# Chapter 2.1: From Brazil with Love Youth Participation Practice in Scotland

Louise Sheridan

## Introduction

A key tenet of Freire's (2000) ideas is that all education is political and this is no different from the education of young people, whether formal or informal. There has been a long established political imperative to involve young people in key societal matters. The United Nations' (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) asserted the need for young people under the age of 18 years to have the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives. On the 18th of September, 2014, approximately three quarters of Scotland's 16 and 17 year olds exercised their right to vote for or against Independence for Scotland within the United Kingdom (The Electoral Commission 2014). This supports Macleod's (2009) belief that young people are vital members of society, who have their own thoughts and opinions and a desire to express them. This chapter will highlight examples of policy directives, such as that

L. Sheridan (✉)
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

from the Scottish Community Education Council (1996) and Scottish Government (2003; 2016a; 2016b) policies, which clearly assert the importance of enabling and encouraging young people to get involved in decision-making processes within local communities in Scotland. The study looked at the lived experiences of young people who have taken part in a youth participation project (YPP) in Scotland. Freire's (2000) pedagogical theories provide a framework for analysis of the data within the study. This chapter will discuss an early examination of findings in relation to the role of some of the youth workers who have been involved in the YPP. It was clear, at an early stage, that the YPP is an example of transformative education in action, with both young people and youth workers noting positive changes at individual and community levels. The first section of the chapter will examine some aspects of youth participation practice in Scotland. An ethics of care was described by young people and youth workers involved in the YPP, which connects with Freire's (2004b) concept of armed love. The next section will demonstrate what is understood by armed love and how this was manifest within the YPP. The concept of armed love is a thread that weaves its way throughout Freire's theories and principles for practice. The third section examines three of Freire's (1986) principles and how they connect to, and underpin, a good practice approach to youth participation. This leads to the conclusion that Freire's theories and ideas should form a part of the training, and the development of the experience, of youth workers. I also conclude that the Scottish Government needs to invest more in the development of youth participation practice across Scotland. Youth participation practice is an example of transformative education that can result in positive social change.

## Youth Participation Practice in Scotland

The political imperative to encourage the youth participation in decision-making processes has been existent for nearly two decades in Scotland. The Scottish Community Education Council (SCEC) led the *Connect Youth* initiative, which aimed to boost young people's involvement in things that affected their lives such as service provision in communities

(SCEC 1996), and youth councils were deemed a suitable forum to enable this to happen. Checkoway (2011) notes that young people from middle and upper-income families are more likely to participate in youth councils, which was also found to be the case in Scotland (McGinley and Grieve 2010). This raises the question of whether youth councils are the most appropriate forum to engage young people from a wide range of backgrounds. The Scottish Government (2003) introduced legislation that called for local governments to involve young people in community planning processes, a wider arena than youth councils, and the Scottish Government (2012a) recorded examples of this happening across Scotland. There is scope for the further development of opportunities for young people to take part in youth participation projects in Scotland, and beyond. The doctoral study will provide some insight into youth participation practice in Scotland, looking at what is working, what the benefits are and what the lessons to be learned are. Whilst the doctoral study concentrates on one example of a youth participation project that stems from local and national government policy, it is worth noting that youth participation practice takes many forms.

Different approaches correlate to differing understandings of young people's capacity to act meaningfully in society, and how youth work might act to help navigate the perceived hurdles that young people face. James and McGillicuddy (2001: 3) suggest three different perspectives of young people. The 'prevention perspective', within which young people are seen as deficient and not able to bring about positive changes in their lives. This perspective warrants an approach that Quixley (2008) identifies as youth service provision, in which young people are helped to overcome the deficiencies that they are seen to have in order to conform to the accepted norms of a particular society. In the 'youth development perspective' young people are believed to face hurdles that prevent them from reaching their full potential therefore the approach focuses on building young people's individual skills and knowledge and relies on help from a supportive adult (The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing and The Movement Strategy Center 2012). This view recognizes that young people must navigate their way through the many challenges and expectations they face, from peers, family and society (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). Finally, the 'empowerment perspective', which stems from the belief that the societal structures are the root causes of young people's problems warrants an

overall approach that encourages and enables young people to take collective action to challenge inequalities within society.

Youth workers play a pivotal role within all of these approaches, irrespective of the views held of young people. Elvin and Frew (2010) refer to a traditional view of role models within youth work, which would include youth workers modelling societal norms for young people who are seen as 'lacking'. They also discussed youth workers as inspirational figures, with youth workers inspiring young people to make choices and take actions through them espousing values such as social justice and equality. It could be said that a common theme in both examples is the notion of care for young people, whether it be through treatment or empowerment. Noddings (2002) is a strong supporter of having an ethics of care for young people in an educational setting. This involves ethical decision-making, with care and concern for the wellbeing of young people at its core. Noddings affirms that when young people have a sense that a teacher or youth worker cares about them, they cope better in the face of adverse situations. This ethics of care is echoed strongly by Freire (1998) in his reference to the idea that education is an act of love.

## Armed Love

Freire's (2004b) transformative approach to education is grounded in 'universal ethics', which he described as valuing people's sense, and embodiment, of personal agency. Freire (2004a) believed that it is a teacher's role to help young people to realize their potential as agents of change. In youth participation practice, an element of universal ethics involves youth workers seeing young people as partners in a process of change (Share and Stacks, 2007). Haskell McBee (2007) refers to the context of care within a classroom but the sentiments are applicable in the context of youth participation practice or youth work in general. Haskell McBee avers the importance of demonstrating care for young people in the classroom, which can be done through finding out '...what is important to them, to truly listen to them and their personal stories and viewpoints' (2007: 41). Daniels (2010: 9) recognizes that care and armed love are both key components of universal ethics but also

acknowledged that it is a challenge to distinguish between 'care' and 'armed love' and what they manifest as within a learning environment. For the purpose of this discussion on the YPP, they will broadly be considered as being the same thing. Freire (2004b) believed armed love does not involve sentimentality but, instead, it is about being concerned about helping people to make a difference in their lives. Armed love is embodied by noticing if someone is tired, or noticing if someone seems not to understand a concept and responding to this. It is also about provoking critical questions, discussions and actions and not simply accepting information without question. Barber (2007) notes that these are vital elements of youth participation practice that are necessary to enable young people to empower themselves. Barber (2009) cautions, practice that appears to be empowering may actually be controlling. That is, achieving the youth worker or organisation's agenda as opposed to helping young people to achieve their goals. All of the youth participants in the research described a strong sense that the youth workers care for them. They identified situations in which they felt they could confide in the youth worker about concerns or in which they felt cared for, through the youth worker taking time to talk to them individually if they had noticed the young person was not their 'usual' self. This was echoed by the youth workers, who identified authentic care for young people as something that brings about positive outcomes for individual young people. The study found that youth workers play a crucial role in the helping young people to build their confidence. It is evident, from this study, that the creation of a caring environment within which young people can work alongside youth workers is a contributing factor for the success of youth participation practice as a means of transformative education.

## Principles for Youth Participation Practice

Freire's vision of transformative education was underpinned by a set of seven principles for practice and the notion that all forms of education are political encapsulates the principles (Freire 1996). It is possible to relate all seven principles to good practice in youth participation but, for the purpose of this short chapter, discussion will be on principles one, six

and seven. Principle one denotes the 'the importance of pedagogical space' Freire (1996: 127). In any educational situation, be it formal or informal, it is beneficial to the learners if the environment is conducive to learning. There must be a recognition that, in order for at least the possibility for people to exercise curiosity and take part in critical discussions, certain conditions must be in place. With even the best intentions from young people, a dark and imposing room can hamper the experience. Pedagogical spaces reach beyond the notion of physical space. It could involve showing some appreciation when a student has made a thoughtful contribution, which helps to show students that it is possible for them to create new ideas and possibilities. This is the embodiment of caring and armed love. Freire (1998: 89) referred to the finer details of creating a good learning space, such as the need to 'understand the meaning of a moment of silence, of a smile, or even an instant in which someone needs to leave the room.' These seemingly small acts, and showing respect for students, can have a positive impact and are a demonstration of a commitment to universal ethics that were described earlier. Mutual respect is a key component of Barber's (2007: 85) 'Engagement Zone', which is part of his 'Top-Down/Bottom-Up Model of Youth Engagement' approach to youth participation practice. In an 'Engagement Zone' adults must treat young people as equals in the process of dialogue. In slight contrast to Barber's view here, Freire (1986) recognized that teachers hold a position of authority. Or, in the context of youth participation practice, youth workers are in a position of authority over young people.

That being said, principle six states that teachers should not impose their agenda onto students (Freire 1986), or onto youth participants in this case. It is important to recognize that some people need assistance to '*name* the world' (Freire 2000: 88). In other words, some young people may need support and a conducive environment (principle one) in order that they can identify and examine the issues that are most prevalent to them. In this circumstance, the youth worker must strike a balance between directing young people when necessary, to taking a step back and listening too. This relates to Henderson and Thomas' (2002) notion of 'predisposition', which relates to the different roles that youth workers can take as mentioned earlier. Aligned to Freire's (1986) sixth principle, Henderson and Thomas (2002) also advocate against a youth worker

influencing the direction of progress based on his or her own views. Freire (2000) was clear that teachers, or youth workers, have a necessary role to play in enabling a transformative process, but he did not envisage that they would manipulate the situation for their own cause. Butler and Princeswal (2010) suggest that cultural forms such as poetry, film, music, drama, and hip-hop provide useful mediums for young people to identify and explore issues that are pertinent to them. These have been shown to be attractive means for young people to reflect upon their experiences within society and envisage and work towards change. The context that they referred to is urban Brazil, which is where Paulo Freire initially conceived his theoretical ideas. Whilst lessons can be learned in a Scottish context, it should be noted that Butler and Princeswal (2010) feel that there is still work to be done in terms of researching the benefits and longer-term outcomes of using cultural forms of youth participation. Future research into the outcomes of using these mediums in Scotland is undoubtedly needed.

Whether future research takes place or not, there still remains the need to mediate and manage realistic expectations. Kohfeldt et al. (2011) note that adults often place limitations on young people's voices. This can be further exacerbated by the fact that adults who have a significant role in youth participation projects are often faced with a conflict of interest; having to deal with the young people's agenda, whilst still operating within the limits of their own organisation. This did not present as an issue in this case; all participants in the YPP articulated that there is a fluid, two-way, process of communication between the young people and senior members within the local authority. Young people expressed a sense that their views are valued and acted upon. Kohfeldt et al. (2011) emphasize the need for adults operating at all levels of institutions to embrace the concept of youth participation; those responsible for administration and funding must be willing to meet with young people who are involved. On the assumption that there is a level of success within the YPP, it appears that young people's voices, experiences and participation are perceived to be valued. This leads to principle seven, which states that teachers should respect the autonomy of the students, respect cultural identities and value their experiences (Freire 1986).

Freire (2000, 1998) wrote that respect for students' identities is an ethical requirement and not just respect for them as human beings but

respect for their culture too. He wrote that a core element of the educational process is about respecting what people know and that 'a fundamental starting point is respect for the learner's cultural identity… language, syntax, prosody, semantics, and informal knowledge' (Freire 1996: 127).Young people are experts in their own lives and the youth worker's role is to help them to explore their perceived realities, which connects to earlier point that youth workers are not role models in terms of guiding young people on how they should be. A crucial part of the process is that young people are given the space and opportunity to identify the paths of action that they wish to take, which might not necessarily be those that the youth worker would choose. The concept of armed love is ever present.

Youth workers should demonstrate that they care and love young people and give them the security to consider their lived experiences at both a micro and a macro level (Freire 2004b). Freire (2000) believed that by broadening their knowledge, by asking questions 'of authority, of freedom, of reading, of writing, of the virtues of the educator' (Freire 2005: 97), people would be equipped to challenge and overcome the injustices of the world and to take new directions (Freire 1998). Young people were not excluded from this kind of process; Freire noted that they are more than able to create new knowledge and take action, but that they must be supported in the right way to do this (Freire 1998). He described some parameters for working with young people in transformative education. It is important to enable them to have the level of freedom that promotes autonomous thinking, but also to set boundaries that give them a sense of protection and support. With the right level of harmony between freedom and limits, many things are possible. An ethics of care towards young people inherently means showing respect for them in relation to all aspects of the process – including respect for their cultural identities. The discussion of Freire's (1968) principles one, six and seven has gone a little way to demonstrate that his theories in relation to transformative education have something to offer youth participation practice in Scotland. In spite of the fact that McLaren (2013) claims it is not possible implement Freire's theories and principles for practice beyond the confines of the Third World, the contrary appears to be happening in Scotland – on a small level. It is important to recognize that Freire

believed that his pedagogical approach could not simply be transported to another context, he conceded that efforts must be made to adapt his ideas and methods to fit the particular context, paying particular attention to the historical context (Shor and Freire 1987).

In Scotland, and beyond, there has been a political context asserting the need for young people to have an active role within their communities (United Nations 1989; Scottish Government 2003, 2012a). Despite this, work is still needed to create a culture of participation amongst young people in Scotland, particularly if Ginwright and James' (2002) concerns prevail. They suggest that many young people face barriers that prevent participation in the civic arena, such as a basic lack of access to the means to express their political views. Findings from a study conducted by Matthews (2001) suggest that work should be done to promote youth participation projects as accessible to all young people and not just to those who are from more affluent backgrounds or those who are more academically able. Giroux (2004) refers to young people as *The Abandoned Generation* and calls for youth workers to continue teach critical thinking, active democracy, and community action for social change. In order to enable this to take place in consistent and cohesive manner, the Scottish Government (2012b) must provide more resources and give recognition to youth work as a worthwhile profession. There is a will amongst young people; the levels of participation of 16 and 17 year olds in the independence referendum in Scotland gives some indication of that (The Electoral Commission 2014). Resources should also be given to projects already involved in successful youth participation practice to enable them to share best practice and research is also needed into the long-term outcomes for young people, and communities, as a result of YPPs in Scotland.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there are aspects of Freire's theories and principles for practice that can be adopted and adapted within youth participation practice in Scotland. Some findings from a doctoral study have shown that the embodiment of armed love and the ethics of care is present

in the YPP in question, with positive results for individual young people. An increased level of confidence was recorded by all young people who have taken part in the YPP, which can be indirectly attributed to the relationship that they have with the youth workers. Regardless of whether a Freirean approach to youth participation is adapted, the Scottish Government must make the necessary investments in local authorities and voluntary youth organisations across Scotland. Without the necessary resources, there will remain a huge gap between rhetoric and reality.

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