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# F O C U S

## WHAT ABOUT YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION? RESEARCH INTO POLICY ON PRACTICE

A research seminar was held in November 2003 in the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg on the topic of political participation of young people across Europe. The participants at the seminar were researchers from across the social sciences, including political science, sociology and social psychology, and from youth and education fields. In this article I will highlight some of the key points that arose from the seminar that may be of interest to non-formal educators, and then look at the recommendations for policy on educational practice. The trends that arose out of the research are notable in their consistency across the wider Europe and across the different academic fields present at the meeting. Thus, quite unusually for social science, a clear picture emerged in the field of youth participation across Europe, with little notable division between east and west. I hope that by reading this article on the seminar you are inspired to read the follow-up publication entitled "*Revisiting Youth Political Participation: Challenges for Research and Democratic Practice in Europe*" where you can explore in much more detail the research studies that are referred to in this article.

### Key trends

Young people were seen to be declining in their interest in traditional forms of politics and political parties, as is evident from reduced levels of voting and membership in youth sections of political parties and youth organisations as a whole. However this reduction does not indicate that young people are less interested in politics as a whole, but that young people are interested in new forms of civil engagement. The necessary step for understanding how young people politically participate is to change the definition of political participation to encompass these new forms. The definition of political participation needs to be enlarged to encapsulate the latest developments, interests, expressions and identities of youth. Although young people now can be understood to be much more individualistic and consumer-orientated, having been born into a globalised, risk society filled with individual choice and competition to succeed, there appears to be little correlation between this and political apathy in the wider sense of politics. When young people do participate, these elements often form the basis for their political involvement. The personal and private sphere of people's everyday lives is where political interest is high. When young people discuss "politics" in their own terms, then there is evidence of much

higher levels of political interest and activity. When young people are participating politically it can relate to what clothes they wear or what food they purchase. Young people often like to have fun and there is an element of irony and play in songs, posters and in their protest. ***It can be concluded from this that there is a real need for politicians to understand young people and their political engagement in order that they can communicate with them and encourage them to join in with the more traditional forms.***

It was also recognised in the seminar that there are some young people who do reflect the notion of apathy, who are disengaged from their community and who do not invoke their rights and responsibilities as citizens. It was recommended that policies on young people's political participation should be directed towards this group.

**T**he recent policy developments in the area of political participation are associated with the European Commission's creation of the Common Objectives (2003) on young people's participation.

### These objectives cover three areas

- 1 participation in the civic life of their community,
- 2 participation in the system of representative democracy
- 3 learning to participate.

Each member state of the European Union will work towards implementing these objectives and will review their progress in 2005. The process of implementing objectives on participation gives the momentum for the creation of new policies and an opportunity to incorporate research inputs into this process. As we are considering not only European Union member states but also the wider 45 states of the Council of Europe, where relevant, examples are used from the Council of Europe policy text of the revised European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life (2003). This is a valid and useful approach as this text is both coherent with the Commission's objectives and expands further the details of how these objectives can be applied. In this article I will focus on Objective 3 Learning to participate, as this is of greatest interest to trainers. However, the publication from the seminar explores all three objectives.



## Objective

### Greater support for various forms of learning to participate

The Commission's Objective of supporting learning to participate focuses on extending training on this topic in the formal education system, encouraging participation activities in the non-formal education field and developing the interaction between these different forms of education on participation. It states the need for recognition of those people who work to promote active citizenship and training in this field, and the need to recognise young people who do participate, whilst at the same time combating the prejudice and other barriers that prevent some young people from participating. It also emphasises the development of experiences of participation in all areas of life, including in the family, in school, in youth organisations, at university, at other places of education, at work, and in sporting and leisure time contexts.

**The following recommendations for how to implement it have been suggested:**

- Democratic methods and processes used in the structures of formal education
- Innovative methods used to teach political participation in the classroom
- Politics of the day discussed in schools  
More education needed on citizenship, rights and responsibilities
- Training of teachers and parents on how to implement democratic methods
- Greater use of youth workers in formal education environments
- Creating a dialogue between formal and non-formal educators
- Creating a dialogue between youth sector non-formal educators and youth researchers
- Provide youth sector non-formal educators with training on research and social analysis so that they can translate results into practice
- Promote youth workers' support of peer education projects

lack the ability to implement their knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens of their nation or Europe. Berrefjord's (from the seminar) research demonstrated that youth workers could be used to facilitate school councils and to demonstrate the pedagogical element behind democratic methods in formal and non-formal environments. The Council of Europe Charter is also useful to look at for suggestions on how to implement the objectives in formal education: It states the need "in the school environment, (*for*) support and training in youth participation, human rights education and non-formal learning in schools. They (local and regional authorities) should also provide training and support for the participation of young people in associative life and in their local community by promoting:

- I. vocational training for teachers and youth workers in the practice of youth participation;**
- II. all forms of participation of pupils in schools;**
- III. civic education programmes in schools;**
- IV. peer-group education, by providing the necessary space and means and by supporting the exchange of good practice.**

#### ► Non-formal education

The role of youth workers and trainers in helping young people learn active citizenship has been demonstrated through research such as Berrefjord's to be vital. Youth workers and trainers can provide value-based education that discusses the issues of the day and simultaneously experience them.

Berrefjord's research demonstrated that **youth work teaches young people to understand and, above all, practice active citizenship and inclusion**. Youth researchers have been shown to play a role in non-formal education, acting as witnesses to demonstrate the benefits from this form of youth educational practice.

One of the methods to come from youth work and educational practice is peer education. As discussed in Pfaff's research, peers form a network of trust from which young people learn, and the evidence from her research showed that young people were more likely to listen to information given to them by their peers. Youth workers and trainers have developed the skills to help young people to teach other people of a similar age about active citizenship and political competencies. **Without the support of youth workers, peer education can negatively affect young people's political engagement**, which was also noted in Pfaff's paper on the socialisation of far-right-wing youth groups.

The discussions introduced by Gavan Titley (2004) in this research seminar highlighted the fact that one of the competencies that trainers and youth workers are less proficient in is being able to work from research findings. Youth trainers/youth workers lacked the competence to create their own social analysis in order to create programmes based on the needs of young people rather than the convictions of the person creating the programme. The emphasis here was on discussion of the complexity of youth and acquiring the competencies to work with these complexities, a discussion mirrored in the work of Hendrick Otten (2002). Within this discussion and in his subsequent publication, Gavan Titley (2004 p.3) expressed the need for training of trainers and youth workers as "knowledge brokers" on how

to understand and translate research results into practice. **One method would be to train researchers, youth workers and trainers together.** Improving trainers' and youth workers' competence in this field could assist in providing better-quality youth work. Training researchers with youth workers could also help to promote a greater understanding of youth as it would provide researchers with first-hand experience and analyses performed by people who have more direct experience with young people.

Interaction between non-formal and formal education Berrefjord's research in Norway has clearly demonstrated the benefits for young people's active engagement in politics when youth workers and schools/ school teachers work together. In this example a dialogue between the school and the youth club helped increase social integration and active citizenship across economic and ethnic differences.

The difficulty lay in working through the stereotype images that the youth worker and teachers had of each other. This example of successful cooperation led to a change in the methods used to increase democracy and participation both in the formal and non-formal sector. The project resulted in the young people in the area becoming more actively engaged, greater inclusion of minorities and all the young people being generally more interested in their community.

► **The family**

The role of the family has been found to have the greatest influence on teaching young people active engagement (Pfaff and Horowitz research from the seminar). The family home was seen as the centre of development of independent thinking, and a place where young people learned about democracy through it being discussed and practised in the home. Horowitz's research has shown that when parents value young people's development of their own political concepts their political interest is the highest and it is most likely that these young people will vote and engage as citizens. This can **be compared with the results of Pfaff's research in East Germany, where 60% of participants experienced no learning of democracy and politics at home. Consideration of what family policies could be developed to bring together educational practice, citizenship and the home would be important in the process of improving learning to participate. Months after the project, 85 % of the participating youngsters were in a job or vocational training.**

Evaluation work is another example where researchers benefit the youth work and youth training fields. The European Commission YOUTH Programme as a whole, the SALTO training courses and the Partnership training courses on European citizenship and the Advanced Training of Trainers in Europe have undergone evaluation research in different forms. In most of the evaluations all the interests groups will have had a chance to input their views into the process. The results have given youth workers and trainers and policy makers the chance to have feedback on youth work and youth training in Europe. The feedback can then be used to implement changes and increase the quality of practice and also, importantly, to reaffirm where and when practice has been successful and of high quality. Thus when evaluation can show

successful impact, for example, highlighting the benefits of the youth work for young people and show that the quality is high this evidence can be used in arguments to maintain or increase the number of activities for young people and youth trainers. Youth researchers then feel that they are actively contributing to the benefit of the youth sector.

► **Conclusion**

**The results of the research seminar demonstrate the need to reflect critically on the notion of political apathy of youth. Do young people need to change to participate more, or do our definitions of political participation need to change to reflect the new forms of engagement of youth? The answer probably lies somewhere between the two. A reasonable social analysis/needs analysis of the young people who are being worked with can help define how they already participate.**

**The results also show that when trying to develop policy approaches on the education of those young people who are apathetic, a holistic approach needs to be taken across the different areas of learning, including the home, with friends, at school, in a sports club or at a youth club.**

**Educators who are willing to take up the challenge to work across the different education sectors are those who will offer young people the greatest opportunity to learn how to implement active citizenship and to feel a greater part of their community.**

**References and contacts :**



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