

# How is it that young people do not have a more prominent seat at the decision-making table?

To answer this question, a good starting point is to look at the three basic types of youth participation: Consultation, Collaboration and Youth Action (I'm borrowing this idea from global children's rights guru Gerison Lansdown; see for example her "Every child's right to be heard": Lansdown, 2011).

- Consultation is when adults ask young people for their views, and young people are not involved beyond this.
- Collaboration is when adults and young people work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.
- Youth Action is when activities are initiated, organised or run by young people themselves (often adults will provide support, though this is not always necessary).

So, let us use this model to take a closer look at the question: How is it that young people do not have a more prominent seat at the decision-making table?

The first point is that a lot of what goes for youth participation at the moment falls under the category of consultation. Adults want to find out young people's views, so they do a survey of young people's opinions. Sometimes they go further and organise a focus group: sometimes they go further still and set up a youth advisory panel. However, all of these are just consultation. The adults discover what the young people think, but in none of these situations do they let young people anywhere near the decision-making table. In other words, there is zero sharing of decision-making power.

Of course, consulting youth is not a bad thing. It is the main way adult decision-makers learn about what young people think, and it allows them to take those views into account in policy decisions affecting young people's lives. If it is done effectively and conscientiously, with a genuine motivation to give due weight to young people's opinions, then adults are meeting their minimum obligation under Article 12 of the UN Convention in the Rights of the Child (Shier, 2001):

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." (UNCRC, Article 12)

(Note that this is a legal obligation on public authorities in every country except the United States of America, as the USA is the only UN member government that is not a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, while the Convention may not have legal force in the USA, it has the same paramount moral force there as everywhere else. Note that "child" here includes all young people under 18).

So, if young people are not being consulted on matters that affect them, this is a direct violation of their human rights. If they are consulted, their basic rights may be upheld, but they are still nowhere near the decision-making table.



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Consider also that, as mentioned above, to comply with young people's basic rights, consultation must be done conscientiously and with genuine motivation. All too often, youth consultation happens, but there is no follow-through; that is, nothing is done to ensure the views expressed by young people are given due weight when decisions are being made. This kind of false participation – often referred to as “tokenism” (Hart, 1992) – is a rights violation and as such is unacceptable, and we need to look out for it and call it out when we see it happening.

On those rare occasions when young people do have a seat at the decision-making table, we move beyond consultation into the realm of collaboration. When genuine collaboration occurs, we see adults in authority working together with young people to come up with decisions that will work for everyone. This does happen, but it is rare and needs to be recognised and applauded when it happens.

It is worth noting here that there is no human right to sit at the governmental decision-making table, either for adults or for young people. However, the difference is that adults have the right to vote, and in theory this means they can choose the key decision-makers in their community to represent their interests, a system known as “democracy”. Under-18s do not have the right to vote (With a few exceptions, notably Nicaragua, Austria, Malta, Brazil, Scotland, Argentina, and Ecuador, all of which have votes at 16; Nicaragua was the first in 1985), so they are automatically excluded from this democratic process. Article 12 of the UN Convention, by giving young people the right to speak out and be heard, provides a partial solution to this problem, but, as we have seen, until young people sit at the decision-making table, they remain outside democratic politics (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

Collaborative decision-making is not without its problems, and the big one for me is the question of who gets to participate and who is excluded. Collaborative initiatives may favour certain types of young people, and ignore others. We rarely know whether the young people involved genuinely represent the views of a wider population, or speak only for themselves (another kind of tokenism). But we can tackle these problems, and so work to strengthen genuine collaborative participation wherever we can.

Finally, we have youth-action, or, as I like to call it, “Protagonismo” (Shier, 2019; Taft, 2019). This is where young people organise themselves and take collective action on issues that concern them (which may include global issues like climate justice, peace and human rights as well as issues closer to home). Adults may support youth action initiatives, and their support – in the background – can do a lot to strengthen the action and increase its impact, but this is not always necessary and there are many successful youth action initiatives that adults know little or nothing about.

Of course, youth-led activities – such as social media campaigns, marches, protests and pickets – do not literally bring young people to the decision-makers' table, but they can and do influence decisions in young people's interests. First, there is the publicity you generate for your cause if you are seen to be taking action and not backing down. To see what can be achieved we only have to look at what Malala Yousafzai and her



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supporters achieved for girls' education rights at a global level a few years back (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2013), and more recently Greta Thunberg for climate action (Thunberg, 2019). Then there is the pressure you can put on those in power – and embarrassment you can cause them – when they renege on their obligations, violate your rights or disrespect your views in their policy actions.

So, to answer the question in the title: Young people do not have a seat at the decision-making table because adults in power can satisfy their minimum obligations – and their own convenience – by consulting young people from time to time, then making decisions behind closed doors as they have always done.

Therefore, to get to the decision-making table, you need to go beyond consultation, and push open the door to new ways of working in collaboration with those in power. But you also need to know that this will not always work, so there has to be a “Plan B”, and that Plan B is direct youth action: Action to demand your voice is heard; action to denounce tokenism and other types of false participation; action to demand respect for rights; action to put the media spotlight on injustice or discrimination; action to challenge abuse of power; and action to hold those in power accountable.

Harry Shier  
JYLR Editorial Board



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