

Promoting Young People's Participation

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“People must be empowered to be key actors in their own development. This applies equally to children, whose participation and self-expression - based on their evolving capacities and with respect for parental guidance - should be valued by adults” (Annan, 2001, p.99).

Annan echoes Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that “every child has the right to have a say in all matters affecting them and to have their views taken seriously”. Children and young people are - or ought to be - key when making decisions that affect them. Participation is not only a legal and moral right, but could improve the lives of those involved in offending by helping them create meaning to their lives and develop new skills. Prout, Simmons and Birchall (2006) state that participation can increase the confidence, sense of achievement and enjoyment of individuals. Additionally, studies identified by Checkoway et al. (2005; 1150) show that efforts to have young people participate “can affect the social development of young people by strengthening their knowledge, practical skills, social values and civic competencies”.

Despite growing attention to the participation agenda, there is still limited research on who is - and more importantly, who is not - likely to have the above right realised (Bessant, 2004). It may seem challenging to ensure that young people involved in offending behaviour can participate when the process may include making decisions about that individual young person's risk, whether that be to themselves or others. The familiar, fraught balance between taking account of public protection and the rights of the individual clearly plays a significant role in such deliberations. The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime highlights that young people involved in persistent and serious offending are more likely to have been victimised and subjected to social adversity (McAra & McVie, 2010). Furthermore, individuals involved in violent offending may be more likely to engage in self-harming and para-suicidal behaviour, regular drug and alcohol use, and may also experience distorted patterns of eating and problematic family backgrounds (McAra & McVie, 2010; Singleton, Meltzer, & Gatward, 1998). This suggests that young people who are involved in offending may have a diminished sense of worth due to feeling that they are neither cared for nor valued within their community, consequently resulting in their choice not to participate if, indeed, the option to participate was available.

Despite research highlighting that participation for young people involved in offending behaviour is a complex and challenging area of work, the UNCRC clearly states that all young people - regardless of their circumstances or behaviour - should have the right to have their say in matters that affect their lives. Much of the literature discusses ways to enhance youth participation when supporting children to participate in community projects or activities (Checkoway et al., 2005; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) although there is a lack of research in relation to how young people can participate in the services that they use. It is therefore

the responsibility of practitioners and organisations to adapt their practices to meet the needs of young people involved in offending behaviour and support their participation in their own plans and matters affecting them.

A model of participation adopted by the Irish National Children's Strategy, known as the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007), offers one possible approach to encouraging participation. It aims to conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC by considering four factors:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be enabled to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon as appropriate

These factors are interrelated and have significant overlap. The Lundy Model is offered in order to inform understanding, develop policy and support existing practices of children's participation.

As acknowledged previously, young people involved in offending behaviour often feel isolated and marginalised from society (Cook, 2015; Warren, 2007) and might not be motivated to participate in decision making fora. It is therefore worth considering how their motivation and ability to do so by reference to the Mutual Incentives Theory (MIT) (Prout, Simmons, & Birchall, 2006) which attempts to explain the dynamics that promote participation. This model suggests that participation can be motivated by three variables:

- Shared goals: People express mutual needs that translate into common goals
- Shared values: People feel a duty to participate as an expression of common values
- Sense of Community: people identify with and care about other people who either live in the same area or who are like them in some respect
(Prout et al., 2006, p 79).

By addressing these variables, MIT argues that young people can be supported to meaningfully participate in the decision making process, thus realising the aspirations encapsulated by Article 12 of the UNCRC.

As we approach the **Year of Young People** in 2018, CYCJ are undertaking work in this area and would be eager to hear from organisations who have experience of promoting and encouraging participation in their particular field, especially with young people who have been involved in the youth justice system. If you wish to share your story please contact ross.a.gibson@strath.ac.uk.

References

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