Promise or practice?
Student participation in low socioeconomic communities

The escalating policy emphasis on civic participation is designed to increase the participation of young people within their communities. Young people have the will to participate but, in low socioeconomic contexts, their participation remains both contested and compromised. This is particularly evident in relation to the role of schools in low socioeconomic areas. These schools are charged with fostering young people’s civic participation, yet the way in which they enact this mandate is subject to numerous tensions between policy and practice. This article examines these tensions and their implications for the participation of the most marginalised young people. It also outlines a research agenda with the potential to reveal more about this situation and inform future policy and practice.

For the past decade, Australia, like the United Kingdom before it, has provided the setting for a significant shift in the relationship between government and civil society. This is characterised by joined-up approaches that engage arms and levels of government in new ways, cross-sectoral partnerships that redistribute responsibility for social agendas among the public and private sectors, and place-based initiatives to build community capacity and civic participation (Black 2008; Considine 2005; Jupp 2000; Skidmore & Craig 2005).

A central proposition of this policy trajectory is that citizens can contribute to the public good through their participation in the local community. As Annette notes, “the idea of community is now seen as a key to rethinking the relationship between civil society and the state” (2009, p.152). While some argue that this represents an abrogation of responsibility by government, the invitation to participate has been taken up by a large number of individuals and groups willing to lead local decision-making (Benkler 2007). Movements such as social entrepreneurship have seen the mobilisation of large numbers of people for agreed and common purposes that frequently focus on the local community.

Young people are increasingly recognised as potential agents within their communities. As Bessant observed some years ago, “most Western governments now advocate enhanced youth participation as part of a discourse about modern citizenship” (2004, p.387). Australian public policy...
is no exception. Pivotal government reports on the condition of young Australians include an assessment of their civic and political participation (Muir et al. 2009) and a strengthening policy agenda has seen the emergence of new initiatives to improve it.

This agenda is reflected in key statements such as the guiding principles of the federal Office for Youth, which state that the Australian Government “respects and understands the value and contributions young people offer as citizens of today, not just the leaders of tomorrow” (Office for Youth 2010) and the National Strategy for Young Australians, which articulates the government’s vision that all young people “engage in community life and influence decisions that affect them” (Australian Government 2009, p.3). In the wake of the strategy’s launch in 2009, the Australian Government has consulted with young people about the ways in which it can support them to take up leadership roles within their communities. Other initiatives include the Prime Minister’s Australian Youth Forum Challenge – an annual campaign to begin in 2010 that will support youth-led projects that address local community needs (Australian Government n.d.).

These developments mirror a growing global recognition that “young people can contribute enormously to their own well-being, and that of the nation, if policymakers recognize young people as decision-making agents who define their own goals and act on them” (World Bank 2007, p.53). Community-level participation has been particularly associated with the development of civic engagement (Flanagan et al. 1998; Youniss & Yates 1999) as young people who participate in local community organisations and activities “come to see themselves as members of the public who share an interest in the common good” (Flanagan 2003, p.257).

Young people also show a clear preference for participation at the level of the local community (Anderton & Abbott 2009; Benton et al. 2008). A comprehensive international study has concluded that “this generation of young people appears ready to engage in practices of citizenship close to the everyday settings that are important to them” (Torney-Purta 2002, p.208). This is certainly true of young Australians: 80% believe that being a good citizen entails participation in activities that are of benefit to the local community (Mellor & Kennedy 2003). This belief is enacted through numerous local community initiatives led or substantially directed by young Australians (Taylor, Walsh & Holdsworth 2010).

This may be partly explained by young people’s desire for belonging at a time when the collective identity and unity of many communities has been lost (Anderton & Abbott 2009) and by the importance of the local community in fostering young people’s self-esteem and connectedness (Dallago et al. 2009). It may also be explained by young people’s tendency to avoid conventional political participation (Andolina et al. 2002; Haste & Hogan 2006) and to gravitate instead towards “small ‘p’ politics” (Arvanitakis & Marren 2009) where they can engage in activities that are informal, deliver immediate and visible outcomes and afford them maximum agency. This frequently translates into involvement in community organisations (Fyfe 2009) where young people have an opportunity to effect change in spheres that concern them (Harris et al. 2008) and in ways that are directly related to their lives (Harris, Wyn & Younes 2000).

Participation and social inclusion

In Australia as elsewhere, the policy push for participation has a particular focus on individuals and communities at risk of exclusion (Productivity Commission 2003; Vinson, Rawsthorne & Cooper 2007). It is closely linked to the social inclusion agenda that has emerged within Australian centre-left politics during the past decade and that has come to fruition under the Rudd government. This link is evident in the definition of social inclusion employed by the Australian Government, which proposes that “socially included individuals “have a voice” and “influence decisions that affect them” (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2010, p.15).

Young Australians are one of the groups most at risk of social exclusion (Robinson & Lamb 2009), yet this burgeoning agenda overlooks the participation of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite arguments that “a social inclusion agenda is simply not properly possible without creating
They are less likely to volunteer, less likely to have faith in civic and political institutions, less likely to participate in their community.

In a recent edition of *Youth Studies Australia*, Pavlidis and Baker underlined the need for marginalised young people to be “given a say in the decisions that affect them” (2010, p.33). The community is a crucial context for the participation of young people marginalised by socioeconomic conditions (Comber et al. 2006; Wilson 2000), yet their participation is particularly vulnerable to contradictory forces and influences.

On the one hand, there is evidence that some young people living in high poverty contexts are engaged in the local community and serve as “active social agents” in structures and processes to improve its capacity and cohesiveness (Ridge 2003). By contrast, others perceive their local neighbourhood to be distrustful, alienating or even actively hostile towards them and what is important to them (Anderton & Abbott 2009; Jonsson & Flanagan 2000). This alienation can also flow the other way: adults in low socioeconomic settings may be slow to believe that young people are willing or able to contribute to community building (Zeldin & Topitzes 2002).

**The role of schools**

Schools are clearly identified within public policy as the primary agencies through which young people learn the skills and dispositions for civic participation. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians expects Australian schools to enable all young people to become “active and informed citizens” who “participate in Australia’s civic life … work for the common good [and] are responsible global and local citizens” (MCEETYA 2008, p.8).

Enabling young people to take an active role in the local community is a recognised means by which schools can fulfil this mandate (Torney-Purta, Richardson & Barber 2004). In fact, the most recent assessment of civics and citizenship education in Australian schools makes it clear that schools will not succeed in educating young people for civic participation unless they link this education to young people’s lives and the community in which they live, and unless they give young people the opportunity to be current and not just future citizens in that community (MCEETYA 2009).

What is far less clear is how this mandate translates into practice in schools. Australian principals believe that their schools prepare young people to participate in the community, but Australian teachers do not necessarily believe that it is the role of schools to do so (Mellor, Kennedy & Greenwood 2001). Young people’s existing community participation tends to remain invisible within their schools (Holdsworth et al. 2007), with few schools enabling young people to participate meaningfully in their communities (Wilson 2000). These effects are particularly strong in schools in low-socioeconomic contexts.

Within these schools, young people’s participation is subject to numerous tensions within and between policy and practice. These include the tension between a policy mandate for student participation on the one hand and, on the other, a policy emphasis on performance and accountability that reduces this participation to an instrumental means of meeting standards of student engagement and achievement (Taylor & Robinson 2009). What Angus has called “the hardening of educational policy” (2006, p.369) leaves little room for the more transformative interpretations of young people’s participation, interpretations that may bring about change in the experience of disadvantaged students.
It also leaves little room for any commitment that teachers may have to socially just pedagogies that promote student participation in disadvantaged contexts (Angus 2009; Comber & Nixon 2009). Furthermore, the culture of performativity that currently permeates Australian educational policy is associated with the perpetuation of systemic educational inequity, which is directly at odds with the social mobility implied by civic participation (Thomson & Gunter 2006).

Schools in low socioeconomic areas are sites where tensions are played out between a policy agenda that positions schools as the means of fostering young people’s agentic participation and a systemic educational culture that continues to position young people – especially socioeconomically disadvantaged young people – as the passive recipients of schooling (Wyn 2009).

Conversely, they are sites in which there is likely to be tension between the policy expectation that all young people participate and the right of young people to resist or evade this expectation. Smyth points out that for many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, experiencing success at school “means having to suppress their own identities and act within a narrowly defined and institutionalized view of what it means to be a ‘good’ student” (2006, p.290). Participation may require a similar suppression of young people’s identity in ways that sit oddly with the empowerment that it promises.

These schools are sites for tensions between the liberatory discourse of participation policy and the constrained opportunities customarily available to young people in poverty. Ironically, these constrained opportunities may be reinforced by a policy climate that emphasises young people’s responsibility “for their lives, their actions and their behaviours” (Australian Government 2009, p.4) and that may further the responsibilisation of already disadvantaged young people (McInerney 2009; Smyth 2009).

They are also sites that are subject to the effects of a policy climate that consistently overlooks the issue of equity in determining which young people participate (Perry 2009). While the renewed policy focus on youth is welcome, it tends to conflate all young people as a single group. In so doing, it promotes a homogenised conception of youth in a way that “obscure(s) the significance of increasing inequalities and differences between groups of young people” (Wyn & Woodman 2006, p.511). As an extension of this, the current policy climate consistently overlooks the issue of class.

This obscures the recognition that the normative values of participation may in fact be middle-class values imposed upon working-class young people (Pearce, Down & Moore 2008). It overlooks the consensus of decades of educational research that indicated that schools are “classed spaces, within which some students feel at home and others can be distinctly uncomfortable” (Ball 2006, p.7). This is despite urgings that “in order to understand what is happening in so-called ‘disadvantaged’ schools, we need to reinvigorate class as an analytical construct” (Smyth et al. 2006, p.121).

**Conclusion**

In a climate that is otherwise encouraging in its attention to young people’s social inclusion and participation, insufficient attention has been paid to the relationship between these forces. In particular, not enough is known about the capacity of schools in low-socioeconomic contexts to meet the policy expectation that they enable young people’s participation. Not enough is known about how the practice of student participation is shaped by the dominant discourse of schooling within these schools or by the discourse of policy. Not enough is known about how the purposes of participation are understood by students in these schools, how its enactment is experienced by them or what they themselves expect and want in regard to their own participation.

In a previous edition of *Youth Studies Australia*, my colleagues and I described the adoption of the ruMAD? (Are you Making A Difference?) student participation initiative by schools in low-socioeconomic communities (Black et al. 2009). ruMAD? is an initiative of Education Foundation, a division of The Foundation for Young Australians. It offers schools a curriculum framework through which students can design and implement social

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change projects in their community. Students research an issue, design a project, develop the skills for project management and harness the needed resources to put the project into practice. In the project’s final phase, they reflect on what they have learned and share the outcomes of their project with the school community as well as with students from other schools.

Schools that have adopted a framework such as ruMAD? provide a rich opportunity for research that can close some of the knowledge gaps currently arising out of the policy and practice literature. They can illustrate what community participation looks like when it works well in low socioeconomic settings. They also provide a site for research that can critically illustrate the tensions between the policy discourse and the practice of participation as it relates to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Without this illustration, there is a real risk that unexamined efforts by policymakers to foster young people’s community participation will fail to address the inequalities and exclusions experienced by some young people, reinforce them or supplement them with new forms of marginalisation.

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