

## Editorial

### **Young people's involvement in policymaking: perceiving young people as part of the solution and not part of the problem**

This special issue is focused on young people's involvement in shaping health and social care policy and practice leading to improvements in health and wellbeing impact/outcomes for young people, especially in response to mitigating the effects of COVID-19. The transition from childhood to adulthood is an important, fascinating period of life. Young people between the ages of 10 and 25 need support and special services, especially those who may be marginalised. They have different patterns of need from younger children and older adults. This special issue showcases research that has helped to improve health outcomes for young people, including developing policy initiatives that focus more specifically on 10 to 25 year olds, implementing age-appropriate health promotion and early interventions, commissioning services that meet the unique needs of young people, particularly during transition, and taking specific actions to reduce health inequalities by addressing the social determinants of health in this age group. Good health for young people is central to their wellbeing, and it forms the bedrock for good health in later life. We wanted to learn about projects and approaches in which young people have helped to ensure health and social care policy is informed, influenced and shaped by the views and lived experiences of young people.

The involvement of the general public in public spending is pretty much well established, and there are best practice examples in "Public Dialogue" with demographically mixed groups of the public, involving them deeply in the creation of complex science, technical and ethical policy, but there is a gap in the involvement and efforts to really effectively involve younger people.

One of the examples given to widen children and young people's (CYP) involvement in policymaking is the Local Government funded Young Researcher Network (YRN) (Sharpe, 2012). The YRN broke new ground with a context-bound CYP-led ecosystem approach to guide the development and implementation of CYP-led research. The main audience for young researchers were commissioners, senior managers, policy officers and legislators. Therefore, they needed an approach to help frame their thinking and measure their progression whilst acknowledging the different views of stakeholders. The model considers the views of young people, parents, support workers and decision makers, and it values differences in opinion. The basic principles of the ecosystem approach are not straightforward. The ecosystem approach is eccentric in character but systematic in its overall approach. The approach values and encourages dynamism, utilitarianism and realism in how CYP-led methodologies are designed and implemented. The approach addresses both the needs and ambitions of CYP alongside working together with the organisation(s) within which they are found and seeking to influence. Thus, the approach calls attention to the contextual interdependency and delicate balance in addressing organisational priorities, and the goal to inform and shape youth policy, as well as to meeting the changing needs and concerns of young people. At a wider public level, the need for co-created understandings of personal, local and global phenomena, and potential routes towards recovery or sustainable wellbeing, is never more pressing than in this time of widespread COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, combined in the UK with the changing policy landscapes of Brexit. Together, these global and local phenomena have narrowed the opportunities open to young people to determine the direction of public policy.

## **Young people as democratic actors**

There is much evidence suggesting a decline in young people's participation in traditional forms of political engagement such as voting and joining political parties and in their strength of feeling of being represented by politicians in power (Bruter and Harrison, 2009). However, while there has been a decrease in the engagement of youth in traditional democratic practices, further analysis of youth participation unveils a complex landscape of different types of informal and formal participation and civic engagement.

While there are commonly held assumptions that many young people have rejected the party-political system, Stolle and Hooghe (2005) suggest that the traditional political party system now operates through a select political elite and there is less emphasis on recruiting young people to be part of this system. Forbrig (2005: 141) also contends that the decline in traditional political participation is more complex than a simple rejection of traditional participatory practices, but that it could also illustrate the growing centrality of new forms of participation that are "less institutionalised and more flexible", such as anti-globalisation protests and boycotting activities. Additionally, Griffin (2005) argues that qualitative research presents a more nuanced picture of youth participation as researchers have challenged some of the assumptions underpinning concepts used in traditional quantitative research on political participation. Such qualitative research has found that "many young people are in fact concerned about matters that are fundamentally political in nature, but that such issues frequently fall outside of the boundaries of how politics is conventionally defined" (Griffin, 2005: 146). Indeed, Griffin suggests that the dialogical nature of qualitative research allows young people to identify the political issues in which they are involved, such as action against domestic violence, anti-racism and environmental protection issues.

While there are many different spaces in which youth involvement in policymaking can occur, it is useful to consider two specific spaces in which youth participation occurs: provided participatory spaces and demanded spaces (Shaw et al., 2009). Utilising Mae Shaw's work on participation within a community development context, and applying these concepts to the area of youth participation, provided participatory spaces can be understood as formal participatory spaces such as youth parliaments, while demanded spaces are participatory spaces in which people act in their own right. The special issue is concerned with the former.

### **Providing policymaking spaces**

At the same time as the concern about youth apathy in political participation, there has been the emergence of separate child and youth participation structures in EU member states, which could be considered as provided participatory spaces. The most important development in international recognition of children's rights is the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is the most highly ratified instrument in international law. The Convention sets forth a comprehensive list of substantive rights for children along with a series of implementation measures that ratifying countries are legally bound to adopt. Article 12 of the UNCRC implies a right to the necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options, so that children can make informed and free decisions. In addition, Article 15 states that children have the right to create and join

associations and to assemble peacefully. Both imply opportunities to express political opinions, engage in political processes and participate in decision-making. Article 3(3) of the Lisbon Treaty explicitly requires the EU to promote the protection of the rights of the child, rights which are further enshrined in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Provided child and youth participation structures emerging across Europe in response to Article 12 are frequently based on adult democratic institutions, such as local councils or corporations. This can have the effect of inhibiting the involvement of young people who do not or will not conform to adults' expectations of behaviour or interactions. Tisdall and Bell (2006) argue that civil servants are firmly in control of who participates, how they participate and what they participate in, and it is they who also ultimately decide which voices will be prioritised in formulating policy. Internationally, youth parliaments, similar to other spaces where youth participation is officially supported, tend to be adult initiated and due to the lack of formal political power or substantial budgets, most youth parliaments largely work as lobbying groups (e.g. by providing manifestos, alongside other voluntary organisations, to try and influence subsequent decision-making) (Tisdall, 2013). Furthermore, because youth parliaments tend to operate outside of the main political party model of adult parliaments, the result can be an expectation of children and young people's participation activities as less than political (Tisdall, 2013).

Some critics suggest that unless participation is effective in bringing about positive change for those involved and those they represent, it can actually have a negative impact, both personally, in creating feelings of powerlessness and failure, and socially, in undermining the credibility of participation structures and by damaging the status of young people in their communities (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Head (2011) cautions, that the development of youth participation in isolation from wider citizen engagement and participation can disconnect it from mainstream public policy. However, benefits of such provided participatory spaces include greater access to policymakers for children and young people involved. In a UNICEF review of child and youth participation, it was found that where young people had participated in policymaking, there was a significant increase in awareness of children's rights and an increase in the commitment to uphold children's rights from policymakers and government leaders (UNICEF, 2009: 13). Indirect benefits of youth participation on wider society include enhanced democracy and the provision of training and experience "for active citizens and leaders of the future" (Head, 2011: 544), so that children may be gradually able to construct more "authentic participatory democracies" (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). Kirby and Bryson (2002) identify a number of benefits of the increased dialogue and relations between adults and young people related to participatory activities, such as adults increasingly perceiving young people as "part of the solution and not part of the problem", and an increased recognition of the need for adults to change themselves and their practices (Kirby and Bryson, 2002: 21).

Young people occupy a special place in society and serve as a specific challenge for policymakers and commissioners alike. As young people enter their second decade of life (i.e. adolescence), they experience remarkable changes in their psycho-social, biological and neurological development, including an increase in the influence of social and peer contexts (Blakemore and Mills, 2014). During this time, young people are still developing and are neither childlike nor adult-like; they are in transition – anatomically, socially and neurochemically (Blakemore and Mills, 2014; Spear, 2000). Yet, when working with services, young people have to navigate two professional worlds: one designed to safeguard children

(0–10 years old) and one that is designed to serve independent adults (Krohn et al., 2010). They are experiencing a particularly vulnerable time in the life course when it comes to mental health and wellbeing, and making smooth transitions into education, training and work (see HM Government, 2011). For instance, around 75% of mental health problems in adult life (not including dementia) start by the age of 18 (Jones, 2013; Department of Health and NHS England, 2015). Listening to and supporting young people at an early stage in the community would improve quality of life and reduce overall severity and impact of mental health conditions, and thereby improve future earnings/productivity, reduce the burden on the health and social care system, the education system and the criminal justice system, which produces monetised benefits.

## Articles

In the article entitled *Giving youth a seat at the table: considerations from existing frameworks of youth participation in public policy decision making*, the author identifies, from a theoretical perspective, the barriers and opportunities of youth participation in making policy. The article frames youth participation in the public policy process using the policy cycle theory in order to identify potential barriers and opportunities, and it argues that the major barrier to youth participation is the existing, often predefined, power relations between the youth and adult worlds. The conclusion of this inquiry is to collectively (i.e. involving policymakers, practitioners, researchers and adult citizens) reconsider the windows of opportunities as well as the sphere of influence allotted to the youth. The author highlights a “golden window of opportunity” to provide well-informed and effective policymaking interventions with, by and for young people (Steinberg, 2014). Therefore, when adopting any process of policymaking with young people, it is important that the role of adolescence as a stage of development is included. To overlook the distinct characteristics associated with this period of transition would arguably be to deny the active role biology plays in their lives.

In the article entitled *The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on young people’s health and wellbeing: how are family relationships and emotional support being affected?*, the authors argue that COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have generally had a negative impact on the emotional wellbeing of the participants in the study. The findings indicate that the lockdown restrictions have had mixed effects on the emotional support that young people are able to receive from, and give to, their families. The negative effects may have been exacerbated by the closure or reduction of key services, such as mental health services. While communications technology has helped some young people maintain contact with their families, it is no substitute for in-person contact. Evidence also suggests that young people living in disadvantaged communities and/or who have been through a lot of adversity are more likely to experience low degrees of human, cultural and social capital than their middle-class peers because of their set of circumstances during COVID-19. As a way of seeing this dynamic, the paper’s conceptual framework links human agency, resilience and capital as capacities, or processes, to explain how participants make choices, bounce back from wrong choices, and use their soft skills and social networks as a resource to support them through this health emergency.

As mentioned, young people’s mental healthcare provision is closed or limited, and has long been considered the “Cinderella service” within the healthcare system in the UK. One of its major weaknesses, identified by user groups, is in the provision of access to flexible, non-stigmatising, community-based services appropriate to their age (RCP, 2017). The authors contribute ideas towards addressing the aspirations of the Department of Health report

*Future in Mind* (Department of Health and NHS England, 2015: 16–17), specifically points 3 and 6. They are:

- A step change in how care is delivered moving away from a system defined in terms of the services organisations provide (the ‘tiered’ model) towards one built around the needs of children, young people and their families.
- Improved care for children and young people in crisis so they are treated in the right place at the right time and as close to home as possible.

This article considers how to make it easier for young people, parents and carers to get help and support when they need it, to improve the help that is offered and to help local areas work with young people to develop plans for making mental health services better in their community. The study is also framed within the Green Paper (Department of Health, 2017) entitled *Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision*. The study identifies potential policy implications and highlights the need for further research into the effects of emotional support on young people’s health and wellbeing.

In the article entitled *Trusting children to enhance youth justice policy: the importance and value of children’s voices*, the authors explore the integration of children’s voices within youth justice policy and practice development. They highlight that children’s voices have been noticeably absent from youth justice policy development in England. Children continue to be the recipients of adult-led, deficit-facing practices underpinned by a long-standing preoccupation with identifying and managing “risk”. These practices have undermined children’s knowledge and potential by distrusting their perspectives. In contrast, the internationally relevant cogent arguments set out in this paper allude to the importance and benefits of engaging with children and listening to their voices in the planning and delivery of “Child First” youth justice. The significant challenge this article has addressed is how to prevent the widening of the intergenerational gap in the UK, from the viewpoint of the criminal justice system. The risk is that the criminal justice system can serve to further exacerbate the gulf experienced by young voters dissatisfied, disappointed, mistrusting or alienated by the British democratic process.

In the article ‘*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*’ (a person is a person because of other people): reflections on student’s experiences of social isolation and the impact of a peer to peer mental health support group during covid-19 lockdown in South Africa, the author presents a reflection, rooted in theory and practice, on the effect and challenges of social isolation on undergraduate students in South Africa during COVID-19 lockdown, strategies that were implemented to help them cope and the potential of peer to peer support groups in mental health management and promotion. The paper presents evidence to justify the significance of peer social network/support as a coping mechanism during COVID-19 lockdown; peer social support fostered a sense of community in which young people could share points of view and provide emotional, informational and instrumental support to peers. The very specific challenges experienced by youth in South African relate to the broader societal issues in the global North of increased exposure to ICT, bullying, living in poverty and underemployment, as well as poor body image, radicalisation, anxiety, self-harming and depression. The paper also highlights higher levels of need resulting from chronic and severe mental disorders (e.g. schizophrenia, bipolar, eating disorder) and there are implications of this in terms of ongoing and longer-term support for young people and families to effectively navigate and negotiate the way out of COVID-19 lockdown. Consequently, investment in securing peer support platforms is needed in the global North

and South. That investment needs to be realised through ongoing and easily accessible support, and to specialist advice/guidance in a timely way to be able to respond to/deal with complex emotional and behavioural issues. Early help through peer support stops young people falling into crisis and avoids expensive and longer-term treatment in adulthood.

This special issue provides instructive accounts of where, how and why it is important to involve young people in policymaking away from high-profile young activists such as Greta Thunberg, who is leading the environmentalist fight, and Malala Yousafzai, who is leading on the fight for girls' education. This special issue shines a spotlight on the role and responsibilities of the state to provide spaces where young people can become involved in policymaking, and where the state can direct limited resources to take action to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19. All of the authors have advocated a bottom-up multi-stakeholder approach to policymaking that is not driven by market forces, but advances procedural norms, accountability, transparency, and the sharing of power in policymaking on matters that concern young people.

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