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Youth participation in Europe: a pedagogical reflection at the crossroads between discourses and policies

Morena Cuconato*

Abstract

The European Commission's White Paper on Youth in 2001 invites the Member States to ensure an effective planning and implementation of national youth policies. Since then, there has been an increased attention on youth in the national political agenda and many discourses regarding their social integration. Based on a comparative analysis of policies and discourses on youth and youth participation that we conducted in eight European countries (PARTISPACE Project, Horizon 2020), the aim of this article is to start a pedagogical reflection on youth participation and the way to promote it: both in term of young people's engagement for individual identity building, self-realization and in term of community development. After presenting what images of youth are proposed in the national policies and discourses, which youth issues are prioritized and measures suggested to promote youth participation, we propose some reflections about the connection of pedagogy and policy and the way in which education could foster a real youth participatory attitude, especially for what concerns 'disadvantaged' young people.

Keywords: *Europe; youth representation; youth policies; discourse on youth; educational promotion of youth (socio) political participation.*

Young citizens are at the heart of what many scholars define as a 'crisis of representative democracy', reporting over the last decades worrying accounts about the perceived distrust of European citizens in general and young citizens in particular regarding the political systems, institutions, and social elites (cfr. Newton, 2001; Mishler & Rose, 1997; Seligman, 1997)

Trying to motivate the younger generation to engage in society, the EU has been focusing on youth programs since 1988 and through the 2001 White Paper on *A New Impetus for European Youth* it has formalized and embedded the *participation* of young people in EU policy-making. After that, also the *Treaty of Lisbon* has explicitly assigned to the European Union the task of 'encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe' (2007: Article 165, sub-section 2), inviting the Mem-

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ber States to ensure an effective planning and implementation of national youth policies. It is within this broader policy context that the project *Youth Spaces and Styles of Participation* (PARTISPACE, www.partispace.eu), has been financed (2015-2018) through the EU Horizon 2020 program.

Based on its intermediate findings, this article proposes a comparative analysis of policies and discourses on youth and youth participation in the eight European countries (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK), participating to this project. After presenting the project's goals and methodology, we focus on what *images* of youth are proposed in the national policies and discourses, the representation of (socio-political) youth participation, which *youth issues* are prioritized and what *measures* are suggested or implemented concerning the EU's invitation to promote youth participation. The concluding section aims to underline the implications that these finding have for the pedagogical reflection and the educational practices.

1. The PARTISPACE project: looking for a updated understanding of youth participation in Europe

Theorizing that *all* young people do participate while *not all* individual meaningful forms of participation and contexts are recognized as such in the European and national discourses, the project aims at giving a transnational contribution in contextualizing and updating the core concept of participation, especially for what concern the *styles* with and the *spaces* in which young people experience it.

The central research question of the project is *how* and *where* 15- and 30 year-old young people do participate differently across social milieus and youth cultural scenes and across eight European cities[1] (framed by different national welfare, education systems and youth policies). What *styles* of participation do they prefer, develop and apply and in what *spaces* does participation take place? Answers to these questions could improve the understanding of the complexities and contradictions of youth participation – on the side of educationalists, policy makers as well as on the side of young people. This could be helpful in empowering young people' personal development and their sense of commitment for social, civic and political issues, renovating also concepts, definitions and discourses on *what* (youth) participation is and *how* it could be pedagogically promoted

1 The eight European cities in which we conduct the study are Bologna (IT), Eskisehir (TK), Frankfurt (DE), Gothenburg (SE), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (BG), Rennes (FR) and Zurich (CH). Although embedded in different national and local contexts, these eight cities are comparable in terms of dimension and relevance in the respective country. This ensures a sufficient provision and diversity of participatory settings without being too close to representative national government institutions and umbrella structures.

updating education and the other youth policies, in order to take into account the subjectivity of human experiences.

The project uses a multilevel mixture of *quantitative* and *qualitative* methodologies to assess in detail the state and development of youth participation in our eight cities. However, this article presents only the intermediate result of the comparison we produce between the eight *states of the arts* written by the national teams in order to provide an analytical description of national and local structures of youth policy, participation programs and discourses. Methodologically, it is based on a *discourse analysis* and *desk-research* of over 30 policy documents, academic journal articles and research reports and on *secondary data analysis* of existing quantitative and qualitative data (European Social Survey wave 6) on young people's participatory orientations. As comparative research on youth, PARTISPACE aims at shading lights on *how* and *to what extent* different institutional structures, discourses and policies perform differently in the countries involved and on *how* EU's intention to promote participation in democratic policy is interpreted in the national discourse and implemented in the youth policies across Europe. These data are of vital importance for developing a new pedagogical approach to the meaning of participation for the educational promotion of youth individual development and social cohesion.

In the attempt of securing European coverage, the PARTISPACE consortium gathers countries according to a model of *transition regime* that is useful to understand also the system of measures taken for promoting equality in participation to education. The model of transition regimes (Walther, 2006) applies to youth-specific dimensions the model of welfare regimes of Esping-Anderson (1990), modified by Gallie and Paugam (2000) and Ferrera (2000) considering young people's access to education and social security, orientations of policies for unemployed youth as well as dominant cultural meanings of disadvantage and youth (see Table 1.).

In our clustering, France, Germany and Switzerland represent the conservative or employment-centred regime type; the UK stands for the liberal regime type; Sweden represents the universalistic regime type; Italy represents the under institutionalized or familistic regime type; Bulgaria is a case of a post-socialist state in transformation, while Turkey stands for a developing country with a relatively small welfare state, focused on family structure and characterized by traditional gender roles. Switzerland and Turkey are two non-EU-countries and this permit to analyse the relevance and impact of EU policies and discourses on local youth participation's settings in two countries respectively *refusing* and *looking for* the entrance in the EU area. Moreover, the country sample includes different interpretations of representative democracy and different levels of influence of local youth policy versus national governments. The use of *welfare* and *transition regimes* as a heuristic model is necessary to understand and interpret comparative data by providing

analytical dimensions that can relate concrete findings to overall societal structures.

Regime type	School	Training	Welfare	Disadvantage	Youth
Universalistic (SW)	Comprehensive	Standardised	State	Individual/ Structural	Personal development
Liberal (UK)	Comprehensive	Non-standardised	State/ family	Individual	Economic independence
Employment-centred (D, FR, CH)	Selective	Standardised	State/ family	Individual	Vocational socialisation
Under-institutionalised (IT- T)	Comprehensive	Non-standardised	Family	Structural	Status vacuum (dependency)
Post-socialist countries (BG)	Comprehensive	Variable	State/ family	Individual/ Structural	Variable

Table 1: GOETE countries according to youth transition regimes

2. The multifaceted representation of youth in the national discourses

Speaking of young people means to refer to a diverse and highly heterogeneous social group showing a complex variety of identities and socio-economic as well as educational backgrounds. Moreover, the distinction between youth and adulthood is also culturally determined and changes over time according to the labour market conditions, promoting or hindering the transition from youth to adulthood. Through the analysis of the national documents, some general trends emerge regarding the images of youth in the public national discourses. Beyond the differences due to the peculiarities of the different contexts, three main representations of youth come to the fore.

2.1 Young people as resources

The vast majority of the texts states the importance of young people as countries' valuable *resources*. The emphasis is set on the importance of youth in building (cf. Lüküslü, Osmanoğlu, Zekiroglu, 2015, Turkey national report; and *Popivanov, Kovacheva, 2015* Bulgaria national reports) and/or renewing the country social and political asset. Examples of this mythicized image of youth can be found in the German (cfr. Lütgens, Mengilli *et al.*, 2015) and the Swedish (cfr. Forkby, Andersson *et al.*, 2015) documents, which assign to young people an active role in reshaping societal

institutions. In the Italian case, they are depicted as 'rebels' who struggle against the apathy and the desertification of adults' values, asking just for tool to turn their rage into positive energy (cfr. Cuconato, De Luigi, *et al.*, 2015). Lüküslü (2014) explains that in the contemporary Turkish conservative paradigm the *ideal* young person is the one carrying a computer in one hand and a Quran in the other. In both cases, young people are considered as the main *agents of change*, who are expected to widen their future opportunities while contributing to a more sustainable future for their country. No words about the rights that societies should grant to young people in term of individual development and self-fulfillment.

2.2 Young people as a threat

Although the texts usually express the intention to overcome the traditional image of youth as a problem, a more in depth analysis highlights that young people, especially the disadvantaged ones, are often depicted as a 'problematic' resource. What emerges is that youth as a difficult transition phase in the individual life course, could represent a *threat*, both at individual and social level. Young people *could be* or *are* a problem for themselves due to possible self-harming behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse and/or for those around them due to possible anti-social behaviors such as vandalism, aggressions or rioting.

This discourse of youth as a problem shows two opposite aspects: *vulnerability* and *dangerousness* of the young people. In the first *deficit-oriented* interpretation, young people are perceived as a group, whose gaps need to be close through specific compensatory measures. Particularly representative of this trend is the art. 58 of the Turkish Constitution on *Protection of Youth* in which it is affirmed that the state has to adopt all the necessary measures to protect young people from alcohol and drug addiction, crime, gambling, and ignorance (cfr. Lüküslü, Osmanoğlu, Zekiroglu, 2015). On the other side, the *deviance-oriented* interpretation of youth embodies the idea of young people as agents of antisocial behaviors. This perspective reflects a strong normative, polarizing model: while the 'conformist' young people are considered as 'active citizens in becoming', the others represent problematic elements menacing the 'norm'. This homogenizing trend refuses space and do not recognize minorities' voices or individual perspectives. This is particularly evident in the UK discourses, reveling the underlying assumption that all child and young behaviors that do not follow the norm needs to be normalized in order to fit them into the mainstream social arrangement based on well-integrated contributors of labor market and society (cfr. Batsleer, Pais *et al.*, 2015). In this cluster, education plays the functional role to homogenize individual life expectations and projects in order to adapt to the societal status-quo.

2.3 Young people as victims

The 'victim discourse' represents the *modernization* of the 'problem discourse' following the societal changes introduced through the globalization processes and the last economic crisis endangering young people' social conditions and individual life projects. The national documents show that this image is particularly widespread in the Italian (cfr. Cuconato, *et al.*, 2015) and French discourses (cfr. *Becquet,* Hinkle *et al.*, 2015), which emphases the negative effects of the labor market changes on young people's lives, especially for what concerns unemployment and the consequent precariousness in their other life spheres.

This youth representation goes hand in hand with other discourses, characterized by moral judgement in term of *guilty* and *innocence*. In the first case, young people are represented as passive or even 'guilty victims', i.e. they are blamed for their missing coping with the challenges of a more open, flexible labor market, that is attributed to their passivity or inadequacy as in the UK neo-liberal approach (cfr. Batsleer, Pais *et al.*, 2015). The contrary emerges in the 'absolution discourse', in which prevails the image of young people as 'innocent victims' of a societal and institutional order that instead of supporting them in achieving an independent and autonomous status, functions as a constraint. This is the case of Italy, where young people's vulnerability in face of the economic uncertainty is a stereotyped image (cfr. Cuconato, *et al.*, 2015). From these different understandings of youth, stem different interpretations of what participation means in young people's life and how education could promote it.

3. How young people are expected to participate in the European discourses

The increasing electoral abstention and the identification's crisis with traditional political parties and trade unions represent clear signs of the decline of youth participation in the conventional forms of politics. However, according to recent EU researches (cfr. Loncle *et al.*, 2012; LSE, 2013; Gretschel *et al.*, 2014), young people are far from apathetic but participate mostly in non-conventional ways:

> Surveys and analysis underlining a poor participation by young people are often the product of an overly formalistic definition of political participation, too focused on very limited measures of engagement, exclusively in the arena of formal politics (LSE, 2013: 45).

From the analysis of the national discourses, it emerges very clearly the 'contested nature' of *participation:* a concept that never achieves a complete closure in terms of what it means and need to be constantly negotiated (Laclau, 1996: 36). The institutional documents (such as laws, youth plans

and programs), instead of providing a straightforward definition of youth participation, usually exemplify it through a list of *practices* (voting, being a volunteer, protesting, etc.), *structures* (association, youth councils, etc.) or *objectives* (for instance being involved in public decision). Instead, some documents elaborated by civic organizations or experts are more explicit and propose classifications and typologies that critically analyze the institutional approach to youth participation, as for example the Swiss' expert report, linking participation to the distinction between *democracy* as a *form of government* and *democracy* as a *way of living* (Gärtner & Vollmer, 2008).

In many documents, the concept of participation overlaps with that of *involvement*, suggesting the idea that young people should be engaged in pre-existing participatory setting. Despite the different labels used in the national documents, all of them adopt the same discourse explaining the need of promoting participation as a tool aimed at strengthening the *young individual* while reinforcing *the society* as a whole. The two arguments often coexist in the same documents; however, some texts place more emphasis on the first while others on the second aspect.

In the *individual-oriented approach*, the involvement in the civic and political life is intended as the educational pathway young people can progress to access their social rights and to win a voice in the public sphere, while gaining self-efficacy, identity and genuine interests. This pathway to progress is expected to foster their sense of belonging and trust, as well as to facilitate their transition to the labor market.

In the *society-oriented approach*, youth engagement is presented instead as a way to develop and improve the country's social system and to solve the issue of the democratic deficit that many countries are experiencing. However, most national discourses seem to accord only a partial recognition of young people as active citizens, disregarding the evidence-based approach. In fact, existing research suggests that socio-political participation of young people depend *whether* and *on how* they succeed in influencing and being involved at local level in the issue of the community in which they are embedded (cfr. Spannring *et al.*, 2008). This means that if individuals live the experience of self-efficacy, they will be more inclined to engage in wider communities. Participation should therefore imply an every-day educational *practice*, and not a postponing to an undefined future as adult. How does this shortcoming influence the national youth policies?

4. Transforming discourses into practice: The national youth policies

The eight PARTISPACE countries' approaches to *youth policy*, *welfare* and *education* vary significantly, depending on the different historical and political realities they have faced: from the post-USSR landscape of Bulgaria, to the well-padded institutions of Sweden. This evolution has produced different binding concepts of 'normalcy', including also the relationship be-

tween individual entitlements, and collective demands (cfr. Walther, 2006). In *Table 2*, we propose an overview of the youth policies' character in the single countries as well as the youth issue that is prioritised in relation to other areas and the meaning of youth participation in the policies, i.e. whether it is recognised as a *practice* and/or as a *tool*. By *multifaceted* we refer to policies that comprise several issues, however without following a comprehensive design. To this cluster belong the UK, where the refuse to consider youth policy as a government's priority together with the withdrawal of financial resources contradict the will to struggle unemployment, promote health and prevent radicalisation (cfr. Batsleer, Pais *et al.*, 2015). As *multi-dimensional* we interpret those policies, which are more active in providing a comprehensive framework embracing several intervention's areas, of which one could be prioritized as it happens for example in French with the employment issue (cfr. *Becquet,* Hinkle *et al.*, 2015). Turkey's youth policy is labelled as *centred* because it focuses only on the *educational aspect* of young people's lives (Lüküslü, Osmanoğlu, *et al.*, 2015). Finally, Sweden mirroring its universalistic welfare principle proposes a *holistic* youth policy connecting different issues and sharing a common 'youth perspective' in order to guide all measures and understandings of young persons' life as individual meaningful life-project (cfr. Forkby, *et al.*, 2015).

	Character of policy	Standing of the youth issue	Participation
Bulgaria	Multi-dimensional, several issues are joined, mainly to struggle economic endeavours	Structures and ideology in place but not prioritized	Top-down approach unattractive for young people
France	Multi-dimensional, several topics are joint together – but over-shadowed by the (un)employment issue	Prioritization of employment issues towards other areas.	Emphases on voluntary work and participation in civic service
Germany	Multi-faceted, refers to youth organizations, extracurricular activities, social support, however not including training, employment and education	Prioritization with blind spots	Recognized as a training for democracy and citizenship
Italy	Multi-faceted, issues are fragmented and not fully structured or coordinated	Hindered prioritization, due to the lack of resources, heavily relying on traditional family-oriented welfare model.	Restricted, interesting local project to promote and exercise participation, but not a developed structure.

Sweden	Holistic, different issues are supposed to be understood and networked	Long tradition of political consensus and fairly prioritized	Integrated both as a practice and a tool
Switzerland	Multi-dimensional and multi-agency, several issues recognized but not fully structured	Increasing priority, but unevenly implemented on the cantonal level.	Recognized as a training of democracy and citizenship, but unevenly recognized and implemented on the cantonal level (some cantons by statutory legislation others lacking)
The UK/ England	Multi-faceted, focus on (un)employment, several issues recognized separately	Not a government priority	Not integrated as a tool to struggle societal challenges
Turkey	Centred, focus on education other areas neglected or underfunded	Generally low priority	Despite the resource discourse, young people mainly considered as receptors of services

Table 2: Youth policies in PARTISPACE's countries

From the analysis, it emerges that in some of the eight national contexts youth policy is not really a prioritised political area on the national agenda. In several cases, governments have a structure in place, but not the will to follow through. Instead of a long-term based strategy, we assist to fragmented approaches and a worrying cut of the budget allocated to youth policies, especially at the educational ones, even in countries where the topic is supposedly 'hot', as in France. The lack of coordination processes aiming at an integrated youth policy highlights the scarce will to implement them: instead of cooperating synchronizing efforts and funds, the different Ministries and authorities work on their little part of the issue, creating no meaningful change in the policy as a whole.

Most countries are facing a growing rate of youth unemployment, but the way they use youth participation strategies to face this problem varies. In many discourses, youth unemployment is considered more as a moral than a structural problem, even in countries such as Bulgaria, where a trivial bureaucracy impedes youth entrepreneurship, which might be part of a solution. In most countries, the efforts to increase training opportunities for young people at risk of exclusion, to provide a counter-balance to their weak socioeconomic backgrounds via educational measures and youth work enabling disadvantaged young people to participate in sport, volunteering or the arts are pursued through support's policies for Third Sector's organization. Therefore, these last are more aimed at a *compensa-*

tory work with these cohorts of young people rather than to a *universalistic* and systemic intervention regarding *all* young people. Consequently, they are perceived as *stigmatizing* by their natural target group, and therefore refused (see Walther *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, youth work in its various interpretations – German, French and Italian – might provide a different answer that encourages young people to activate; however, it does not necessarily provide work.

The NEETs issue represents a big hurdle for the participating countries, in particular for Turkey and Bulgaria. Not being able to provide good education, preventing students' dropping out of education, or reserving the best education paths to the already privileged young people seems to be a common issue, menacing youth development to adulthood and social integration. This is particularly the case of Turkey, where it is additionally a gendered problem. Further analysis reveals that only few young people – mainly the best-educated ones – participate in formalized settings (parties, trade unions, or youth councils), which are too rigid and normative oriented for satisfying individualized concerns, biographies and life styles, while reflecting patterns of social inequality (cfr. Kovacheva, 2006; Spannring *et al.*, 2008; Vromen & Collins, 2010; Diemer, 2012; Eurobarometer, 2013).

Ideally, *decentralised* power is supposed to lead to a more context-oriented and individual tailored approach; however, in some cases seems to produce also a great disarray within the same country creating *unequal* situation as citizens of certain regions are granted more opportunities and rights than citizens in others are. While welfare systems vary a lot among the participating countries, the common trend across the boarders seems to be a movement towards cutting costs, especially in education, often through putting the responsibility of youth development elsewhere than on the state budget. Overall, an ambivalent attitude emerges from the analysis of the national policies concerning youth, whose relevance in the national political agendas is commonly acknowledged more at policy discourse level than in practice.

5. Concluding pedagogical remarks: educating to participate through a lived practice

After having presented, the state of the art concerning the youth representations and the related youth policies in the eight countries involved in the PARTISPACE project, we put now the focus on the pedagogical link that connect *education* to *participation*. This implies a brief reflection on the connection between *pedagogy* and *politics*. Introducing the English translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull wrote:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about

> conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom", the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull, 1970).

This quote highlighte the contradiction of living every day in a society, that though apparently founded on the ideals of freedom, democracy and individual realization continues to reproduce through education forms of dominance and injustice in order to grant the status-quo. Whilst there are theoretically opportunities for young people to participate in democratic structures, many of these structures do not belong to their lifestyles and cultures. As the most important youth policy, *education* need to recognise that young people's engagement in public issues, both at local and global level, needs to be developed in ways that relate to their own identity building process, individual life experiences and cultural practices. Young people seem to be the "losers of globalisation" and this has a deep impact on their identity building process, lifestyle and relationship to social and political issues.

In this condition, pedagogy has to come back to its original political vision of emancipatory practices in favour of people's individual self-realisation and fulfilment. There is urgent need to return to a "pedagogy of possibility" (Bertin, 1968), articulating a social ethics providing a moral vision guiding emancipatory paths of educational practices and processes. The pedagogical conceptualisation should therefore integrate reflections on power, politics and "possibilities" with the aim of clarifying *how* and *to what extent* education may contribute to engage especially (disadvantaged) young people in their self-directed empowering process and struggling for individual development and social recognition. Pedagogy is therefore required to consider the relation between knowledge- and subjectivity production, acknowledging the complex nature of youth production of identity, competences, interests and desires and the possibilities for an emancipatory agenda for learning and living participation within school, networking with other (educational) stakeholders outside school. As emerged from our research, civil society organisations across Europe have considerable expertise and experience in the participation development approach and can act as facilitator advising teachers on how to develop appropriate participatory educational programmes and practices. From our findings, it emerges that young people are interested in learning more about global issues but it seems that the school environments of many European countries do not promote this involvement.

The development of a genuine attitude to participate implies that young people are being actively involved in decision-making and taking action on issues relevant to them. Within formal education, this could be seen as encompassing a *learner-centred* and *participative approach* within both the formal curriculum and non-formal or informal learning, closing the disjuncture between policies and how young people actively engage in political and social issues.

From our PARTISPACE data, it emerges that successful support to youth engagement implies that young people have to be provided in their everyday educational practices with genuine and meaningful opportunities to work with *each other* and with *teachers* on issues that are important for them. Activities will be effective while respecting the *values* of young people in individual and public problem solving. Therefore, there is vital to overcome a mere "tokenistic" participatory approach (cfr. Hurt, 1992), providing young people and adults with information, tools and support in order to work effectively as partners, allowing opportunities for youth to take ownership of important parts of the process. For teacher and educators in general, it is important to be inclusive in planning and working with youth, placing particular emphasis on engaging young people valuing their diversity (including ethnic, gender and socio-economic background). Civic engagement within inside and outside school provides young people with opportunities to gain identity reference points, life experience, new skills, and to learn responsibility and accountability, while contributing to their self-emancipation process and the wealth of their communities. Neglecting the meaning that participation assume in the biographical work of young people, their life conditions that enhance or hinder the participation's possibilities risks to be an educational *dead-end* way.

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