



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

June 2018



PARTISPACE Policy brief no. 5

## YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN DEMOCRACY BY DOING

**Horizon 2020 Project “Spaces and Styles of Participation. Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities”**

PARTISPACE has analysed **what participation means for young people** in different social positions and life conditions. Research findings suggest that an understanding of participation is needed that is broader and recognises the diverse ways young people claim being a part of society. This has implications for understanding how young people learn to participate.

This policy brief is concerned with the **learning processes related with young people’s participation and how such learning can be supported**. First, it refers to **practitioners** working with young people in formal and non-formal education. Second, it gives recommendations to **youth policies** at local, national and European level who are concerned with empowering young people to get involved in political social and civic participation. Third, it addresses **education policies** with regard to necessary changes in formal and non-formal education.

### KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. **Experience of being recognized as an active person is the most powerful experience that fuels participation**

Learning about participation through the experience of speaking out, being active, exercising rights and realising their own ability to make a difference is more important for young people than receiving citizenship education and information on participation opportunities.

A turning point in the life story of **Amanda, 16**, from **Gothenburg** was finding a word for her experiences of discrimination due to her black skin since kindergarten: bullying. She tells her mother who informs the school and the bullying stops. This experience made her realize the possibilities to fight against injustice and to use public spaces and institutions in this respect. She gets involved in student councils, she writes and lectures on racism and at age 16 she becomes president of the city's Formal Youth Representation.

→ **Recognition** needs to become a fundamental principle and binding right in all institutions addressing young people.

## 2. Many young people lack positive experiences of recognition in formal institutions

Biographical analysis in PARTISPACE has revealed that distrust of many young people towards formal participation is rooted in negative or ambivalent experiences with school or other formal institutions like youth services, resulting in a preference for informal contexts.

**Mario, 24**, from **Plovdiv**, felt he didn't fit in to secondary school due to low achievement and being an outsider. At age 13, he started looking 'outside' for other possibilities for belonging and activity. He engaged in illegal graffiti and formed his first band. Later, together with a friend, he created an alternative location where they organised concerts and debates. According to them authorities neither value nor support youth culture. At the same time, Mario has managed to finish school and to start studying Law.

→ Enhancing young people's **trust** in institutions requires providing them with opportunities to exercise power and experience trust. This should be positively reinforced to compensate for earlier negative experiences.

## 3. Democratisation of school is the most powerful way for young people to learn participation

Young people spend most of their time in education and training. There they are taught citizenship education, but at the same time learn that their influence in school itself is limited:

**Student Committee, Zurich**, is a student representation of a private grammar school. The mandate is limited to social activities, in the school board they do not have a vote. They see themselves trying to *"change things that never get changed ... We can't change the teachers either ... fire them and hire new ones ... just trivial things like copy cards or an event. Sometimes it's like a fight to say what I want and that they take me seriously ... At the end of the day, they [the teachers] are a superpower."*

→ Opportunities of **participation in school, training and university need to be increased** beginning in early years settings and involving exercising choice of contents and activities, debate and critical questioning, as well as involvement in all levels of school management.

## 4. Dialogic reflection is a more effective way of learning about participation than teaching

'Pedagogisation' means that youth participation is often made conditional upon prior training in order to ensure the 'right' way of participation whilst also often being restricted in exercising their own power. Thus the fact that participation is also about power tends to be made invisible.

→ The best way of supporting young people to learn about participation is to **provide them multiple opportunities for being active** in public spaces and institutions and **enabling dialogue to reflect** their experiences.

**Formal Youth Representation Manchester** is formed to represent young people in the city and to provide them training of citizenship skills. Key activities are running educational campaigns that are pre-defined from outside. They are facilitated by a youth worker helping them getting it 'right'. In PARTISPACE some young people got involved in an Action Research Project aimed at raising awareness on homelessness. In the project they learned that with a minimum of dialogic reflection they were able to develop their own ideas and goals. They also learned that awareness is not enough to achieve social change but power is also needed.

## 5. Youth work can be a place of participatory learning if it is not instrumentalised

Youth work has the potential to provide young people opportunities of appropriating space, exploring interests, experimenting, involvement in decision-making and experiences of recognition.

**Girls group, Frankfurt:** A group of young girls have discovered and conquered a youth centre as a stage for experimenting with gender roles and youth cultural practice. They constantly provoke conflicts with staff who feel offended and ascribe the girls a deficit of will and competence to participate: *"I don't know what they want. They always criticize everything and yet they come. But they are hard to motivate."* According to the girls, *"we do what we want, we're our own youth workers. They [youth workers] only pretend to take us seriously."*

- **Youth work** needs to be **properly resourced** and be It should be preserved as an **open space** for young people's practices of appropriation, exploration and experimentation.
- Youth work should **not be instrumentalised for human capital building** or by complementing school in preparing young people solely as future economic participants.
- Learning to participate does not need extra programmes, **each conflict is a situation in which claims for participation are involved** and can be negotiated.
- Practitioners and policy makers are needed who are **not afraid of conflicts but reflect** their role.

## 6. Adults also have to learn! Participation as social learning

Participation is relational, involves belonging, recognition and developing social capital in everyday contexts. Participation is not a prescribed process but emerges in all activities as a reflexive and dynamic learning process through communicative action in which all actors are involved.

**Islamic Youth Association, Bologna,** are a group of young Italian Muslims concerned with understanding about how they can participate as young Muslims in Italy. In seeking to increased membership, they engaged in critical reflection on barriers for potential participants. Images and representations in both the Muslim and non-Muslim population emerged as the biggest challenge. For example, they found that for young women interested to join the question whether they were expected to wear a veil or not was one of the major concerns.

- Being open for processes of social learning requires **professionals to be more reflexive**. The PARTISPACE **training module** provides insight and practical exercise aimed at supporting reflexivity in policy and practice (→ [www.partispace.eu/downloads/trainingmodule](http://www.partispace.eu/downloads/trainingmodule)).

## 7. Mainstreaming youth participation in and through EU programmes for formal and non-formal education and training

The EU may serve as a trendsetter for including participatory approaches in youth policy as well as in education and training by including experiences of personal recognition into the central goals and making participatory mechanisms conditional for funding from programmes like **ERASMUS+** and **Youth Guarantee**.

## ABOUT THE PARTISPACE PROJECT

PARTISPACE has responded to a concern that young people do not participate enough in public affairs. The central research question of PARTISPACE was **how** and **where** young people do participate across formal, non-formal and informal settings. What **styles** of participation do they prefer, develop and apply and in what **spaces** does participation take place?

The study has undertaken a comparative analysis of young people's practices in the public and the ways in which they are recognised or not by other societal actors. The study is conducted in **eight cities across Europe** – Bologna (IT), Frankfurt (DE), Gothenburg (SE), Eskisehir (TK), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (BG), Rennes (FR) and Zurich (CH).

**Theoretically** PARTISPACE starts from understanding youth participation as:

- **Discursive** practice that is produced by societal discourses addressing young people as 'citizens in the making' and distinguishing participatory and non-participatory activities
- Being constituted out of (unequal) **relationships between individuals, institutions and society**, rather than a problem of individual attitudes or knowledge deficits.
- Manifest through **youth cultural styles** of practice in the public domain by which young people present themselves as different from children, adults and other young people
- Situated practice embedded in structured **social spaces** while at the same time expressing the appropriation of social space
- **Participation biographies** expressing young people's individual processes of coping with particular life situations and constructions of self-identity
- Enabled and inhibited by **public institutions and policies** at local, national, transnational level.

PARTISPACE has adopted a **mixed-method and multilevel approach**:

- National research literature reviews, youth policy and discourse analyses
- Analysis of the youth participation discourse at European level
- Analysis of European Social Survey data on young people's participation
  - Local case studies in one major city per country including mapping youth participation, expert interviews, group discussions & city walks with young people
  - in-depth case studies of formal, non-formal, and informal practices of youth participation consisting of ethnographic observation, group discussions and biographical interviews
- Participatory action research projects led by young people on their own issues.

In summary, PARTISPACE findings suggest that youth participation is **relational** (not individualised), based on experiences of **recognition**, **political** (but not politics) and often **conflictual**. Participation is rooted in everyday life practices and struggles structured by social inequalities, inclusion and exclusion. It evolves in public spaces and thus includes claims to be a part of, and attempts to take part in, society.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information, reports and working papers can be accessed at: [www.partispace.eu/downloads](http://www.partispace.eu/downloads)

Further PARTISPACE Policy Briefs:

- Policy Brief no. 1 project summary for policy and practice
- Policy Brief no. 2 recognize diversity of styles
- Policy Brief no. 3 spaces of participation
- Policy Brief no. 4 biographies of participation
- Policy Brief no. 6 address conflicts as participation

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** **Spaces and Styles of Participation.** Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people's participation in European cities (**PARTISPACE**)

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