

# Governance of young people's participation

## Critical reflections

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### Introduction

In youth policy and youth research, activating young people to participate in society has been on the agenda for many years (Bessant 2004; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021; Shefer et al., 2018). Numerous policy interventions and programmes have been established by national governments and supranational organisations, such as OECD (2017), to ensure that young people attach to the structures and practices of society. For instance, Finland's National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme for 2020–2023 strongly emphasises the importance of youth participation in preventing social exclusion (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). Additionally, both in Finland and elsewhere, emphasis is placed on integrating young people into the labour market. The aim behind this is to maintain economic growth and prevent marginalisation, as discussed in Chapter 5. Such goals and programmes are telling examples of the kind of economic, political and social expectations that authorities now place on young people. Their inclusion and activity in society have become “serious business”, which is managed and monitored closely.

Our task in this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, we explore assumptions that underpin the dominant political and research discourses on youth participation in Finland, highlighting also tensions between them. Empirically, we review and discuss two cases, utilising the Virtual Council e-participation service (described in Chapter 2), that illustrate how the discourses come to embody how youth participation is currently understood, structured, practised and (often) researched. The cases we present are linked to the objectives of the ALL-YOUTH project to probe the obstacles of young people's participation and develop more youth-centred ways of participation, including the creation of spaces where young people can freely and safely discuss their participation experiences. We point out some significant differences between the experiments and contemplate therewith the importance and the effects of how and from whose starting points the participation is organised.

On the other hand, our interest in the chapter is methodological, and our purpose is to critically reflect our own values, research ethics, knowledge assumptions and research strategies. As for the critical reflexivity, we especially emphasise the researchers' ethical responsibility to be clear about the type of discourses they take

part in through their research and the type of narrative on youth participation they contribute to (see Sukarieh & Tannock 2016; Kelly 2018). At the same time, we point out the challenges associated with this responsibility. According to our experiences, the researchers' critical standpoints and ethical concerns may be sidelined in multi-stakeholder research contexts, especially the ones initiated by authorities, despite their wishes to approach youth participation with a critical mind. This observation raises some key questions in terms of knowledge production. We stress that it is an important part of reliable and valid research to ask whose knowledge and "truths" it ultimately promotes, as we have attempted to do in our own research (cf. Kelly 2018). In Chapters 8 and 9, this methodological stance is called "strong objectivity", in reference to the critical feminist epistemology.

The chapter consists of the following elements. We highlight the complexities of the public and research narratives currently defining youth participation; we describe the two study cases that experimented with a new (e-)participation method, the Virtual Council; we explain our critically reflexive approach to the discussion in the chapter; we review the research processes and their results reflexively, explicating along the way our own concerns as researchers who wish to promote young people's participation and well-being, but who sometimes become curtailed in these aims when the research process is defined by diverse interests of multiple stakeholders (see also Chapter 9 for a different angle on this problematics).

### **The ambiguity of youth participation**

In this book, the participation and well-being of young people are approached through several disciplines, perspectives and concepts. Our point of view arises from how youth participation is defined and managed through public policies, measures and practices. Consequently, we pay attention to the structures and organisation of participation – which we call unimaginatively "official participation" – and the societal discourses that guide them. Throughout the discussion, we are interested in how those discourses affect the way participation is defined and studied in youth research. We start from the prevailing discourse, where young people's active participation is taken as a self-evident goal and considered important for securing and strengthening the legitimacy of democracy and the entire social system (Cammaerts et al., 2015; Martin 2012).

As to the structures of youth participation in Finland, young people's participation is enabled and governed by several laws as is pointed out in Introduction and Chapter 1. Policy-wise, one of the most significant ones is the Youth Act (2016), which strives to enhance young people's engagement in society based on several guiding principles: transnational interaction, cultural diversity, healthy lifestyle, sustainable development and respect for the environment. The Act regulates the preparation of a cross-sectoral programme for youth work and youth policy, outlining detailed four-year goals. The central goal of the 2020–2023 National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme is to guarantee meaningful life and inclusive possibilities of participation for all youth. The goal is promoted through a number

of policy initiatives, including measures that promote young people's employment and coping in everyday life and offer more opportunities for them to influence society (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). We would also like to point out how the recent legislation on education, such as the Act on Vocational Education and Training (2017), is geared to strengthen the role of educational institutions in guiding young people's development towards active citizenship – the kind of citizenship that the state sees fit or necessary for maintaining the existing society with its values and interests (attuned to neoliberalism, as argued in Chapter 5). When we add to these policies typical public representations of young people as incomplete and vulnerable or irresponsible and risky (Setty 2020; Vesikansa & Honkatukia 2018; Fionda 2005) or, at times, as a force for change that “saves the world” (Bessant 2020), we can begin to see how contradictory the discourses that define young people can be.

However, despite that society buzzes so much around activating young people to participate, the question of youth participation in terms of how it should be understood and organised is not at all simple. Here, we would like to point out two complexities. First, youth participation is not an easy issue because it is politically charged, connected to the future of democracy and heavily governed (Dean & Hindess 1998; Foucault 1991). Youth participation has indeed become serious business, one that is even seen to indicate the future of society and its economic success (Bessant et al., 2017; Kelly 2018). Moreover, the governmentality (Foucault 1980, 1991) that frames how youth participation is thought and spoken about, how it is managed and how it is supposed to work produces its own roundabout “truths” that are needed to justify how it is currently run (also Kelly 2018). These truths, which include a certain understanding of what young people's active citizenship should look like and how it should be pursued, are produced in public and research-based discourses alike. According to this conception of citizenship, young people are expected to participate in society, most of all through the labour market (including taking care of their own employability; see e.g., Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017), but also through other (conventional) means, such as voting and acting in civil society organisations. These are also the kind of goals that Finland's democratic politics explicitly strive for. Furthermore, the dominant discourse tends to see young people not as full citizens, but as citizens-in-the-making who require special guidance from adults and professionals to be able to participate in society in normatively acceptable ways (Bessant 2020; Nikunen 2017; Sukarieh & Tannock 2016).

Second, as it has been found in many studies, despite the myriad policy efforts to develop youth participation, the methods and arenas specifically designed for young people are often too narrowly understood, tokenistic, uninteresting and ineffective from the young people's viewpoint (e.g., Bessant 2020; Nikunen 2017; Suni & Mietola 2021; see also Chapter 6). The official structures and practices of participation have clearly not been planned by listening to what young people themselves think and feel about them. Instead, participation organised by adults tends to bypass young people's voices and aspirations, especially those who come from

marginalised positions (Bessant 2004; Cammaerts et al., 2015; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). We will see an example of this problem of bypassing when we present our own cases and experiences. Meanwhile, young people's participation in their own terms is not necessarily welcomed, especially if it is seen as disruptive or as a challenge to society's (elite) status quo.

In ALL-YOUTH, we have tried to tackle these barriers and prejudices through developing and studying more youth-centred forms of participation, aspiring to use new kinds of research strategies that engage young people from various backgrounds in the production of knowledge that concerns their lives. As several of the book's chapters demonstrate, these aspirations have sometimes been rather successful, but researchers have also faced difficulties when carrying out participatory research in the field. These kinds of challenges are discussed extensively in the third section of the book. In this chapter, we speak about our experiences of studying two participation experiments, using the Virtual Council e-participation service. We review how the experiments were planned and implemented and critically reflect our endeavor to study and promote young people's societal participation.

### **Practising ethically sustainable research: critical reflexivity as methodological guidance**

As many youth researchers, we find both necessary and valuable that young people are offered meaningful opportunities to participate in society. We agree with the argument presented in Introduction that young people's participation needs and their connection to young people's well-being have been insufficiently understood thus far (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2015; Gough 2017). Like many other researchers (e.g., Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021), we are concerned that policy measures intended to activate young people to become productive members of society and the labour market may turn against themselves and can actually worsen the well-being of young people.

As a starting point, we think that if youth researchers are interested in the well-being of young people, they should also pay keen attention to what kind of effects participation policies and practices have on young people's lives. Likewise, we find it important that researchers practise critical self-reflection and contemplate their own assumptions about youth participation, including what kind of discourses they take part in through their own knowledge production (Kelly 2018). In our studies, we have attempted to do so by utilising ideas from critical reflexivity (Högbacka & Aaltonen 2015). From the methodological point of view, critical reflexivity has at least three important benefits: it helps the researchers to see themselves and their research work as part of the social world they are studying. Second, reflexivity opens space for ethical reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the researched; for example, how the researcher's assumptions and research practices might influence the research participants and even guide them to act in a certain way (see Subramani 2019). Third, critical reflexivity can enhance researchers' awareness of the conditions of knowledge and the fact that research always

produces truths about its “object”, which in turn has real-life consequences for how society sees and treats specific groups of people (Subramani 2019; Högbacka & Aaltonen 2015). Recognising the researcher’s personal positions, surrounding cultural and societal factors, and the epistemological assumptions behind the chosen research methods are therefore important aspects of the reflexive research process.

When writing this text, we have extensively reflected on the ways in which youth participation is generally discussed and what is expected of it. We have tried to make visible how young people’s participation is guided by various policy measures, and how these measures potentially affect young people’s understandings and experiences of their own participation (see Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021, 2023). While critically analysing such discourses, we have continuously reflected on how our own institutional research environment, collaboration with research partners, theoretical frameworks and previous understanding of youth participation have influenced the knowledge that we have generated (see e.g., Kallio, Honkatukia & Valtonen 2022). In this reflection, our research ethics have also been put to the test from time to time. We feel that sometimes we have been pushed to operate between the rock and the hard place, considering that the ALL-YOUTH project is funded by the government through a programme (The Strategic Research Council) which is expected to work closely with multiple stakeholders in society to provide solutions for the societal inclusion of young people in a way that supports sustainable economic growth. As part of this collaboration, we too have inevitably contributed to the discourse that defines and manages youth participation. On the other hand, we have also consistently tried to take a critical distance from this discourse, especially from the assumptions related to economic growth. As stated above, strengthening the social inclusion and well-being of young people is an important value and goal for us, but we do not always agree on the policies and means to achieve it, or the research approaches that uncritically accept public participation policies as starting points of the inquiry.

### **Dilemmas of youth participation – reflexive notes on two research processes**

The two cases discussed here – one on young people’s participation in the preparation of the national anti-racism action plan (“the Action Plan case”) and the other bringing out young people’s experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (“the Pandemic case”) – were conducted in the online context of the Virtual Council e-participation service. Developed in the ALL-YOUTH project, the Virtual Council seeks to enhance young people’s participation by providing online space with a tool to engage in discussions on desired societal topics. This kind of e-participation tool is relatively new in Finland, one which the Finnish youth and democracy policies regard with high hopes (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). It is also a key means to diversify democracy and human rights practices in educational institutions, as stated in the National Democracy Programme (Ministry of Justice 2021a). In the future, e-democracy tools are expected to become more widely used.

The two studies were carried out independently in different sub-projects of ALL-YOUTH, the Action Plan case studied primarily by Henna and the Pandemic case primarily by Annika (also, other researchers were involved in both processes). Susanna did not take part in the empirical work, but in another ALL-YOUTH study she has made similar observations about the impacts of the dominant “neoliberal” discourse on young people’s experiences of their position in working life and society more generally (Ågren 2021; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren, 2023; see also Chapter 5). In writing this chapter, we have reviewed and reflected thoroughly the two research processes and their results and have subsequently chosen to speak about ourselves as a collective “we” (occasionally also as unnamed “researchers”). Hence, we present our shared understandings of what went on in the experiments, and what they teach us about young people’s participation in settings that are structured and managed by authorities, or in the second case, by a well-established and internationally known NGO, the (Finnish) Red Cross.

### ***The Action Plan case: innovative (e-)participation – but on whose terms?***

In the first case, we studied the preparation of the National Anti-Racism Action Plan (NARAP) in the spring of 2021. The preparation was coordinated by the Ministry of Justice (from now on, “the Ministry”), the responsible authority in the government for reforming and strengthening the structures of Finnish democracy. NARAP is based on the goals stated in the Government Programme (2019–2023) of Prime Minister Sanna Marin to draw up an action plan against racism and to improve good relations between different population groups (Finnish Government 2019). The Ministry considered young people as a key group to be consulted in drawing the plan (Ministry of Justice 2021b) since, according to studies, young people in Finland are increasingly experiencing racism both on personal (Halme et al., 2018) and structural levels, especially in educational contexts (Jauhola & Vehviläinen 2015). Representatives from the Ministry suggested a collaboration with ALL-YOUTH to organise the consultation using the Virtual Council service prototype. From the Ministry’s perspective, virtual consultation sounded appropriate, particularly because the ongoing pandemic had made it challenging to organise in-person events. Also, the Ministry was interested in experimenting with a new kind of e-participation instrument because of its perceived potential to involve young people in decision-making processes more widely and more meaningfully (Ministry of Justice 2021b).

The consultation was eventually implemented as a collaboration between the Ministry, the ALL-YOUTH project, three educational institutions (comprehensive school, vocational institution and general upper secondary school) and a Finnish Red Cross (FRC) Youth Shelter (institutions came from different parts of the country). The Ministry was responsible for practicalities, such as recruiting the partner institutions, determining the schedule for the consultation and providing

relevant background information about NARAP. Local organisations were responsible for recruiting the participants. The role of the researchers was twofold: to provide the Virtual Council service prototype with technical support and to study the usefulness of the service as a means for hearing young people, especially from the viewpoint of an inter-organisational collaboration between authorities and other actors. For the study, researchers conducted several interviews with representatives from the local organisations and the Ministry, but they did not facilitate or otherwise participate in the work of the Councils.

Altogether, five Councils were organised in February and March 2021, including approximately 60 young persons between 14 and 17 years of age. Each Council went on for one to two weeks. In educational institutions, the Councils were implemented either as part of the daily classwork or as part of the activities of the student union. In the FRC Youth Shelter, young people participated in their spare time. The basic tenet of the Virtual Council service is to generate a concluding statement, based on the facilitated discussions on a topic that is regarded important for young people and/or for decision making. In this case, the concluding statements were prepared by the participants themselves, but they can also be prepared by, for example, the facilitators or the head organiser. In terms of substance, the statements stressed the need to provide safe spaces for young people to share racism-related experiences, develop non-discriminatory practices for job and other recruitments and promote diversity in society in general (Ministry of Justice 2021a). All statements were communicated to the Ministry, which utilised them as a part of the final version of NARAP (Ministry of Justice 2021b, 51–52).

Here, we will not describe the Councils, their discussions or final statements in more detail (see Chapter 2). Instead, we want to take up two reflections, through which it is possible to shed light on some of the dilemmas regarding pre-arranged institutional participation for young people.

First, in the Action Plan case, the research context was defined by the Ministry's pre-set goals to consult a group of Finnish young people and collect their opinions on the plan being prepared. The task of the researchers was to find out how this goal was achieved and to evaluate the functionality of the Virtual Council generally as a way of consulting young people. The research setting was therefore limited from the start by the knowledge interests of the Ministry and by the fact that interviews would only be made with representatives of the involved institutions. Originally, the purpose was to interview young people as well, but none of them showed interest in being interviewed. Retrospectively, we think that this was primarily due to that their participation was organised institutionally, where the researchers had no direct contact with young people themselves. On the flip side, neither were the representatives of the institutions involved in planning the research, which meant that they were not familiar with its starting points and objectives. In this way, the interests of the Ministry and the researchers regarding the experiment were crossed, and no fruitful dialogue formed between them. In afterthought, we can conclude that in the research based on multi-stakeholder cooperation, especially when powerful actors are involved, it is important to have joint discussions

about the goals and implementation of the research, not to mention the different theoretical understandings regarding the topic itself. In the best scenario, this way of proceeding enables a critical discussion among the parties, which was unfortunately missing in this case. In addition, registering the young people's own views on how they experienced their participation would have been essential information. The research data were clearly insufficient and several knowledge needs of the researchers were not met.

Another challenge was the tight schedule of the research, given that the timeframe for the preparation of the plan was already set in the Government Programme. As a result, the researchers did not have enough time to carefully consider the starting points of the project nor implement the research as reflexively as they would have liked. The schedule and the fact that the study's knowledge interests were determined from the Ministry's point of view led us to critically reflect about who the study ultimately benefited. On the bright side, the consultation of the young people was certainly well-intentioned and meant to support the dialogue between young people and decision makers on the issue of racism in Finnish society. Moreover, the consultation did give young people a practical chance to impact national policymaking, as their contribution was recognised in the published version of NARAP, which included a separate chapter on young people's views of anti-racism (Ministry of Justice 2021b, 51–52). On the other hand, there was no interactive dialogue between the Council participants and decision makers after the consultation, and the whole experiment appeared as more or less top-down arrangement, which the young people could not influence.

### ***The Pandemic Case – organising the Council in a more youth-centred way***

In the second case, a Virtual Council was organised in a close collaboration between ALL-YOUTH and a FRC Youth Shelter to hear young people's thoughts about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their lives. The FRC Youth Shelters, situated in several larger cities in Finland, support young people under 25 years of age in various matters, such as family and social relationships, independent living and coping with school. They also offer young people a temporary place to stay if needed. The project had previously collaborated with this shelter and knew the staff, which made the collaboration comfortable and trustworthy from the start.

The Council was organised in April 2021 in the middle of the pandemic at a time when the Finnish government rapidly changed safety regulations to prevent the uncontrollable spread of the coronavirus. The measures had a major impact on young people's everyday lives, especially opportunities to go to school and meet friends. When the project contacted the Youth Shelter to propose the study, its theme turned out to be one that young people had already suggested to the staff as a possible subject for a Virtual Council (which the staff and many of the young people were familiar with due to FRC's prior involvement in the development of

the service's prototype). Both these factors, that the people at the shelter already knew about the service and the ALL-YOUTH project and that the young people could participate in choosing the topic, proved important in how young people felt about their participation and how the research succeeded.

In terms of the topic, it is interesting to note that at the time of the research, two competing narratives existed in the Finnish public about how the pandemic affected young people's lives. First, there was the "worry narrative" where young people were seen to suffer from social isolation and the shattering of their dreams for the future. Another narrative in turn took young people as selfish and careless risk-takers and even super-spreaders of the virus, as they were seen to disregard the public safety guidelines by going out to have fun and meet with their friends. In the research, we were interested in what young people thought about the pandemic and how they felt their behaviour in relation to the pandemic was judged in public. Additionally, we wanted to hear how they thought the public support services had succeeded during the pandemic. For example, did they feel they got the help they needed in coping with the difficult situation? Thus, the Council provided a platform for young people to share their experiences of the pandemic and an opportunity to express their opinions to the decision makers. By doing so, the young participants managed to challenge the general narrative, which saw them either as vulnerable victims with no capacities for agency or as careless and selfish spreaders of the virus.

The Council was advertised to young people aged 18–29. Eventually, 13 participants were recruited by the FRC with the help of several youth organisations and the Youth Shelter volunteers. The Council ran for two weeks; the participation in it was voluntary throughout; and the anonymous discussion was open 24/7 (as always in the Councils). Due to the anonymity, the actual ages of the participants remained unknown, but the organisers' and the researchers' assessment was that the participants were young adults. In contrast to the Action Plan case, here the researchers were actively involved together with the volunteers as facilitators in the discussion, commenting empathetically and encouraging the participants to express their views. The organising team arranged on-call persons to facilitate the discussion for several hours a day to make sure that everyone received a response to their input. As a thank you to the participants, the FRC provided everyone with a participation certificate and a gift card to a retail store chain.

In reflection of how the discussion went in this case, it is important to note the crucial role of the facilitators who were sensitive to the participants' views, replied to all posts and encouraged the discussants to reflect further on the issues they raised in the Council. We noticed that during the discussion, participants started reflecting on their own experiences in relation to other participants' posts and offered peer support with each other, which indicates that a dialogical exchange of ideas also took place. Judging by the participants' feedback, many appreciated learning about others' experiences and realising that they are not alone with their ordeals. In reflecting back, we consider it important for a smooth and stimulating flow of online communication to ensure that everyone's contribution is visibly registered

and appreciated, that the conversation proceeds without unnecessary gaps and that when a need for moderation emerges, it is quickly responded to.

In contrast to the Action Plan case, where the concluding statement was drawn by the discussants themselves, the Pandemic case statement was written jointly by researchers and the FRC volunteers. This choice was made among the facilitators, taking it as the most flexible way of producing the text – which is not always easy, considering that the final statement is supposed to summarise all the views expressed during the discussion. Retrospectively, we feel that this was not an ideal solution, and that engaging the young participants in the writing process would have better supported the intended youth-centredness of the process. However, preparing the statement collectively might have proved to be a time-consuming effort without the guarantee that the participants would have enjoyed taking part in it.

The concluding statement (a seven-page document) brought out many issues the participants found important about the pandemic, for example, regarding the crucial significance of social relationships in difficult times, feelings about one's job or school-work being disrupted for long periods of time and problems with the availability and accessibility of public support measures. The statement was then forwarded to several relevant institutions, such as the Finnish Student Health Service and a Children's Ombudsman. A summary of the concluding statement was published on the ALL-YOUTH website (Kallio, Valtonen & Honkatukia 2021), and its key points were rehearsed on several social media outlets, such as the FRC's Twitter and Instagram accounts. The discussions have also been reported in scientific articles (e.g., Kallio, Honkatukia & Valtonen 2022).

In the Pandemic case, nine young people (out of 13) gave their consent to be interviewed about their experiences of participating in the Council. This differs significantly from the first case, where none of the young people agreed to be interviewed. We think this difference can be explained by at least three factors. First, the participants were already informed about the research when registering in the service and asked for their permission to be contacted later about the interview. Even if they chose to decline, they were still able to participate in the Council freely. This proved to be a simple and convenient way to inform participants about the study and recruit interviewees. In the Action Plan case, the registration was handled by the involved institutions, and information on the research was sent to the participants as a separate document before the Council commenced, asking their interest to participate in research and willingness to be interviewed, which eventually none of them did. Another point is that in the Pandemic case, the researchers actively communicated with the participants, allowing everyone to get acquainted with them during the process, which may have made the idea of being interviewed more comfortable for the participants. Third, in the Pandemic case, the topic of the Council was one that young people themselves had wished for, signalling that they found it meaningful and had something important to say about it to the authorities. This, together with the convivial atmosphere of the discussion, probably made the participants eager to continue the conversation in the interviews, which turned out very lively and rich in substance.

As it can be seen from the case descriptions, the Virtual Council may be implemented in various ways, depending, for instance, on the organiser's interests and their previous experience of engaging young people successfully. It is quite possible to include young people in the planning of the Council, like in the Pandemic case. The authorities, however, tend to prefer implementing the Councils in a pre-arranged way to enable a quick and flexible gathering of young people's opinions about a desired topic. From our own research, we can initially infer that young people's participation in a Virtual Council is more active and committed if they have been able to influence its topic and arrangements, and if they feel that their views are acknowledged in a vicarious and supporting manner. Nevertheless, each Council is unique with its potential and challenges, and their success cannot really be guaranteed in advance.

To conclude, we would like to present two more reflections: the first points to a challenge in this form of participation and the other to its potential in fostering the societal impact of youth participation.

First, about the obvious problem. In its current form, the Virtual Council service works with written communication and only in Finnish, which ipso facto entails that participation in the Councils requires rather proficient Finnish language skills. This prerequisite may exclude some groups from participating, such as immigrant youth or people with visual impairments. Also, participation in this kind of context requires courage to express one's opinions in writing, which can be too much for some young people, even if they have good language skills. For example, in the Action Plan case, the topic of the Council (racism) was socially and politically sensitive. It is possible that some of the participants had difficulties in expressing their views on it, or were reluctant to do so, even if the discussion was anonymous. In the Pandemic case, the discussion in the Council was lively, but keeping it so required special effort from the facilitators. It is not easy to conclude from the discussions how well this form of participation generally helps to bring out young people's views. Much depends on whether the organisers succeed in recruiting young people, whether the participants feel confident with their language and expressive skills, whether they consider the topic interesting, whether the facilitators are committed to keep the discussion going and whether the participants feel that the (virtual) space is safe.

The societal impact of the Virtual Council as a tool of participation is somewhat complicated to assess. As a reminder, the service is designed to promote dialogue between young people, along with discussions between them and decision makers, to make young people's participation meaningful and effective. In principle, the service can be considered promising, especially now that it has been transferred under the control of the Ministry of Justice (see Chapter 2), and the Ministry takes it seriously as an opportunity to develop the democratic participation of young people. The final statements prepared in the Councils are regularly delivered to the Ministry and/or other relevant decision-making bodies. Yet, it is not clear how or if the final statements and young people's views expressed in these statements are taken into account. In the two cases we investigated, the impact of the closing

statements was structured differently: in the Action Plan case, the impact was rather direct, considering that the Council was organised by the Ministry's initiative, and the closing statements were truly noted in the final anti-racism plan. In the Pandemic case, the societal impact was sought through the final statement being brought to the attention of the relevant organisations and through writing scientific articles. Yet, there is no information on whether these measures led to any actions.

In hindsight, we regard ourselves as some sort of "activist researchers" (Wright, Hadley & Burke 2020) in a sense that through our research project we have managed to enhance, even if modestly, the dialogue between young people and policymakers. Still, from the perspective of critical research, the Virtual Council as an arena and tool for youth participation raises some complex questions. On the one hand, it is possible to claim that researchers should support and actively study this kind of participation, which directly promotes young people's engagement in policy processes. On the other hand, it can be critically inquired, whose and what interests this kind of official, pre-organised participation ultimately serves and what kind of truths about youth participation and citizenship it produces. As our own experiences show, we have not been able to avoid unpleasant doubts on whether the Councils have been supportive of our initial aim to prioritise young people's opportunities to express their views.

### **Conclusion: lessons learned**

In this chapter we have described and critically reflected our research strategies and knowledge production in the context of studying the use of the Virtual Council as a participatory platform. By practising "strong objectivity", we have attempted to situate ourselves within the dominant public and research discourses on youth participation, attempting also to take a critical distance to them. Our view is that it is crucial for critical youth researchers to remain sensitive to what kind of discourses they take part in with their knowledge production, and what kind of perception of young people's social participation they promote (cf. Kelly 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock 2016). In our reflection, we have become aware that at times our own critical thinking and ethical principles have been overshadowed when we have conducted research starting from institutions' knowledge interests and pre-arranged forms of participation. However, our critical stance is complicated by the fact that we are working in a government-funded project which is tasked to present solutions for the integration of young people into society; even ones that we as critical youth researchers do not find altogether justified.

We have looked at youth participation from a particular perspective, that of the official, institutionalised participation, and based the discussion on findings from two experiments with the Virtual Council e-participation service, critically evaluating the opportunities and challenges it offers for youth participation. In contrast, in our previous studies we have emphasised the heterogeneity of young people's participation and that there are many ways of belonging to and acting in society outside of formal, adult-centred structures and practices. When we

think about our previous observations, such as the criticism expressed by many young people towards the hegemony of labour market citizenship (Ågren, 2023; Honkatukia et al., 2020; see also Chapter 5), and consider them in the context of this study, we can conclude that there is a generational gap in how youth participation is understood and realised. This gap appears at least in two ways. First, there is the danger that the new tools of participation will merely become another means of the adult society to control young people's relationship to society if they are not invited along to plan, test and study them. Even when adults and experts often mean well, the pre-arranged institutional participation can end up producing defunct structures and practices that are of no interest to anyone and have no practical effect. Second, the new means of participation will have little meaning unless they touch upon the issues that young people consider important for their lives and futures (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017; Huttunen & Albrecht 2021).

Our position is that instead of offering young people separate arenas of participation, the making of sustainable society requires more of intergenerational dialogue (Gough 2017, 53), especially if we wish to avoid underestimating young people's views simply because of their age (Anttila 2010; Bessant 2020, 239). As Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017) state, and as is argued in Chapter 3, a truly intergenerational appreciation requires that the older generation overcomes its "self-centredness" and engages in an open dialogue with the younger generation, a dialogue that is marked by mutual learning and active listening, enabling both the consensus and disagreements in a constructive atmosphere. Achieving this kind of supportive interaction is a challenge for decision makers and researchers alike. Indeed, as Bessant (2020, 258) has stressed, it is the responsibility of youth researchers and the adults working and encountering young people to ensure that they are not left alone in their efforts to build a vital and just future.

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