



**Youth (-work) and social participation.**

Elements for a practical theory

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## Preface

Participation is in. This much becomes obvious when you take a closer look at youth work. But not only in youth work is participation on everybody's lips. In other sectors also of our ever incipient society we seem to rely more and more on everybody's input. Apart from politicians and other actors in civil society, consumers, citizens, the elderly and youngsters,... are tackled on their social responsibility and stimulated to participate in society. The current policy discourse<sup>1</sup> talks in this respect about an active welfare state and social activation. By that a future perspective is traced out for our society in which everyone participates in the construction and preservation of our welfare according to devoutness and capability. Against the background of this current policy discourse participation often gets an ambivalent meaning. After all, participating can be done in many ways. It can be done by doing what is expected of you. For youngsters it means at the very least studying hard and in anticipation, using leisure sensibly. Participation can also be understood differently, notably helping to steer and to form future society or parts of it.

Here we focus on the last meaning of participation: helping to steer and to form. Youth work supports, facilitates and stimulates for a longer time such a social involvement of young people. Yet in a rapidly changing environment as we know it today, youth work can thereto less fall back on traditional and general frames. Youth workers and policy *makers* experience a need for new and adapted handles. Formulating a practical theory and designing models concerning youth work and participation were the main issues of a Delphi-research<sup>2</sup>, which is reported on here.

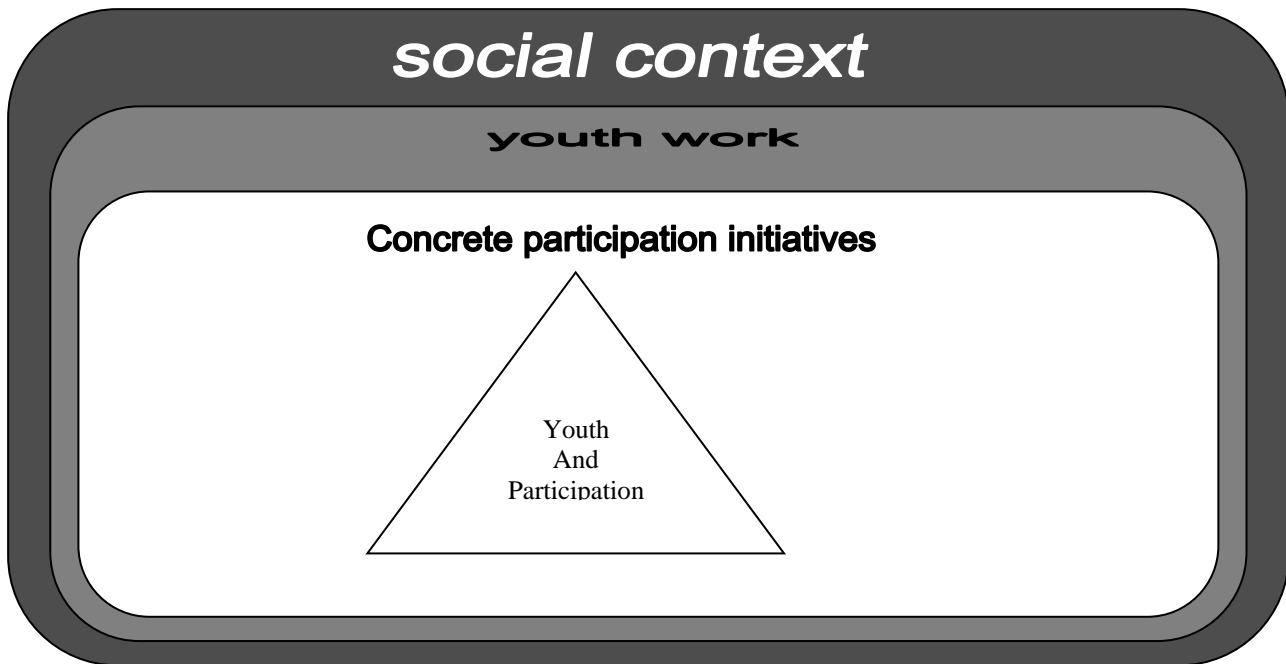
The developed insights are rendered on the basis of the scheme below. We gradually build up the scheme and focus first of all on the young people themselves. We ask ourselves which factors can determine whether or not young people could (or could not) be participative. Next we recognize that the circumstances of concrete participation initiatives are mostly very specific. We look for the appropriate handles that can help go along with these actual circumstances. Then we look at what specific discourses and challenges about youth participation circulate in and about youth work. For youth work<sup>3</sup> is the more specific context in which the inducements for youth participation, here under discussion, have to be placed. Finally, we believe that tendencies in the wider social context can influence concrete practices of youth participation. We mainly pay attention to those social tendencies that the youth organisations involved in the research considered to be qualifying in relation to their concrete initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> with the concept of discourses we are referring to the whole of publicly held and explicated viewpoints on a certain theme. Discourses do not by definition clash with the concrete practices about which they handle.

<sup>2</sup> the Delphi-research 'to a practical theory on youth and participation' was an initiative of JeP! (Jeugd en Participatie, Youth and Participation). During the different rounds of research the insights and models reported on here, were developed and this in close consultation with ten very diverse organisations that are actively working on youth and participation. Those are in alphabetical order: Globelink, Graffiti, In Petto, JeMP (jeugddienst voor Maatschappelijke Participatie, Youth service for social participation), Jeugd en Stad (Youth and City), Jeugd en Vrede (Youth and Peace), Uit de Marge (umbrella organisation for youth work with deprived youngsters), VFJ (Vlaamse Federatie Jeugdhuizen, Flemish Federation Youth clubs), VLASTROV (Vlaams Straathoekwerkoverleg, Flemish consultation of social workers concerned primarily with homeless young people) and VSK (Flemish umbrella of scholars). With the exception of VLASTROV and VSK all these organisations are recognized as national youth work. The input of VSK and VLASTROV in the Delphi-research proves that the relevance of the formulated insights carries further than the decretal defined youthwork.

<sup>3</sup> footnote 2 goes to show that we use a wider definition of "youth work" and that we do not restrict ourselves to the decretal regulated youth work.



Against the background of our complex current society, definite participation initiatives with and for young people take various shapes.

*I notice that participation is very complex, in fact, much more complicated than I initially thought. The various definitions, different contents given to that term and the terms connected to it by different organisations who each approach that concept from a different background and context, make the concept very hazy. (JeP! Research seminar 1)*

It is therefore desirable to explicit the different basic principles of this research report. We do this prior to the elaboration of the scheme above. This is important because these basic principles define on the one hand the domain we want to tackle, but explicit on the other hand also social options and choices with regard to young people and social participation.

## 1. Our basic principles

It would be misleading to represent the basic principles below as if they were given at the beginning of the Delphi-research. A number of these principles and their explicitness are also the outcome of the Delphi-research. The advancing reflection on youth work and youth participation which was stimulated by the Delphi-method<sup>4</sup> prompted us several times to explicit our basic principles. Choices were made during the course of the survey, which on the one hand imply a vision on youth work and youth participation and on the other hand define the domain<sup>5</sup>. Certainly as far as domain delimitation is concerned, it is absolutely likely that other standpoints are chosen that may lead to an inspiring story about youth participation. In order to set our story in a right context, we first explicit our basic principles.

When talking about young people and participation, it is obvious that youngsters are central actors. This is less obvious for the youth work as an actor. It is absolutely possible that young people would participate in society or parts of it through no fault of youth work. Here we explicitly incorporate youth work next to young people as a central actor.

<sup>4</sup> the phasing of the Delphi-research is incorporated under cover.

<sup>5</sup> we fully realize that each delimitation implies a reduction of the complex reality. On the other hand it allows us to take more convenient parts as basic principles for reflection and analysis.

For we develop insights on which part youth work can play when it wants to support, stimulate and facilitate social participation of young people.

What is more, we believe that participation of young people can offer an excess value to society. This proposition was endorsed by all organisations.

*There is not only an excess value to society because young people have another perspective to contribute or an own input ...I also think there is a surplus value because you give them the opportunity to effectively be a part of society and to consequently feel better in a society which becomes a part of them. Because they can give a meaning in that shared space, they can help to colour that shared space, help to outline it and become a joint owner of that society. (JeP! research seminar 1)*

In the preface we already pointed out what we want to understand under the notion of participation: helping to steer and shaping our society or parts of it. Deprived young people who are involved in the educational system or offer their services on the labour market, but also young people who take part in activities of a soccer team or of a youth movement are attributed passive participation. They accept an offer, take part in activities that are to a great extent designed by others. We do not talk about passive participation to begin with. We rather aim at the active participation of young people. We can attribute active participation to young people when they one way or the other, whether or not successful, challenge our community or try to influence the program of the youth movement or the soccer club. We will focus on this active meaning in what is to follow. Later on it will become clear that what we call active and passive participation can not be easily distinguished. There is a complex relationship between the both of them. In anticipation we can say that passive participation often is an important breeding ground for active participation and that the limit between the both of them cannot always clearly be set.

A third basic principle in our vision is that participation processes are strongly contextual, embedded in social developments and structures. 'Participation' can never be seen separately from the social context. It is important to also charge that context. Consequently we cannot or do not want to express a value judgement on concrete initiatives without estimating the specific context. Every initiative has its own circumstances, depends on them and has to be judged in that given situation.

Closely related to this, we state that young people form a heterogeneous group in our society. One cannot too easily make the assumption that all young people can be generalized. Here we explicitly want to bear in mind the diversity among youngsters. Young people are conspicuous for their origin, interests, education, lifestyle choices, age and so on. Initiatives for the promotion of participation of young people will accordingly not only have to take the specific context into account, but also the individuality of the group of young people with whom is worked.

Young people obviously do not solely have to rely on the doing of youth workers to take part in society or parts of it. In their everyday activities within the framework of their life world, they constantly appropriate the social and physical space, put a meaning to that space and try to bend that space in their way to their will. From their spontaneous enthusiasm for, just like from their spontaneous aversion to all kinds of initiatives, developments and trends, a strong influence could go out to other actors in society. Similar participation is often less formal and organized than the one aimed at by youth work. When we want to learn how we can stimulate youth participation in the framework of youth work, we must pay attention to these actual and informal forms of youth participation. Youth work initiatives who try to play along with this, fit the interests and motives of young people most likely better. Recognizing this actual participation requires a basic attitude originating from the competence and potency of youngsters. We will learn later on that such a basic attitude is not always and everywhere present in our society.

Youth workers who want to promote social participation of young people face a complicated task. The youth worker will not only have to judge the concrete context, but also the specificity of the youngsters with whom is worked. Moreover other actors like policymakers, teachers and parents will often be the party concerned in the initiated processes. The position, interests, possibilities and basic attitude of those other actors will also have to be judged by the youth worker. Such assessments are essential to be able to design initiatives to size and require skills like critical reflection, discretion, analysis and synthesis<sup>6</sup> from the youth worker. Starting from the basic principles sketched above, youth workers

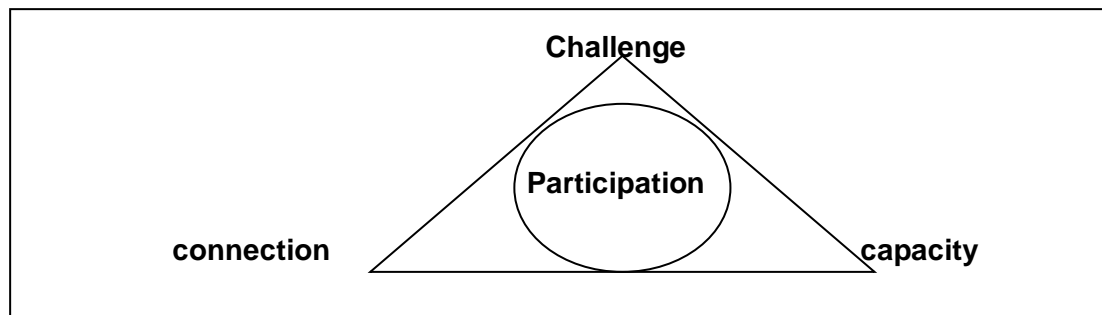
can no longer continue along the general guidelines to act. There is a need for interpretive practitioners who on the basis of reflection, time and again will have to draw up context and target group-bound actions. For these reasons we cannot present universal guidelines to act here but we have to restrict ourselves to formulating insights and models which can help the youth worker to judge the specific context and to design appropriate actions.

## 2. Young people participate!

Young people are undeniably a part of society. They take part in several organized activities. These activities are constructive for and integrated in the activities of adults, even though they are not usually given this meaning in this way. Through these activities young people actually participate in the design of their immediate environment. In that way they appropriate themselves constantly physical and social space<sup>7</sup> in which they proceed and which they give a meaning. Throughout their young course of life they learned and learn how to influence that space. This learning process passes off to a great extent in an informal way and is not so much the output of formal education or forming efforts. The competence young people acquire in that way is used when they feel sufficiently challenged to realize changes in their environment or to take part in designing that environment.

Against the background of our rapidly changing present society the meaning of the notion of 'active citizenship' changes. On research appears that adults also today are constantly learning to give 'their' active citizenship<sup>8</sup> an interpretation in an informal and personal manner. There are three distinguished dimensions in this learning process that are necessary basic conditions and in varying combinations and accents steer<sup>9</sup> the learning process, namely challenge, connection and capacity. Young people will actively participate in society or parts of it when there is a dynamic balance among these three dimensions.

Scheme 2: three structuring dimensions of youth participation



6 Jans & Percy-Smith (1999) and Wildemeersch (2000) refer to 'interpretive professional', aiming at the skill of among others youth workers to critically reflect on their actions with a view to designing more adequate actions which reckon with uncertainties, the specificity and the complexity proper to the context in which and the target group with whom they work.

7 cf Baacke, 1976

8 Stroobants, V., Celis, R., Snick, A. and Wildemeersch, D., 2001.

9 Stroobants, Celis, Snick & Wildemeersch (2001) talk about the three C's: challenge, capacity, connection

In the first place, there has to be a question of ‘a **challenge**’ which incites to participating. This can be a personal or social theme to which the young person is attracted and for which he or she wants to devote him or herself to. Youth work can only succeed in stimulating participation when young people are open to it, when young people see enough challenges in the initiatives of youth work. We may not too quickly presume that what youth work defines as a challenge for young people, always is a challenge for young people also.

*Young people give an own agenda to participation. We often presume that young people do not find certain activities interesting, but the challenge for youngsters often differs from the challenge of youth work. (JeP! research seminar 2)*

Secondly young people need to feel that they can have a grasp on the challenge and can make a difference through their efforts. Their ‘**capacity**’ to make a difference will to a great extent incite to participatory action. This capacity contains specific knowledge as well as experiences, skills, insights and strategies. Young people can only significantly take advantage of a challenge when they can use their skills. Youth work initiatives that insufficiently fit in with the capacity of the concrete target group, will not be widely approved of. We can play along with that capacity of young people with information and training. Next to that, initiatives can also be taken by youth work which aim at connection and challenge.

The dimensions of challenge and capacity relate to each other in a specific way<sup>10</sup>. Participation requires on the one hand a need to do something, to change. On the other hand the necessary competences have to be present. Both dimensions are best in a dynamic balance. A lack of capacity may lead to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. A lack of challenge can lead to routine behaviour and feelings of meaninglessness<sup>11</sup>. A chain of incentives and initiatives which lead to a failure is undesirable and can lead to embedded feelings of powerlessness or senselessness. During the different rounds of consultation in the Delphi-research it became clear more than once that this danger is not unimaginable. Therefore we want to emphasize the importance of successful experiences. When youth work incites youth participation, well-practicable, realistic aims can be put first. A chain of successes can be an extra incentive for youth work as well as for young people.

Finally young people have to feel ‘**connected**’ with and supported by humans, communities, ideas, movements, range of thoughts, organisation,... in order to work together on the challenge. A number of youth work organisations play along with this connection in a strong way, by seeking alliance with other youth cultures, friendship relations among young people or specific attitudes of the young. The possibilities of connection however, cannot confine themselves to the limits of youth work. On the basis of an expanded dialogue between youngsters and adults, JeP!<sup>12</sup> believes that young people also want to be supported by adults.

Youth workers who want to promote the social participation of youngsters best know the relationship of the three dimensions of ‘challenge, capacity and connection’ within a given target group in a given context. When designing useful incentives one ventures a dynamic balance exercise among the three dimensions. Depending on the young people in a given context, it can be useful to look for a powerful common challenge, look for an expansion of the existing capacity and or the strengthening of bonds among youngsters and between youngsters and other actors.

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<sup>10</sup> according to Gronemeyer (1976) each action is determined by the tension between an experience of need and of competence.

<sup>11</sup> Vandenabeele, 1999, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> JeP! (Youth and Participation) is a collaboration of different youth work organisations and initiator of this Delphi-research. On their second website you can find de JeP! mission statement ([www.jep.be](http://www.jep.be)).

### 3. Youth organisations take action!

Concrete participation initiatives organized by youth work balance between challenge, capacity and connection among young people. A feasible balance between these three dimensions does not only depend on the features of the young people involved, but also on the specific circumstances in which these initiatives are embedded. In the framework of youth work we can distinguish several initiatives. Those can be concrete projects, organisational interventions, planning processes, network development and so on. Concrete participation initiatives is what we mean by more or less demarcated entities of actions aimed at the promotion of involvement and the contribution of youngsters. Suchlike initiatives are frequently organized and differ from each other because they are aimed at different groups of young people and diverse actors. They aim at a variation of objectives and operate in different specific circumstances. Each of these initiatives will to a greater or lesser extent have to face a number of choices. One can opt for the promotion of external or internal participation, for direct and indirect participation and for participation through structures and/or through more spontaneous bonds and channels. With reference to concrete participation initiatives it seems useful to dwell upon these different shapes of participation and in relation to the concrete target group, objectives and circumstances emphasize in an adapted way

#### 3.1. Internal and/or external participation

Youth work obviously is a part of our current society, also and exactly because it is under discussion from time to time. At the same time youth work is to a great extent a sector of society reserved for young people. Due to this ambivalence of youth work the line between youth work or more generally the youth land<sup>13</sup> and society cannot be clearly set. That is why we draw a dotted line in scheme 3.

When young people contribute to affairs that take place in youth land, via interactions between youngsters on the one hand and youth workers and/or youth organisations<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, we speak of internal participation. Through internal participation young people can help to steer and shape developments in youth work or parts of it. We found that a number of youth organisations involved young people in their policy structures, for instance as administrators.

Youth work however is not just an island in society. (Youth) organisations are indisputably part of society, of the public domain, just like young people themselves. When young people in interactions with youth workers, youth organisations or other actors from the public domain<sup>15</sup> influence on matters beyond the youth land we speak of external participation. Through external participation young people can play a part in social decision taking with repercussions for other actors in the public domain. Some youth organisations for instance devote themselves to get a say of young people with regard to local developments or even global developments on the agenda of the public debate.

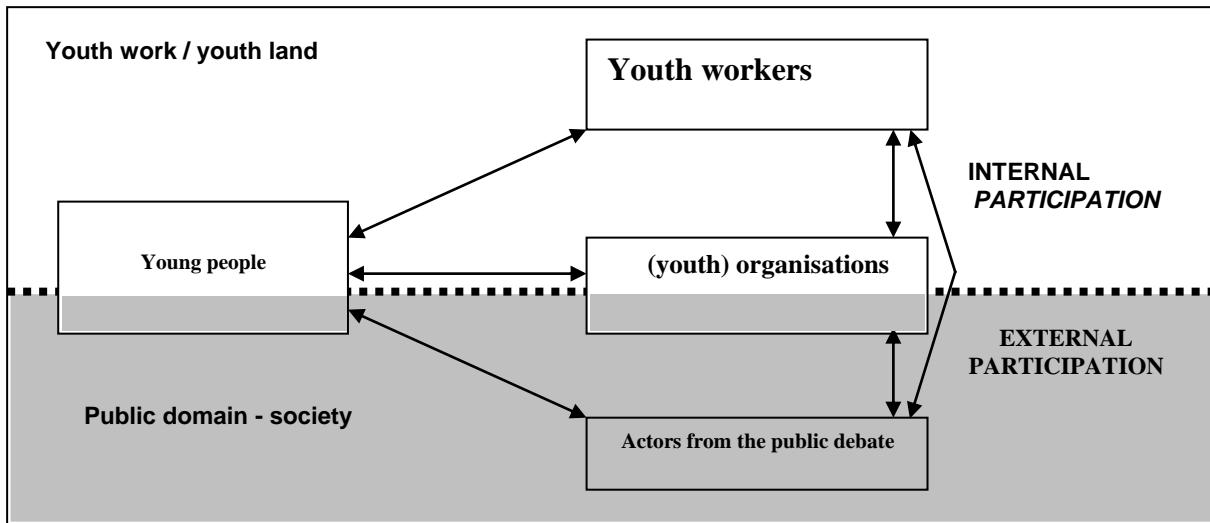
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<sup>13</sup> We borrow the notion youth land from L. Dasberg (1984). We mean to indicate these niches in society that are especially constructed for youngsters, like youth work, the educational system, child care,...

<sup>14</sup> We use the notion youth organisation to point to a large range of organisational constructions in which youngsters are central actors. They can be formal organisations, youth councils, informal networks,...

<sup>15</sup> Other actors in the public domain can be: politicians, public administrators, action groups, neighbours,...

Scheme 3: internal and external participation

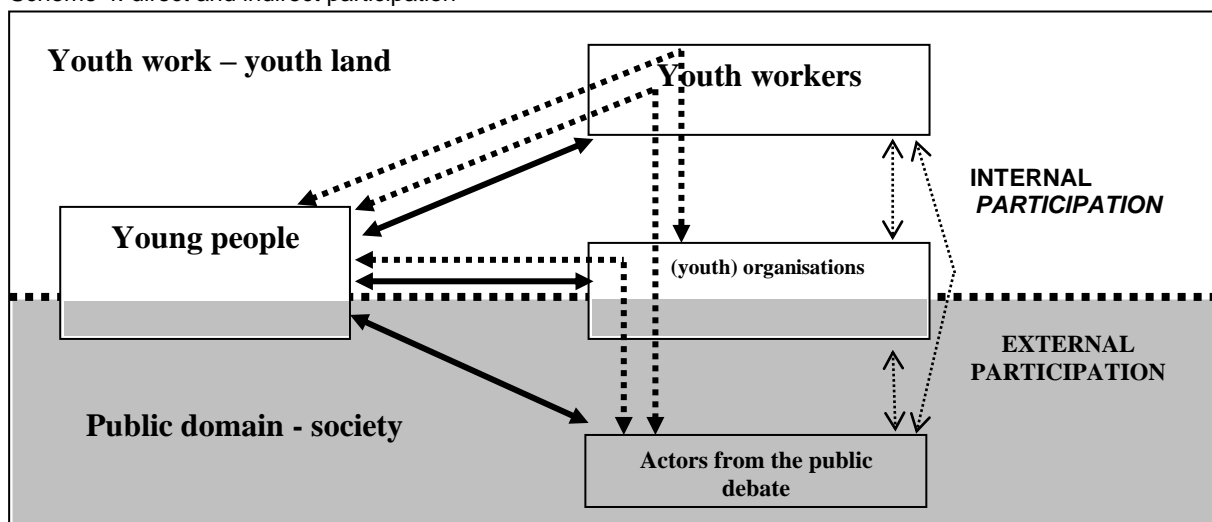


External and internal participation sometimes go perfectly hand in hand, but that does not always have to be the case. Youth participation rarely is univocally external or internal, exactly because youth land undeniably is a part of society. The difference between external and internal participation can be of importance when planning participation initiatives. Depending on the youngsters, the targets and the specific circumstances, more or less attention can be paid to the promotion of internal and/or external forms of participation. Initiatives aimed at the fortification of youth facilities can to a great extent pay attention to internal participation. Initiatives that want to profile youngsters as an actor on the public forum will have to pay attention to external participation.

### 3.2 Direct and/or indirect participation

When interactions between youngsters and other actors involved go about without (the help of) intermediaries we talk about direct participation. These direct interactions are indicated with a full line in the scheme below. When intermediaries - in the framework of youth work often youth workers and/or (youth) organisations – mediate the interaction between youngsters and other actors, we talk about indirect participation. Somebody else speaks for the young people. The thick dotted lines in the scheme below represent this indirect form of participation.

Scheme 4: direct and indirect participation





Each initiative can also here look for a context specific balance between both. The question is whether one prefers direct contact of young people with for instance the policy makers or whether they represent the voice of youngsters through youth workers. The ideal balance between both will self-explanatory depend on the context.

*Our organisation works a lot via indirect participation. I think this is largely determined by the context in which we work. For us this is on the one hand a metropolis and on the other the specific target group. We do this because direct participation in big cities can sometimes lead to disappointments. (JeP! Research seminar 1)*

Direct interactions between young people and other involved actors can be very useful. This way other involved actors can learn to see the viewpoints of young people through their perspective and vice versa.

On the basis of direct participation young people can acquire much more direct and faster feedback on their contribution. Improper, strategic use of direct interactions between youngsters and for instance policy makers carries possible risks. Young people are in some cases allowed to come and shake hands, but have no say in the actual interactions.

Indirect interaction also has its benefits. Competent intermediaries are used when one wants the influence of young people to be felt on short notice. Certainly when that intermediary is an experienced negotiator and has an understanding of the complexity of the facing challenge, his or her intervention can make a difference.

*We think that our target group often directly takes part in policy and advisory bodies, discussions, networks.. But it is often the case that young people are new there or not experienced in certain themes or do not master the used language. When they participate in that, we support them often by giving an explanation by the theme, in a simpler language. Maybe that is already intermediating but not exactly taking the place of. (JeP! Research seminar 1)*

A prerequisite however is that the go-between has direct interactions with the young people concerned.

*As an adult you must pay attention not to use or abuse your own values and standards (JeP! Research seminar 2)*

Participation can not purely be seen as an instrument to promote interests. It is also a learning process. Young people as well as the other actors concerned can learn through participation<sup>16</sup>. Therefore it is important not to limit the interactions to intermediated interactions. The learning process will imply for the young as well as for the other actors additional possibilities when also direct interaction can be made possible.

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<sup>16</sup> Wildemeersch and Berkers, 1997.

### 3.3 the degree of the structuring of participation

Initiatives aimed at youth participation distinguish themselves by the degree in which that participation is structured. In the case of highly structured participation, interactions between young people and other actors<sup>17</sup> will go off through pre-structured channels. Youth and pupil councils are a good example of that. Such forms of structured participation offer benefits: structures allow youngsters to participate well-prepared in the policy. They are a recognisable form of address for other involved actors and structures make it possible to provide the participation of young people with continuity.

In highly structured forms of participation there is often worked with representatives. When this is the case, the representatives are often inquired after their legitimacy.

*You are indeed snowed under by reactions: "Youth councils, you do not represent youth!" Youth councils are obligated to reach unorganised and socially vulnerable young people. They have to legitimate themselves constantly and this is inherent in the structure. (JeP! Research seminar 1)*

We talk about less structured participation when interactions between young people and other involved actors are not regulated beforehand. The participation of youngsters then has a more spontaneous character. This often fits in better with the life world of young people. Participation in a more spontaneous way however often is also more passing.

From an intervention point of view there will always have to be a certain degree of structure. Youth workers and policy makers will – in their efforts to promote participation- have to aim at a balanced degree of the structuring of that participation. Here also this balance will be dependent on the context.

### 3.4 Participation: a process and/or a product?

In youth work, a lot of importance is placed on the process. Experiencing things together and also group work receive a lot of attention. Suchlike process- targeted approach is stimulating for the participation of young people. It creates conditions so that young people would feel connected. But in participation initiatives, the product, namely the result, can also be important. Concrete results can be stimulating for youngsters. It is important, depending on the concrete target group but also on the context, to give more or less weight to the product or the process. When youngsters feel insufficiently connected, a process-aimed approach will grow in significance. When they on top of this feel highly challenged a product-aimed approach can step in the limelight.

Within a product-aimed approach of participation it is assumed that the input of young people has to result in a concrete difference. Cash on the nail, participation has to be productive. It has to influence the policy. However, it is not always simple to point out the obvious results of youth participation. Policy may run through whimsical ways. The final influence of young people, but also of other actors, is sometimes hard to judge. This can be discouraging. Hence the importance of feedback. Policy actors and midfield players best point out what the input of young people means to them.

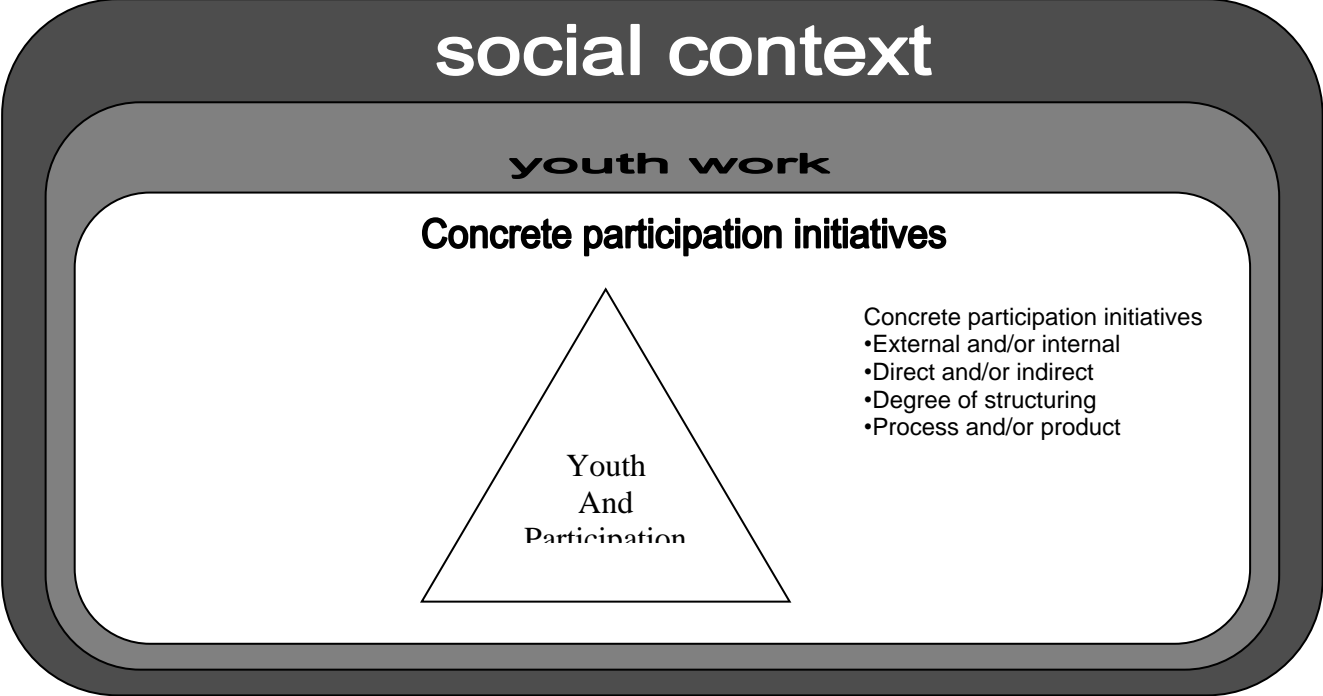
Youth workers can, from an intervention perspective, give other definitions to the desired product or result, than young people (themselves) do. Some youth organisations find that participating in itself is an important motive for youngsters to participate. By participating young people can learn a lot and these learning effects form for them sometimes a sufficiently satisfying effect. When we see participation as a learning process, we mostly start from a process-aimed approach. The way in which participation goes by and is or is not made possible comes than more to attention. Interventions from suchlike approaches are less focussed on the desired effect of youth participation, as on the course of it.

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<sup>17</sup> these are the interactions represented in figures 3 and 4 by means of arrows.

On the level of concrete participation initiatives it becomes clear that youth workers and policymakers who have the competence to judge the concrete context, will succeed better in looking for workable balances between internal and external participation, between direct and indirect participation, between strongly and rather weakly structured participation, between a process and a product-aimed approach.

Scheme 5: concrete initiatives in a concrete context.



The context in which youth workers and policy makers work however, is not only made up of these dynamic balances on the level of concrete participation initiatives. The youth worker will also have to gain a clear understanding of the more abstract circumstances in which he or she will work. Youth work, as sectorial framework and the broader social context also determines these circumstances and are successively discussed in the following chapters. Exactly because youth work as a sectorial framework and social perceptions on youth and participation are harder to put into guidelines to act, the possibilities of the interpretive practitioner will be appealed to in an excessive way.

## **4. Youth work, an institutional framework**

Ever since its inception, youth work has always been in a field of tension between social aims (preparing young people for society) and offering a space, a place to experiment where youngsters can and are allowed to be themselves<sup>18</sup>. This field of tension will also entail possibilities and sometimes even limitations when young people in the framework of youth work are stimulated to participate.

### **4.1. Participation as a standard**

In youth work, participation is a hot item. However, this is not new. Against the background of youth work as a field of tension, the notion of participation draws for quite a while now the attention. As far as youth work is concerned, participation seems to have become some sort of a standard. On the basis of that norm youth work initiatives are sometimes judged and sometimes even denounced. Even the notion of participation carries a great charge in youth work. Organisations feel reproached when they are told that they do not do too little work participatively. By participation is often meant : involving young people in the decision-taking of the organisation. Some organisations identify themselves very closely with the notion of participation. This involving of young people in the own functioning also forms the identity of organisations.

At the same time, this could be a pitfall. The concept of participation often is so normative that one hardly can or dares to critically approach the own practice. The person who asks critical questions on the level of participation of youth work initiatives, soon receives defensive answers. He who questions the level of participation of an organisation, obviously also questions the identity of that organisation. Nevertheless, it is important to be able to think in a critical reflexive way about the own practice. We even put this first as a necessary condition to design useful participation initiatives in complex and specific circumstances. A sound balance between closing the ranks regarding normative starting points like participation on the one hand and openness to critical reflection on the other would prove to be very useful to youth work.

### **4.2 Youth work: an experiential expert**

In real terms of youth work activities, pedagogic aims are rarely put first. The voluntary engagement, the purely taking part in pleasant activities with friends is in most cases priority number one. This is often also amply sufficient to lead to social desired results like citizenship, sense of responsibility critical thinking<sup>19</sup>. How do they do it? In the framework of youth work appears what we earlier on called passive participation as an important condition for active participation. The main issue for a lot of youth work initiatives is to reach young people and to let them be present. The rest will follow almost by itself.

Earlier we said that youth work undeniably is a part of society. In that sense youth work forms for young people a part of society and is youth work de facto a social training place for them. Youth work is a strong experiential expert when it comes to involving young people in their life world, in activities, in the own organisation and this exactly because of the continuous relation to the field of tension between letting go and initiating. Many (youth) organisations believe for quite a while now that the social training place they offer, has to be created and filled in as much as possible by the young people themselves. Paying attention to internal participation is thus not new in youth work. One has already acquired a lot of relevant experience with it. Obviously it is an asset that youth work can rely on this experiential expertise. When youth workers and policy makers plan participation initiatives, they are likely to find quite some inspiration in the rich experience of youth work. Nevertheless, it will always be a challenge to context specifically set in that experience.

### **4.3 commitments to achieve results**

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<sup>18</sup> De Backer, K.& Van Effelterre, E., 2001.

<sup>19</sup> This thesis was exhaustively argued by Elhardus, Huyse and Hooghe, 2001.

The pedagogic tension of youth work also brings along a number of risks for the participation initiatives it sets up. Exactly because of the earlier mentioned experiential expertise youth work is sometimes asked for carrying out participation projects for third persons. Youth work organisations accept these for various reasons. Suchlike questions are often bound by commitments to achieve results.

In participation projects, these commitments to achieve results are often experienced as very threatening. It is often the case that suchlike participation initiatives are financially dependent. Very often this dependence reveals itself in regard to the subsidizing authorities. Self-evidently, these authorities will foster expectations of their own with regard to the means spent. The expectations of the government and the own motives of youth work do not always converge. Commitments to achieve results may sometimes be experienced as a non-productive straitjacket. Conditions that steer the ins and outs of projects and initiatives, can divert the attention of youth organisations from the participation idea.

A track to dike in the risk of suchlike straitjacket is to work with indicators of effort. With that the procedure is also agreed on and not only or unilaterally the desired results.

This way of working offers youth work organisations the chance to set their own conditions to participation projects and to warn policy makers for too ambitious expectations.

#### **4.4 model of consensus or of conflict**

The expectations of the different actors involved in the public domain with regard to initiatives in which young people are stimulated to take part in can be different. Policy actors mainly look at suchlike initiatives through the perspective of their policy and expect a social return of them. Other actors with obvious interests will mainly be watchful and make sure that the input of young people will not affect their interests. Youth workers do not necessarily have the same expectations as young people do. In other words, there are many differences of interests and even discrepancies of interests are thinkable in the framework of youth work initiatives aimed at the participation of young people.

Suchlike initiatives often open Pandora's box. Contradictions, tensions, disagreements, differences in vision, everything can get a chance. It does not have to lead to conflicts, but it can. The danger is that it will not find any hearing, and that projects founder on conflicts between the different involved actors. This can be avoided by clearly and mutually formulating the own objectives and starting points, before submitting a list of demands. Nevertheless it is also important to leave a space for friction, tension and conflict because this is often inherent to participation. On the condition that these conflicts are used to enter into useful interaction with each other, they may even constructively contribute to the participation of young people.

When setting up participation initiatives youth work better not starts from a model of consensus. Beforehand fostering expectations that everything will pass in harmony, is unrealistic. When there is a space left for a model of conflict in youth work, a space is created for reflection on the frictions and the tensions that could occur.

With regard to the sectorial embedding of youth participation in youth work we have explained four elements. In youth work, participation is often used as a standard. This indicates the importance people set to youth participation. That is the reason why youth work could already build up quite some useful experiential expertise. But also a normative framework can be stiffening and the experiential expertise will each time have to be used context specifically. This requires reflexive skills of the initiators. Commitments to achieve results just like the romantic seduction that could start from a model of consensus may imply risks with regard to youth participation.

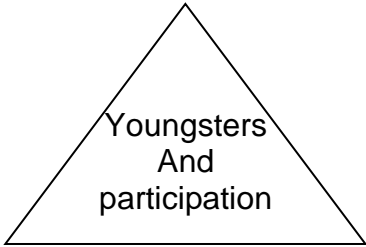
Scheme 6: elements of the youth work context

# social context

## youth work

**participation as a norm**  
**experiential expertise**  
**commitments to achieve results**  
**exaggerated models of consensus**

### Concrete participation initiatives



Youngsters  
And  
participation

## 5. Ruling social perceptions

We stated in our starting points that participation is context-bound. The broader social context will hence influence to a great extent the concrete participation initiatives. The organisations to whom we applied, supply different points of interest that influence their practice. The social thinking on children and young people and the way people look at participation are central elements to that.

### 5.1 present-day youth

Youth and young people seem to mark out a social group. This has grown historically. During the Middle Ages there was hardly spoken of a separate youthful age group. It was only during the eighteenth century that some sort of scientific notion of adolescence began to grow. In Belgium we know since the beginning of the nineteenth century the origin of the Catholic youth groups and a little while later the growth of the student movement. The majority of the young people at that time however worked in factories or on the land.

It is only after the introduction of child welfare and the introduction of the 48 hour week (1921) that something like leisure time was at one's disposal and that people could begin to think in terms of a youth age for everybody. Around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a more general idea on 'youth' comes to existence<sup>20</sup>. Young people obtain more and more a statute of their own, are allocated an own space to experiment. The way society sees youth land, is determining for the way society looks at social participation of youngsters. The perception of young people as 'citizens in a reserve' can lead to a deficiency approach of young people:

In the frame of such an approach, youngsters are seen as 'adults in training' or 'citizens in the making'<sup>21</sup>. They are in a psychosocial moratorium, in the waiting room of society. They do not know everything yet, and can not do everything yet. A deficiency model causes in practice that young people are not always taken seriously. Participation projects are filled in with a preventive, a pedagogic or an instrumental aim. They serve to guard young people from dangers, to teach something or to digest policy arguments. The deficiency approach is sometimes deeply rooted, as well in the case of policy makers as in the case of youth work organisations. A reflexive attitude with regard to the own vision and the own procedure seems useful.

*"The youth worker in some cases takes too much the place of the young person. Sometimes, a part of the power should be given back to the young person. It is also not easy. Sometimes some young persons need to be protected, but on the other hand there is often overprotection."* (JeP! research seminar 2)

In this report we start from the belief in the possibilities of young people to actually actively participate in society or specific parts of it. The attention goes out to the positive qualities and the potential present among youngsters. Such a basic principle or approach is what we call a competence approach<sup>22</sup>. Such a competence approach however is not always sufficiently present in all circumstances. When young people themselves, the youth workers or the other involved actors start from a deficiency perspective, it seems appropriate to first take favourable actions. Only afterwards useful participation initiatives can be designed.

The growing pressure exerted on the boundaries of youth land is partly caused by new ideas on society. We live in a risk society<sup>23</sup>: risks are connected to the rapid social shifts, as well for society as for individuals within that society. A dominant social perception believes that children and young people have to be protected against risks as social discrimination, criminality, drugs, sexual and other abuse.

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<sup>20</sup> De Backer, K. and Van Effelterre, E., 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Verhellen (1991) and Van Gils (1999) speak in this respect of the 'not-yet approach'.

<sup>22</sup> Wildemeersch, D. & Jansen, T., 1995.

<sup>23</sup> we adopt the notion of risk society from prominent sociologists like Beck (1986) and Giddens (1991).

Next to that and at the same time the notion of 'active citizenship' applies more and more to children and young people. Young people are more and more seen as individuals with rights of their own<sup>24</sup>. They are increasingly stimulated to present themselves as autonomous individuals, to express their wishes and expectations and to develop a lifestyle of their own<sup>25</sup>.

This social ambiguity, namely that children and young people are simultaneously regarded as an object to protect and as subject of self-development, creates a very ambivalent approach of children and young people<sup>26</sup>. By this we mean that children in this day and age simultaneously are on the one hand encouraged to present themselves as individuals with rights and possibilities of their own and on the other as an object of concern and control and this more than they used to. Children and young people obtain at the same time and paradoxically on the one hand more space to do their own thing and on the other they are subjected to more control, control to protect them against all kinds of risks. The tension between the protection of young people and giving them space, has its practical translation in among others youth work.

When participation initiatives are organized it is important to verify how these dominant social ideas on children and young people could influence youth participation. It could be important to judge in advance what views on youth the other involved actors have. Do they unilaterally start from a deficiency perspective or do they also believe in the possibilities of young people? Are they rather aimed at the protection of youth or at the self-development of young people? Answers to these questions are specific to each initiative and require reflexive skills of the initiator.

## 5.2 the many faces of participation

Not only the view on children has historically grown, but also the social discourse on participation. Hence, the intermixture of the various conceptions about participation. The notion of participation evolved from the French Revolution to universal suffrage, from woman's right to vote and the protest movements of the sixties. Social values also have changed in the last decades and are still fiercely evolving. This causes for children and young people to be confronted with different values in different environments. The values used in the family are not the same as the ones experienced with peers<sup>27</sup>. The same thing happens when we have to deal with different conceptions of participation. Nowadays there are two related risks: coercive participation and danger for recuperation.

### Coercive participation

Because participation is so in, a certain implicit pressure to make young people participate arises in the many authorities that work with and for youngsters. This pressure is often passed on the young.

*By stressing the importance of participation, one may get the feeling that some things do not function well because of the lack of certain actors. Here there does not necessarily have to be spoken of obligation to participate but of too high expectations of participation. (JeP! research seminar1)*

The youth organisations involved in the Delphi-research see this coercion to participate as a threat. They do not want to involve themselves in a system that obligates young people to participate. This system could lead to the slogan: 'no rights without obligations'. This could be applied in the demand that young people actively take part in publicly held debates on the point before they actually have been listened to.

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<sup>24</sup> By introducing the children's rights a whole array of children's right movements for instance got into stride. That movement pleads for more participation of children and young people in our society.

<sup>25</sup> apart from the phenomenon of youth cultures, there is now also talk of 'children's cultures'. See Torrance, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Prout, A. 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Baacke, D., 1987.



For youth work organisations, that feel strongly about voluntariness, this is unacceptable. It goes against their basic principles. Young people can only usefully be involved in their activities, but also in publicly held debates, on the basis of their voluntariness.

*' I notice this sometimes on a local level too, when local residents want to participate, certain things have to be given in return . Then they have to do the craziest things. When you want to have a play area, you have to provide five people responsible who are available during certain hours. It is not because I do want to have a play area in my street, and we have I don't know how many civil servants, that I have to be responsible.'* (JeP! research seminar 1)

### **Danger for recuperation**

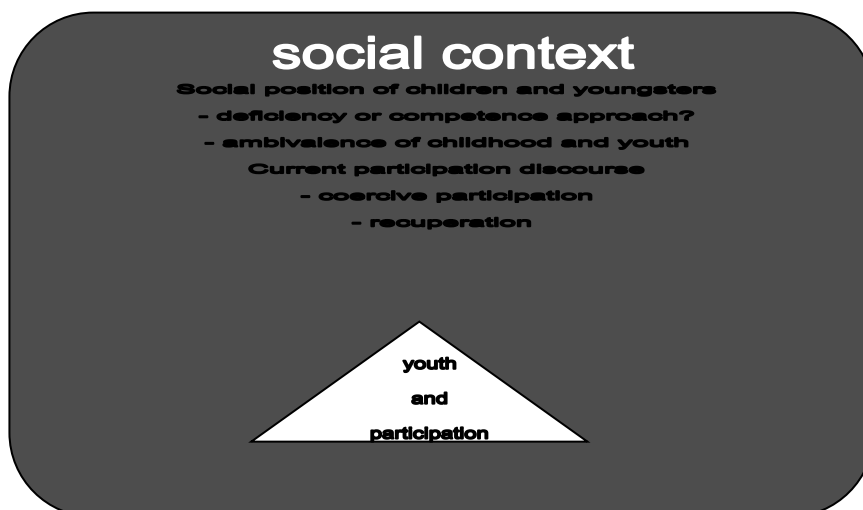
Next to the coercion to participate youth workers often indicate the danger for recuperation of participation. It is feared that certain social groupings will recuperate the the voice of young people expressed in set-up projects and present them as the basic principle on the long term and in different circumstances. This is baleful to the willingness of young people to participate. Often young people still want the freedom to change their mind, to encounter different viewpoints and they do not want to be pinned down on a temporary idea. Actors involved that in such a way recuperate the opinion of young people, do not take this sensibility into account.

We also talk about recuperation however when participation initiatives are brought in to legitimise or push policy targets. The idea of participation is sometimes used by certain actors in society to convince young people (or others) of the ruling values and standards.

*' It often occurs that the school assigns the pupil council with the task to solve a problem the school has (pestering, smoking in the toilets,...). It is assumed that the pupils will influence the other pupils. This does not concern 'making school together', looking together for solutions...'* (JeP! research seminar1)

The broader context also creates a frame in which youth participation can take place. The ruling social perception on children and young people and on participation also determines the margin the initiators have when they want to promote youth participation. It is useful when designing participation initiatives to think about the socially determined risks connected to youth participation. How realistic is the threat of a deficiency perspective or the exaggerated reflex to protect in a given specific context. Which guarantees are there that participation of young people will not too much happen under pressure and that the danger for recuperation will stay controllable? Answers to these questions can help to steer the design of concrete participation initiatives.

Scheme 7: elements from the social context



## Conclusion

Youth participation is a complex matter. This much was clear during the course of the Delphi-research. This complexity got us to approach youth participation from four perspectives. (See scheme 8)

First of all there is the perspective of the young people themselves. We suggested that a dynamic balance between challenge, capacity and connection is a sound base for youth participation. when there is a lack of this dynamic balance with concrete youngsters in concrete circumstances stimulating interventions are appropriate.

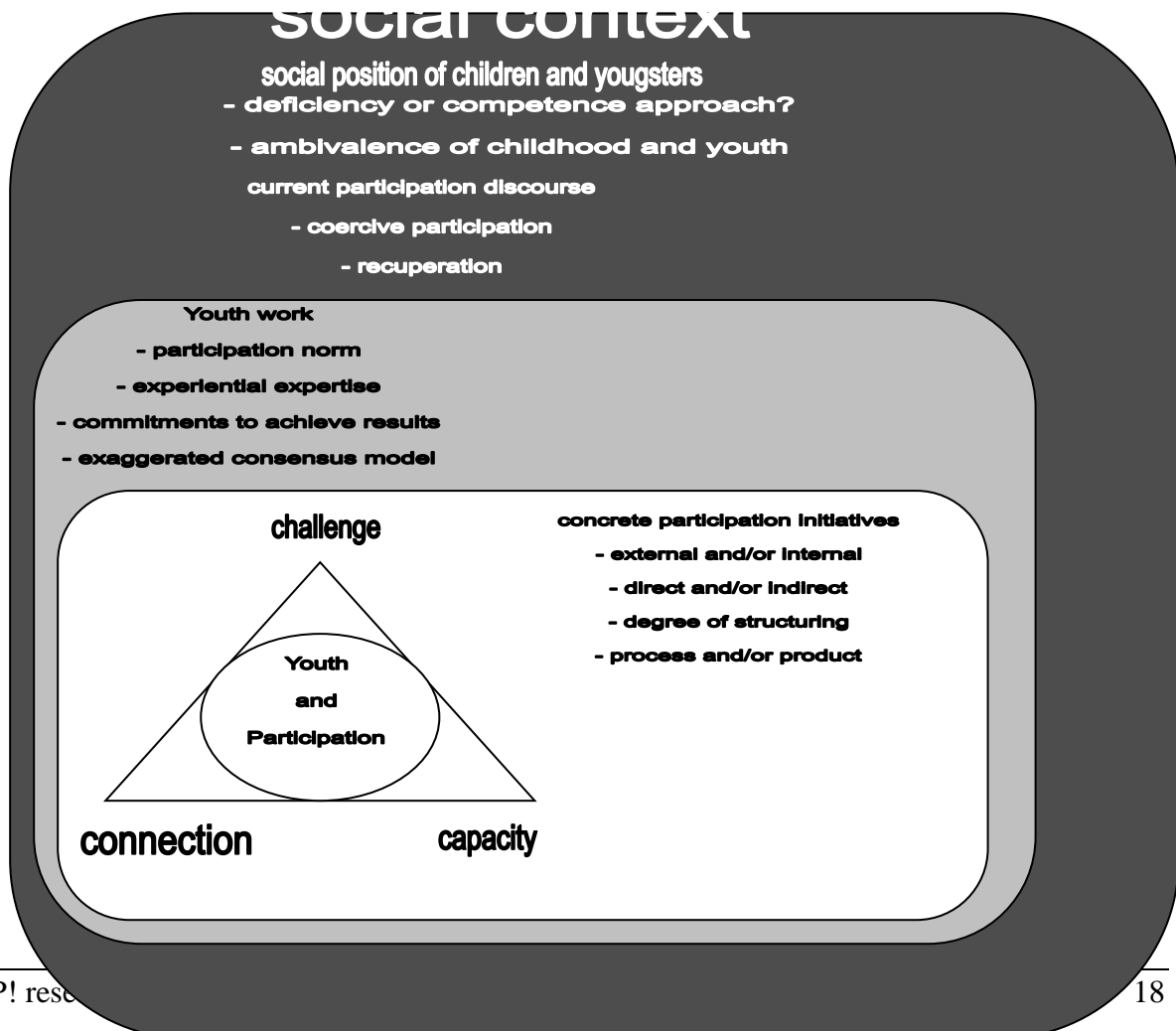
On the level of concrete participation initiatives we found we had to look for context-bound balances on four dimensions. Participation can be external and/or internal, direct and/or indirect, more or less structured and finally process and/or product-targeted.

Thirdly, there are also factors embedded in the sector of youth work that help stipulate the space of participation initiatives. Youth work has experiential expertise and this is an asset. But sometimes it seems as if participation is raised to a standard, a standard that can give cause to a contorted attitude and which interferes with critical reflection.

We also learned that the commitments to achieve results with which youth work has to comply, can be a restriction with regard to youth participation. Youth work can also look for an adequate place for conflicts and frictions and this way avoid to end up in a unilateral and exaggerated model of consensus.

Finally we discussed the factors of the current social context that can be determining for the participation initiatives of youth work. The ruling ideas on youth and participation count. The deficiency perspective poses a risk. The current ambivalence surrounding children and young people can as well lead to overreacted as well as to insufficient protection of young people. Referring to the social construction of the notion of participation we pointed out the dangers of coercive participation and of recuperation of participation.

Scheme 8: summary youth work and youth participation



Throughout the Delphi-research and from the four summarized perspectives mentioned above it became clearer that the attitude of other involved actors with regard to youngsters and participation are of great importance. The relevant parties concerned can relate to that in different ways. How do they look at youngsters, participation, youth work initiatives? Youth organisations however do not have these attitudes under control and they are not covered by the context of youth work. Nevertheless the youth worker best evaluates these attitudes, if he or she wants to design useful participation initiatives.

This evaluation demands critical reflexive competences of the youth worker. The same competences are necessary to look for the context specific balances in the various fields of tension we discussed. A continuous evaluation of the specific group of youngsters with whom and the specific circumstances in which is worked is important to deliver custom-made services. Due to this specificity it is impossible to write ready-made guidelines to act. We suggested several times that the youth worker will have to design the concrete guidelines to act himself and doing so will have to balance on the different fields of tension we put forward. In this respect we can compare the youth worker to a tightrope walker. Also on the basis of the research with the aim of designing a practical theory on young people and participation we cannot even help the tightrope walker once he is on that rope. We tried to point out which exercises of balance are important. It's the concrete environment (rope, height and so on) that determines where the balance can be found.

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## **Annexe**

### **Delphi-research To a practical theory on youth and participation**

#### **IDEA**

On behalf of the stimulation of expertise with regard to youth and participation JeP! drew the need of a well-founded practical theory on youth and participation to attention. In the framework of the JeP!-project one wanted to develop suchlike theory. This practical theory and the development of it had to meet a number of conditions:

- They had to be founded on the vision and the theories in use of the partners in the JeP!-network and a number of youth work organisations invited to that.
- They had to form a common starting point for the different network partners in the JeP! and be inspiring to the broader youth work.
- They had to be inspiring and usable in all kinds of forming initiatives on youth and participation aimed at the various target groups. (Youth, Youth workers, policy actors,...)

#### **THE DELPHI-RESEARCH**

In view of the conditions mentioned above the Delphi-research seemed the most suitable one. Typical of the Delphi-research is that a practical theory is developed in consultation with the actors concerned from a certain field of practice. On the basis of joint and systematically organized reflection. The Delphi-research method provides several rounds in which existing insights and experience knowledge are further and deeper explored and refined. The great advantage of the Delphi research is the big involvement of the actors of the work field. This offers the guarantees that the practical theory will be found in the vision, experience and starting points of the JeP!-network partners. But the Delphi-method requires a serious effort of these partners. (taking part in seminars and research activities, making time for reflection and consideration) and this can simultaneously be a drawback typical of the Delphi-method.

#### **PHASING**

Delphi-round 1:

A commission composed of the co-ordinator of the JeP!-project, an external researcher and at least one delegate of the JeP!-network paid a working visit to 9 involved youth organisations. During these working visits the different viewpoints, experiences, needs and wants concerning youth and participation were explored on the basis of interviews, written sources, websites, a guided tour on the work floor, presentations,...

Such a working visit took half a day. The commission was received by the core actors of the youth organisations involved. The gathered material was analysed and incorporated. The researcher wrote an interim report, in which the common and various starting points were explicated.

Delphi-round 2:

During a first seminar all partners reflected together on the common and the various starting points concerning youth and participation on the basis of the first interim report. It was stipulated what was essential and what inessential and suggestions were made for a further development of the practical theory. The seminar was recorded on tape.

Delphi-round 3:

The co-ordinator, extern researcher and some of the partners together formed a research group. They analysed the data from the first seminar and worked on the development of a practical theory.

Edited by the co-ordinator a second interim report was compiled. Starting from the report of the second Delphi-round and the analysis of it, inspiration was drawn from relevant literature.

Delphi-round 4:

All network partners received the second interim report well in advance and could comment on it. During a second seminar those comments were discussed and the practical theory in the making was applied on three cases. On the basis of the findings of this seminar the researcher edited the final report.