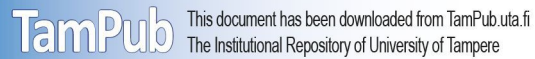


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Condescension or co-decisions:

A case of institutional youth participation

Abstract



This paper examines youth participation in public decision-making through an ethnographic case study analysing structural factors and agency of participants in a process of participatory budgeting.

Deliberative democracy is increasingly offered as a policy solution for civic renewal. However, the legitimacy of these processes is commonly questioned. Therefore, procedural theorists have attempted to define ideal conditions for participation, highlighting how the possibility of participation is communicated, the selection of participants and their level of influence.

This study found that while some participants felt the process was meaningful, for others it offered sanctions and reinforcement of existing hierarchies. This paper argues that ideal conditions of participation need to be understood in a wider sense, including how participation is made “youth friendly”, the opportunities and possibilities of participants in the core of the process versus those occupying marginal positions, and what kind of prior knowledge is necessary in order to participate.

Introduction

Many argue that western democracy is suffering a crisis of legitimacy and that democratic participation is a solution offering to fix disillusionment with representative politics. Regardless of critics highlighting tokenistic (Arnstein 1969) tendencies, failure of deliberative ideals due to contingent power struggles (Ferree et. al. 2002) and the influence of the privileged few over the common good (Eranti 2014), the benefits of public participation in decision-making are not contested (Beierle 1999). Consequently, democratic participation has been adopted by organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union as well as local and national authorities worldwide.

The strategies chosen to implement participative practices are numerous and many of them have been criticised for being decorative rather than influential. In particular, youth participation has been contested for being an adult dominated consultation

mechanism rather than a forum for democratic engagement and deliberation (Barber 2009). Academic research on participation and deliberation has a rich tradition of defining ideal conditions for participation (see for example Arnstein 1969, Fishkin 1997, Fung 2006, Habermas 1984, Hart 1992 and Irvin & Stansbury 2004). Definitions of procedural legitimacy commonly underline pluralistic and democratic values as requirements for quality participation, particularly in regards to who gets to participate and the actual influence participants have over the process and its result.

This paper presents a case study on a participatory budgeting pilot launched by the city of Helsinki youth department in 2013. This was one of the first cases of participatory budgeting in Finland (Laitinen 2012, Nuorisoasiainkeskus 2013) and a departure from the common model of local youth participation in Finland, the city youth council. Nevertheless, the objectives were typical, i.e. fostering active citizenship and increasing democratic participation through a more inclusive decision-making process with a potential to affect funding priorities.

In many Finnish municipalities the promotion of participation is limited to youth departments. Consequently many municipal administrations are not open or accustomed to citizen participation. Research shows that Finnish youth councils have a very limited political influence, if any at all, and that they mainly engage youth that are already socially or politically active (Eskelinen et. al. 2010, 38-56). Additionally, youth work for active citizenship tends to adhere to processes that are restrictive of young peoples freedom to influence and act, as well as, exclusionary practices at youth houses hindering the engagement of newcomers (Junttila-Vitikka et. al. 2010, 190-191).

This study aims to identify potential sources of tension, contestation, frustration and reasons for disenchantment by comparing theoretical ideal conditions for participation with the process set up by the city youth department. Since opportunities to affect public decisions are increasingly offered, it begs the question how this change in democratic policy is affecting citizen engagement, political power relations and the legitimacy of decisions. This paper sets out to find what it is that constitutes the experience of meaningful participation and whether or not this is dependent on the

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fulfilment of so-called ideal conditions of participation. That is, does the opportunity to influence decisions suffice as motivation to participate or do other factors play an equal or more important role? Hypothetically, less than ideal conditions of participation lead to disappointment and disillusionment, increasing the tension in encounters with adult authorities in public settings.

I use this case to argue that while pluralism of representation, influence, and the quality and quantity of deliberation are important considerations in terms of procedural legitimacy, there is a need to interpret micro-level interaction and improve the adaptation of participatory procedures to participant skill-sets in public initiatives that are intended to bolster active citizenship.

Deliberative democracy and participatory budgeting

There is an increasing criticism of minimal or elite democracy (Schumpeter 1943). As a response to the perceived illegitimacy of representative democracy, deliberative democracy suggests the use of democratic reasoning, rather than voting or aggregation of preferences, as an alternative political process (Ercan 2014). In deliberative processes participants offer reasons for their positions, listen to the views of others, and consider their preferences in light of new information and arguments as a means for achieving a refined public opinion (Fishkin 1997). Ideally deliberating individuals make informed decisions based on facts rather than answering at random or ignoring competing opinions or issues not affecting them personally.

One key question regarding public participation is whether it can be considered real as opposed to consultative or tokenistic. In her seminal text Sherry Arnstein (1969) introduced the ladder of citizen participation in order to distinguish various degrees of participation, from tokenistic whitewashing to citizen control. Since then, the urge to define what is real and appropriate participation has led to decades of theorizing on the proper ways to structure public participation (see Beierle 1999; Hart 1992; Irvin & Stansbury 2004; Fung 2006 for some examples of ideal conditions for participation). Common for these deliberative theories is a focus on how structural factors affect

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procedural legitimacy, highlighting the representativeness of the participants, the actual power to affect outcomes and ultimately the legitimacy of the decisions taken.

Participatory budgeting has become a model of best practice for public deliberation ever since it was introduced in Porto Alegre in the early nineties. The Brazilian case exemplifies a spectacular inversion in the priorities for public spending as a result of citizens locally deciding what is best for their surroundings (Avritzer 2000, Cabannes 2004; Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke 2008).

Recent studies of participatory budgeting in Europe (Talpin 2011, Berger 2015) have shown that the method can result in frustration and cynicism when real participation is missing but that it can also lead to the inclusion of marginalized groups, increase the vitality of local democracy, and function as a learning experience for active citizenship. Moreover, methods and timeframes tend to cause problems when they are adapted to suit public officials and decision makers rather than the participants. To boot, these processes and methods often require participants to have certain skills in expressing themselves, understanding institutional languages and in reading cultural codes of interaction (Hill et. al. 2004, 86). This automatically excludes many of the people that have the most to gain from participating in these processes, such as migrants, young people or those who are functionally impaired (Ibid, 91). A macro-level analysis of the structural conditions of participation is not sensitive to the study of the meanings participants attach to their participatory experience. Therefore, in this article, participant interaction has been analytically approached through the use of Erving Goffmans ideas of impression management.

Data and methods

The empirical research for this case study was conducted in a borough of Helsinki over six months between May and November 2013. The fieldwork consisted of ethnographic participatory observation with the aim of documenting the process of participatory budgeting. Ethnography as a method was chosen for its capacity to produce thick and deep descriptions of human interaction. It documents inclusion, exclusion, movement, and physical spaces (Pink 2009, 63–81), enabling readers to understand phenomena on

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a level other methods do not reach (O'Reilly 2005, 226). As exemplified by Gordon et. al (2005) ethnographic participatory observation coupled with reflexive practice (Pillow 2010) allows the researcher to tune his/her gaze to take note also of non-events and register silence over the visible and audible. As such the method offers a deeper understanding of human agency and the factors that shape it, than is possible to attain with most other methods.

Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg 2011, 302-303) argues that much of the empirical knowledge of the world has been gained through case studies. Flyvbjerg underlines that knowledge in social sciences is always situational and case specific. Case studies do not necessarily verify assumptions but can offer new insights and a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of human interaction. Such real knowledge cannot always be generalized through hypotheses or theory but can be transferred to similar cases or be used as examples (Flyvbjerg 2011, 305).

The power of ethnographic participatory observation in case studies and youth research is exemplified by Julien Talpins (2011) and Mathieu Bergers (2015) research on participatory budgeting and Karoliina Ojanen's (2012) research in social hierarchies at riding stables, demonstrating that case specific findings on mechanisms for construction of hierarchies and attaining social capital are transferrable to a more general level, increasing the understanding of identity creation processes beyond the particular field of research.

Echoing Les Back (2007), there is a sociological value in looking beyond spectacle and fireworks, in order to hear weak voices over the loud ones and give space to those that tend to stay unheard. A study of a participatory process aiming to give young people a voice must reach and listen to the young. Further, the validity of the empirical data in terms of the research question is dependent of documenting the varying positions and levels of influence that participants have. Data collection by means of a survey or structured interviews does not yield the data needed to critically assess the case and answer the research questions. A common approach of studying political socialization, civic action and efforts to increase active citizenship has been through quantitative analysis of surveys (see Fahmy 2006, Gaiser et. al. 2010 and Ødegård 2007) or interview

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data (Arensmeier 2010). While these methods offer tools for the interpretation of factors and trends shaping civic action, they are not sensitive in recording the “barely visible signs, habits and practices hidden from news headlines, and the counter trends that may be bubbling underneath them...” (Luhtakallio & Eliasoph 2014: 2). Political ethnography has the capacity to slow down the camera to reveal how political communication takes shape and what consequence this has. (Luhtakallio & Eliasoph 2014: 6). This capacity of showing the link between how and why in a political process and immersing the researcher in the quintessential practices that constitute political participation, arguably offers a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study.

The process of participation was studied through participatory observation. Additionally, informants were offered the chance to be interviewed prior to the workshops at the youth centre. Most of them agreed to do the interview and some informants participated were interviewed twice. In all thirteen out of the twenty workshop participants were interviewed in five semi-structured group discussions. Fieldwork observations prompted my questions but many times the informants would raise important issues that had not been previously considered by me. Likewise, these tangential offshoots would sometimes arrive at and explain, some issue that had been on my mind but which I had not up to then been able to put into words.

Researching youth always raises the requirements of ethically correct research procedures. For a more in depth discussion on the issue of research ethics, negotiating access, interview procedure, establishing rapport and informed consent see Boldt (2014). A research permit was obtained from the youth department of Helsinki, and guidelines by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2002) were followed throughout the research process. There was an aspiration to have a balanced selection of informants in term of gender and age for the interviews. All interview participants were school students between twelve and sixteen years of age. Informants' names have been changed, some informants were combined into one and location identifiers were omitted in order to ensure anonymity.

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The empirical case description that follows is divided thematically into two sections, each grounded (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in the research. The first section describes the participatory budgeting process and presents an analysis of interaction, acts and agency in the field. Following that, an analysis of the structural conditions of participation is presented in four subchapters dealing with the selection of the participants, deliberation within the participatory budgeting process, information offered by the city of Helsinki about the possibility to participate and finally the overall influence of the participants. The significance of a few (namely selection, deliberation and influence) of these categories was deduced from theory (Beierle 1999; Hart 1992; Irvin & Stansbury 2004; Fung 2006) prior to the fieldwork. Nevertheless, all of the themes have been inductively verified as factors of consequence in this case.

The Ruutibudjetti experience

Participatory budgeting was one of several democracy pilots that the city of Helsinki initiated in 2013 and the only one directly concerning youth. The participatory budgeting process was loosely based on the Porto Alegre model and consisted of an introductory event meant to gather ideas on a general level, followed by two workshops where participants produced detailed proposals for action. Finally a school vote in local schools was organised in order to rank the popularity of those proposals. After the vote a delegation of youth representatives met with youth department officials and decided, based on the result of the vote, which projects were to be carried out. The decision-making process started in the end of May and the final decisions were made in November 2013.

The participants in the process were 12-16 years old, living or attending school in a suburban, mostly middle-class area of Helsinki. The introductory happening gathered 212 students from nearby schools, the workshops had twenty participants and in 570 school students participated at some stage of the process, most of them through school votes.

Interaction in the field

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Much of the interaction in the field revolved around agents in marginal positions of power attempting to retain their dignity and prestige. These acts were characterised by their likeness to the analytical concepts of keeping face (Goffman 1967), role distance (1961) and symbolic resistance (Scott 1989). The following section offers characteristic examples of this.

The first part of the participatory budgeting process was organised on a cloudless day in the end of May. The event was called RuBufest and all ninth graders attending school in the area had been invited to participate at the local youth centre. A route dotted with activities snaked its way through the youth centre and the park outside. The event was inspired by the monopoly game, with youth workers dressed in fake moustaches and top hats. Teachers arrived with their students, who seemed excited to be doing something else than attend lessons at school. Overall the atmosphere was nice with extra-curricular activities such as a bouncy castle, a rap workshop with popular artist Super Janne, and a DJ playing music. There were five tasks that participants had to fulfil in order to finish and receive a prize. Participants started by rolling a giant dice to decide which activity they would start at and as in life, some of them ended up in jail straight away. Others got to discuss public transport or sports facilities with city officials and youth workers. As soon as participants would fulfil a task they were allowed to move on to the next one on the route. However, few seemed inclined to play along. Common participant responses were “do we have to?” and “can we go now?”. Perhaps expecting this, the organisers offered cones of spun sugar to everyone that completed all tasks. Nevertheless, as a motivational prize, it was rather symbolic in value. Saving their own or the youth workers’ face seemed to be the prime motivator, for the participants, in much of their interaction. The norm of politeness is strong (Goffman 1967, 40) and many of the interactions where participants initially questioned the task eventually ended with them agreeing to do what the organisers asked them to do.

One of the first things participants did was posing in a plywood cutout photo prop with a cartoon speech bubble (see figure 1) where each participant could write their idea for what is needed in Helsinki. This turned out to be fun since participants were complying with the expectation of participation while performing their participation in unexpected

ways, a recurrent theme in many of the tasks that included some form of creative expression.



Figure 1. Photo prop at the RuBufest event.

When asked what youth in Helsinki need, participants answered Starbucks (Figure 1) and when offered the opportunity to affect urban planning through building a good city and a bad city from Lego and play dough, participants created spaceships, crocodiles, green bananas, gay houses, drunks and so forth. Eventually it became hard to distinguish between the times when participants were making fun of the method and the adult supervisor, and when they were being sincere. Goffman (1961) expresses role distance as being a function of social status through which individual separate themselves from a given role. Since play dough and Lego are associated with children's play, a participant working too eagerly with these could lose face in front of his/her classmates. In this

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setting it is safer to participate ironically, in order to retain ones' honour and sense of self, seemingly playing along but actually resisting.

While enjoying their cones of spun sugar, the participants were asked what the point of the event was. Everyone knew they could influence something but the answers lacked specificity. This could be explained by the lack of information material outlining the process. Except for information gained through individual discussions with youth workers, participants were not given an explanation of what the participatory budgeting process was going to be like and the event did not offer clues as to how ideas were going to be considered in the next steps of the process. The norm of politeness and self-regulation (Goffman 1967, 5-46) kept participants from confronting the youth workers and city officials openly. However, many participants were critically challenging the given tasks and the expectation of compliance. Through small acts of resistance they demonstrated their integrity while still fulfilling the minimum level of interaction necessary to please the youth workers. The lack of deliberation during the various activities and the lack of information about the process were the most probable reasons for why participants did not consider it necessary to please the organizers through dedicated participation, stopping only short of challenging the face of a youth worker or risking to lose their own face.

Matthieu Berger (2015) observed similar phenomena while studying tightly framed and hierarchized top-down processes for participatory democracy in Belgium. Berger notes (Ibid, 16) that the structural asymmetry in power relations makes it difficult to participate in a representational and discursive manner, leading participants to reposition themselves in relation to public officials through various channels of resistance. In the case of participatory budgeting in Helsinki, this type of symbolic resistance through the participants juxtaposing their actions vis-à-vis the expected culture of compliance was recurrent.

The challenge in developing a youth friendly method for participation is retaining an aura of seriousness. Morrow (2001) describes the difficulty of penetrating the wall of youth culture and language with methods that are not too childish and simple on one

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hand but not requiring fluency in the full arsenal of citizen skills on the other. Likewise, Hill et al. (2004, 86) propose the use of a multitude of methods to triangulate the opinions of youth. This difficulty in making youth participate became evident on a multitude of occasions throughout the fieldwork.

The youth friendly adaptation chosen by the youth department in Helsinki and its youth workers sometimes turned out to be counterproductive and frustrating as it forced participants to consider whether or not they were losing their dignity from playing along or not. During one of the school votes, as a local youth worker was explaining how the voting works, one of the students stood up and exclaimed "*Surprise, surprise, the youth understand something and they know how to read too. Could we just vote?*" This was the strongest breach of the politeness strategy and most face-threatening act observed during the fieldwork. The speaker, without a doubt, was feeling confident that his comment would not be perceived as shameless, and consequently not at risk of losing face in front of his peers and the local youth workers. It seems, this reaction was prompted by a tension often apparent in the interaction between youth workers and young people brought about by patronizing attitudes such as referring to the young as children and expecting them to sit still and keep quiet until they are given permission to act. That the speaker was not afraid to stand up and make his remark and the fact that none of the others present wished to challenge him or speak in favour of the youth workers confirms this tension in interaction.

There was a difference between how participants occupying positions of marginal influence expressed their doubts and criticism compared to the participants occupying core positions in the process. Most of the workshop participants were committed to the process and proud to be involved, even expressing moral positions in favour of their participation over that of someone else. Nevertheless, non-participation was also visible. Some participants did not take part in discussions, choosing to toy with their phones, look the other way when someone was speaking, or otherwise reject to contribute. Youth workers dismissed this during a debrief by stating that he/she was not doing so well and had been placed in the group as an integrative measure. Perhaps, but one of the outspoken objectives of the process was to give voice to a multitude of youth. Whereas

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core participants were nicely playing along and doing what the youth workers asked them to do, participation in positions of marginal influence tended to consist of frame braking acts comparable to what Engin Isin (2009) calls writing the script versus playing along. Isin (2009, 379) defines acts as “...those that ‘create a scene’, which means both performance and disturbance. Creating a scene means to call into question the script itself. Acts are ruptures or beginnings but are not impulsive and random reactions to a scene.” These deviations from the routines were the strongest signals in the field that there was something troubling with the participatory method and should not be dismissed as freak occurrences or kids making fun.

The youth friendly adaptation of participatory budgeting developed for the two workshops consisted of participants sitting on the floor, cutting and gluing pieces of glossy magazines onto posters and organizing post-it notes across flipcharts instead of discussing, testing ideas and considering competing opinions. Four workshop representatives later attended the executive committee meeting together with city officials and commented on the stark contrast.

Fanny: Well there (at the executive committee meeting) were less people present so we could discuss the issues at hand and be more flexible. The meeting was around a table and there were chairs for everyone...

Mikko: Sometimes I feel (in the workshops) we are jumping from one thing to the other; there (in the executive committee) we actually had an agenda, which made things clear. These workshop meetings have been mainly drawing and such...

Fanny: ...gluing pieces of paper together....

Mikko: Feels like being in kindergarten... it's crazy to spend time on stuff like that and then to have to hurry and not have enough time to do anything proper.

Fanny: ...it goes like: "You have five minutes to finish this thing and then continue with the next"

Both participants in the margins and the core of the process shared similar scepticism in terms of the participatory method and its “youth friendly” approach. Their participation was characterised by a strategy of cautious observation and critical evaluation.

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However, the core participants, assured by having been selected for the task were less overt in their criticism.

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Informing about the possibility to participate

Given that this case was pilot project some hiccups could be expected. Paraphrasing Jürgen Habermas the authorities were taking strategic rather than communicative action in their implementation of participatory budgeting.

The decision to carry out the pilot project was made in early February 2013 by the city youth board followed a few days later by a small announcement in the main Finnish newspaper (Helsingin Sanomat 2013). A short memo was distributed to youth actors in the area a month before the introductory participatory budgeting event. However, the chance to participate was not advertised in local schools, newspapers, online or in the youth centres. At the introductory event participants did not receive an explanation of the process that was to follow the event or what kind of influence the participants had. Despite youth workers cooperating with local schools some of the workshop participants were accused of truancy and had to face disciplinary measures in their schools, when in fact they were at the youth centre taking part in the participatory budgeting. Fung (2006) highlights the necessity of clearly informing about how the participation is linked with participation or policy action. Involving minipublics can be done in several different ways all of which will affect the perceived legitimacy and justice of the participation (Fung 2006, 70-72). Surely none of these factors increased the incentive to participate, seeing that getting time off from schools was an important motivational factor for many participants.

Mikko: I tried to tell a few young people about this, but they weren't really interested. Someone more influential should, maybe during morning assembly at school, present this.

Emma: That we are deciding on common issues, maybe then more people would want to join.

The participants considered participation important and worthwhile, more than half of them attended both workshops. However, they were already what could be called "active" youth in the sense of having other social engagements. There is an irony here in

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the sense that participatory budgeting was hailed by the city as a democratic innovation giving voice to “non-organized” youth rather than activists already engaged with NGO’s and political party youth sections. Early in the process the selection of participants for the workshops was said to follow the principle of self-selection Fung (2006, 67), meaning that the workshops would be open to anyone wishing to attend. However, this changed when the youth department decided to engage a group of active youth that were already associated to a local youth centre. Informing about possibilities to participate is important because it reduces the impact of social capital on who participates and makes participation accessible for everyone. Transparency in the organisation of participation builds trust (Irvin & Stansbury 2004, 61) and educates the public (Beierle 1999, 82) in the decision-making process and the trade-offs involved with different results. Additionally, informing about the possibility to participate can force participants to consider the public good in addition to their own self-interest since more people are bound to know about the participatory process.

Selecting the participants

Local schools brought their ninth-graders to the introductory event. Participation was not voluntary nor was it offered for others. At the event six participants signed up to participate in the workshops and an additional fourteen asked for more information via Facebook. However, by autumn, the youth department decided to use a group associated to a local youth centre, instead of issuing an open call for workshop participants. Effectively this denied the participation of those that signed up regardless of them calling the youth centre to ask when they are expected to be there. The group that was selected to participate in the workshops consisted of twenty 12-16 year old, white, well-behaved youth, many of them active in the school student councils of their schools. This homogeneity could have been representative of youth in the area except that several of the names on the list of volunteers were not typically Finnish.

Discussing who should be chosen to participate in the future, informants were keen to deliver arguments in favour of their own participation. Bearing this in mind many comments also underlined that participants should be suited for the task, suggesting that their selection should be controlled in a just and objective way, such as

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participation in the school student council or the selection of representatives by their teacher. The following is a typical excerpt from a discussion on the topic.

Researcher: How do you think representatives should be chosen here in the future?

Mikko: I think the ones who are active in the school, maybe in the school student council. They should consider who is suited not just select someone randomly.

Hilkka: ...in principle even the teachers could decide who would be good so that we don't select people who come and say I can do it and then they don't do anything anyway.

Satu: People that are really interested and that have the energy to carry through.

All informants expressed sentiments in favour of selecting eager and motivated participants for the workshops. Since the selection to the workshops was not pluralistically representative or mandated by their peers, it is striking how much of the comments echo a demand for accountability in the sense of selecting the “right people for the job”. The workshop participants’ moral positions in favour of their own participation were surprising seeing how they were very much acting along the script compared to participants in the margins of the process who were openly questioning it. It is questionable whether a selection procedure lacking transparency can instil a feeling of responsibility and a sense of accountability towards ones’ peers. Nevertheless, accountability is an important public safeguard in democratic decision-making, especially when participation is not free for all. Critics of deliberative democracy have highlighted the gap between the ideal of deliberation and the way in which it is practised. Differences in race, class, gender and ability cause unequal power relations, and the promotion of self-interest rather than that of the common good, becomes norm (Ercan 2014). This paradox between ideal and praxis, in this case “...trading off inclusion for efficiency or smooth rationality” (Iris Marion Young in Fung 2004) does not support civic renewal, trust in public institutions or democratic participation. Given that the support for the ideas was ranked through school votes it cannot be said that the process was elitist but it certainly failed in including previously unheard voices in decision-making.

On deliberation

Arriving early at the youth centre for the first workshop in October, I had the chance to listen to youth workers planning the day ahead. The timetable was tight. Working in smaller groups, the participants were going to start brainstorming at 09:30, at 09:40 categorize their ideas, at 09:50 refine them and at 10:00 present them to the other groups. Later all informants complained about the lack of time to deliberate and develop solid common proposals.

Researcher: Do you think this was a good way to hear young people?

Mikko: Two hours with two weeks in between...

Fanny: That's it, I feel the process was left unfinished

Mikko: ...it was really offhand, we always had to quit just as we got up to speed.

Emma: We were told "just quickly present it to the rest and see what they think". It was really fast; there wasn't really enough time to do it well.

Mikko: An hour more would have helped a lot.

Fanny: Yes it would, we would have had time to finish our thoughts.

Emma: And there's that staleness in the beginning, nobody says anything even if they have something on their mind... then when we get up to speed and the ideas start flowing, time is up and we need to go.

The lack of time was the main constraint for achieving quality deliberation. Nevertheless, there were other factors involved. The youth workers that prepared presentations for the school votes forgot to include two out of the eight initiatives. Additionally, with the exception of five themes that were initially given to the workshop participants, there was no clear use of material gathered at the introductory event in May. However, even the thematic link was lost to the participants.

Researcher: There were five given themes to discuss in the initial workshop...

Fanny: (Interrupting the question) It would have been nice if young people got to decide which they were. That's the way they give young people the idea that they can

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decide on things and at the end of the day they can't, at least not that... But on the other hand we would have needed a lot of time to decide on five themes.

The influence of participation

Participants to the workshops and the school vote had a defined and palpable influence over the outcome whereas participants at the kick-off turned out to have little or none. Participants at the two workshops conceived the ideas that were brought to the school votes in three local schools. Based on the result of the school votes, an executive committee decided to fund a graffiti-wall, a summer café run by young people, an event against bullying as well as some renovations of the local youth centres. These initiatives are similar to what youth in other European countries participating in comparable processes have asked for (Autio et al. 2008, Borland et al. 2001, Hill et al. 2004, Morrow 2001) that is, places where young people can mingle and interact without feeling threatened or bothered, turning the public image of youth as an unpredictable nuisance into something more positive, preventing bullying and getting help with everyday problems. That these initiatives reflect normal, expectable interests and a spirit of altruism in deliberation, certainly adds legitimacy to the outcome of the process.

Arriving at decisions that truly reflect the needs and interests of those concerned is the primary argument for participatory budgeting. It is striking how the informants argue in favour of youth participation in very similar terms as political theorists.

Researcher: Do you consider it important to hear young people in decision-making?

Matti: Yes, many things affect young people and they know more about them because they are affected by them everyday.

Hilkka: It (youth participation) would make it more youth like and not what the adults think is best. The voice of the target group should be heard.

Overall, informants in this case were satisfied with the process. However, when asked to define their worst-case scenarios for a participatory process they were all in line with the theoretical formulations of decorative or bad participation as defined by Hart (1992) and echo the sentiments of discontented participants in participatory budgeting studied by Talpin (2011).

Researcher: So far you seem content but what would change that?

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Tiina: The worst would be if they just forget our ideas.

Matilda: That nothing came of it.

Researcher: How would that feel?

Tiina: I would probably feel disappointed.

Juha: Like we wasted our time coming here, missing our lessons at school and at the end nothing comes out of it.

A multi-sited ethnography, researching participatory budgeting in several European countries (Talpin 2011) makes it evident that badly conducted, “decorative”, participatory processes can cause cynicism and disillusionment rather than spurring political agency. Jane Mansbridge (Fung 2004) also raises the point that non-attendance in deliberative meetings is not a signal of satisfaction but rather shows that people have learnt that their views are not given sufficient weight in order to make participation worthwhile. The workshop participants expressed an overall satisfaction with the process. However, it is worth considering, and quite plausible, that some of the participants in positions of marginal influence would recognize themselves in the worst-case scenarios described in the quotes above.

Discussion

This study gives an example of the difficulty in implementing deliberative democracy without wide institutional changes in support of inclusion and transparency. Some conclusions can be made from this. Most of the core participants felt participation in the process was meaningful. Nevertheless, with the exception of the participants in the workshops, young people remained firmly at the margins of the participatory experience. Moreover, the process tended to reinforce hierarchies between adults and youth as well as between the successful and the non-achievers. The results point at preconditions not being the same for all youth and that several factors can limit their full participation such as who can stay away from school and who is punished for doing the same, whose ideas are accepted by the group, who participates in discussions and who fades into the background.

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Analytically this study operates on two levels. The first part of the empirical section deals with interaction, acts and agency of participating youth. This is followed by a structural analysis of the conditions of participation as a guide to understanding the macro-level issues at work. The combination of methods allowed both for an analysis of the meanings the process had for its participants and a comparison of the process with existing theory on procedural legitimacy in deliberation. In addition the combination of methods demonstrates the disparity in power between those selected to participate in the core of the process and those acting in its margins. Interpreting participant interaction indicates that acts that are oftentimes dismissed as wanton disruption by rowdy individuals, should be understood as active opposition to the co-opting of youth in a decision-making process where their influence is mainly symbolic. The significance of these acts (Isin 2009) is that they resist a form of hegemonic dominance that youth are oftentimes exposed to. They constitute what Scott (1989) defines as weapons of the weak. While deliberately provocative, most of this behaviour is strategically offstage. A phenomenon interpreted to be the result of impression management and face work (Goffman 1967).

Procedural theorists have underlined the necessity of fair rules guaranteeing a deliberative process its legitimacy, whereas substantive theorists focus on the fairness of the outcome. However, based on this study the issue of legitimacy is more multifaceted. Compared to theoretical ideal conditions of participation there was much to be improved upon in the case of participatory budgeting presented here. Still, core participants considered their participation fulfilling and rewarding. They showed a sense of pride in being chosen for the task and were without question very committed in their participation whereas those participants that were only present at the margins of the process were subtly challenging and questioning it. This was mostly apparent though their reluctance of uncritically playing along. On the other hand, given the results of the school votes, the satisfaction of core participants with the outcome, and the generally altruistic nature of the initiatives, the political outcome in terms of decisions taken can be considered a successful. In terms of improving the legitimacy of the political decision-making process and including a multitude of youth in these decisions the result was not as clear-cut.

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This study reinforced the relevance of utilizing theoretical definitions of the ideal conditions of participation as a comparative example when evaluating procedural legitimacy in a participatory method. Highlighting the characteristics of selection, information, quality deliberation and influence in the participatory budgeting process is a non-arbitrary way to analyse procedural strengths and weaknesses in any case of democratic participation. That said, judging the fairness of the outcome is a harder task. The result of the process was easily the most tangible batch of local youth-proposed initiatives to be approved of by the city authorities in years. However, looking at the participation of those that remained in the margins of the process, the results are less than stellar. Exclusion, condescending attitudes, sanctions and frustration were but some of the common unrewarding experiences these participants faced. This raises the question of meaningful participation. For whom should participation be meaningful?

Indeed theoretical ideal conditions of participation are crucial factors when it comes to meaningful participation. However, other factors seem to be equally important such as proper deliberation, adapting the process to the skill-level of the participants and allowing them to participate on their own conditions and according to their own agenda. Many have argued against adapting traditional, and in many opinions failed participatory processes for youth participation (Prout 2003, 20-21; Hill et. al. 2004, 86; Morrow 2001). According to these voices, pluralistic youth participation requires methods where specific socioeconomic conditions and cultural capital are not prerequisites for participation. Based on this study it seems that institutions for formal and non-formal learning, through their ambition to increase active citizenship, maintain practices miming adult ways of participation in which participants are not met according to their needs and preconditions. This creates a participatory process that is meaningful first and foremost for the authorities arranging it. These findings closely echo results of studies on participation in other contexts (Berger 2015, Talpin 2011).

Nevertheless, it begs to be stated that several of the informants are still active locally in youth politics and some of their ideas have been realized.

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Fanny: This really opened my eyes, that it's possible to influence decisions. I didn't think too much about the money, that it really exists. It was all quite loose, without too much effort but in the executive committee meeting I realized the money really exists and that this is for real. That we should do this meticulously.

Youth participation and deliberative democracy carries a promise of inclusion and more efficient policy implementation. The conditions required for achieving democratic legitimacy are elusive but in terms of creating a democratic process this study corroborated previous findings in terms of procedural legitimacy (Beierle 1999; Hart 1992; Irvin & Stansbury 2004; Fung 2006) and the misrecognition of participants skills and agency (Berger 2015, Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014, Talpin 2011). In terms of engaging a multitude of youth, motivating them to participate without inhibitions and giving them space for deliberation the process was a failure. However, in terms of engaging some youth in testing a new methodology, gathering experience and developing a new praxis for hearing youth and diverting some public funds to youth initiated projects the process was a success for the youth department. Testing new participatory methods on youth is applaudable but also problematic since experiences can affect attitudes for a lifetime. Without careful design these processes can reaffirm social strata and exclusion rather than achieving the opposite.

A comparative research setting studying different ways local authorities engage youth could elaborate on the how participatory practices can be brought closer to deliberative ideals. Increased data set variation on how youth are given the chance to participate and who chooses to participate in these fora could cast additional light on this issue. In closing it needs to be stated, in the interest of scientific objectivity and the fairness of analysis that critically analysing youth participation from the participant perspective rarely is flattering for those organizing the participation. Discussing the potential for accusations of bias following these situations Becker (1967) proposes using the theoretical and technical resources we have available as scientist to avoid distortion (from sympathizing with informants in subordinate positions) and including a clear sociological disclaimer stating the vantage point of the study. This seems to me the sensible approach and least straining in terms of personal relations in the field. Even so,

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this study could have taken the point of view of the youth workers, critically challenging their superiors for not equipping them with the knowledge, skills and timeframe necessary to conduct participation better. It also needs to be said that although this participatory process was called participatory budgeting there was very little budgeting being carried out, rather participants could propose ideas for action, that were then ranked according to popularity thorough a school vote.

As a result of this first participatory budgeting process the method has now (as of 2016) been expanded to all youth work sections in the city of Helsinki. It is also being tested in the neighbouring city of Espoo. The pilot project presented here failed to live up to its promise of engaging new voices and challenging budgetary priorities within the city youth work. As an alternative to more common methods of youth participation participatory budgeting will not change much, as long as it stumbles on the same problems, namely treating youth as a homogenous group, misrecognizing their skills and capacities and consequently causing frustration and alienation from the political process.

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