Participation: Getting children and young people involved

CAPEJ
Research and Action
for Emancipatory Policies
for Youth

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Analysis of participatory projects and action-research in the capitalisation phase showed us that young people may be involved to varying degrees in different projects. Whether they are originators, actors, contributors, spectators or beneficiaries in a project, young people deserve a place when things are undertaken for or by them. But getting them to participate, in whatever role, requires guidelines, especially when we're talking about children or very young people.

While we do not pretend to give an exhaustive explanation of what that participation can be, this overview is intended to bring together elements from the capitalisation phase, from theoretical knowledge and from the experience of the partners in the CAPEJ project, in order to highlight what we mean by the term *"participation"* as well as a few points that require attention in setting up participatory research designs for and with young people.

We begin by trying to clarify what we mean by *"participation"*, and follow up with some thoughts on various levels of participation. Finally, the conditions for obtaining the participation of young people are presented.

What is participation?

The notion of participation has been conceptualised many times, in sociology, law, psychology or even politics (Claisse, Laviolette, Reuchamps & Ruyters, 2013). Given how many fields use the concept, there is no real consensus on what it means.

Participation as we understand it in the CAPEJ project is a commitment to listen to children and young people and to take their opinions to heart in any decisions that impact them. This is one of the guiding principles/pillars of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines the rights of children up to the age of 18. In particular, the CRC states that *"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."*

Here we also take into consideration the participation of young people up to 25 to 30 years of age, and the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life has this to say about the citizenship implications of participation: *"Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society."* This definition insists on the fact that participating is not just expressing an opinion by voting after a process offering no possibility of getting involved. Nor is it attending a debate as a passive spectator.

Participation means being able to influence and shape decisions and actions that will impact the lives of young people – or simply ones that are important to them – and take responsibility for them (Gozdzik-Ormel, 2015). The participation of children and young people in decisions that concern them brings real added value both to public policy and to the associations and other organisations working directly or indirectly with young people. For example, listening to their opinions and their experiences is useful when designing living or welcome spaces and allocating budgets so that responses are tailored to their needs and expectations. In addition, participation helps the young people themselves develop knowledge and skills, and bolsters their self-esteem and capacity to take action.

Levels of participation

At the outset of a project, it may be tempting to declare up front your intention of following a participatory process. But before going into the concrete ways and means of implementing such a process (e.g. who gets to play what role?), you first need to determine the intentions behind the participatory process (Claisse, Laviolette, Reuchamps & Ruyters 2013), i.e. specify what objectives are being pursued under the project.

This section starts with some general considerations on the question of what a project's objectives are, which will lead to an initial model of levels in participation. A second model, specifically focused on the participation of children and young people, will then be presented.

What are the project's objectives?

When a participatory process is being considered, the first step is to define its main objective. Fung's model (2007) provides us with a framework for examination of this question, based on four general views of what participation can mean:

- Participation in an educative forum that seeks to inform protagonists through participatory techniques;
- Participation in a participatory advisory panel in which the goal is not simply to inform but also to determine the preferences of the participants on the topic under study;
- Participation in a participatory problem-solving collaboration with the goal of finding solutions to problems based on discussions between the participants;
- Participation in a participatory democratic governance where participation is intended not only to find solutions but also to make decisions.
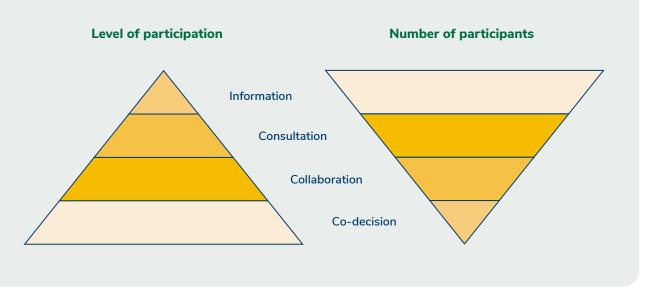
Using these models of participation, we can conceptualise four levels of participatory process depending on the objective being pursued (Claisse, Laviolette, Reuchamps & Ruyters 2013): information, consultation, collaboration and co-decision. The degree of participation associated with each level rises to a crescendo of maximum involvement of the protagonists in co-decision. Obviously, this increase in involvement has a proportionally inverse effect on the number of people involved in the process

(See figure 1)

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Figure 1. Levels of participation and number of participants
(Claisse, Laviolette, REUCHAMPS & Ruyters, 2013)

Level of participation

Number of participants

Information

Consultation

Collaboration

Co-decision

A modified ladder for participation of young people

In the same way as for adults, the concept of *"youth participation"* cannot be defined as a dichotomy. It is not enough to know whether young people participated or not (Gozdzik-Ormel, 2015). To properly understand, bring about and improve participation, it has to be considered in degrees. Several authors have conceptualised it in *"levels of participation"*. One of the best-known conceptualisations was developed by Roger Hart (2002)[1]., in the form of the "Ladder of Children's Participation" describing eight levels of participation by children.

1. We should note that this modified ladder for children and youth is based on the work of Sherry Arnstein in 1969 (cited par Graizon, 2019), defining the participation of adults in eight levels. The first two levels are akin to non-participation (**1.** manipulation, **2.** therapy), the next three are purely symbolic (**3.** informing, **4.** consultation, **5.** placation) while the last three promise real citizen empowerment (**6.** partnership, **7.** delegated power, **8.** citizen control).

• Level 1: Young people are manipulated

Young people are invited to participate in the project but have no real influence on decisions or results. In fact their presence is used to achieve other goals, such as winning local elections, casting an institution in a favourable light, or obtaining additional financing from institutions that support youth participation.

• Level 2: Young people are decoration

Within the project, young people represent youth as a disenfranchised group but fulfil no significant role (beyond their mere presence). They serve as shiny objects that are given a prominent place in the project or organisation so that an outside observer is bound to see them.

• Level 3: Young people are tokenised

Young people are invited to occupy certain functions in the project but have no real influence on decisions. This creates (deliberately or not) a false impression that young people are participating, although they have no say in what they do or how they participate.

• Level 4 : Young people are assigned and informed

The project is initiated and managed by adults; young people are invited to occupy certain specific functions or carry out certain tasks within the project, but they are aware of the limitations on their actual influence.

• Level 5: Young people are consulted and informed

The project is initiated and managed by adults, but young people can express their opinions and make suggestions, and are informed about the impact of that input on the final decisions or results.

• Level 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

The project is initiated by adults, but young people are invited to participate in the decision-making process and to take responsibilities as equal partners.

• Level 7: Young people-initiated and directed

A project or idea is initiated and managed by young people. Adults may be invited to play a supporting role if necessary, but the project can be carried out without their help.

• Level 8: Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults

A project or idea is initiated by young people, who invite adults to participate in the decision-making process as partners.

All these levels, along with the involvement and objectives they pursue, show that the result of a participatory process is not enough on its own: the means used to achieve that result are just as important (Hart, 1992; Claisse, Laviolette, Reuchamps & Ruyters, 2019). In other words, participation cannot be considered as a goal in and of itself, but as a planned process to guarantee the right level of involvement that will result in outputs reflecting the discussions held. Above all, it is an evolving process, and levels of participation may evolve with it (Faisca, 2019; Gozdzik-Ormel, 2015). The ascending presentation of the levels may suggest that the highest level must be sought at all times in a participatory process. But the appropriate level of participation actually depends on context, on the population being targeted in the defined objectives, and on experience acquired in the field (Gozdzik-Ormel, 2015, Claisse, Laviolette, Reuchamps & Ruyters, 2013). It is entirely conceivable, according to those parameters, that a middle-of-the-ladder level of participation may be more appropriate in a given situation. However, the three bottom rungs must be studiously avoided, as they in fact correspond to no participation at all (Hart, 1992).

How to get youth participation

While some projects may be initiated by young people themselves, in most cases these processes will be implemented and/or supported by professionals. There's no place for improvisation in getting youth to participate, and it is important to create conditions that are appropriate, empowering, and heedful of the rights and the well-being of young people, based on methodological but more importantly ethical references. Here we need to recall a series of guidelines and recommendations that will help not only in planning but also throughout the implementation of a participatory process involving young people.

It is advisable to include and involve young people as early as possible in the participative process. More generally, all of the other actors/stakeholders should be involved from the beginning and in all the various stages of the process (elected representatives, partner associations, etc.).

Voluntary, "en*light*ened" participation

Participants need to have clear and detailed information before they can decide whether they want to participate. This includes information on the process itself, how it is organised (where, when, how, number and age of participants, etc.), the people (facilitators, social workers, researchers, etc.) involved in the process and their roles throughout the process, how the young people's input is going to be used, and how their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information will be guaranteed (see ethical and deontic reference points).

In this information phase, it is essential to highlight the role of the young people in the process, to recognise their competence as experts in their lived experience, to guarantee their right to freely express themselves (or not to express themselves when they do not want to), and to apprise them of how their opinions will be taken into account. It is also important to describe the objectives and finalities pursued, while presenting possible limitations on what the project may be able to achieve or influence.

> The information given to participant may also concern their rights.
> In the case of a participatory process involving children (0-17 years), one particular recommendation is that elements of information, or if necessary training, be provided on the rights of the child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNO, 1989).

The information conveyed must be tailored to its audience, in terms of supporting material, presentation, content, and more specifically language and/or any pictograms/illustrations used. Such elements must be adapted depending on the age, any specific needs/handicaps, or other factors of vulnerability the participants may be confronted with.

> When participants are living in situations of vulnerability, it is advisable when setting up a process to work with professionals who are already in contact with people in the same situation or who actually know the participants, and to be especially attentive when contacting them (individually) and informing them from the very beginning.

The participation of young people must be voluntary. This means not only that the participant must clearly signify his/her intention to participate at the outset, but also that he/she may withdraw from the process at any time (fully or partially, e.g. refusing to answer certain questions).

Ethics and deontology

As we have just seen, it is essential that young participants receive clear, unambiguous information prior to implementation of the participatory process, in order to ensure that their participation is indeed voluntary and that you have their free and informed consent.

Young people must be treated at all times with benevolence, with respect for their rights, and their well-being must be a constant concern throughout implementation of the process. They must be assured that the project is organised in such a way that they will remain anonymous, that their privacy will be respected and confidentiality guaranteed throughout the process, and that their words and opinions can never be used against them. It is also important to make sure that what they have to say is correctly interpreted and reported, and it is recommended that they have the possibility of disagreeing with any results/productions that may be published.

If the process involves the use of audio or video recordings, or photography, it is essential to inform the young people of this intention and to obtain their prior consent, but also, if any of those elements are later proposed for public use, to guarantee that the young people's private lives remain private.

> If the participatory process involves children under 18 years of age there may be other measures of protection that need to be guaranteed and implemented (e.g. adult supervision/ organisation of accommodations, presence of a resource person for children so that they can speak freely, proof of consent, etc.[2]).

2. SOME USEFUL REFERENCES:

OEJAJ : "Children's participation in public decision-making: Why should I involve them?":

https://oejaj.cfwb.be/fileadmin/sites/oejaj/uploads/Hors_PublicationsTravaux/Documents/CIDE/Participation_des_enfants_
en_FWB/La_participation_des_enfants_et_des_jeunes_aux_decisions_publiques/VadeMecum_PED_def___1_.pdf

OEJAJ : "How to survey young children" (5-8 years: Carrying out quantitative surveys with young children):

https://oejaj.cfwb.be/fileadmin/sites/oejaj/uploads/Hors_PublicationsTravaux/Documents/CIDE/Participation_
des_enfants_en_FWB/outils_pratiques/Vade-mecum.pdf

**ESOMAR : "Guideline on Research and Data Analytics with Children, Young People,
and Other Vulnerable Individuals":**

https://www.esomar.org/what-we-do/codeguidelines/esomar-grbn-guideline-on-research-with-children

The participation process needs to be inclusive: accessible to all young people, and free from any discrimination (age, sex, handicap, language barriers – spoken or written, origin, living conditions, religion, geographical area, etc.). It is important to be able to ensure that everyone can participate, respecting the sensibilities, capacities, and competence of each individual, etc.

The participatory process may of course focus on a specific "target group" with defined characteristics (e.g. a certain age group, or young people benefiting from a particular service or on the contrary not taking advantage of that service, etc.). In such cases it is necessary to be attentive to offer each individual within that group the same opportunity to participate with no form of discrimination whatsoever.

Committed, respectful facilitators/speakers

Any person taking part in or facilitating the process as a leader and/or involved in the dynamics of the participatory process must be really committed and implicated in the process with a focus on **benevolence, honesty, empathy, absence of judgement, respect, and active listening to what the young people have to say.** This requires good people and communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal.

Any such leaders/facilitators must be able to create a climate of trust for true participation to develop. Most of the project leaders/researchers we talked to during the capitalisation phase insisted on the importance of working with young people they already knew or of getting to know them through involvement and interaction with them in the places they frequented.

Meaningful topics

The participation of young people must be focused on topics that are **relevant** for young people, **subjects of interest to them, especially subjects of concern for them.** There may be many such topics, concerning the different places their lives revolve around. Ideally of course, a project will identify topics that are highly meaningful and have a major impact on the lives of young people, in collaboration with the young people themselves.

Sufficient financial resources

A good estimate of the resources needed and the necessary financial backing to implement a participatory process are always necessary. This concerns both the **necessary human resources,** and a coherent **budget** that will cover the organisational aspects and logistics for the process.

A few examples of potential costs:
meeting rooms, as well as other places to organise residential activities if necessary; meals and/or snacks and drinks; "resource" people for specific competences and/or methodologies (recruited from associations, academia, or the private sector - graphic designers for publications, etc. - among other things); transportation; printing and distribution of reports/publications, etc.

Some processes include plans to "compensate" young participants. This kind of remuneration is useful to recognize and value the competence of the young people and brings stability to their participation over time, especially with less "steady" populations or people living in conditions of vulnerability.

Suitable methods and tools

The methods used in participatory processes can be highly diverse. There may also be a combination when a process is implemented of quantitative methods (surveys/enquiries by questionnaire) and/or qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, etc.), whether in individual or group settings.

Considerable thought must be given, when possible in collaboration with young people, to the choice of a process and of the methods that will be used to make sure they are appropriate for the subject, the objectives, and the target audience (e.g. what age groups will be interviewed, with what abilities/ competences - language skills, oral and written, etc. -, factors of vulnerability, handicaps/specific needs, etc.).

Throughout the process, remember to leave the young people enough time to reflect and to formulate their ideas, and to let them express themselves freely, with supporting materials and communication channels that they feel comfortable with and can appropriate. As stated above, what the young people have to say needs to be taken seriously, and it is important to make sure that their words are understood and transcribed exactly as they have expressed them.

In parallel to the methods under consideration, thought must be given to suitable facilitation tools for the target audience. In addition to the energy they can bring to a participatory process (e.g. alternating between practical exercises and discussions), such tools can help create a relationship of trust between young participants and between the young people and the facilitators/speakers. Another important point to decide on is the (maximum) number of facilitators versus the number of young participants, to encourage free and fair participation and speech.

It is recommended that any project seek out young people *where they live*, i.e. where they feel most "at home" or at ease.

These may also be "virtual" spaces where they may be active (e.g. social networks). If the intention is to guarantee that the participants will be at least somewhat representative within the participatory process, special attention must be paid to ensuring the presence of diverse profiles in the groups (geographical areas, towns and villages, representation of sexes, socio-cultural origins, etc.).

A few examples of tools:
— showing a film followed by a debate;
— role playing/theatre, or workshops for creative or artistic expression;
— games to "break the ice" and get to know each other;
— radio workshops, etc.

A suitable, friendly environment

The choice of venue for a youth participation process is important, as are dates, the duration of the stages in the process, and, more generally, the framework in which those stages will take place.

In terms of place, a "calm" setting should be preferred, with little foot traffic in particular. The venue should also be arranged to facilitate the use of the tools/methods under consideration in the project (e.g. auditorium vs meeting rooms for smaller groups). Some facilitators highlight the importance for young people of being familiar with the setting so that they feel at ease, while others encourage the use of residential settings to create a certain dynamic between young people, and to plan on more intensive working sessions interspersed with leisure or sports/games with or between the young participants.

Friendliness and sociability do appear to be essential elements for young people, according to our conversations with facilitators/project leaders/researchers in participatory processes with that audience. It is important, for instance, to create opportunities for meeting people and for discussions between young people within the project framework, for example at meals or during activities and other events (e.g. concerts).

It's also wise to take a good hard look at the timeline of the process that the project intends to

set up with young people. If a participatory process requires the involvement of the same young people **over a period of time**, it is preferable to never exceed a year, as there is a risk of the participants losing interest and motivation as time goes by. **The calendar and schedule** for the various stages in the process must also be developed according to the rhythms of the young participants (i.e. need for breaks) as well as their other activities and occupations. Once again, pay attention to the opinions of the young people concerning how the participatory process is organised, so that their needs, expectations, and suggestions can be taken into account, as well as their availability and priorities.

Feedback to participants and evaluation of the set-up

Youth participation implies that young people are involved in the set-up until the very end. That means providing **feedback to the young people** at least once on how their opinions have been used: what has been produced and what channels or means of publication have been used above all, but also what stages come next, and what results or impacts can be attributed to the participatory set-up. Of course, it is still recommended that the work of selecting and creating relevant content, supporting materials, and communication (or solicitation) channels and resources be done with the young people involved, to match the project's objectives and finalities. It is also important to plan on evaluating the participatory process once implemented. Such an evaluation should be done with all the various participants/actors involved in the set-up. The young people must play a central role, and, whenever possible, be able to contribute to the format and content of the evaluation themselves. It is important to guarantee the young people that their opinions will be considered, to improve participatory processes that will be implemented in the future.

**A few examples of questions for use in evaluation of participation,
taken from the report "*Children's participation in public decision-making – Why
should I involve children?*" (Schuurman, M., for the OEJAJ, 2014:**

- How did the children experience the consultation process used?
- Were they listened to by the other children/young people and adults present?
- What was the role of the facilitator – was his/her role useful, guiding, creating a good or fun atmosphere, etc.?
- Did everyone participate equally? If not, was that felt as a problem for the group?

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