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***What mattered ten years on? Young people's reflections on their involvement with a charitable youth participation project***

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***Abstract***

*Youth work in England is experiencing ongoing rapid and significant change, fuelling debate about its very function. This paper contributes to this debate by presenting original research on what young people themselves prioritised as significant in-service provision and highlights the longer-term impact that engagement with a voluntary sector organisation can have on the lives of vulnerable young people. Drawing on qualitative interviews with ten former youth participants involved in youth participation projects, the findings presented in this paper suggest that participants felt the support they received was, in many cases, 'transformative'. However, they primarily defined their experiences and the impact through their relationships with individuals supporting them, through the sense of achievement and ability to effect change they developed and through finding a voice to affect community decisions.*

**Introduction**

Youth engagement and youth service provision by voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) are inextricably linked. Being supported to participate and volunteer as a young person can open the door to a lifetime of engagement, with positive experiences reinforcing volunteering as a fun, interesting and helpful activity (Brodie et al. 2011; Hogg 2016; Musick and Wilson 2007). The value of youth service provision, therefore, goes beyond the immediate benefits of support given and potentially extends to a lifetime of community engagement and the benefits that this potentially brings (Morrow-Howell, Hong, and Tang 2009; Cattán, Hogg, and Hardill 2011). Youth services have for a long time been provided by a combination of state organisations and VSOs, with proactive youth work post-2010 increasingly dominated by the latter. In this paper, we explore former youth participants' perceptions of the impact of their engagement with VSO-provided youth participation services and the impact this has had on their civic engagement in young adulthood.

Since the election in the United Kingdom of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010, and the subsequent election of the Conservative governments in 2015 and 2017, youth services and provision have undergone radical transformation driven by austerity measures and service realignment (Davies 2013; Murphy 2017). In 2016, UNISON claimed that funding cuts to youth services amounted to £387 million since April 2010, alongside a £1.7 billion reduction in grants to VSOs delivering early intervention youth services (Doward and Menin, 2017). Youth provision in the UK has traditionally been delivered by the network of 418 local authorities who work at a relatively local scale. However, multiple

studies identify increasing differences between these local authority areas as a rapid re-shaping of services occurs based on local circumstances, rather than a nationally agreed vision (National Youth Agency (NYA) 2014; Ritchie and Ord 2017). Indeed, many local authority youth service budgets have been reduced by 50% or more since 2010 (NYA 2014; Ritchie and Ord 2017), with some cutting youth services altogether (House of Commons 2011, paras 62-63). These funding reductions are resulting in radically different models of service provision for young people.

As a result, and further driven by a rise in contracting and commissioning, youth services in the UK are being pushed to become increasingly specialised and targeted (Davies 2013; McNeil, Reeder, and Rich 2012; Ritchie and Ord 2017; NYA 2014). In the absence of a national youth policy this has steered youth work to a more reactionary model of interventions, with the traditional youth work model being increasingly merged in with social care intervention (France, Freiberg, and Homel 2010). For example, qualified youth workers are increasingly more likely to be delivering caseload based interventions or working on targeted intervention programmes such as Troubled Families, a programme launched in 2011 and aimed at the 120,000 most 'troubled' families in England, defined as those families who themselves have problems and who further cause problems to those around them (Hayden and Jenkins 2014). This reflects an ongoing recognition of the traditional skill base of youth workers and their contribution to young people's lives, but is markedly different from delivery of universal services with specialist support woven through (Davies 2013; NYA 2014).

Even so, youth participation remains an important component of youth work. Yet, youth participation is not a singular or simple term, instead the term embraces multiple interpretations and understandings. In terms of this paper, we first and foremost understand youth participation as a right, protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Specifically, Article 12 establishes two obligations, first that the child's wishes and opinions are sought; and second that their views are taken into consideration having due regard for the age, capability and maturity of the child. A fundamental right, Article 12 is also influential in the interpretation and implementation of all the other children's rights (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). Under this interpretation youth participation refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people in decision making which affects their lives. Closely linked to the concept of young people as citizens (Hill et al. 2006; Murphy 2017), policy and practice embrace youth participation (Barber 2009; Gunn 2008). Indeed, research highlights significant benefits of youth participation as: improving outcomes for children and young people in educational settings (Ruddock and Flutter 2004); increasing citizenship and democratic understanding (Kerr and Cleaver 2004); and increasing young people's skills including relationship building, confidence and trust (Nolas, 2014).

Despite these benefits, there have been tensions identified in the amount young people are embraced as partners in decision making processes. Referring to Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), we would hope to see youth work encouraging youth participation in ways which would involve young people initiating and directing their own activities in consultation with and supported by adults. However, what we often find is young people simply being consulted in a tokenistic way or indeed not being consulted at all (Spicer and

Evans 2007; Taylor and Percy-Smith 2008). The extent to which youth participation can have the positive outcomes on youth and adult citizenship is contingent on the participation being genuine (Hart 1992; Shier 2001). To achieve successful participative engagement, research highlights the importance of role of the youth worker or practitioner, emphasising the importance of this role in creating the appropriate space, context and environment for meaningful and ‘real’ participation to take place (Nolas 2014; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Ritchie and Ord 2017). Indeed, relational factors (including family, out of school activities and wider community links) are positively related to meaningful community engagement by young people (Rivera and Santos 2016; Saunders, Munford, and Thimasarn-Anwar 2016).

Although the term ‘participation’ is broad (Barber 2009) this paper focuses on participative activities supporting young people to develop different elements of active citizenship, including activities related to activism (e.g. campaigning, advocacy, etc.) and those related to more traditional forms of volunteering (Rochester, Ellis Paine, and Howlett 2011). Through the involvement in volunteering and participating in decision making process, young people can learn the value of and process to undertake civic engagement (Rivera and Santos 2016) and the positive impact it has on their relationships with other people and their own sense of identity. We also know that early experiences of volunteering increase the likelihood of someone volunteering as they go through their lives (Flanagan 2009; Hogg 2016). It allows young people to see how collective effort can enable them and others to achieve their goals (Musick and Wilson 2007). For example, longitudinal data from the USA found that young people’s participative involvement in VSOs encouraged them to be involved in community activities, public speaking and debate, and was the strongest predictor of continued political engagement during and after transitions to adulthood (McFarland and Thomas 2006).

This process is in effect a training in citizenship which enables young people to speak out on behalf of their communities and to effect change for themselves and others (Flanagan 2009). As such, young people are potentially more likely to take up volunteer roles during the transition to adulthood if they have previously experienced volunteering in contexts such as school, church or through a club aimed at young people (Musick and Wilson 2007). Within this, VSOs are well placed to engender trust and engage more vulnerable individuals (Morris, Barnes, and Mason 2009) and may help to mitigate inequalities by providing opportunities in areas where they might not otherwise exist, often seeking to engage more vulnerable young people. As such, participation initiatives by VSOs enable young people to take part in voluntary activities. Furthermore, services which are open to all young people allow them to participate in activities and a wide range of volunteering tasks alongside their peers and friends (Ritchie and Ord 2017). Research shows that this is important - young people are more likely to take part in the volunteering activities that their peers are doing, so there is a strong group influence at play (McLellan and Youniss 2003; Musick and Wilson 2007; Youniss, McLellan, and Mazer 2001).

The benefits that occur because of the activities of VSOs are many and varied. They include direct benefits to the immediate recipients of services but also include wider community benefits which accrue to a wide range of stakeholders – family members, friends, neighbours and the community as a whole (Salamon 1992). VSOs

can add value in other ways, too. Often, they are funded by people or groups who have a strong commitment to the core values of the work they do. By staying true to their core values, VSOs can achieve goals that organisations from other sectors would not be able to (Rochester 2013). The Wolfenden Committee (1978) argued that VSOs sit in a middle ground between the formally organised and impersonal state and the sometimes chaotic and uneven provision of informal care. They can provide a personalized service to the people they support, yet are organised and able to provide this support consistently over long periods of time. Furthermore, simply being part of a VSO provides a sense of camaraderie and comradeship, alongside a sense of belonging and identity (Rochester 2013). For young people experiencing difficult transitions this can be of enormous benefit as they find a place which welcomes them and supports them as they continue on the path to a stable and civically engaged adulthood. However, there is little academic research which seeks to explore the subsequent life experiences of former youth participants and the impact support has on the trajectory of their lives post activity (Sinclair 2004). Therefore, the research question posed is: *What do former youth participants of a youth participation project highlight as significant post-engagement, and what can current and future provision learn from this?*

## **Methodology**

To answer the research question, we undertook an in-depth case study analysis involving ten individuals who had been involved in youth participation projects in 2005/6, with one charity working at a local scale in a semi-rural area made up of small market towns. The voluntary organisation who had engaged these young people is a small, locally-operating VSO who have an established history in delivering youth participation focused services. Services included two youth forums which established projects to address local issues in the community and beyond, for example through the establishment of a youth café and hub, alongside a local youth-led creative art project creating and directing film and music projects about the local community within which they lived.

Central to this research, is a perspective which understands young people as experts of their own lives and experiences, and therefore positions them pivotal to the research process (Barber 2009; Hart 1992; Shier 2001; Treseder 1997). Adopting an interpretivist epistemology, we aim to understand the meaning young people attribute to their experiences (Fox and Martin 2007). Qualitative interviewing was consistent with our research question, in that it provided us with rich qualitative data about the social world's young people occupy (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). Qualitative interviewing allows for a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess 1984: 102) in which key themes are explored. Interviews were semi-structured, each following a similar line of questioning whilst allowing for individual perspectives and events to be discussed (Mason 1996, Kvale 2007). Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was recorded, transcribed and analysed in order to explore the content of the interview (Oliver, Serovich, and Mason 2005). Interviewees were assured that all

their comments would be anonymised and were encouraged to share their views honestly and freely. Pseudonyms have been used where participants have been quoted, as outlined at the end of this section.

Sampling of the interviewees was purposive - members of staff from the VSO acted as gatekeepers and contacted a range of former youth participants who had been involved in one of these youth participation focused projects and sought consent for their contact details and names to be passed over to the researchers. Gatekeepers are organisations or individuals who facilitate initial access to research participants, and whose sponsorship of the researcher – a result of having introduced them to the participants – underpins the relationship between researcher and participant (Jenkins 2004). Researchers engaged with the gatekeepers to ensure that those young people who were recruited were not only those who had had a uniquely positive relationship with the VSO and indeed included some who had left on bad terms. This was essential in ensuring that the research explored the experiences of a range of young people. The researchers and two key members of VSO staff communicated regularly. This cooperation was key to the research being conducted effectively (Hogg, Hardill, and Ramsey 2014)

Once consent had been sought by staff at the VSO to share participants' details, the researchers contacted the former youth participants. Of the 20 potential participants identified, 10 individuals, five females and five males, aged 21 to 26 years agreed to participate and were interviewed. Though the research focuses on participants who had been engaged 10 years previously, in 2005/6, participants were often engaged with the VSO for significantly longer, and some remain involved as staff and volunteers. The research has undergone full ethical review within the researchers' institutions, and participants were allocated appropriate gender pseudonyms to protect identity. The ten participants are detailed in *Table 1*.

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Projects Engaged With</b>
1	Abbie	Female	23	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
2	Becky	Female	23	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
3	Chris	Male	21	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
4	Danielle	Female	24	Youth Forum
5	Edward	Male	22	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
6	Frankie	Male	26	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
7	Georgia	Female	23	Youth Forum
8	Harry	Male	25	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
9	Joshua	Male	24	Youth Forum and Creative Art Projects
10	Katy	Female	24	Youth Forum

*Table 1: Participants details*

## **Findings and Discussion**

All the participants in this research felt that their experiences with the VSO engaging in participative project had been in some way positive and productive, while in some cases they were seen as being transformative in their lives, as summarised by Danielle:

“It changed my life... if it wasn't for them then I wouldn't be half the person that I am now.”

Danielle

In particular, participants highlighted three key ingredients which they felt had been significant in shaping their experiences.

### ***The Key Ingredients***

Firstly, as explored in the literature review, it is the ability of staff and volunteers to build positive relationships with young people that is fundamental in terms of youth participation having a meaningful lasting impact (Nolas 2014; Rivera and Santos 2016; Saunders, Munford, and Thimasarn-Anwar 2016). It was telling that across all interviews, the participants rarely identified or specifically discussed the different services they engaged with (such as early intervention support, drug and alcohol advice or, sexual health services) or the larger organisation. Rather they identified and framed their experiences based around individual practitioners within the organisation, and discussed strong and lasting attachments to these individuals, highlighting the idea that relationships remain central to service provision (Ritchie and Ord 2017).

These relationships acted as the hub of the wheel that meant young people felt they could talk about a wide range of issues from drugs, sex, mental health issues, problems at home to ambitions, aspirations and dreams. For example, as Katy highlighted:

“I went through a really rough patch, I wanted to drop out of school, I was really down... I came to these guys, they gave me advice, they helped me help myself, they were brilliant.”

Katy

These relationships became part of the ongoing support networks for the participants beyond the lifetime of the project they were involved in. Though all of the youth participants were identified as ‘vulnerable’ by the VSO at point of engagement, once engaged many of the participants reached and maintained stable periods of their lives. However even during periods of stability the participants still had times when they felt vulnerable, and in these situations, they felt they had support network beyond their family and school, as Harry and Katy explained:

“They [youth workers] became my ‘other’ family, sort of like a big brother.”

Harry

“Literally just having someone to talk who wasn’t my family, who were going through stuff too, was so good, just to have someone to listen”

Katy

Participants drew on this as being significantly important to them, as Abbie described:

“I felt and feel valued here, I wasn't treated like that at school not at all. They didn't care what was happening but guys here did. I just needed someone to say, 'what do you need'. I needed support not someone telling me everything I was doing was wrong. These guys just said, 'how can we help you', they actually listened and cared.”

Abbie

Relationships, then, are crucial to building strong and positive relationships between young people and a VSO (Rivera and Santos 2016; Saunders, Munford, and Thimasarn-Anwar 2016). This in itself is not a ‘new’ concept, with McMillan and Chavis (1986) highlighting the need for young people to feel ‘connected’ over three decades ago, however it acts as a useful reminder that relationships are a necessary building block to achieve the more participatory approaches identified by Hart (1992).

Secondly, and linked to the first ingredient, having a voice and feeling respected by VSO staff, volunteers and other young participants was cited by interviewees as an important ingredient. Echoing previous research (e.g. Rudduck and Flutter 2004), several participants highlighted how they felt being heard and being listened to through their engagement with the VSO increased their confidence and self-esteem:

“I spoke to all the people at the AGM about our work, usually I get worked up and start stuttering but I’m getting so much better.”

Edward

“I think my confidence really increased, yeah, it did.”

Danielle

“I went down to the town hall meeting thing about closing the local school down, and I made sure they heard what I had to say about it.”

Chris

They also highlighted how through this work, they felt more confident to articulate their views, discuss things with those in authority and stand up for their rights:

“I was being bullied at school and I remember one day suddenly feeling empowered enough to say ‘enough, this isn’t right’. I started campaigning against bullying locally and it just grew and grew.”

Becky



“I wanted to make a difference, I got involved, well because some of my mates were, but then I wanted to make a difference.”

Harry

Through positive relationships and the confidence of being listened to and respected, young people were able to engage in meaningful collaborative decision making around the way in which services in their local community were provided (Rivera and Santos 2016), as Becky’s experience shows. The sense that young participants were able to actively shape their communities was echoed by Chris, who commented that:

“I only have to look out of my window and I can see the skate park that we got the funding for and we helped build – we did that.”

Chris

Reflecting on this, participants expressed a strong sense of achievement in their accomplishments. Many of the young people we spoke to had been nominated for awards for their work and volunteering, and the majority of them felt respected and that their contribution was acknowledged by family, friends and their local community:

“Me and my mates still feel attached to that place, and everyone knows the youth forum did loads of good work here.”

Joshua

“I got nominated for this award and I was like really, really chuffed... and then I got it, I actually won, I couldn’t believe it.”

Harry

This validation of their achievements further boosted confidence and in doing so helped to encourage continued civic engagement into adulthood.

The third key ingredient participants highlighted as having lasting significance was the opportunity to experience new things. This ranged from accessing equipment and facilities to produce music, film and art; to trips to Wales, camping and even a trip to Africa. For the participants in this research, the impact of these new experiences ranged from being something they felt proud of doing and enjoyed, to being key life experiences. For example, as Katy commented:

“There is no way I would have done some of things I’ve been able to do, my Mum is a single parent, it was tough for her. I got to do things I would never otherwise would have had the opportunity because we couldn’t afford it.”

Katy

And as Edward and Frankie reflected:

“The trips were awesome, we did things we would never have had the chance to do before and probably will never do again.”

Edward

“Going to Africa was a massive turning point in my life, I suddenly saw what it really meant to be poor.”

Frankie

As we progressively move to more targeted, intervention-based youth services, there is a real danger access to these new experiences will continue to diminish (Davies 2013; McNeil, Reeder, and Rich 2012; Ritchie and Ord 2017; NYA 2014).

### ***Lasting Impacts***

Further to these key ingredients, participants identified several lasting impacts to which they felt their experiences with the VSO had contributed. Participants felt that their ability to form and maintain relationships was improved through their engagement with the VSO (Ritchie and Ord 2017; Rivera and Santos 2016; Saunders, Munford, and Thimasarn-Anwar 2016). This appeared on a variety of different levels, from improvements in peer to peer relationships, relationships with those in authority, and relationships with individuals and groups younger than themselves. Consistent with international research (e.g. McFarland and Thomas 2006), through these improved relationships with individuals younger than themselves, participants consistently demonstrated a strong inclination to help others and support peers and other young people to ‘grow and develop’, and demonstrated a strong desire to ‘give back’:

“If we hadn’t had been involved in that [development of new youth facilities] I don’t think I would have really thought too much about the next generation. For the first time it was like, it wasn’t just me and my age group that mattered but what we left behind, what would our lasting impact on them be like.”

Edward

“My involvement with the organisation has led me to the involvement I now have in a disabilities charity as a children’s buddy.”

Danielle

“It was that step (chairing the youth forum) in the journey which made me become more independent and want to more volunteering with other kids, you know ‘give something back’.”

Joshua

“I volunteer now and teach other young people music.”

Chris

Note in particular how Edward and Joshua attribute their involvement in the development of youth facilities as fundamental to their desire to benefit future generations (Musick and Wilson 2007). This illustrates the importance of meaningful participation to ensuring positive outcomes for young people (Hart 1992; Shier 2001; Treseder 1997). Building on this, this research supports wider studies on self-efficacy for young people (e.g. UK Youth 2013) which suggest youth participation work helps to increase this confidence (Schwarzer and Fuchs 1995). Each participant reflected they felt more confident to act positively in given situations, and thought more about engaging in challenging tasks. Such examples varied from applying for new jobs, having a voice in local decision making and campaigning for their and others' rights.

Furthermore, there was consistency amongst the interviewees in feeling uniquely supported and that the individuals who worked with them "saw something special" (Abbie). Most of the participants felt they had been personally invested in, for example:

"I feel they really invested in me...they put so much into me, I mean, I felt people really cared about me."

Frankie

"It was just nice to have someone say you matter."

Danielle

In addition, all but one of the interviewees were currently undertaking formal and/or informal volunteering, ranging from supporting other youth programmes, sports coaching to self-funding trips to Africa to support community development programmes. According to the Cabinet Office (2015) young people aged 16 to 25 are the most likely to volunteer of any age range, with over a third (35%) volunteering at least once a month. Indeed, most of the participants we interviewed volunteer regularly – nine out of ten had volunteered within the last six months, and half volunteer on a regular basis. All those volunteering had progressed into volunteering as young people through networks established through the VSO. This resulted in them either continuing as part of the VSO by volunteering with them, or moving on to volunteer with other organisations. Previous research suggests that positive experiences of youth participation are likely to have directly impacted the above average rates of volunteering amongst this group (Flanagan 2009; Musick and Wilson 2007; Rivera and Santos 2016), although with a small qualitative sample we should be wary of assuming this relationship.

Linked to this, participants also felt an increased sense of political engagement, that they have a voice in local decision making and that they are able to challenge what they see as injustices in their local community. We know from previous studies both in the UK (e.g. Musick and Wilson 2007) and USA (e.g. McFarland and Thomas 2006) that young people's involvement in VSOs, where they have opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision making and to volunteer, encourages them to continue to be involved in community activities, public speaking and debate (Rochester 2013). Participants within this research supported this notion

with most of them continuing into adulthood to advocate strongly for the right and beliefs of themselves and others. For example, one participant went on to advocate for minority groups in a national forum, whilst others commented:

“Now I go to the town council and when they say anything else to add, I’m like right, yes, I’ve got something to say, this is what our community needs.”

Harry

“I stood for the youth county council, then as a student rep at university... I am now really interested in using social media to campaign.”

Danielle

“I’m working with some others at the moment to get funding for a new football ground in this area, we need it and the council won’t help.”

Frankie

There are several potential factors which support this finding. The projects offered by the VSO enabled young people to speak out on behalf of their communities and to effect change for themselves and others. This lived experience of collective effort to achieve goals is likely to encourage and teach young people political engagement skills such as participating in community activities, public speaking and debate (Hart 1992; Rivera and Santos 2016). We know that participation in these activities acts as the strongest predictor of continued political engagement during and after transitions to adulthood (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Musick and Wilson 2007).

There are also long term organisational impacts and benefits to this approach to working. It was evident that the VSO was perceived as hugely influential in the lives of the young people it supports and also the lives of those around them. The building of ongoing, sustained relationships with individuals within the local communities ensured a high reputational value amongst the youth participants and their families. Participants highlighted how they encouraged younger siblings, family friends and other young people in the local community to join and support the projects. For example, as Georgia reflected on her experiences of supporting younger people to be trained as members of the youth forum:

“And you know what, I know it sounds silly, but I just kept looking around me and seeing how much all these guys were developing and really changing and I was really proud of them... I felt I was part of something special.”

Georgie

However, while most participants reflected on an ongoing desire to ‘give back’ and continue to support the development and sustainability of the VSO and its youth projects, this was not universally the case. Where less favourable views of the support received were expressed, they concerned the way in which exiting the

organisation during the transition to adulthood had been managed. As such, occasionally when participants came to leave the project or service it was often accompanied by a sense of loss and grief:

“I felt really bereft when I was too old for the youth forum, it was like I had to move out of home... it was like losing my family.”

Becky

“I think I was ready to move on from the project when I went to university, but I did miss it and I know my friends had a really hard time leaving it, and some stayed involved in one way or another.”

Danielle

“Well when [youth worker] went off sick for a while it all just stopped, and I didn't have a lot to do with them for a long time after that, it was a shame really.”

Edward

Nevertheless, the strength of the relational approach and participative projects meant that the participants felt connected and still part of the VSO even once they had grown too old to remain involved as young participants, for example, as Georgia states:

“In this charity, you grow up through it, and when you get to a certain age you volunteer, give back, and then you may move on to be a youth worker or something... you always stick around, somehow you always remember and connect back to here. You will always be a part of it.”

Georgia

As a result, we suggest it is important that VSOs develop pro-active ‘moving on’ strategies which allow for pathways that capture the momentum and desire to ‘give back’, as well as positively support young people to move onto other opportunities within and beyond the VSO. Like Georgia the majority of participants expressed an ongoing desire to meet as group and continue engaging with staff, volunteers and peers beyond the lifetime of particular projects and/or their age of engagement. By providing such opportunities, organisations may help to avoid the sense of loss that Becky, Danielle and Edward outline and several other participants experienced.

We have previously reflected on the opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful participatory activities (Hart 1992). Indeed, each participant gave examples of what they felt had been excellent and innovative participation opportunities. However, there was tension between what was perceived as adult-led participation (with tasks and agenda items set by adults) and youth-led participation (where the participants felt ownership of the agenda). Reflecting on activities, most participants highlighted experiences of both types of participation across the projects they engaged in. On discussion, this divide between youth-led and adult-led participation became more prominent when the participation projects were in partnership with a range of public sector agencies; the more partners involved, the more tokenistic participants felt their input became:

“So for example we had involvement in how a centre was built, we went along to all these [multi-agency] meetings but I didn't feel we, as young people, really got a say. I still think young people's involvement is tokenistic and not really valued for our actual opinions..... In decision making youth could still be considered a lot more... we still don't get the same say as other groups in society.”

Katy

Those who reflected on these different participative mechanisms highlighted the youth-led model as more empowering, respectful and having a greater lasting impact on their skills and confidence. This is consistent with Hart's *Ladder of Participation* (1992) and it is potentially concerning if opportunities for youth participation in publicly-funded projects often amount to tokenism.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Drawing together the literature review and research findings we suggest the following implications for policy and practice. When operating in an increasingly competitive environment and balancing a range of funding and commissioning requirements, it is important VSOs do not lose sight of the long-term relationships with young people in favour of funding driven short-term interventions. This ever-changing environment has given rise to issues that organisations need to contend with, from which we propose three key recommendations:

**1. Focus on relationships:** As identified in the literature review, in times of diminishing funds, the public sector is increasingly commissioning youth services out to the voluntary sector and other providers (Davies 2013; NYA 2014). This presents interesting opportunities for organisations to grow and expand, however does pose the risk of fundamentally altering service provision. This research, along with previous studies (Nolas 2014; Ritchie and Ord 2017; Rivera and Santos 2016; Saunders, Munford, and Thimasarn-Anwar 2016), highlights the importance of sustained relationships. Though the participants in this research were considered vulnerable at point of engagement, over their time with the VSO they were not consistently identified as vulnerable. However, within this time all ten of the participants reached varying degrees of often unpredictable crisis, shifting from vulnerable to stable, and relied heavily on their relationship with key individuals within the VSO to see them through these points. It is impossible of course to predict how these young people would have coped without this additional and highly personalised support, but their perception of the importance the VSO played in supporting them return to a positive trajectory highlights the value of relationship building for both marginalised groups and those at risk of becoming marginalised.

**2. Support positive transitions:** A second challenge this research raised is how youth providers support and facilitate exit strategies for youth participants at the level of both organisations and at individual youth workers. This presents a dual challenge: firstly, how such organisations can provide clear pathways to support youth participants who wish to remain engaged with the organisation or community and 'give back' beyond

the service provision, continuing to build on civic and political engagement; secondly, how individuals can be supported to exit both the service provision of the organisation and move on from maintained and established relationships built with individuals within the organisation. Individual participants who effectively ‘left’ the VSO expressed feeling bereft on having to move on, and as such consideration needs to be given to the positive management and facilitation of these processes.

**3. *Maintaining meaningful participation:*** A third and perhaps more complex challenging is how to maintain and develop meaningful participation. Research shows that VSOs continue to develop and lead on creating opportunities for meaningful participation and this momentum needs to continue, learning through on-going self-reflection and good practice from others (NYA 2014). Within this research each of the participants drew upon significant examples of youth participation, however there remains a tension between young people working on issues identified by adults, and young people working on issues they identify themselves – a core difference outlined in Hart’s *Ladder of Participation* (1992). Meaningful participation gives young people the means to address and challenge issues they may face, and thus, if it is to continue to make a positive contribution young people need to be facilitated by policy makers, organisations and practitioners alike to set their own agendas (Fleming 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Youth VSOs which facilitate participation engagement projects can play a significant, lasting and important role in the life journeys of those who take part in them, and can fundamentally alter young people’s trajectories and provide necessary support in times of crisis. It is impossible of course to predict what the life outcomes to date would have been for the ten participants we spoke to if they had not been involved in the VSO. However, what is important is the significance and importance each young person ascribed to their involvement in the projects and services offered by the VSO, and most importantly the significance of the impact they felt the relationships they formed have had on their lives.

This research highlights the ongoing argument that relationships remain central to service provision (e.g. Nolas 2014; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Ritchie and Ord 2017). Young people rarely identify with different services, projects or the larger organisation; rather they identify with individuals within the organisation and can form strong and lasting attachments to these individuals. The relationships formed mean that if or when young people experienced crisis, often triggered by unpredictable events, they are networked into immediate support which enables them to move forwards. A relational approach which builds on trust, honesty and respect appears to be at the heart of the success of this youth work and the associated participation projects. However, it is also important to note that this is not the only the factor which was perceived to have supported the successful outcomes of the young people involved. The opportunity for new experiences, especially when these are far out of the young people’s comfort zone, was also highlighted as important.

Finally, the importance and lasting impact of supporting young people to have a voice also comes out of the research as a dominating theme. In facilitating this through well-designed and supportive programmes of participation, this research suggests that participation projects can have a strong and lasting impact on civic and political engagement, advocacy and citizenship (Flanagan 2009; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Musick and Wilson 2007).

While the research discussed in this paper itself is limited in scale and scope, it provides an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the long-term impacts and pathways based on the experience of one cohort. However, the size and scale of the study limits its overall generalisability. As such we would suggest further research which seeks to capture these impacts as they happen over a longer period of time and investment in longitudinal impact evaluation models. Furthermore, this research is based on the experiences of participants who journeyed with a single VSO, therefore neglecting other service providers and indeed does not address the perspectives of those who choose not to engage or who disengaged early on from service provision. We would suggest it would be useful to seek to capture some of these perspectives in moving forwards.

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