004). This is because, according to Ord (2021), these professionals have the potential to understand young people’s needs, create a positive environment, be aware of available resources and services, build meaningful relationships and work as a team to provide young people with the support and guidance they need.

2.3. The youth worker’s normative framework for promoting youth participation

The EU and EC have played an important role in designing youth policies and developing youth work across Europe. The EC was one of the first international institutions to focus on the needs and rights of young people and recommends that they participate more in society. In the “White paper – A new impetus for European youth”, governments were asked to co-ordinate with each other on participation, information, volunteering and a greater understanding of young people. The White Paper specified that fomenting youth participation meant more than merely consulting the young, but rather that they should be included in the decision-making process (EC, 2001). Furthermore, the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (passed in 1992, revised 10 years later, and passed by the Congress of the Council of Europe in 2003) holds that, as citizens of municipalities and regions, young people must have access to all forms of participation in society (Soler, Novella, Planas, 2015). In the same line, in 2009 a new strategy in the framework of youth policies proposed improving the access of all young people to full participation and highlighted the importance of youth work in achieving this aim (EC, 2009). Following the agreement signed by the EU and EC in 2010, which specified youth participation as a common objective, the new resolution of the EC and EU: EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, 2018 (European Commission, 2018; Council of European Union, 2019) continued to support participation, and recommended that member states: a) promote dialogue and the

means of participation at all levels; b) contribute to preparing young people for participation through youth work; and c) explore innovative and alternative methods of democratic participation. Thus, the EU and EC encourage member states to promote the active participation of young people; to achieve this through including them in the decision-making process; and to foment dialogue between adults and young people via the figure of the youth worker (Bianchi et al., 2022).

Since 2010, the EU has also supported and clearly recognized the figure of the youth worker: the European Youth Work Convention of 2010 acknowledged the importance of youth work, and the EU report of 2015 highlighted the importance of the role of youth workers in promoting active citizenship and the participation of young people throughout the European Union. The latter report indicated that youth workers could play a key role in supporting young people’s active participation in public life and decision making. Later, Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2017) which pertained to youth work, highlighted the importance of counting on youth workers with the skills to promote and support the active participation of young people in local and regional life. This was echoed in the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, which called on member states to invest in training and development for these professionals in order to support their work in promoting youth participation.

In the case of Catalonia, recommendations regarding youth policy are considered under Law 33/2010, which recognizes the importance of the youth worker, and encourages public authorities to foment youth participation with the aim of improving democratic systems and structures, guaranteeing that young people can play an active role in transforming society. The Law urges public administrations to incorporate the participation of young people in their daily activity and to provide the conditions that foment processes of youth participation. The 2021 Action Plan of the Catalan Government states the desire to transform services and programmes in this regard. Its vision is to foster guidance for young people through the following measures: providing professionals, whether or not they work with young people, with specific training in participation and providing the community with a youth perspective; and training in the different ranks of power and privilege for politicians, entities and groups. The aim of these measures is to guarantee equal participation opportunities for all young people (Youth Action Plan 2021 – COVID 2021).

3. Methods

Young people can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. This naturally leads to very different ways of working with them, although these ways are constantly evolving. The aim of this study is therefore to analyse the perceptions and interventions of youth workers when working to promote participation among young people in the community in Catalonia (Spain). The specific aims are as follows:

- To understand youth workers’ visions of young people’s participation in their community.
- To examine the strategies youth workers use to promote this participation.
- To understand the factors that condition the youth worker’s role in promoting such participation.

To this end, qualitative research was carried out by means of discussion groups. This methodology involves conducting interviews and focusing on the interaction between the group and the joint construction of meanings. The interaction between participants produces spontaneous synergies, conversations and reactions that can provide answers to specific issues as they arise in the groups. The discussion group thus provides a range of perspectives, and the opportunity to examine a specific subject in depth (Morgan, 1997; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007). The guidelines for the discussion groups were produced

following a dialectic logic between theory and practice and were organized in two blocks. The first focused on perceptions regarding participation, youth and community; and the second on professional practice, paying particular attention to the problems and potentials of the intervention methodologies used when fomenting participation and the factors that condition the role played by youth workers in producing and implementing policies on a local level.

A total of six discussion groups were formed: a) five with youth workers of different profiles, one from each of the Regional Coordination Departments in Catalonia: Barcelona, Girona, Lleida, Tarragona and Terres de l'Ebre; and b) one with professionals from the Agència Catalana de la Joventut (Catalan Youth Agency), specialists in promoting youth participation in each of the aforementioned areas. After receiving authorization from the Direcció General de Joventut (General Directorate of Youth), we contacted professionals from each of the Regional Coordination Departments who selected the most ideal candidates according to their experience and knowledge of the territory. The following variables were taken into account when selecting participants: municipal youth workers with direct contact with young people, who develop participative projects, and, if possible, with a certain community vision. A total of 51 youth workers took part, with a range of profiles (see Table 1).

The professionals gave their informed consent and participated voluntarily in the research, receiving no payment. Data confidentiality and anonymity were respected throughout the entire process according to Organic Law 3/2018 on Data Protection and Guarantee of Digital Rights, and the General Data Protection Regulation (DGPR) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and the Council. In addition, the study was conducted following the guidelines and with the approval of the University's Ethics Committee (CEBRU0017-22). The Secretary of Childhood, Adolescence and Youth (Catalan Government) approved the procedure and reviewed the instruments.

The collected data was transcribed using the Atlas.ti program. The grounded theory approach, an inductive method that aims to derive theory from the meanings of individuals' experiences, was followed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This involves an initial open coding analysis to categorize and organize the codes. Afterwards, a second review of the data was conducted to categorise codes into broader themes or categories (axial coding). We identified 44 codes and grouped them into the following seven categories: community, enhancing/limiting factors, young people, participation, professionals, society and methodologies. Our focus was on developing a core category or central concept that explains the relationships between the other categories identified during axial coding, specifically participation category. During the analysis, we constantly compared data, codes, and categories to ensure that our findings remained grounded in empirical evidence. This allowed us to iteratively refine the theory. Table 2 displays codes in each category and

Table 1
Youth worker profiles.

Profile	Number
Municipal youth worker: professional with direct contact who develops programmes on the municipal level	17
Shared youth worker: professional with direct contact who develops programmes on the municipal level in more than one municipality	7
County youth worker: professional who co-ordinates and implements programmes on a county level	8
Civic youth activity co-ordinator: professional with direct contact with young people in vulnerable situations	7
Youth co-ordinator: professional with direct contact charged with promoting youth clubs and facilities	4
Territorial co-ordination manager: professionals who co-ordinate programmes and actions of youth workers in the Regional Coordination Departments of Catalonia	4
Other (political profiles, work experience students and one professional from an entity)	4
Total	51

Table 2
Analysis categories and codes.

Categories	Codes
Community (135)	Agents (15) Entities and associations (33) Spaces and facilities (25) Geographical area (5) Relationships (59)
Enhancing/limiting factors (170)	Administration (83) Roots (6) Self-management (6) Deceit (8) Financial investment (8) Leisure (11) Power and privilege (19) Politicians/politics (21) Rural location (19)
Young people (57)	Active (19) Fluctuating (34) Vulnerable (5)
Participation (215)	Concept (48) Decoration/Manipulation (17) Symbolic (16) Consultation (14) From adults to young people (14) From young people (12) From young people to adults (3) Learning process (40) Adult (17) Consumerist (14) Elitist (14) Significant (19) Online (9)
Professionals (210)	Tasks and assignments (77) Networking (27) Bond (20) Guidance (37) Recognition (59) Transformation (9) Immediacy (5) Individualistic/Capitalist (14) Racism/Sexism/-isms (6)
Society (34)	Occasional activity (46) Platform project (5) Tools and methods (39) Sharing challenges (5) Capturing interests (19)
Methodologies (108)	

the number of mentions.

4. Results

The aim of the present article is to provide information on the perception of youth and community participation by youth workers, the strategies and methodologies they use to promote it, and the factors that condition their role in promoting such participation. The results are presented in three blocks.

4.1. Perceptions of youth and community participation

In general terms, the surveyed youth workers perceived participation as the ability to make decisions and take part in something. Furthermore, they assumed that participation involves more than just attending an activity or being consulted on specific issues. Rather, it is seen as a process that involves organizing something together with other people in order to carry it out. Different levels of involvement can be assumed as part of this organization. However, the youth workers stressed that there have been changes in the ways people participate. On the one hand, they explained that we live in increasingly fragmented societies, in which collectivism takes a back seat to individualism. Thus, the accelerated pace of capitalism also transforms young people's participation into more sporadic and individualistic forms of it.

"I have the feeling that we often tend to analyse young people from our adult perspective..... 'Young people don't participate anymore'. Young people are a product of our society today. They aren't different from this society. Today's society tends towards hedonism, individualism, and young people respond to these principles. I think this comes from the advance of capitalism, which has been going on for a few years now... now the emphasis is on conformity, or accelerating processes that already existed. And what does lockdown do? It isolates you, which is just another form of individualism" (DG1).

Furthermore, they explained that there has been a decrease in young people's participation in formal entities or associations due to these global changes. In addition to the increased bureaucracy and legal requirements to legally formalize an association, young people have actually lost interest in them. It is difficult for some young people to participate regularly over a long period of time beyond specific projects or initiatives that interest them on an ad hoc basis. According to these youth workers, there has been a shift from organized participation in formal structures, which is stable over time and has long-lasting objectives, to forms of participation that focus on specific, much more concrete or even global objectives, which do not require a formal, institutional organization at the local level.

"Looking back to the start, 10 years ago, we worked very closely with legally registered associations, you know what I mean, with all the paperwork and everything, but not any more, now they're identical groups of young people, but with no legal status as an entity. Why? Well, paperwork, because nobody wants to be responsible if something has to be signed, but they participate just the same, and I think that's worth something, they're not an association, but are also groups of young people who want to do things" (DG3).

They place this general framework within two trends in youth participation: firstly, the increase in use of the Internet to join or express agreement or disagreement in certain situations and issues that go beyond the local level; and secondly, they understand that the activities they offer have become ones that are consumed; that is, they realize that some young people *take part* in global movements, whereas they *consume* activities on the local level.

"I think all this totally distorts participation. I mean, because, of course, there's no responsibility, they end up being pure consumers and consumption is instant..." (DG4).

Another explanation given by the interviewees for the emergence of these new forms of participation is the lack of time to meet. According to the youth workers, using the Internet to participate is less time-consuming than organizing physical meetings and does not require everyone being present at the same time and place. However, some of the interviewees argued that this lack of time is more due to priorities than a general issue, and suggested that young people do not prioritize group activities. This is one of the negative ways in which these youth workers perceive young people. In fact, throughout the analysis, two opposing ways of perceiving young people coexisted. When the youth workers referred to the youth group as a whole, they said that they were disengaged, out of place and it is difficult to understand them. In contrast, when referring to the young people they know, with whom they work and with whom they have established educational relationships, they emphasized understanding and trust.

While some of the professionals remarked that participation benefits young people's development and social change, as it helps them understand their surroundings and be critical, and widens their circle of acquaintances, they also stated that the general conceptual framework within which they work is not very participative. Additionally, they emphasized that the presence of young people in the spaces where they are invited to participate is solely for the purpose of collecting opinions. They rarely have the capacity to influence the subject matter on which they are asked to give their opinion. Equally, the few professionals who

referred to spaces of community participation in their municipalities stated that the presence of young people is only representative or symbolic, criticizing the adult-centred dynamics in these spaces.

"I mean, if the young person doesn't participate, doesn't get involved, whatever, "they're irresponsible", "they're selfish", I don't know. But at the same time, those in power don't listen to them. That's what we say, right? That the young person isn't "stupid". "Why should I have to form part of a commission if in the end the person who's run it for 40 years takes all the decisions, and what they say, goes?" How can you motivate a young person to dedicate their time to specific participatory spaces when they know that it's nothing but an autocracy?" (DG1).

4.2. Strategies and methodologies for promoting community participation

The group members agreed on the need to change the strategies used to promote youth participation. This will require projects that can adapt to spontaneous participation and respond to new issues as they arise. When asked for concrete examples, they identified two basic strategies: supporting existing associations, and collaborating with young people in planning activities. In the first instance, the strategy is to provide support to such associations, which often involves providing them with resources. It was agreed that support should be offered to these associations because they provide spaces that foster participatory processes and being in contact with them allows young people to establish stable relationships with potential leaders who participate in community participation processes. The interviewees highlighted that leisure and free time associations are the ones that bring together most young people and present fewer problems in terms of new generations joining. This contrasts with others such as cultural or traditional associations, which tend to retain the same people in power and decision-making positions over long periods of time.

"what we try to do to get rid of this stigma is, through the youth centre, to offer activities that involve being there in the centre, and have the activity led by the youth facilitators we know in the area. Maybe we'll take them trampolining in the summer to Salt, or do activities like "Young people's afternoons". During the winter, we did a project called "Viu als carrers (Living on the streets)" and we've done "Basket Beat" (...), we try to broaden their horizons a little" (DG5).

The second strategy concerns planning activities. On the one hand, some youth workers said they promote participation based on the success of the activities they plan at the youth facilities; that is, they look for strategies to capture the interests of young people and promote activities of their interest. To achieve this, it is necessary to go to where the young people are, use specific language, and be flexible regarding methods of capturing needs.

On the other hand, some use the need for planning activities in their facilities to stimulate groups of young people, who then decide on and organize these activities. The idea is to use this process as a participatory learning process, where the young people end up choosing the activities of interest to them. To achieve this, the youth workers' main strategy is to create meaningful relationships with the young people who come to the centres. This requires constant rather than sporadic work and can be achieved through direct contact, informal conversations and sharing useful information whether, in the youth facilities themselves or in public spaces. Related to this, providing young people with support for their needs is another strategy the youth workers use to create bonds. They argued that young people need to be given opportunities, take their own decisions, and assume responsibility, even if this leads to mistakes.

"...in finding out these needs, you try to consider a few projects, you communicate with them, speak with them, and you try to make a reason fit into the project long-term. I also think that the projects should either have a long- or medium-term vision, or last as long as they naturally would" (DG3).

The youth workers surveyed acknowledged that planning these activities needs to take account of the diverse nature of youth, but argued that it is hard to find young people other than those who already attend youth facilities. Thus, most projects that aim to foment participation mainly involve young people they already know. Regarding those who do participate in activities, they are mainly of school age (up to 16 years old) and do no or few out-of-school activities. Although the professionals said they would like to include new people, very few could name projects that had this as their goal. When discussing community-level methodologies, the youth workers mentioned networking, above all in collaboration with schools, stating that this is a vital element for their work to progress correctly. In addition, some of the professionals mentioned forums as a participatory methodology. However, when asked for specific examples, the individual level was most often referred to as the only way to intervene.

“What we see is that, if you’re working with a lot of people, you have to start with the basics of participation, because they can’t even form a group, or anything at all, they can’t give their problems a community or group dimension to come up with a solution together. Very often they think it’s about individual responsibility which, in the end, is the dominant discourse, isn’t it?” (DG4).

Some of the youth workers expressed concern that institutions have no established procedure for addressing the youth interests they observe and come into contact with. Others argued that young people should be involved directly in decision-making and that their work should entail organizing activities to promote the development of a participatory culture through which young people can participate in the municipality’s participatory spaces. Moreover, it should be noted that some professionals placed value on participation taking place outside the remit of the local authorities, acknowledging and applauding such experiences of self-organization. In most of these cases, they argued in favour of a lack of intervention by the public administration.

“I think there are two kinds of participation: the institutionalized, and the self-organized, right? And I feel that we try to hinder the self-managed type and institutionalize it more and more. I think that if we give self-management groups more space, then the young people will trust each other more, and the two types of participation can co-exist in some way. But if we try to take up all the facilities, then it’s normal that the relationships are more about power, even if there are links between them, right? But in the end, they do exist, and they think that self-management’s really great, like you said earlier, right? And I don’t think they’re given enough space...” (DG5).

4.3. Factors influencing youth workers’ promotion of community participation

Some of the strategies used by youth workers conflict with public administration logics. The youth workers perceive their work within these administrations as uncommon: their actions are necessary, and the bond and trust generated with groups of young people mean that they are a constant figure in managing the expectations that young people and administrations have of each other. That being said, they expressed a certain disagreement with the daily reality of their job.

“In the end, most of us work for an institution, and, well, if the institution says “it’s black”, then it’s black. That’s participation. Of course, you have to make the effort, even if you have doubts or don’t see it really as participation, your job is to sell it as such. The young person will come to you and say... “No, you’ve sold participation to me as this, you’ve fooled me, I’m done with it”. I mean, I think that this problem is right at the front of everything. [...] And, well, between these four walls, I think that this has had something to do, whether deliberately or not, consciously or not, with the breakdown of the idea of “What is participation?” (DG5).

In addition, other professionals working in public administration

often fail to comprehend and/or mistrust ideas proposed by the youth department. The youth workers felt that providing training in participation for their colleagues in other departments would be a positive measure. Decisions and suggestions regarding youth participation are often conditioned by the needs of the administration. The youth workers complained that they are limited by the will of the administration and the money allocated to youth issues, although participatory budgets were mentioned as an occasional exception.

“The councillor says “Yes, I’ve invited all the young people to a meeting to organize the annual festivities”, and I say “that’s great”. Then the youngsters came to the meeting and everything is already decided. And, for the councillor, participation meant “You come to this bar...” I think they feel that participation means young people should do whatever they’re told. So I think they should have some training...” (DG3).

According to the youth workers, local administrations undervalue them and youth policies. They feel they are often stigmatized as young people who do a little of everything and a lot of nothing, and only serve to promote leisure activities for young people. The consequences of this are poor working conditions, a lack of recognition and a lack of budget.

“I mean, the youth worker in the local council is the last in line for everything, unless they’re a trusted worker, that’s the other model of youth worker, which is really cool: the councillor’s right hand, but that only lasts as long as it lasts, and when it’s over, then, like a firework show, it’s over. This is the other profile of youth worker. So, building anything long-term, that’s impossible. We’re the last in line” (DG1).

They also referred to the increasing amount of bureaucracy that their job entails as a hindrance to them being able to address any issues that arise.

“In practice, we’re overwhelmed with paperwork. The ideal thing would be, “Today I’m visiting the schools to talk to the kids or teachers and see how it’s all going, then off to the health centre to talk to the nurses and find out whatever, then I’ll see my contact in the Centre for Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors to check on so-and-so...”, I mean, we should have more weight inside the administration, but actually we’re nothing but decoration, right? But of course, your daily work is what it is...” (DG1).

Despite their criticisms of external factors, there was little self-criticism among the youth workers regarding how they relate to young people, other agents in the municipality, and the local administration. Some of their comments also revealed a certain resistance to changing practices or tasks, and a degree of conformism, whether through a lack of knowledge of other methodologies or a lack of time.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study explores youth workers’ perspectives on youth participation in community settings, the strategies they use and the factors that influence youth participation. As we have discussed, empowering young people to participate in decisions that affect them is a task in youth workers’ practice that distinguishes them from other professionals (Ord, 2007; Sapin, 2013; Corney, 2009, 2014; Cooper, 2018). According to the normative framework provided by the EC, EU and national policies, youth workers face several challenges in promoting youth participation in their communities. These include: promoting dialogue and the participation of young people at all levels; contributing to preparing young people for participation; and exploring innovative methods for inclusive participation of all young people. We believe that when these challenges are put into practice in local contexts, the ways of understanding participation and working with young people determine the methods used to promote participation. This Discussion section has therefore been organized around three main points: ways of understanding participation and youth work; strategies and methods used; and limitations on youth workers in promoting this participation.

5.1. Perceptions on working for youth participation

The youth workers surveyed note that participation by young people is changing as a result of the increasing individualization and atomization of our daily lives, the general loss of a sense of community and a lack of time. Furthermore, they argue that forms of participation are closely linked to global goals and take place largely in the online world. These forms of participation are characterized by immediacy and are less stable in nature than participation spaces anchored in communities, as they respond to more concrete and changing objectives than those pursued by traditional youth participation models, such as youth councils or other models of representation. These findings are in line with those of Soler-i-Martí et al. (2022), who highlighted the relationship between local and global narratives, particularly in movements fighting against the emergence of climate change, such as Fridays for the Future; or other research highlighting global changes in participation, which tend to blur large, long-term milestones and develop more concrete and attainable practices (Francés, 2008; Benedicto, 2013; Amnå & Ek-man, 2014; Ballesté et al., 2021).

Beyond this observation, when youth workers situate the concept of participation within the community sphere, they relate it to educational practice. That is, they understand youth work as an educational practice, according to which the aim of the youth worker – often based on the idea of critical and emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1992) – is for young people to learn to participate. From this point of view, the group of young people the youth workers are working with is seen as having the potential to take decisions, and criticisms of their non-participation fades away.

While most of the youth workers interviewed understand that their role is to promote the participation of young people in the spaces and times specifically dedicated to them, and therefore take up the non-radical defence first posited by Cooper and White (1994), some also emphasize the marginality of young people in decision-making spaces. In doing so, they link the concept of participation to that of social justice, showing how young people are treated and disenfranchised in relation to political and civic decision-making, a common element in the relationship between young people and the public sphere according to Ballesté (2022). This is why they stress young people's lack of citizenship rights, criticizing their marginalization. In fact, youth workers may link their work to social justice and human rights, as Kenny's studies pointed out (Kenny, 2011).

5.2. Actions to promote youth participation

Youth workers highlight co-design processes, through the creation of the socio-educational link, as the main strategy they implement to promote youth participation. Several authors have reviewed practices aimed at creating meaningful and positive learning environments for young people, which offer them training and opportunities for community action, such as those framed within youth-driven programmes (Green and Portelli, 2018; Rowland et al., 2014). This is viewed as a practice of socio-educational intervention that offers young people opportunities to learn and improve social and interpersonal skills for participatory living. In this regard, the practitioners interviewed also emphasize participatory models developed by and with young people. However, despite being well-intentioned, such processes and strategies for promoting youth participation can inadvertently be used to stifle young people's organic and spontaneous participation (Malone & Hartung, 2010). For this reason, policies aimed at strengthening young people's experiences and identities (affirmative policies) and those aimed at facilitating social integration (transitional policies) could be reoriented to promote the socio-political integration of young people as full members of their community, giving them a greater voice in the public sphere. Young people can be considered as autonomous individuals, capable of deciding and transforming their daily reality. In fact, some of the practices proposed are similar to Service Learning,

which provides participants with meaningful learning experiences through structured reflection (Vargas and Erba, 2017). All that being said, as Mumburú (2020) argued, youth workers must be willing, available, have a critical attitude and be able to create spaces of trust through active listening, empathy and the co-creation of common goals. Thus, activities that take place in spaces and facilities designed for young people can be considered both promoters of participatory learning processes and developers of life experiences, and therefore useful for transition policies (in the former case) and positive policies (in the latter) (Soler, 2006). However, as with any participatory process, when such practices do not result in change, they can actually disempower young people (Strack et al., 2004).

In order to harness young people's potential, in the terms used by Cuconato (2020), it is time to start basing youth policies on and planning them around the notion of young citizens, as posited by Benedict (2016); that is, considering young people as active subjects. Otherwise, it does not seem possible or plausible that they will become active citizens when they suddenly move into another social category: that of adults. In this regard, it is worth considering that if adults do not consciously create the conditions for youth development, leadership and participation, most discussion spaces, which are by default adult-led, will suffer from conventional or habitual power imbalances that undermine youth participation (Kudva and Driskell, 2009).

5.3. Limitations in promoting youth participation

The youth workers surveyed agree with Ord's assertion (Ord et al., 2021) that they have the potential to understand young people's needs and build meaningful relationships to help them meet those needs. However, they believe that the innovative potential of youth participation policies in the municipality is conditioned by the power and status that youth workers have in public administrations. In fact, the professionals interviewed report not having a minimum stable team structure, making it impossible for them to bring about changes in citizen participation. Therefore, the value that European and regional policies give to youth workers in the development of participatory policies is limited by the power and status that governments are willing to give to them and their professional field.

The professionals who took part in the study confirm that public administrations see participation as a threat, given that it can lead to change. This limits young people's decision-making power to issues that have little relevance to their daily lives. Not prioritizing young people's needs and demands only reinforces the perception that participation in institutional policies does not have a relevant impact on young people. Thus, youth participation policies respond to nominal or instrumental interests, on the scale suggested by White (1996), rather than to a desire to change the everyday environment.

If local authorities truly want to foster transformative youth participation through the work of youth leaders, they should promote more innovative processes at the local level (Crowley and Maxon, 2018). As noted by Carrera et al. (2019), municipalities are 'theoretically conducive spaces for innovation, but this potential is frustrated by the limited power of innovation drivers' (page 14), which in this case could be mobilized through the figure of the youth worker. Indeed, the participants in our study mention the innovative potential of their communities, giving as examples the common vision of their professional profiles, the trust and connections they can build with young people, and the potential of networking. They also state that they are unable to put this into practice, however. Achieving this innovation would require relational, more flexible, horizontal and complex public administrations that involve a range of services, departments and actors in designing and implementing solutions to social demands. This means that the public administration needs to move beyond a more bureaucratic and management-driven model to a relational one in which many people work together, while incorporating networks and community perspectives (Brugué, 2018).

In addition to the above, several studies (Collins et al., 2016; Larson et al., 2015; Roach et al., 2013) have highlighted adults' resistance to involving young people in decision-making and power-sharing. A further step forward would therefore be to support trusting spaces where adults and young people can share power and make decisions together and see each other as allies (Checkoway, 1996), and to plan spaces where both groups can connect and discuss issues that affect them. This partnership between young people and adults would represent an innovative step in community development work, where "young people are more likely to achieve positive outcomes when they experience the freedom to make decisions while experiencing the trust and shared power of adults" (Zeldin, et al., 2017). Returning to Putnam's original idea, if forms of social interaction are crucial in the proper functioning of a society, and youth workers are able to build trusting relationships with young people through the public administration, now is the time to implement innovative participation policies that focus on the status of young people and allow adults and young people to bowl together, thereby strengthening community bonds.

Funding

This work was supported by Department of Universities and Research of Catalonia government through the Industrial Doctorate plan number 2020/78. Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Elsevier.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mireia Sala-Torrent: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Anna Planas-Lladó:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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