Not done and dusted: agency and structure in youth participation

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Abstract

A growing body of education policy and practice purports to educate young people to become reflexive citizens with the capacity to direct their own lives as well as to ‘make a difference’ in ways that improve the democratic fabric of society. This reinforces a discourse of youth agency that obscures the structural inequalities that continue to centrally influence some young people’s lives and to play themselves out in complex ways within schools. This paper discusses the findings of a recent study that employs concepts of risk and reflexive modernity to analyse the experience of young people in two Australian schools in areas of entrenched disadvantage where programs of youth participation have been introduced as part of the curriculum. It concludes that the debate about the relationship between agency and structure is one that is far from being done and dusted, but is one with which sociology must continue to engage.

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The persistence of agency

Over the past two decades, young people’s democratic participation has been the subject of vast policy and academic literature, one that continues to expand. The more critical elements of this literature have done much to bring nuance to understandings of young people’s political engagement (e.g. Print, 2007) as well as the emergence of new conceptions of youth citizenship (e.g. Arvanitakis & Sidoti, 2011) and new modes of participation (e.g. Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010). They have also shed light on some young people’s systemic or structural exclusion from full democratic and social membership (e.g. Black, 2011).

What this literature has done less thoroughly, overall, is to theorise contemporary youth citizenship and participation. This under-theorisation has a number of effects that include the persistent characterisation of youth participation as a site of romantic and unlikely degrees of personal and social agency and change. This characterisation is increasingly making its way into the discourses of education policy and practice in ways that serve to conceal the structural inequalities that continue to play themselves out in many young people’s lives.

In this paper, I draw on data from case study research conducted in a purposive, critical case sample of two Australian government secondary schools to consider the ways in which young people are constructed as reflexive citizens through their schooling and what this means for young people who are subject to structural or socioeconomic inequalities. Each school is located in areas of entrenched disadvantage characterised by high poverty, intergenerational unemployment and, in the case of one school, a large community of recently arrived refugees. Each school has also introduced a formal program of youth participation for its middle years
students in an attempt to improve their immediate educational engagement as well as their longer term life outcomes.

My discussion focuses on data drawn from focus groups held with thirty-six Year Eight and Nine students and with eight educators, all of whom have been actively involved in either the Student Leader program at what I will call Eastview College, or the Making A Difference (MAD) program at what I will call Valley High School. Each of these programs supports student-led, social change projects that range from local community activities to ambitious initiatives with a global focus.

**Making a difference in reflexive modernity**

A large body of youth sociology has drawn on the work of Bauman and Beck (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) to characterise the contemporary young citizen as an individualised and reflexive subject: one who is constituted ‘as entrepreneurial, as active, as autonomous, as prudential, as risk aware, as choice making and as responsible’ (Kelly, 2011, p.7) and who is expected to demonstrate these attributes both within their private and public life. A smaller body of sociology (e.g. France, 2009; Furlong, 2009; Walsh & Black, 2011; Wyn, 2009) has also considered the ways in which this construction renders some young people - including young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds - vulnerable to new forms of inequality as well as to the continued effects of older and more familiar forms of exclusion. In particular, it has described such young people’s vulnerability to the ‘false reality’ (France, 2007) or ‘epistemological fallacy’ (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) of late modernity, which encourages them to seek individualised solutions to their own inequality while obscuring its structural origins.
Even a quick examination of Australian education policy suggests that it is perpetuating or propagating this individualised discourse, communicating the expectation that even the most structurally marginalised young people should be - or should become - citizens who have the reflexive agency to purposively and productively direct their own lives. Increasingly, education policy also constructs young people’s democratic participation as a means of achieving socially just purposes or social change, reflecting the expectation that all young people should ‘make a difference’ to the society in which they live.

This discourse can be seen in key policy texts such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which describes the role of schooling in educating all young Australians to be ‘active and informed citizens’ who are ‘committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice’ (MCEETYA, 2008: 9). The ‘I am Australian: Exploring Australian Citizenship’ resource, designed for teachers implementing the national civics and citizenship curriculum, urges young people to join the ranks of ‘local heroes’ or ‘social challenger(s)’ who have worked to ‘make a difference’ within Australian society (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009: 25). The shaping paper for the new Australian civics and citizenship curriculum emphasises the values of ‘practical’ citizenship, setting out the expectation that young Australians become ‘active and empowered citizens’ who promote socially just values and structures (ACARA, 2012: 5).

The same discourse also underpins the pedagogical practice of youth participation in both of the case study schools. My interviews with school leadership indicate that the MAD and Student Leader programs were introduced without reference to the kind of policies I have just
described. Each nevertheless reflects a similar discursive association between youth participation and social change, and a similar pedagogical belief that education should prepare young people for a citizenship that encompasses such purposes.

At Valley High School, this discourse is embedded in the very name of the MAD program. At Eastview College, the teacher conducting the Student Leader program explains that the Student Leaders ‘exist to instigate change’ and describes their activities as an effort to ‘make a difference, whether it’s within their classroom, or their school, or within the community’. The will to make such a difference is, in fact, one of the key criteria for their selection into the program:

When it says ‘why do you want to be part of the Student Leader program?’, the kids that wrote ‘because I want to go on camp’ we just put to the side and focussed on the ones that said ‘because I want to make a difference (teacher).

More significantly, the students themselves describe their desire to create social change: ‘we are determined to make a difference’ (student, Eastview College). They also describe their capacity to do so on a vast and powerful scale. Students at both schools refer to their mandate not only to ‘change someone’s life’ but to ‘help out in the world’ or even ‘change the world’. They describe their intention - and their capacity - to redress ‘all the diversity and the poverty in this world, and the homelessness’, to ‘make everyone be treated equally’ and to ‘give everyone a go, treat everyone as one’. In so doing, they lay claim to an almost unlimited degree of influence or social agency:
If you set your mind to things, you can do whatever you want (student, Valley High School).

**Becoming someone different**

For the students at both schools, this discursive promise that they can challenge and change inequitable social structures and processes is accompanied by an even more seductive promise: that their experience of participation will enable them to change themselves and their own circumstances. Within both programs, the discourse of *making a difference* is constantly interwoven with the reflexive discourse of *becoming someone different*. There is a consistent belief amongst the educators at each school that the students’ experience within each program has enabled them to transform themselves in ways that are enabling:

> It’s opened doors for them and opened their minds up, and also given them an idea that yeah, they are important, they can make a difference (teacher, Valley High School)

> They’ve kind of learnt to think outside, you know, and to be bigger than they are (teacher, Eastview College).

This theme of ‘being bigger’ emerges as a frequent trope within my interviews with the educators each school. The Valley High School teachers describe the importance of the MAD program in ‘broadening [the students’] horizon’ and in enabling them to ‘think bigger’, see ‘a bigger picture’ and be ‘member[s] of a bigger place’. More significantly, the students themselves believe that they have been transformed. Particularly at Eastview College, the students describe their experience of participation as one that has enabled them to develop a new sense of self or to become more fully themselves:
It just showed us how, getting us to open up to who we are, and showing each other that we have strengths, all we need is just to let them out

It’s just brilliant being in the Student Leader program. It’s basically a great experience. It’s life-changing. You’re changing yourself and it’s life-changing.

This notion of making a difference is constantly interwoven with the reflexive discourse of becoming also encompasses the notion of becoming someone more equal. At both schools, students articulate a keen awareness of social inequality and the ways in which this plays itself out in their own community. They describe their capacity to redress this inequality for other local young people: as one Eastview College student explains, ‘our location isn’t that cool, so maybe it’s giving a few kids some hope or something like that’. They also describe their own ability to elevate their own position through their social action:

[...] just because we’re students at just a regular high school it doesn’t mean that we like can’t do something bigger in the world to make a difference

You don’t have to be Barack Obama to make a difference.

The persistence of risk

Bauman has warned that ‘all of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers’ (1999: 40), but this caveat is one of which these young people seem largely innocent. This innocence does not extend to their educators, however. Within both
programs, the romantic and hopeful discourses of agency and change jostle uncomfortably with persistent discourses of risk.

This risk discourse is particularly strong at Eastview College, where the level of socioeconomic disadvantage amongst the school community is considerably greater than at Valley High School. The Student Leader program is promoted as an educational intervention that will endow these young people with full social and economic membership despite their socioeconomic circumstances:

Just because they come from a poor country or just because they’re one of eighteen kids, or just because their family doesn’t have a lot of money doesn’t mean they can’t work hard and develop a certain set of skills or make opportunities available to them when they get older (teacher, Eastview College).

At the same time, it is also constructed as a means of avoiding or ameliorating the risks that are believed to await these young people by virtue of those same circumstances. The school leader describes these risks in graphic terms:

Some of the kids that come here from disadvantaged backgrounds have got such poor backgrounds, or dysfunctional families [...] that’s a really important role for us, to actually make sure that the children that come here have got the best opportunity not to end up on the streets or in drugs or whatever.

I’m always thinking about where the kids will end up. Like all schools we’ll have kids that fall through the gaps, and schools are full of kids that end up in jail. There’s always a kid in
every school that’s going to end up in jail somewhere, but we want to minimise that. We
want to minimise kids that do harm to themselves or each other.

Such observations depict the Student Leader program as an antidote to what Zipin has called
‘the dark edginess’ of young people’s lives in disadvantaged contexts (2009: 320). Where the
official and public discourse of the program celebrates these young people’s social agency,
this more covert risk discourse constructs their participation as a redemptive educational
intervention: one that will, in the words of the same school leader, remove or rescue them
from ‘their own little niches [where they] can fester and learn bad habits’.

Conclusion

The data that I have described in this paper suggests that the experience of participation for
disadvantaged young people cannot be reduced to any single formulation. On the one hand,
they are the subjects of educational interventions that enmesh them in complex discourses of
change, redemption and agency, rendering them responsible both for their own
socioeconomic exclusion and for the creation of a more just society, promising them a degree
of objective agency that is dubious, to say the least.

On the other hand, these same interventions do appear to foster a sense of agency that is
important. If the reflexive task for individuals is, as Sweetman has argued, to ‘construct a
coherent and viable sense of self-identity from the various means at their disposal’ (2003:
528), then the Student Leader and MAD programs may represent valuable resources for the
young people who participate in them and through them. They may enable them to
understand themselves as social actors and agents, to construct ‘a sense of themselves with
value’ (Skeggs, 1997: 162) in the face of significant structural constraints. To paraphrase Davies, such education practices may enable young people to be agentic because they are constituted as agents, because they think they can have agency and because they act as if they had agency (2000).

The small body of findings I have discussed here do not lend themselves to any grand conclusions. They certainly do not lend themselves to an answer to the continuing debate about the nature of agency and structure or the relationship between them. What they do provide is a reminder of the ambivalence and ambiguity that attend so many young people’s experience of participation, especially where disadvantage is an issue and where education is employed to promote specific constructions of youth, and of youth citizenship. They highlight the continued need for a sociology that can theorise the tensions and contradictions that play themselves out within young people’s experience of participation as well as those that are inherent in youth participation itself as a site of education policy, practice and discourse.

References


