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Workers' and volunteers' ideas about the benefits of young people's cultural participation: a critical capital-based approach

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with non-profit sector and voluntary workers' understandings of the benefits of young people's participation in cultural and leisure projects in Central Finland. Active participation is highlighted on a policy level as a solution to social inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation among young people. The article focuses on the cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions of participation by exploring the advantages that cultural projects bring to young people. The article theorises these dimensions by drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital to provide a more critical account of the participation paradigm. Fifteen workers and volunteers on cultural projects were interviewed in 2017–2018 and asked about the advantages of participation. Although – according to informants – such projects generate positive outcomes – they can improve quality of life, create networks and a sense of belonging, support self-esteem and self-expression, and teach emotional, social, and working-life skills – Bourdieu's approach raises the question of whether the benefits (or capitals) that young people are understood to gain translate into advantages in other spheres.

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Introduction

This article deals with young people's participation in cultural and leisure projects¹ that are meant to encourage them into active citizenship and participation from the perspective of workers and volunteers of cultural projects. Cultural participation is one of the arenas that aim to educate and engage young people in active citizenship. Participation (along with engagement, activeness, accessibility, and cultural diversity) became an important point of departure for political programmes and various projects in the 2000s in Finland, even though cultural democracy had been an important goal of Finnish cultural politics since the 1960s and 1970s (Virolainen 2016). Cultural policy is meant to promote equal access to the arts and cultural activities, which are also understood to reduce social, economic, and regional inequalities (Virolainen 2016).

Neoliberal regimes and policymakers see participation and activation as a solution to the inequality, marginalisation, and social exclusion of vulnerable groups. However, participation policies and practices are widely criticised as ineffective in this regard (e.g. Kothari and Cooke 2001). Although previous studies have noted that such practices provide participants with benefits related to the cultural (Tomka 2013; Mandiola 2016; Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2017), social (Guillen, Coromina, and Saris 2011; Putnam 2000), economic (Deng and Meng 2013; Cogley 2013), and political dimensions of participation (Ivaldi, Bonati, and Soliani 2017), in this article we offer

a more structural and critical account of the participation and activation paradigm and ‘empowerment’ discourse (see Ekholm and Lindström Sol 2019).

We scrutinise workers’ and volunteers’ ideas of young people’s participation in cultural projects in reference to Bourdieu’s theorisation of cultural, social, economic, and political capital (Bourdieu 1986a, 1986b). The participatory turn and empowerment discourse that have arisen in politics alongside the dismantling of the welfare state can be used as an ideological tool to justify government withdrawal, with organisations and projects taking more responsibility for ‘empowering’ young people. It is important to draw attention to the questions of power, position, and reproduction that are central features of Bourdieu’s theorisation of capital. In other words, we draw attention to the contradictory aspects of these projects, taking into account how the benefits the projects provide to young people are understood by the workers and volunteers. We, then, reflect on these ideas with regard to projects’ limitations and restrictions related to the accumulation of capital.

Critiques from within youth research have suggested that Bourdieu’s theory of capital is more suitable and relevant to the adult world, since few (individual) young people are able to transform the other forms of capital into economic capital (e.g. Tolonen 2007; Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007; Bullen and Kenway 2004, 2005; Morrow 1999; Thornton 1995). Another critique of Bourdieu’s theory of capital is that whether it captures the complexities of youth experience and aspects of wellbeing that do not fit Bourdieu’s work. Cultural participatory projects have been shown to have positive effects on young people’s lives (see Campbell 2019, 170). The Bourdieusian frame pays less attention to this. However when activation policies are designed to prevent social exclusion and marginalisation and to promote wellbeing – if not social mobilisation – a capital-based approach translates the question of the individual benefits and assets brought by activation into a question about the social and cultural reproduction of inequality. In Finland – similar to Sweden or elsewhere – activation policies and (cultural) workshops are mostly targeted at young people from underprivileged backgrounds (see Virolainen 2016, 66; Ekholm and Lindström Sol 2019; Campbell 2019).

Bourdieu has not been widely used to examine the issue of young people’s civic participation (see Wood 2013). There are studies that are interested in the role of various forms of capital in young people’s participation. Studies interested in social capital include Print and Coleman (2003) and Weller (2006). However, according to Wood (2013), there have been few studies that integrate the Bourdieusian approach, with the exception of McFarland and Thomas (2006), who refer to Bourdieu’s concept of political habitus in order to show that capital is unequally distributed among children from different backgrounds in youth voluntary organisations.

We interviewed 15 workers and volunteers on such projects, exploring their views and experiences of the projects’ benefits for young people. Our data was gathered in 2017–2018 in the province of Central Finland. It is important to point out that the study does not focus on the accumulation of young peoples’ actual resources, but rather how workers and volunteers talk about these potential resources. However, workers and volunteers are aware of the advantages of participatory projects and how they influence young people’s lives. Thus, the informants can tell us what are the general goals and benefits of Finnish cultural projects. In the interviews, they paid attention to the cultural, social, economic, and political aspects of these cultural projects. Their perspectives on and understandings of what types of benefits these projects can have for young people’s lives are important indicators of the underlying values and guiding principles of activation policies and participation. How do they understand the benefits and what perspectives are not present in the interviews? The projects in question provide a comprehensive picture of activities and forms of cultural participation for young people in the province.

The activation turn in young people's civic and cultural participation

Finland – among many other countries – has adopted neoliberal policies since the 1990s, which reflects the transformation of the Nordic policy model. Finnish youth work has highlighted participation increasingly since the 2000s on a policy level as a solution to social inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation (e.g. Gretschel and Myllyniemi 2017). Youth participation can generally be defined as 'a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives', which implies the 'active engagement and real influence of young people, not [...] their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies', and which 'has objectives, outcomes, and assessment criteria' (Checkoway 2010, 341). Participation and active engagement is understood as helping young people to adjust, commit, and contribute to society (Wood 2013).

One way to promote participation is cultural projects. The idea is that these cultural projects and leisure activities promote health and well-being (e.g. Virolainen 2016; Kangas 2017). They are meant to help young people form bonds (i.e. to build their social capital), create a sense of belonging, and increase their skills, abilities, and resources. Another goal is to promote their self-esteem, self-expression, and self-knowledge (Ahola et al. 2010; THL 2019). Such measures are seen as central to preventing social exclusion and other problems (e.g. Ministry of Education and Culture 2017; Ahola et al. 2010).

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for strategic planning, implementation of the programmes and objectives, and providing state funding for cultural participation through other organisations and institutions (Virolainen 2016, 64; Kangas 2017, 66). For instance, Finnish municipalities, organisations, and associations arrange many types of leisure activities, workshops, and events. According to research by the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 59 per cent of municipalities in Finland offered cultural-participatory activities for young people in 2019 (THL 2019).

Programmes, cultural projects, and leisure activities for young people aspire to educate and support them to become active citizens in ways that will generate their wider participation and sense of belonging to society. Even though, the cultural participation can refer to access to cultural activities (Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2017) – in a wider sense including cultural experiences, cultural education, cultural inheritance, language, cultural values, identities, and shared symbolic meanings, as well as creative and artistic expression and opportunities to consume art (Mandiola 2016) – the important value of Finnish cultural participation is to participate decision-making and planning of the content cultural activities (see Kangas 2017).

Bourdieu's capital-based approach

Participation has overlapping cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions. Each of these dimensions can be more closely scrutinised by referring to Bourdieu's theorisation of capital. Bourdieu (1986b, 114) defines capital as a 'set of actually usable resources and powers'. Individuals need capital in order to have an impact on the social world. For Bourdieu (1986a, 15), capital 'is accumulated history': it emerges from accumulated labour, manifesting itself in either a material form or an embodied, incorporated form. The accumulation of various forms of capital is connected to early socialisation, in which one's childhood family plays an important role. The childhood family's social position and its accumulation of various forms of capital – i.e. the volume and composition of the economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital to which one becomes accustomed in one's childhood family – has an effect on one's later success in school and educational settings (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu's sociology highlights reproduction rather than transformation. Privileged social groups are strategically able to transmit their high volume of capital to the next generation (for instance, through educational institutions), whereas disadvantaged social groups struggle to take advantage of the capitals they have. For Bourdieu, this is the mechanism through which class divisions are reproduced (Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu (1986b) has a tendency to view cultural capital through the lens of class distinction, whereby upper- or middle-class actors possess a large amount of cultural capital (i.e. are inclined towards high culture), while the lower classes' lack of cultural capital manifests itself as a 'taste for necessity'. This distinction is related to variations in symbolic legitimacy and status (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). Individuals possess different amounts of cultural capital, which can be objectified through the possession of cultural goods (the ownership of artworks, musical instruments, etc.), embodied in terms of lifestyle and taste, or institutionalised, as in the case of educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986a, 17). In this sense, Bourdieu has relatively narrow understanding of culture, which differs from the concept of cultural participation entailing culture as non-stratified meaningful action or identity.

Social capital can be used to aggregate other capitals and advantages, such as cultural or economic capital, where certain actors are in less privileged positions to do so (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). The accumulation of social capital is related to the functioning of institutions (Bourdieu 1993, 33). High-end (cultural) institutions provide the best opportunities to gather social capital. Young people do not typically possess large amounts of social capital. In youth studies, definitions of social capital take account of young people's points of view. For instance, Raffo and Reeves (2000, 148) point out that 'an individualized system of social capital is a dynamic, social, spatially, culturally, temporally and economically embedded group, network, or constellation of social relations, which has the young person at the core of the constellation and which provides authentic opportunities for everyday learning'. The benefits of social capital with regard to well-being make the concept appealing to policymakers, and many projects for young people aim to increase their social capital (Holland 2009; Morrow 1999).

Economic capital is linked to material resources (i.e. money and ownership), reflecting actors' economic positions in social space. It is unequally distributed, making certain groups such as (unemployed) young people, immigrants, and disabled individuals particularly vulnerable. These individuals encounter more difficulties in entering working life and gaining economic independence (e.g. Cobley 2013). Moreover, a lack of economic capital diminishes one's opportunities for social and political participation in Finland (Gretshel and Myllykoski 2017). It has been argued that young people do not have the same opportunities as adults to transform other forms of capital into economic capital, and that the role of economic capital has been overemphasised (e.g. Tolonen 2007; Bullen and Kenway 2005, 52). However, this does not make a capital-based approach unimportant with regard to young people, because their opportunities to gain economic capital lie in the future: their current social, cultural, and symbolic capital plays a significant role in their future access to economic services, labour markets, and consumption.

Bourdieu (1986a) argues that those who lack capital face more limitations on their participation in the political field. Political capital is a power resource that (political) actors draw upon 'in their efforts to win in the political arena' (Swartz 2013, 64). For Bourdieu, politics is also an arena of competence. Competence means not only specific skills, but also a feeling of easy participation, a sense of entitlement, or the social recognition that one is worthy, which derives from the possession of capital (Bourdieu 1986a, 399–400, 406, 1993). The concept of political capital has been most widely applied to formal and professional politics (Swartz 2013), and has arguably been neglected in the field of informal politics – a field that is typical of young people's political action.

Bourdieu has been criticised that he does not value marginalised young people's lives and cultures as meaningful, because they are disadvantageously positioned in power relations (Tolonen 2007). Many youth scholars (Thornton 1995; Bullen and Kenway 2005; Tolonen 2007; Holland 2007) therefore use the concept of subcultural capital, which makes it possible 'to observe subspecies of capital operating within other less privileged domains' (Thornton 1995, 11). These scholars argue that young people gain cultural, social, and symbolic capitals that 'have currency within their social groupings, providing resources and strategies' (Bullen and Kenway 2005, 52). Bourdieu neglects the idea that some specific environments (subcultures, leisure activities, hobbies, etc.) might help marginalised young people to gain capital, or that

informal politics might develop young people's own ways of being active – creating free spaces that combine culture and politics, for example. Indeed, activation policies and the forms of cultural participation they support also function in this way. Municipalities, organisations, and associations that aspire to empower young people can be thought of as providing opportunities to accumulate capital by organising leisure activities, workshops, and events. However, while this criticism is central to the need for subtler ways of analysing young people's assets, there is nevertheless a contradiction between the role of capital in social and cultural reproduction and young people's own use of resources in their self-created domains (e.g. MacDonald et al. 2005; Holland 2007).

Data and method

There are several cultural participation projects for young people in Central Finland. The province has 275,992 inhabitants and consists of one large city, Jyväskylä (population 138,922), 22 smaller municipalities, and large rural areas. We selected 15 projects – of varying sizes and budgets – whose objective was to increase young people's participation in cultural and leisure activities. Some of these projects have now ended, some are still running, and some are permanent. Although there are also other types of youth participation project in Central Finland (concentrating on employment, health and well-being, the provision of services, the promotion of entrepreneurship, the prevention of exclusion, etc.), this study focuses on cultural participation projects.

We sent emails to municipalities, associations, and cultural institutions in order to reach as many of the province's cultural participation projects as possible. Overall, the 15 cultural projects in our data provide a comprehensive picture of the content of participatory youth work in recent years in Central Finland. Eight of the projects were based in Jyväskylä, and eight in smaller municipalities. In nine of the projects, an association was the main operator; in five, it was a municipality. Because only three of the projects were operated by art institutions, our results support the critique that cultural participation studies focusing on publicly funded art organisations exclude other relevant cultural activities and modes of participation (Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2017). Three were rural development projects funded by the European Union Leader programme; two were multicultural projects targeted at immigrants. All the data has been anonymised.

The goals of the projects varied. Most often, they aimed to prevent social exclusion and promote well-being. A minority were aimed at young people with migrant backgrounds or had goals that were more political, such as reducing hate speech and promoting equity and gender-sensitivity. It was also common that they aimed to increase knowledge and motivate young people towards activities such as community development and entrepreneurship, producing (cultural) events, or supporting working-life skills. Some projects supported creativity and self-expression through the arts, music, or video games (Tables 1 and 2).

Our data was generated through loosely structured interviews that contained two parts. The first part dealt with the projects in general, their backgrounds, activities, practices, and goals. The second part of the interview concentrated on workers' and volunteers' ideas and definitions of participation and belonging. In this part the informants were asked to think about the cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions of participation from their own points of view. We asked:

- (1) How did the workers and volunteers perceive and understand the advantages of their projects for young people?
- (2) How did they understand the different dimensions of participation in their projects?

In general, we were interested in the views and ideas of the actors (workers and volunteers) who planned and organised the activities and workshops, and who had gained an understanding of their projects' effects on young people.

Table 1. Developmental projects meant to increase young people's participation (projects' names are translated from Finnish to English).

| Project (number of informants) | Executer | Content | Financing |
|---|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Gender sensitive youth work (1) | Association | Leisure activities and communal support | Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations |
| Jo/Jo (1) | Association | Leisure activities for the youth in countryside | Leader |
| Landebuusti (1) (Country Boost) | Association | Activation for community development and entrepreneurial activity | Leader |
| Art testers -project (1) | Municipal Art institution | Inspire young people to art experiences | Finnish Cultural Foundation |
| Don't assume -project (1) | Municipal | Prevent hate speech and support equality in work shops | Ministry of Education and Culture |
| Gameon Jyväskylä (1) | Association | Gaming-related education, workshops and events | European Social Fund |
| Invisibles -project (1) | The University of Jyväskylä | Comics work shop | European Social Fund |
| I'm In! Project for the Young Adults with Immigrant Background (1) | Association | Intergration to Finnish society and culture | Finland's Slot Machine Association |
| Young People's Video Project/ MLL (1) | Association | To give young people voice through video workshops | Regional State Administrative Agency |

Table 2. Permanent activities to support young people's cultural participation.

| Activity (number of informants) | Executer | Content |
|--|-----------------|--|
| BackStage action (of a theatre) (1) | Art Institution | Participate young people in theatre activities |
| Music project (1) | Art Institution | Activation for cultural event production |
| Young people's art work shops (1) | Municipal | Improve employment possibilities and control of life |
| Culture Club and Young People's Cultural Association Tuff (2) | Association | Support creative action and cultural activities |
| Lutakko Ballroom (1) | Association | Teach event organisation ja working life skills |

We used the method of theory-based qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012), analysing the data in relation to Bourdieu's theorisation of capital. First, we paid attention to how the workers and volunteers saw the different dimensions of participation, and how they described different elements of participatory advantage for young people, which we divided into cultural, emotional, social, economic, and political advantages. We gathered all the expressions in the data that dealt with these advantages. Then we analysed these advantages with regard to Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, economic, and political capital. We have classified our results according to these themes in what follows.

Results

Cultural participation increasing cultural skills

For the workers and volunteers, culture and art means educating young people to enjoy and spend time in the sphere of art and culture, either as consumers (at museums, art galleries, concerts, etc.) or as people who find joy in artistic self-expression. Many projects organise museums and concert visits, and many provide workshops that enable young people to learn new skills and building culture together.

So young people build culture, cultural norms, and rap lyrics or music production. [...] It is exactly what we aim for, that young people start to do things on their own in their environment. We are enablers at the beginning. (volunteer producer from cultural association)

Informants encourage young people to be creative and build their own culture and rules.

In addition at the same time, some informants highlight that they use professionals to teach young people. One informant from the art workshop speaks of the skilled coaches and professionals that come to her project's workshops. She mentions a photographer who has formal education and years of experience in the field, and who has written a book about it:

His expertise is amazing. He is passionate, and he is clearly able to pass it on to young people. And give his expertise and make clear what they do in the workshop. (Informant from art workshop)

Crossley (2008, 91) points out that individuals' everyday concrete social networks outside the family shape their incorporated ways of being (i.e. their habitus). Holt, Bowlby, and Lea (2013, 33) argue that formal and informal leisure spaces can provide a positive counter-force to individuals' negative previous experiences, 'generating a sense of themselves as skilled and proficient'. Projects offer low-cost access to cultural activities (street dance, hip-hop, etc.), as many of the informants point out.

The positive effects of participation and the formation of cultural capital can be seen when art opens up possibilities for self-discovery and self-expression. Informants stress that art is 'a medium for the achievement of good things':

One paints something amazing that comes from the inside. And then you see the happiness and joy of succeeding. [...] Someone draws and may find – we have many people whose talents are discovered here – that art helps them to find something in themselves, and it can further help them find new things. (Informant from art workshop)

This illustrates how informants see the role of art as central to the discovery of skills, potentially launching a lifelong relationship with art and artistic self-expression.

The concept of emotional capital has been presented as a form of cultural capital that contains certain forms of emotional knowledge and skill operating in an embodied manner analogous to cultural taste (see Cottingham 2016; Froyum 2010). According to Froyum (2010, 39), 'emotional capital treats emotions and their management as skills or habits that translate into social advantages'. When it comes to cultural projects, nearly all workers and volunteers draw attention to the development of emotional and social skills. The projects provide a space where it is possible to (re) socialise young people through new, emotionally laden experiences.

In a small group, you are able to practice those social skills and overcome [...] anxiety. Then, step by step, you are encouraged to move on. [...] These social interaction skills form the basis, and participants are able to develop them here. (Informant from leisure project to support emotional and social skills)

Many informants think that participation in the projects is good for participants' social and emotional skills and encourages them socially and emotionally to operate in the social world. They highlight that participation can boost self-esteem and self-confidence, and that young people become more comfortable to act and use these social skills, including in new settings. Yet, the way they speak resonates with individualised social and cultural policy models that link improvement and change to young people's own practices and thoughts, glossing over the structural conditions behind youth marginalisation (see Merli 2002).

Cultural participation creating social capital?

One of the main points of the projects is to organise opportunities for informal cultural participation, underlining the role of 'hanging out' in informal social-interactive settings. The workers and volunteers point to the desire to belong to the group, and the creation of a 'sense of we' and 'sense of togetherness'. Social capital in the sense of networks that young people can take advantage of is not present in the data. Instead, informants highlight a 'sense of belonging' which they understand 'sense of belonging' as a link between young people and society, and as one of the most central aspects of social participation.

I feel that you cannot participate in society if you don't feel like you socially belong, meaning that we support young people in their identity formation and development, and everything that we are able to give with regard to participation and the experience of belonging. [...] (Informant from drama workshop)

Here the informant – who works in the project, which aims to prevent hate speech and support equality through drama and theatre education – relates belonging and participation. Participation is achieved through the sense of belonging and identity formation, which the projects encourage. This view represents an individualistic idea in which improvement is related to self-development. She continues: 'We think about these activities as supporting integration, and that it is possible to find meaningful leisure activities and something that you feel connected to. Through that comes societal participation.' Meaningful leisure activities that these projects enable young people help them to integrate and connect to society. Participation is here as well understood in individualistic terms as a sense of connection.

A sense of belonging and an experience of connection are seen as necessary. One worker in gender-sensitive workshop mentions that when they collected feedback, 97 per cent of responders 'experienced that they could be themselves in the group, and just as many felt that they belonged to the group'. A worker in the Leader-funded project said that she got feedback from young people living in the countryside that they wish to gain more sense of community. Another informant from the art workshop said that a problem is that networks are tenuous for participation. The 'sense of being an outsider' and 'not belonging' is presented as a central problem in many interviews. In this sense, according to the workers and volunteers the leisure activities that the projects offer create meaningful networks, a sense of meaning, and hence a sense of togetherness and well-being. However, meaningful networks generate a 'sense of belonging' in ready-made settings. Young people are not viewed as active producers of social capital, but rather as passive recipients (see Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007, 97; Weller 2006). Holt, Bowlby, and Lea (2013) also stress that young people participating in formal or informal leisure activities are able to actively create and maintain social and affective relationships. In this respect, the social capital formed on the projects 'encompasses social networks and interaction, trust and reciprocity, and sense of belonging' (Weller 2006, 561).

However, Bourdieu is mostly interested in how social capital is related to the formation of economic and cultural capital (Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007, 98). He pays more attention to the unequal distribution of resources, and to the limitations on individual action that derive from a lack of influential ties and networks. When networks are created in contexts such as activation projects, which are characterised by the participants' lack of capital, this can enable the reproduction of inequality, even if the participants personally gain positive feelings from those networks (MacDonald et al. 2005; Holland 2007, 23). According to the workers and volunteers, one central issue is that young people need to gain the experience of being able to influence the social world; this is often emphasised in the interviews as an aspect of wider social participation. Weller (2006, 562) argues that young people's social capital has the potential to become transformative, referring to young people's capacities to contribute to their communities. Yet, she also acknowledges the danger that the concept of social capital may mask inequalities, since it might be regarded as alleviating social disadvantages. She therefore refers to the importance of Bourdieu's 'packages of capital' for providing a more nuanced understanding of young people's circumstances (Weller 2006, 571–572). Bourdieu believes that individuals must be able to exert a certain force and to produce effects in the social universe (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 80). The informants share this view, but they do not treat this experience as an actual outcome, and they do not consider how a lack of influential networks might set limitations on young people's ability to 'personally influence things'.

Cultural participation and economic capital

Projects provide easy access to cultural activities, including for young people who lack the economic capital to take part in cultural hobbies and leisure, which can be expensive or difficult to reach. In this sense, the projects alleviate the consequences of unequally distributed economic capital, which places families in different positions in terms of young people's opportunities to take an interest in cultural leisure activities: the projects offer such activities free of charge. Another question is how projects can make it possible for young people to accumulate economic capital in the future. Some of the projects aim to give young people entrepreneurship skills by teaching them about event management and the organisation of leisure activities. Cultural projects that work with young people from migrant backgrounds aim to provide them with working-life skills. In addition, projects related to gaming seek to train young people to find employment in the video game industry. There are also workshops that encourage young people to work in the arts or handicrafts. All these projects are meant to support employment and working life.

Bourdieu (e.g. 1986a) views economic capital as the most dominant and central of all the capitals. This raises the question of how well the cultural and social capital that young people gain from the projects translates into economic capital in terms of work and employment. Some of the projects – albeit a very limited number of them – are able to offer apprenticeships for young people. However, one arts worker says:

The museum has been a very desired place for apprenticeships, and while indeed it is a very wonderful place, as the arts community is inspiring and many would like to work there, the fact is that it is extremely difficult to find employment here. (Informant from museum)

Even if young people take part in projects, their chances of getting an apprenticeship, or indeed any other kind of job, remain low. It seems that while projects can increase cultural capital – which has value in itself – it is impossible for young people to translate this into economic benefits such as an income or steady work.

Project workers and volunteers speak mostly on an individual level about the skills development, encouragement, support with regard to self-esteem, and so on that the projects provide, which are all understood as stepping stones to working life. The advantages of cultural participation are also linked to the idea that by participating in the projects, young people can discover their own areas of expertise, i.e. where they would like to work and what they would like to do. In addition, the projects can encourage young people into voluntary work, which will facilitate their chances of getting a job in the future.

The art workshop informant points out the differences between different types of workshop. In addition to vocational workshops, there are workshops for life management where young people are advised on everyday issues such as sleep and exercise. This also entails time management. A local music club offers young people many types of voluntary work, helping them to gain work experience. This informant sees it as important that young people also keep up their end of the bargain:

Even though we are a relaxed rock club, it nevertheless means that if we have a deal that you're coming at 10 o'clock, you are ready to start then. You don't just drop by when you feel like it, make coffee and smoke cigarettes, and wonder whether you should work. (Informant from art workshop)

Many project workers emphasise that the projects teach young people 'basic things' about how to generally manage their everyday lives, time, and health. These views reflect greater doubt, and differ from the more positive views related to cultural and social participation, which highlight the joy of artistic self-expression and a sense of belonging. Cultural and social participation is seen as an end in itself, compensating for a lack of economic capital. While life management skills – which are often connected to working-life skills – can improve everyday experience, workers and volunteers rarely expect these skills to be helpful for finding employment. There are obstacles to

entry into the labour market, and informants do not think that the projects are able to remove those obstacles.

Cultural participation related to political capital

One of the goals of the cultural projects was to encourage young people's political engagement and participation to become 'active citizens'. Many of the projects took account of issues related to cultural diversity and difference (in terms of reducing hate speech, for example), gender-sensitivity, and so on. In most cases, workers and volunteers considered it crucial that young people should experience themselves as able to make a difference. Informants emphasised the importance of both formal (i.e. voting and political party membership) and informal politics (i.e. political awareness through art production for example), although the goals of the majority of projects concerned the latter. However, one informant who worked in a multicultural centre stressed the centrality of formal politics to their project:

We have told them [...] you have a right to vote! [...] That everyone has a right to express their political party and positions, and then we talk about these matters with young people. [...] Especially in municipal elections, when there are familiar people and they understand that these people affect our [...] everyday lives. But also in the sense that they can express their ideas and write opinion pieces. Now we have a young person who has started to think that they could work hard and be elected in the next four years, wondering whether it would be possible. Of course it is possible. (Informant from multicultural centre)

This informant sees it as important to support young people to join formal political parties and help them to set politically motivated goals, such as standing for local election. In Finland, only 5.7 percent of municipal council representatives are aged between 18 and 29, indicating the difficulty for young people to enter formal politics (Pekola-Sjöblom and Piipponen 2017).

In most cases, the cultural projects encourage young people to become involved in informal politics. Informal political participation can be understood to accumulate political capital, such as an ability to organise a campaign, or a new understanding of politics. An informant who works as a cultural producer describes the relationship between formal and informal politics:

In a way, if you think that young people are not interested in [formal] politics, well, they are not interested in [...] free coffee, sausages, or free buckets. They are not interested in MTV3 or YLE's [Finland's public service broadcasting company] election debates. [...] They are interested in influencing in completely different ways. When the system is just so old-fashioned. (cultural producer from gaming project)

This informant finds it problematic that informal politics is not considered legitimate and is seen as less significant than formal politics. Informants highlight the importance of the informal political sphere, and point out that 'young people have a lot to say' that can be expressed through art, drama, and music ['all hip-hop culture is political']. The workers and volunteers consider it essential that young people should do things, create art, and communicate their own experiences in order to wield political influence.

For one volunteer who organises hip-hop events, political participation in relation to hip-hop is about 'having an impact on people's feelings'. The Bourdieusian frame stresses that formal political participation generally demands expertise and cognitive skills in argumentation and abstraction (Bourdieu 1986a). Unprivileged political actors come to believe that politics is not meant for them (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Wood 2013, 582). Politically motivated hip-hop music includes expertise, skills, argumentation, and abstraction, representing a new field in which young people are confident to act.

A cultural producer from gaming project is critical of the idea of participation because it contains goals that seem desirable but do not resonate with reality:

Participation is a horrible word, it makes me sick, and I feel repelled by this kind of specious participation. You know, when you are asked what colour paint you prefer for our room, and you are like, I want red and blue. And

when it's done, the colour is black and white. [...] Why don't we just ask them, and then do what they say?
(cultural producer from gaming project)

This informant pays attention to the limits of the participation paradigm, asking whether it actually increases young people's decision-making power at all. The problem arises when young people take part in events and activities that have been designed and organised by other actors such as project workers.

For Bourdieu, political capital has the 'capacity to yield considerable profits and privileges' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). The Bourdieusian framework raises the question of the relationship between politics, power, and privilege. This then raises the further question of the relationship between informal everyday politics and power, and the extent to which informal politics is transformative. Yet, many of the political campaigns that successfully appeal to young people today (LGBTQ+ politics, veganism, animal rights, etc.) represent informal politics, which does suggest that formal politics is not the only medium for effective political change. Nevertheless, McFarland and Thomas (2006) have shown that children who inherit large amounts of social and cultural capital from their families can more easily transform these species of capital into political capital and active citizenship.

Discussion: individual benefits, but social and cultural reproduction

According to our data, cultural participation can improve one's quality of life and sense of belonging, and can create new (affective) networks; it can support self-esteem and self-awareness, as well as artistic self-expression; individuals can learn emotional and social-interactive skills; they can develop working skills and gain experience; they can also gain a lot of digital skills from the workshops. All of this increases young people's resources for navigating the social world, implying that participation can have a positive impact on the individual. Bourdieu has been criticised for neglecting the normative aspects of social practices, highlighting instead their instrumental and habitual sides (Sayer 2005). When we focus on the advantages of cultural projects, the Bourdieusian frame does not recognise their beneficial effects on young people's well-being. For instance, Bourdieu glosses over the view that learning artistic self-expression – which according to project workers and volunteers offers positive new experiences for young people – can have value in itself, encouraging young people to live meaningful lives.

Many youth participatory scholars link participation to the concept of space (e.g. Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi 2015, Campbell 2019) in which cultural projects 'act as spaces of knowledge transfer, skill sharing, teaching, and learning in novel ways' (Campbell 2019, 164). These spaces also provide possibilities for the formation of sub-capital. In this sense, projects can be understood creating 'a margin of freedom' that for Bourdieu means an arena of expression and manifestation of signs, symbols, and discourses, which makes sense of the social world (Bourdieu 2000, 235). Nevertheless, 'a margin of freedom' is a space of political awareness, resistance and mobilisation, i.e. chance to stop the process of reproduction. As Ekholm and Lindström Sol (2019, 3) point out, 'culture and art-based interventions may well facilitate emotional wellbeing, but the question of underlying structures relating to exclusion remains unanswered'.

Do these projects make the young people participating in them more powerful? We theorise about certain restrictions and limitations related to the accumulation of capital in the context of the projects:

- (1) Projects promoting cultural participation are short-term and temporary. Young people participate for a little while and then move on. One of the most important aspects of the accumulation of cultural capital in its embodied form is the 'labor of inculcation and assimilation', which costs time, and which 'must be invested personally by the investor' – 'it cannot be done at second hand' (Bourdieu 1986b, 244). Bourdieu considers that

prolonged family socialisation and elite institutions are the most central factors in the accumulation of cultural capital, and that they cannot be substantially replaced by other (disadvantaged) institutions.

- (2) Even if projects increase the amount of one form of capital, it cannot be effectively converted into another form, because the volume of the initial capital is too low. The central aspect of the theorisation of capital is the logic through which it is converted 'from one type into another' (Bourdieu 1986a, 24): social capital can be used to aggregate economic capital, for example. But as these projects provide opportunities to 'hang out' with other young people in the same position – rather than to network with entrepreneurs or employers – this social capital cannot be translated into economic advantage. The profitability of social capital depends on the volume of other species of capital (Bourdieu 1986b, 249). Young people's social relations can both 'support and constrain individual action and outcomes', as Raffo and Reeves (2000, 148) point out. According to our data, the cultural capital – such as new artistic skills – that young people gain by taking part in the projects does not easily translate into future economic capital. It is difficult to get a job in the arts. For Bourdieu (1986b, 252), economic capital 'is the root of all the other types of capital' because it provides immediate access to goods and services – i.e. it makes individuals members of economic and consumption-oriented society, not only providing access to goods and services, but also granting actors status and prestige.
- (3) According to Bourdieu (1986b, 245), symbolic capital is defined as legitimate competence. Does participation in cultural projects increase the status and legitimacy of young people? Are they seen as more competent afterwards, and can they use this competence when applying for jobs, for example? Or do these activation policy projects generally lack symbolic capital – which would make the participation and certification that the projects offer problematic, in the sense that they do not help young people to gain more capital after the projects have ended?

Policymakers emphasise participation as the solution to marginalisation and exclusion, but project workers and volunteers did not mention social mobility or improvement in young people's social conditions. Rather they understood the benefits of the project at the level of personal transformation. This resonates with neoliberal ideology in terms of ideas related to self-improvement, identity, and how positive outcome is achieved through self-work, which is something that these projects support. Wellbeing is central in the data but it does not mean social mobility. The idea of social mobility as a solution for social exclusion and marginalisation – rather than participation – seems to be missing. Hence, the Bourdieusian frame raises the question of whether participation in these projects increases the 'world-making capacity' of excluded and marginalised actors. A Bourdieusian lens onto participation reveals the specific preconditions for the 'empowerment' that policymakers see as desirable.

Conclusion

We have explored the possible benefits of cultural projects in Central Finland in relation to the cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions of participation. We have further theorised these dimensions with regard to Bourdieu's concept of capital. The workers and volunteers that we interviewed pointed out several benefits that these projects provided for young people. The cultural benefits of participation were related to new (artistic or digital) skills, forms of self-expression, and the enhancement of self-esteem. The social benefits were mostly understood in terms of a sense of belonging and togetherness, rather than as networks of which project participants could take advantage. Economic capital was discussed in the context of learning basic working-life skills that would help participants to find employment. Political capital – mostly in reference to informal politics – was linked to politically motivated artistic self-expression (such as hip-hop) and citizenship skills.

We found that the workers and volunteers understood the benefits of different dimensions of participation in individualistic terms. Individual participants benefited, and positive aspects of cultural projects were highlighted, but there were no expressions of transgression, social improvement, or the upward mobilisation of marginalised young people. Indeed, the individualistic focus hindered workers' and volunteers' attention to the societal level. The informants emphasised that it was vital for young people to learn from the cultural projects that they were 'able to influence the world', which is the key idea behind Bourdieu's concept of capital. But this also raises the question of whether young people are able to accumulate capital in these projects, and whether it translates into advantages in other fields. Workers and volunteers on cultural projects in Central Finland highlighted and encouraged the positive outcomes of self-expression and the experience of influence, but these goals resonate with the individualistic ideas that are typical of the participatory paradigm. When the focus is on the individual, the structural limitations and disadvantageous social positions faced by the young people participating in these projects are glossed over. Bourdieu enables us to ask: do the benefits that these young people gain constitute capital? And if these benefits can be understood as an increased volume of capital, is that enough?

Note

1. In this article, we use the term 'project' to refer to any type of leisure activity or workshop.

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