

Create space for collaboration: can we help each other participate in participation?

Paul Sullivan

Abstract

This article is, in part, a celebration of Scotland's Year of Young People (YoYP) 2018. Year of Young People allows us a chance to promote and celebrate the fantastic talent of young people across Scotland. The 'Participation' theme of Year of Young People is a perfect example of this. As part of Year of Young People, CELCIS, alongside a wide range of partners, young people and communities involved in participation, are creating an exciting new space — the 'Participating in Participation Network' — where all of this great work can be amplified; and where people can be supported to learn from each other and share their own approach around participation. Recognising that currently in Scotland, there are thousands, probably millions, of young people and communities involved in participation work at any given time: People who are using their voice to change their world for the better; Who are contributing to their communities, or others, and using their passions, skills and experience to make a difference. This is an exciting time of change in Scotland, with a great deal of innovative practice, and we hope to share this excellent work via the participation network. This article offers an invite for interested parties to join the Participation Network and get involved in creating further change for children and young people

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Scotland's Year of Young People (YoYP) 2018 is a year where we can promote and celebrate the fantastic talent of young people across Scotland. Already there has been a huge amount of activity across the six themes of the Year, which were themselves chosen by young people: Participation; Enterprise and Regeneration; Equality and Discrimination; Health and Wellbeing; Education; and Culture.

As well as celebrating work that's already taking place, YoYP also provides us with exciting opportunities to create change, challenge the status quo and help to create an even better Scotland in 2018 and beyond.

The 'Participation' theme of Year of Young People is a perfect example of this. In Scotland, there are thousands, probably millions, of young people and communities involved in participation work at any given time.

These are people who are using their voice to change their world for the better; People who are contributing to their communities or others and using their passions, skills and experience to make a difference.

This amazing activity should be celebrated; however, often, we see it taking place in a vacuum. Organisations and groups can lack the resources, or are simply too busy, to share their incredible work. Sometimes this means that opportunities for long-lasting change are limited and that all their hard work isn't able to leave a lasting legacy. Participation, although usually done in a group environment, can also even feel a bit 'lonely' as groups don't always have the opportunity to share ideas of learning.

As part of Year of Young People, CELCIS, alongside a wide range of partners, young people and communities involved in participation, are creating an exciting new space — the 'Participating in Participation Network' — where all of this great work can be amplified; and where people can be supported to learn from each other and share their own approach around participation. Working as a Community of Practice, the space will also be used to collaborate on key themes (e.g. mental health, ACEs) that often groups are trying to tackle individually, thereby helping to develop a collective vision of how to tackle these issues.

The Network is a completely open and inclusive space. Whether your ambition is to plan better care for young people; uphold the human rights of a particular community; or turn the world upside down entirely – it doesn't matter. As long as your aim is to improve your own participation practice and share your learning with others, you're welcome at the Network.

There are myriad different models and approaches to participation, ranging from complex academic studies, to basic youth work models. These models all have merits and value; however, the name of the model is less important than the values that sit behind it. At heart, the values of participation are simple.

Whether on an individual basis, or in group work, participation should aim to actively listen and continually act upon the voices of those who are taking part.

We hope through the Network to define some common principles and practice for participation, whilst recognising that no 'one size fits all' model exists.

Demystifying participation into something everyone can understand.

Over the course of three Network events in 2018, the first hosted by CELCIS and other partners, attendees will get the chance to:

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1. Share good practice and learn from different participation approaches;
2. Challenge poor practice and tokenism;
3. Develop new skills in areas such as participation, co-production, facilitation, presentation skills and conflict resolution;
4. Amplify and champion the participation work of each individual organisation and participation group;
5. Tackle 'hot topics' (e.g. ACEs, mental health) as a collective;
6. Develop new friends and opportunities for networking;
7. Inform a series of principles, values and guidelines for participation practice.

Through these events, as a partnership, we aim to improve participation practice across the sector. The Independent Care Review, fuelled by the 1,000 Voices Campaign, has set a standard for others to follow. Others, too many to mention, are also doing amazing work that needs to be celebrated and shared.

Everyone, however, has the capacity to improve and develop new skills. This is where we hope the Network can help. As a collective, we can help support, challenge and inspire each other to improve our practice. Participation which is tokenistic or exploitative can be more damaging than having no participation whatsoever; however, we do need to inspire people to try it. We need to inspire people to park preconceived ideas of what works, to forget about professional pride and to try something new.

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The Network is having its first meeting in June 2018, but is already growing in size. An idea born out of informal conversations with like-minded young people and colleagues from other organisations, has since mushroomed into something delightfully bigger. Now, we have over 25 groups and organisations signed up across a diverse range of interests. There are some, such as Champions Boards, Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, Who Cares? Scotland and the Life Changes Trust, who are focussed on care, but there are many others who are interested in justice, health, disability, LGBT and many other issues. Clearly there is a gap here.

In trying to organise these events, we've taken huge heart from the appetite that people have shown to sharing their own practice and learning from that of others. People know that this isn't being created as a CELCIS space, or any one organisation's space — it's everyone's space.

I'm excited about the potential for collaboration and optimistic about the capacity for change. The Network gives us an opportunity to go beyond the limitations of our organisational silos and focuses our efforts on doing our very best to listen to those we aim to support. This, for me, would be a great outcome of Year of Young People and one which would create a legacy well beyond 2018.

At CELCIS, we ourselves are on a journey to ensure we are truly listening to the voices of children, young people and families, with part of my role to try and support this internally. Another exciting part of my role is to support other organisations who are trying to improve their participation approaches. The

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Network is one small part of this, so if you would like to join, or would like any support at all with your participation practice, please contact us to get involved.

About the author

Paul Sullivan is Sector Engagement Lead at CELCIS, where he supports the use of child-centred co-production, participation and engagement work across the sector and internally. Paul has a background in participation and co-production across a number of roles, including at the Life Changes Trust, the Prince's Trust, the Sound Lab, Glasgow Homelessness Network and the Royal Bank of Scotland.