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MIND THE GAP: THE POTENTIAL OF PROFESSIONAL YOUTH WORK FOR CIVIC EMPOWERMENT AND ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH AT SOCIAL RISK

MIND THE GAP: HET POTENTIEEL VAN PROFESSIONEEL JEUGDWERK OM EMPOWERMENT EN MAATSCHAPPELIJKE BETROKKENHEID VAN JONGEREN DIE IN EEN SOCIAAL KWETSBARE SITUATIE LEVEN TE VERSTERKEN

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ABSTRACT

Youth work is often regarded as a fruitful place for the creation of democratic citizens and is thus a favoured space for civic educational activities. Despite these efforts, there is a growing concern on the civic empowerment gap: the difference between disadvantaged groups and those from dominant and socio-economically advantaged backgrounds, that can still be found across various domains of civic outcomes. From a democratic point of view the civic empowerment gap is deeply problematic. Various efforts exist to include excluded or so-called nonparticipating youngsters, often with a socialisation or disciplinarian discourse. This study challenges such an approach and builds on the concept of political subjectification to offer an alternative approach to remedy the civic empowerment gap. To do so, a case study has been conducted with a professional youth organisation in Molenbeek, Brussels. The findings emphasise the importance of the explicit and implicit role of advocacy by the organisation and the importance of the fragile pedagogical and political relationship between youth workers and youngsters to enable meaningful participation.

KEYWORDS

Civic education, youth work, civic empowerment gap, informal civic education, subjectification, political engagement

SAMENVATTING

Jeugdwerk wordt vaak beschouwd als een vruchtbare plaats voor de vorming van democratische burgers en is dus een bevoorrechte plaats voor educatieve burgerschapsactiviteiten. Ondanks deze inspanningen groeit de bezorgdheid over de participatiekloof. Het verschil tussen kansarme groepen en groepen uit dominante en sociaaleconomisch bevoorrechte milieus, dat op verscheidene domeinen van participatie nog steeds kan worden vastgesteld, is vanuit democratisch oogpunt een problematische constatering. Deze problematisering resulteert in pogingen om uitgesloten en zogenaamde niet-participerende jongeren te betrekken, vaak vanuit een socialiserend of disciplinair oogpunt. Deze studie betwist een dergelijke benadering en bouwt voort op het concept van subjectivering om een alternatieve invalshoek te bieden op de participatiekloof. Daartoe werd een casestudy uitgevoerd bij een jeugdwerkorganisatie in Molenbeek, Brussel. De bevindingen benadrukken het belang van de expliciete en impliciete rol van belangenbehartiging door de organisatie en het belang van de fragiele pedagogische relatie tussen jeugdwerkers en jongeren om betekenisvolle participatie mogelijk te maken.

TREFWOORDEN

Burgerschapseducatie, jongerenwerk, empowerment, subjectivering, politieke betrokkenheid, kansarme jongeren, participatiekloof

INTRODUCTION

There is a renewed interest in civic education and it is considered as an increasingly important matter in societies striving to (re)establish democratic governments, but also in societies with continuous democratic traditions (De Winter, Schillemans & Janssens, 2006). Civic education is thought to be an essential and effective way to promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for responsible democratic citizens, to encourage political participation and to foster social cohesion (Levinson, 2010). Today, civic education is found in various areas of society: as a learning path in secondary education, in citizenship courses and in a variety of other initiatives. Despite those educational efforts, there is a growing concern on what is called the civic empowerment gap, the differences that can still be found across various domains of civic outcomes. Minorities, immigrants, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups tend to be less civically engaged than those from dominant and socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. The differences in civic empowerment and engagement according to social background have been a source of growing concern in established democracies (Kavadias, Jacobeth & Hemmerechts, 2020). That is, there is the concern that groups which are already disadvantaged by social structures (e.g., those that have lower status and/or fewer resources) and therefore have a shortage in skills, knowledge, participation, attitudes etc., also tend to lack political representation. The inability of these groups to actively voice concerns has implications for the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems that aim to be representative and responsive (Sloam, 2016).

Important to consider within the problematic of the civic empowerment gap, is the long-standing discussion on the definition of 'the good citizen'. Normative and ideological conceptions of citizenship attribute certain norms, values and expectations to participation, developing an ideal of the good citizen (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Consequently, these normative and ideological conceptions influence the design of civic education initiatives, leading to a hierarchy between citizens: the participating, good citizen and the passive, rather uncivilised citizen (Villalobos, Morel & Trevino, 2016). This hierarchy is amplified when considering that general participation levels are lower among youngsters in more vulnerable socio-economic situations, as opposed to their middle- and higher-class peers (Vettenburg, Elchardus & Put, 2011). Not only do youngsters in

more vulnerable situations have less benefits from the positive effects of participation, but their non-participation is further stigmatised and problematised as bad citizenship (Coussée, 2008; Van de Walle, Coussée & Bouverne-De Bie, 2011). The ideal of the good citizen can thus broaden the civic empowerment gap, both due to the design of civic educational activities, as due to normative expectations concerning participation.

Formal education plays an important role in terms of political socialisation and the development of civic literacy for youngsters (Kavadias et al., 2020). The school is often the preferred site for civic education initiatives. Next to that, non-formal educational spaces are also a fertile site for practices of empowerment and engagement (Crouzé & Meurs, 2022). Non-formal education occurs in a context which is more flexible, less prearranged, and less hierarchical than a formal educational setting. Furthermore, it is less teacher-led and school-driven; usually voluntary instead of compulsory; participants' motivation is typically more intrinsic; and learning is usually not evaluated (Meurs, 2019). In this sense, youth work can be considered as an important space of non-formal civic learning, with participation in youth work often having a strong and lasting impact on civic and political engagement, advocacy, and citizenship (Fitzsimons, Hope, Russell & Cooper, 2011). This non-formal educational setting offers experiences that encourage youngsters to be involved in community activities and learn new skills as public speaking, leadership, and performance (Mcfarland & Thomas, 2006). This form of engagement enables young people to act, speak out and to bring about change for themselves and others, holding an important civic empowerment potential for excluded youngsters due to its informal and practical nature (Flanagan, 2008). It is thus not surprising that due to the renewed attention on civic education, youth work has become a favourite site for civic educational initiatives, apart from a more formal educational setting, such as school (Batsleer, 2013; Lohmeyer, 2019).

Following the problematisation of non-participation, youth work has the assignment of including and socialising socially excluded youngsters. The debate on the civic empowerment gap and participation resonates with a defining historical tension characterising social-pedagogical initiatives: the tension between integration and emancipation (Coussée, 2008; Lorenz, 2008). Historically, youth work originates in the nineteenth century in Flanders, as a response to the incomplete formal education of youngsters from the working class. Proper schooling and education were considered as the instruments to tackle social problems caused by industrial revolution and became regarded as necessary for the education and socialisation of youngsters (Bouverne-de Bie, Roose, Coussée & Bradt, 2014; Van de Walle et al., 2011). Two, sometimes contradictory, principles guided the diverse and complex emerging landscape that would come to define youth work: on the one

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hand, the task of involving individuals and groups in existing social orders. And on the other, the moral task of supporting those same individuals and groups in their self-development. This tension between the need for socialisation and a sometimes disciplinarian discourse on the one hand, and a duty of empowerment and politisation on the other, becomes especially tangible when youth work addresses the civic education and participation of vulnerable, excluded, or so-called 'nonparticipating' youngsters (Coussée, Roets & de Bie, 2009). Due to the consensus on both individual and societal benefits of youth work, there is an emphasis to include those who do not participate. This leads to a differentiation within the sector between 'voluntary or general youth work' and 'professional or specific youth work'. The first is probably most visible and prominent in Flanders. It focusses on all young people and often relies on volunteers (e.g., Boy Scouts and Girl Guides or local youth clubs and centers). This mainstream type of youth work is generally considered as highly effective in enabling participation. Next to that, the latter targets specific groups such as minorities, socially vulnerable or different abled youngsters. The often implicit rationale is that these groups are in need of more support than those who participate in mainstream youth organisations, and this type is thus referred to as professional youth work or specific youth work. Youth social work is part of professional youth work and specifically targets youngsters at social risk. Youth social work is characterised by open organisation forms, without attendance obligations, organised by professional youth workers (Coussée et al., 2009; Van de Walle et al., 2011). Unfortunately, this differentiation has the perverse effect that the separations between youths seem rather affirmed instead of mitigated with the hierarchy between voluntary youth work and professional youth social work. Within the participation discourse, youth social work is often instrumentalised to facilitate the inclusion of 'socially excluded' youngsters, finding itself acting within a socialisation and disciplinary discourse to comply with the expectation of the good participating citizen. Although integration, inclusion and socialisation are important functions of youth (social) work, a mere reduction to instrumental methodisation is challenged by its unidimensional approach.

A socialisation and a subjectification conception of civic learning

To profoundly grasp the significance and scope of the double role of youth social work within the participation discourse, it is insightful to consider the difference between a socialisation and a subjectification conception of civic learning, proposed by educational scientist Gert Biesta (Biesta, 2014). A socialisation conception of civic learning refers to "the necessity to become part of an existing socio-political order" (Biesta, 2014, p. 6). A subjectification conception of civic learning is about "the learning that is involved in engagement with what we might refer

to as the 'experiment' of democracy" (Biesta, 2014, p. 6). Socialisation entails the learning of certain knowledge and skills which focusses more on the process of individual adaptation and inclusion. In this conception, civic education is often aimed at future participation and citizenship becomes the outcome of an educational trajectory. Subjectification is about learning from current experiences and engagements in daily life without pre-determined learning outcomes. It is a type of engagement that connects private troubles with public concerns (Lawy, 2014). Significant is the shift from a necessary educational trajectory for young people to become good and active citizens, to spontaneous and unstructured learning rooted in everyday experiences. The conflicting discourses concerning the citizenship of the climate truants is a good example of this. On the one hand, this type of engagement is applauded and considered meaningful, on the other hand, it is written off as youngsters who just wish to skip class. In this paper we argue that citizenship isn't a predefined matter, but rather something that can be questioned and shaped by the individuals themselves. The learning involved is often of an interruptive nature and not pre-defined by learning outcomes or normative expectations. While differentiating between those two forms of civic learning is insightful, it does not imply that the socialisation and subjectification domain of education can be strictly separated within educational practices. Rather, both are intertwined and necessary, although often the socialisation function tends to be emphasised (Biesta, 2020). It is helpful to view the proposed differentiation within the critical and emancipatory pedagogical tradition: a tradition that emphasises that education should not only play a role in the maintenance and continuation of current societal structures and power relations but should also contribute to individual and collective emancipatory possibilities of disruption or abandonment of these prevailing existing structures (Crouzé & Meurs, 2022; Masschelein, 2019). The questioning of power relations and the position of youngsters in the social world are the starting point of democratic learning (Biesta, 2010; Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, 2009; Lawy, 2014).

To conclude, by building on the concept of subjectification, a conceptualisation of civic education, without solely focusing on a disciplinary approach, becomes feasible when working with vulnerable youth. Youth social work can stimulate participation of vulnerable youngsters based in their day-to-day life, while at the same time legitimising different forms of engagements of youngster who feel delineated from more classical pathways of engagement.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

The current study explored how youth social work can contribute to mitigate the civic empowerment gap and offer meaningful opportunities for democratic engagement to

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hard-to-reach youngsters, without solely acting from an instrumental logic, a socialisation function or an ideal of the good citizen. The following research questions were identified:

1. Which social youth work practices offer the opportunity for emancipatory and subjectification forms of engagement for socially excluded youngsters?
2. Which elements and circumstances are important according to youngsters to participate and take up engagement?
3. How do professional youth workers encourage the participation of youngsters?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research design

The data for this case-study have been gathered in close collaboration with a Brussels based youth social work organisation. The organisation is active in a Brussels district facing socio-economic disadvantages, a young population, a high youth unemployment and a significant migrant population. The collaboration with the organisation followed from the observation that certain socially vulnerable young people started to take up leadership roles in a variety of ways and express a strong civic engagement in the local neighbourhood. The observed engagement resulted in the creation of several youth initiatives and new organisations that succeed in attracting vulnerable and otherwise 'non-participating' youngsters. This is relevant as in comparison to their Flemish peers, Brussels' youngsters participate less in nonformal educational activities. This trend is more outspoken within neighbourhoods characterised by socio-economic disadvantages and is even more the case for youngsters with a migrant background (Vettenburg et al., 2011). The organisation in this case-study holds openness and trust as the core values to support and strengthen youngsters. The organisation's philosophy and praxis provide a fruitful context for civic education as subjectification: the possibility for youngsters to exist as a subject and not as an object of (educational) interventions (Biesta, 2020). As such the organisation acts as a critical case-study, with wider relevance for pedagogical reflections and civic learning (Mortelmans, 2013).

Data collection

To answer the research questions in this the qualitative critical-case study a phased multi-method approach was undertaken. The data-collection consisted of a document-analysis of the strategic

work- and policy documents of the organisation, focus-groups, individual interviews and a workshop. The research trajectory consisted of three phases.

Focus group interviews

During the first phase a total of five focus groups were organised. Two focus groups with youth workers and three with youngsters. The two focus groups with a total of eleven youth workers were organised to gain an in depth understanding of their praxis as well as the role of individual and collective values guiding these actions. For this, we first asked what the main challenges are for young people today and whether they are different for the urban youth they work with and why. We then asked how an organisation like theirs can respond to these challenges. What are the needs, strengths and outcomes hoped-for? Which competences and attitudes are important? What are key factors for success in creating opportunities for participation? To conclude we asked them about experienced differences between their organisation and other places where (excluded) young people go to.

Another three focus groups were conducted with sixteen engaged young participants. The youngsters were first asked similar questions as the youth workers, concerning the main societal challenges. This was followed by a discussion concerning their worldviews, perspectives on these challenges and their perceived possibility to tackle them by engagement. Finally, the youngsters were invited to reflect upon their experiences within the organisation and put the outcome in relation to their personal trajectory.

Individual interviews

In a second phase, 15 individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with other participants to broaden and deepen the insights stemming from the focus groups. These interviews focused on the lifestyles of young people, where they felt (un)welcome in society, and which thresholds for participation they experienced in organised youth work. Finally other significant places of engagement were explored.

Workshop

The third phase consisted of a reflective workshop with youth workers following the presentation of the findings of the previous phases. Based on the presented findings and the occurring issues a discussion was held which simultaneously served as a moment of data-collection.

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All recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically through different iterative cycles of coding. The coding scheme was adapted throughout the different cycles refining the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allows for in-depth questioning of experiences which take place and are shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional narratives and makes a connection between perceptions, motivations and actions (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

As explained earlier, the choice of the youth organisation as a case was motivated by the known positive results when working with youth at social risk. This choice made it possible to specifically address the research questions and to go into detail on the interventions of the organisation. However, the respondents of first phase were selected through the organisation itself. This selection has the disadvantage of (un)conscious cherry-picking, which affects the reliability of the research. Another concern is the question of whether the young people who took on commitment in the youth organisation would not have done so elsewhere due to other factors such as personal dispositions and attitudes. To remediate this, specific attention was paid to intersubjectivity by the researchers involved and by using triangulation. Furthermore, in the second phase the selection of youngsters was done by the researchers to explore different perspectives.

FINDINGS

We have chosen to present the results according to the different study populations: the participating youngsters and the social youth workers. On the one hand, this enables an in-depth reporting of each group, on the other hand it allows for the engagement between both findings during the discussion. Furthermore, we decided to report the findings of the different phases simultaneously for the clarity of the reporting, but also to mutually support each other.

PERSPECTIVE OF THE YOUTH WORKERS

Perceived social challenges

When asked about the most important contemporary social challenges, respondents referred to some important social shifts and evolutions: especially the increasing polarisation and the pressure on public space are mentioned. By polarisation, respondents mean both the political polarisation between left and right, and the polarisation between communities, resulting in us-versus-them thinking. Furthermore, polarisation refers to a kind of problematisation and criminalisation of youth, certainly in an urban context characterised by diversity. The increasing pressure on public

space not only refers to the physical public space, but also to the metaphysical public space since the public debate seems to pay less attention to a heterogeneity of voices. According to the respondents, the consequences of these social shifts for young people are very challenging. They imply a lack of place, voice, and ownership, and even more so for young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds. As one interviewee said:

Young people still need to form themselves. They need time and space to do this, and they don't get it, because the space is not there. That's the difference with young people: they still have to form themselves and they don't get that time and space.

Pedagogical philosophy

Summarising the views of the interviewees and based upon the policy documents, the philosophy of the organisation indicates the importance to empower young people and support them in taking ownership to claim their place and voice in society. Many participants referred to a horizontal interpretation of Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation: each form of participation is valued and non-hierarchical ranked, the organisation strives to encourage further participation.

Respondents indicated that support is not always easy nor available. Regular youth work does not always succeed in attracting and including youngsters from all backgrounds. According to the respondents, one of the key factors, is the importance of a relationship of trust, being approachable, with attention for the possibility to informally experiment in a safe space. It means that, as a youth worker, you make a connection with young people based on authenticity and trust. As expressed by one interviewee: "Young people can smell from miles away whether a youth worker is real, authentic or just playing a role." In addition, trust refers to a certain professional proximity. The most important is that a direct, informal dialogue is always possible, in which young people are taken seriously and agreements are clear. Furthermore, this proximity and accessibility also refer to proximity in the living environment. Respondents indicated that a youth organisation should (dare to) go to the young people, rather than the other way around. A place-focused approach is very important to connect to the world in which young people live.

According to the respondents, this approach guarantees a form of youth work in which young people can take their place and claim ownership. This way, young people are supported to take up responsibility themselves, based on their own needs and strengths which confirm them in their individuality. This applies specifically to the social roles young people take in their own

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neighbourhood or district. Giving responsibility and supporting ownership does not imply leaving young people to their own devices.

Lastly, most participants agreed with the statement that the organisation primarily supports young people to acquire different competences, skills, and attitudes. They refer to the stimulation of self-confidence and self-knowledge, the socialising aspect of youth work and the support of social commitment. One respondent summarizes this as follows:

We try to empower young people positively; support them in their own projects so that they take ownership of their own ideas ... strengthen them in actually taking the floor, so that they feel strong enough to make clear what their concerns are.

PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNGSTERS

Perceived social challenges

In general, the same urgent social challenges were expressed in the various focus groups with youngsters. The challenges are found on different levels: the individual level, the neighbourhood and city level, and the broader social context. These levels are not strictly separated but intertwined and in interaction with each other. At the individual level, respondents are mainly concerned about other young people who are 'lost' and in search for meaning, their (social) role and their identity. It is striking that most respondents feel very much at home in their neighbourhood. The immediate neighbourhood is an important building block in their identity. Knowing their surroundings in a physical and social sense creates recognition and acknowledgement. One youngster stated:

You know your neighbourhood, you know your friends, you know your family, you know that you can go to a restaurant where you often eat, you can go shopping, you can go to the cinema, you know your neighbourhood. Nobody is going to show you your neighbourhood.

This pronounced feeling of belonging at neighbourhood level contrasts with feeling at home in the broader social context. Young people with a migration background struggle with their place in society and the subsequent identity they can derive from this. They feel systematically disadvantaged, attacked, poorly represented, stigmatised, and have the feeling of being second-class citizens. This is exemplified by the following statement: "You are pushed into a corner without having chosen to be there, and I think this immediately impacts young people's

development". This polarisation and perceived racism affect their search for identity, as they struggle with combining and shaping their own being because of this exclusion. The exclusion is not only experienced internally but is also fed by experiences in different contexts such as school or leisure activities.

Engagement within youth social work

The interviews show the importance young people attach to meaningful leisure time and the role of youth organisations. Many respondents indicated that the informal context provides a good breeding ground for young people to grow and take responsibility, which is more difficult to find in other aspects of their lives. These statements were justified based on their own trajectory and indicate that involvement and voluntary work had helped them to find a place. Respondents also emphasise the learning process that comes with being involved and taking responsibilities. It provides a context for reflection, contact with others and new experiences. This is illustrated by the following comment: "By being given responsibilities, the person realises that there are other things in life, that if you are given a responsibility, you have to be serious."

The respondents repeatedly emphasised the importance of proximity, not only physical, but also in the living environment. The young people experience a welcoming atmosphere, as one youngster put it: "Youth worker X thinks of us as young people, not as third-rate Moroccans ... the advantage is that the people who work there usually have real life experience and also have empathy." Furthermore, the organisation offers a safe framework with a lower threshold to participate than in other organisations, because of the informal setting and the possibility to be involved in different activities in an accessible way. Within the activities themselves, young people especially appreciate the freedom to set up initiatives that are supported and of which they can claim ownership.

Motives for engagement

The rationale for their engagement stems from forms of altruism, the desire to change society, wanting to contribute to the community and a sense of responsibility towards their peers. They especially emphasised the positive experiences they have had in youth work and their wish to share this with as many others as possible. This is because they identify with the situation of young people and are conscious of the different difficulties they face.

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The desire to change society for themselves and those who come after them is strongly expressed by the respondents. Talking about this issue, one interviewee said: "I wouldn't want the next generation to be in the same position, so they don't have to experience this." There is a wish for the next generations not to have to go through the same difficulties and that society could be a warmer and more welcoming place for them. Here respondents often refer to offering meaning, but also to being able to deal with other challenges such as socio-economic difficulties and learning to deal with polarisation and exclusion.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this part, we combine the different points of interest that emerge from the results and relate them to the literature. Similar important dynamics emerge, both youth workers and youngsters refer to social differences and inequalities between population groups as the most significant challenges, although youngsters emphasise more on racism and discrimination. It boils down to the fact that not everyone can participate and have an equal voice in the social debate. The respondents also refer to the possible remedial role youth work can play. The results confirm the existence of a civic empowerment gap (Kavadias et al., 2020; Sloam, 2016): the difference in social participation between population groups and the tensions and experiences of inferiority resulting from those differences. Also confirmed is the role of youth work in encouraging social engagement and self-development as it provides a space in which young people can meet others, gain new experiences and develop their identity (Fitzsimons et al., 2011; Flanagan, 2008). Furthermore, it confirms that youth work enables young people to voice the interests of their community (Flanagan, 2008) and to realize long-term participation (Mcfarland & Thomas, 2006). What is of importance here, is the idea that engagement is more than socialisation based on a certain ideal of the good citizen (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). It is also about the opportunities for young people to be valued and supported in their own forms of engagement: in this sense, it emphasises the subjectification domain of civic education. Of course, there is a side note: as already mentioned, there is the self-selection bias due to some of the respondents being selected by the organisation itself. Furthermore, it is questionable to what extent the young people involved were not already 'strong participating profiles' while others are again excluded. This also rises another point we must take into careful consideration, and which we criticised in the introduction: the mantra of participation. If participation is the absolute aim, we always need to be wary about the thin line between encouraging real participation and forms of tokenism that only serve an organisational goal or an ideal of the good citizen.

Important for the subjectification domain of civic education is a need for proximity and a contextualised approach, as expressed both by youth workers and youngsters. This proximity is important in physical and metaphysical sense. The emphasis youth workers put on departing from strengths and the daily living environment of youngsters exposes implicit values and a pedagogical conviction: youngsters should not be approached as the object in need of an intervention, but rather as a subject that is being exposed to a world (Biesta, 2010, 2014; Masschelein, 2019). This result indicates that a key element in the subjectification function of civic learning is a pedagogical relationship characterised as equal instead of hierarchical. The youth worker is the one who safeguards the circumstances in which the youngsters experiment and reflect. Although there still might be an uneven potential for taking initiative, this does not detract the possibility for empowering engagement. It is, however, important to pay close attention to latent forms of disciplining practices. According to the youngsters, important for this pedagogical relationship of proximity is the possibility for open dialogue based on mutual discussion and listening. Furthermore, youth workers can play a role by instigating reflection grounded in trust and respect. The informal context of youth social work provides a good framework for growing, experimenting, taking responsibility, and learning to fail. The experiences described by the participants during these engagements align with the subjectivation conception of civic learning, especially if the youngsters gain a better understanding of their situation and a capacity to act (Biesta, 2014). However, it is important to keep in mind that investigating the different domains of education - socialisation and subjectification - is not a straightforward and qualitative task. It is difficult to make a clear distinction, as both occur simultaneously, but the free and open nature of youth social work and of the organisation tends to create a context which fosters subjectivation.

The pedagogical relationship focusses on the individual experiences of youngsters but can also foster the more public role if it offers the tools and the stage to voice these experiences in the public debate. According to the youngsters, it is liberating to place their own (political) subjectivities in a wider social context. This support, beyond individual recognition, is considered as one of the key elements of the engagement of an organisation by the interviewed youngsters.

CONCLUSION

From a subjectification conception and critical pedagogical perspective, supporting 'nonparticipating' and socially disadvantaged youngsters is a difficult balancing act. On the one hand there is a need to socialize young people and help them to enter a world they feel excluded

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from so that they can feel more comfortable navigating this world. On the other hand, there is a danger in perceiving this as a normative and linear trajectory moving from youth social work to the regular and legitimate youth work, making it a disciplining approach. To avoid this, there is an absolute need to work in a contextualised manner, departing from the lifeworld of youngsters valorising their individual and particular engagements. Participation is a fluid and dynamic concept that is able to adapt to the individuality of each young person. It is important that not only youth workers but also funding authorities should view participation flexibly, as the latter often want value for money through a measurable quantitative output. Also important is the recognition of the collective experiences of inequality and exclusion shared by youngsters and support them in making this issue public. Youth work is a tailor-made practice with a certain degree of unpredictability. This makes it difficult to formalize it in a universal method. All in all, our research supports the importance and extension of the discretionary space of youth work organisations. Providing meaningful spaces of engagement is a continuous and difficult exercise, which depends on many factors, such as the pedagogical philosophy, a flexible functioning, proximity, and an open approach towards youngsters. This paper concludes however that having an explicit or implicit critical and empowering (i.e., a subjective and educational) approach is vital for fostering meaningful engagement and mitigating the civic empowerment gap. If youth work wishes to continue to be a relevant space for engagement for all youngsters, it could benefit from learning from the pedagogical relationship presented in this case-study of youth social work, which is based on equality and proximity.

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