Youth participation in policy-making processes in the United Kingdom: A scoping review of the literature

Abstract

Young people's voices remain underrepresented in health policy processes. This scoping review focuses on the United Kingdom (UK) and investigates how and to what degree young people have participated in policy-making processes. We adapt an established framework categorising how young people are involved in policy-related processes, ranging from advisory roles to communicating findings. We report a spectrum of practical examples, highlighting opportunities for successful policymaking with youth, in relation to key factors such as type of involvement, role of facilitators and the integration of young people in different stages of the process.

Introduction

There is increasing recognition in policy-making and programme development, and the research that informs it, of the need to amplify the participation and views of the young people for whom policies and programmes are designed. Yet their voice remains underrepresented, as does their importance as researchers, practitioners, activists, community organisers, decision-makers and policy advocates. Collaboration with young people and including them as equitable partners, rather than as the objects of policy or programmes, not only yields a more contextualized and practical approach to the problem but is also an empowering process for the participants involved (Horwathet al., 2012; Kataria & Fagan, 2019; Krenichynet al., 2007).

Many frameworks, models and tooklits have been developed to describe various forms and degrees of youth engagement, often outlining youth engagement on a spectrum from minor input through consultation, to developing youth-led initiatives (Funders Collaborative on Youth Organising, 2003; Wong et al., 2010). Putting youth engagement on a spectrum often implies that there is an optimal strategy, or 'best practice' for youth engagement (Wong et al., 2010): A 2017 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) toolkit on policy making for youth wellbeing acknowledges that the lowest level of youth participation is to passively inform, as opposed to empowering young people to take initiatives and lead projects, the highest level, and provides examples of such (OECD, 2017). This is also demonstrated in the 2020 European Commission report on Good Practices of Youth Participation which collates country-specific examples of good practice; these include entrusting young people to develop ownership over initiatives, to make youth participation a priority, and embedding it in institutional and policy making structures (Borkowska-Waszaket al., 2020).

In order to inform the integration of young people UK-wide in policy processes, there is a need to map out the existing UK evidence of youth participation. There is precedence in the literature for geographically focused scoping reviews (Evans et al., 2020). This paper therefore reports the findings of a scoping review of published studies on youth participation in policy-making processes in the UK, with implications for international practices.

Methods

Capturing the experience of how young people are engaged in policymaking requires an exploration of studies that goes beyond only examining policy outcome or effectiveness of an approach. A scoping review allows for this broader, deeper approach (Peters et al., 2015), to make use of and synthesize knowledge from a range of study designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), and to account for the far-reaching nature of policy research and policy-related activity, and the varied modes of youth participation. This scoping review explores practices of participation where young people actively contribute to policy and decision making as valued key stakeholders in processes that empower and build the capacity of young people (Checkoway, 2011; Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2018) while also exploring the feedback and experiences of this participation from young people themselves.

We conducted a scoping review, a process to rapidly outline key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available, often undertaken as a stand-alone project to inform future research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This is especially useful where an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before (Mays et al., 2001) such as with youth participation in policy-making.

Arksey and O'Malley's 5-stage scoping review framework (2005) was used: 1) identifying the research question; 2) identifying relevant studies; 3) study selection; 4) charting the data; 5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results. Stage 1 was supported

by Peter and colleagues' (2015) guidance to develop a concise research question that reflects the 'population' (young people), 'concept' (youth participation) and 'context' (policy and policy-related activity in the UK) (Peters et al., 2015): What is known about the approaches used to engage young people in policy and policy-related activity in the UK, and what are the views of young people on the process of participation?

Search Strategy

The following scientific literature databases were searched: MEDLINE, IBSS, Scopus, PsychInfo, Web of Science, Social Policy & Practice, Global Health using specific search terms and subject headings. Search terms were guided by Peters et al. (2015) emphasis on 'population' (young people, youth, adolescent*, teen*), 'concept' (policy-making, policy*, decision-making, social change, political activism) and 'context' (engagement, participation, engage*, involve*). The terms 'U.K.', 'Great Britain', 'United Kingdom', 'England', 'Scotland', 'Wales', 'Northern Ireland' were added as a filter.

Selection Criteria

Articles were included for their relevance to the research question rather than by quality: peer-reviewed publications, between 2000 and 2019, on UK research, with participants aged 15-24, on policy or policy-related activity. This age range is based on the United Nations definition of 'youth' (United Nations, 1995). Studies with children aged <15 were included only if the study also involved young people between 15-24. Articles were excluded if they did not report participation methods used or were conceptual commentaries on youth participation, without an accompanying example.

Three co-authors (TM, CK, NS) screened titles and abstracts of the resulting papers to select potentially relevant papers, followed by full text screening using the inclusion criteria. The PRISMA chart in Figure 1 shows the selection process.

[insert Figure 1]

Data Extraction

Data extraction was completed using an approach adapted from the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2015), aligned with a 'narrative review' to guide data charting and analysis (Pawson, 2002; Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). Data was extracted on: authors, date, title, aim, characteristics of study participants, participation context, participation aim, participation methods and design, participation outcomes and young people's views on their participation.

To investigate how and to what degree young people participated in a policy-making process, we employed an approach developed by Israel and colleaguesto gauge community-based participatory research for health (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005) and further adapted by Jacquez et al (2013), to categorise how children and adolescents are involved in community-based participatory research (Jacquezet al., 2013). The approach consists of using five, non-mutually exclusive categories to describe youth involvement in different steps or phases of a research process, here adapted for our purposes. Youth involvement in policy processes is organised in terms of: (1) *an advisory role*: youth could actively give input into the research through a Youth Advisory Board or other formal group/council mechanism; (2) *identifying research goals*: youth could be involved in identifying priorities, goals, and research questions through a needs assessment or similar process; (3) *designing and/or conducting an activity*: youth could be involved in designing and conducting the research; (4) *synthesising a process or findings*: youth could participate in data analysis, summarizing the data, and/or interpreting and understanding research findings; and (5) *disseminating and translating findings*: youth could participate in communicating the research findings to different audiences.

We selected this approach as it allowed for an exploration of involvement strategies across all – or any – key stages of research or project planning.

Collating and Summarising the Results

Following Arksey & O'Malley (2005), we first made a descriptive summary of the nature and distribution of studies. The narrative review focused on two main aspects, participation methods and design, and young people's views of the participation process. Results were summarised (Table 1) and further tabulated by study characteristics (Table 2) and levels of youth involvement (Table 3).

Results

Study Characteristics

The preliminary literature search returned 2383 results. After removal of duplicates and the application of inclusion criteria to titles and abstracts by 3 reviewers (TM, CK, NS), 96 articles remained for full text screening. At this stage 23 articles were further excluded as out of scope; an additional 19 articles could not be accessed by reviewers, leaving 53 articles remaining. During data extraction, 39 articles were further excluded as they were ultimately found out of scope, thus including 14 articles in this scoping review. (Table 1)

[insert Table 1]

As detailed in Table 2, the 14 included studies were published between 2003 and 2019, with the majority (9) published in or prior to 2010. All used a qualitative study design. Seven studies were conducted in England, four in Scotland, two in Wales and one focused on the UK as a whole. The policy focus of the studies ranged from youth participation in decision making (Badham, 2004; Charles & Haines, 2019; Faulkner, 2009; Horwath et al., 2012); health services (Coad et al., 2008; Jackson, 2003; Percy-Smith, 2007); education (Aranda et al., 2018; Fyfe, 2004; Warwick, 2008), as well as local service provision (for example, to tackle deprivation) (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Kilmurry, 2017), road safety engineering (Kimberlee, 2008) and a national DNA database (Andersonet al., 2011).

[insert Table 2]

Types of Youth Participation

Table 3 shows that the ways in which young people were involved in the 14 reviewed studies varied considerably, based on the the Jacquez et al framework (Jacquez et al., 2013). Young people were most commonly (13/14 studies) involved in providing input via a specific advisory mechanism. Only two of the 14 studies reported involving young people in the identification of priorities and goals. Just over half of the studies reported having young people involved in the designing and conducting of an activity, and just under half reported involving young people in synthesising the outputs of the activity. Finally, just over half of studies reported young people participating in dissemination of the outputs.

[insert Figure 2]

Advisory Role

Though Jacquez et al (2013) define the advisory role as young people actively giving input through a Youth Advisory Board or other *formal* group/council mechanism (Jacquez et al., 2013), the approaches categorised in this Advisory Role phase include any mechanism which collects and considers the views of young people where they are explicitly asked to share their views—even if not in a 'formal' advisory body. In the reviewed papers, the most common participation approaches used in this phase were consultation and formal youth advisory bodies (e.g. research steering team; youth council). Seven studies (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Badham, 2004; Horwath et al., 2012; Kilmurry, 2017; Kimberlee, 2008; Percy-Smith, 2007; Warwick, 2008) included some form of consultation as a way to engage young people. Types of consultation across these seven studies varied from opinion polls and e-surveys (Kilmurry, 2017) to incorporating visual materials and activities to engage young people to depict their views (Horwath et al., 2012).

Four studies (Aranda et al., 2018; Charles & Haines, 2019; Coad et al., 2008; Faulkner, 2009) used a form of oversight or advisory group as a method of youth participation with two (Aranda et al., 2018; Charles & Haines, 2019) including young people as part of a steering group to manage and oversee the research processes. Young people participated as members of a youth council (Coad et al., 2008) and Action Group (Faulkner, 2009) where they were consulted to share their views in helping to shape youth forward strategies on different areas of service delivery.

Identifying Priorities and Goals

Only two studies (Fyfe, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2007) included young people in the process of identifying priorities and goals. Percy-Smith involved young people as part of a peer project where they were given the task of exploring what they felt were the main issues affecting their lives to identify any unmet health needs. The participation project described by Fyfe (2004) was based on the social action model, which aims to empower groups to take action and achieve collectively identified goals. This article reports how young people negotiated a learning programme on "active citizenship" that reflected their own interests and needs as participants, while also taking into consideration the project's aims.

Designing and/or Conducting Research/Activities

Of the nine studies that included young people in designing and/or conducting activities, five (Aranda et al., 2018; Charles & Haines, 2019; Fyfe, 2004; Kilmurry, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2007) had young people participating in both. Four studies (Aranda et al., 2018; Charles & Haines, 2019; Percy-Smith, 2007; Fyfe, 2004) involved young people throughout the engagement activity, in the design and implementation process.. This included young people helping to inform recruitment materials and data collection methods (Aranda et al., 2018), designing an ethical framework and dissemination strategy, and conducting consultations with stakeholders via e-surveys and youth conferences (Charles & Haines,

2019). Young people in the Kilmurry study participated as members of a 'sounding board' that helped design and shape the approach of the participation process, while also carrying out some of the engagement activities themselves e.g. a youth led review of facilities and activities to determine issues associated with negative perceptions of local youth services (Kilmurry, 2017).

Participation of young people in the remaining four studies varied, from preparing for a mock trial (Anderson et al., 2011), to taking part in an environmental audit using photographic data (Kimberlee, 2008), and conducting consultations and interviews with their peers (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Jackson, 2003).

Synthesising the Outputs

Young people in four studies worked jointly with the researchers to analyse findings and summarise the key messages for presentation (Aranda et al., 2018; Charles & Haines, 2019; Fyfe, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2007). Horwath et al (2012) validated their findings with young people to establish significance of the results and determine if anything had been left out, based on their views and experience (Horwath et al., 2012).

Disseminating Findings

Eight studies involved young people in the dissemination process in some way. The most common means of young people participating in dissemination was through an organised meeting or formal event between young people and other stakeholders (Anderson et al., 2011; Charles & Haines, 2019; Jackson, 2003; Kilmurry, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2007). The format of these meetings differed across the five studies with some young people organising multi-agency and youth conferences (Charles & Haines, 2019; Kilmurry, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2007) and others putting on a mock trial (Anderson et al., 2011) or a play (Jackson, 2003) to present their views to relevant stakeholders and decision-makers. Youth participants in two studies used mixed media to present their findings to local government

through created songs, photos and posters (Arches & Fleming, 2006) and a summary CD ROM of key findings to disseminate to local and national government (Badham, 2004).

Views Expressed by Young People Regarding Their Participation

The majority of studies included assessed young people's views on the participation process, though three did not collect feedback from the young people (Aranda et al., 2018; Badham, 2004; Kilmurry, 2017).

Making Their Own Decisions and Having Ownership of the Process

Young people reported that making their own choices concerning their participation was important to them. This included having a say on whether they wanted to participate (Charles & Haines, 2019; Horwath et al., 2012) or quit (Charles & Haines, 2019) and how inclusive the group would be to others (Arches & Fleming, 2006). During the process, young people wanted to have a say on the topics of discussion and the activities they would engage in (Arches & Fleming, 2006). Ownership over the presentation of findings (Arches & Fleming, 2006) and the use of the research results (Charles & Haines, 2019) was mentioned by young people in two studies as important aspects of their participation. Afterwards, young people reported that their participation exceeded their expectations (Coad et al., 2008), others reported that it had been 'worthwhile', a valuable experience (Percy-Smith, 2007), fun (Kimberlee, 2008) and that they enjoyed it (Anderson et al., 2011).

Supportive Facilitators

The facilitator or educator involved in the project was mentioned by young people as a factor that influenced their participation experience (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Horwath et al., 2012; Warwick, 2008). For example, young people indicated that the effectiveness of youth engagement in policy and service delivery processes was reliant upon the facilitator's principles and convictions, their willingness to share power, and their attitudes towards young people (Horwath et al., 2012).

Warwick (2008) summarized a set of key facilitator characteristics in conducting consultations with young people based on feedback from students and teacher participants (Warwick, 2008): thus, facilitators needed to be able to establish a trusting environment for young people, show the ability to listen actively and have good communication skills overall. Young people described the ideal facilitator to be empathetic, genuinely interested and showing young people that they are taken seriously, and that they have influence (Warwick, 2008). Similarly, others reported young people wanting to feel accepted by the facilitator (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Horwath et al., 2012). Young people also said they wanted to have the space to express themselves openly and feel supported in their decision making. They saw it as the role of the facilitator to adapt to the group to ensure that all group members felt safe and secure (Horwath et al., 2012).

Young People's Views on Collaboration or Co-creation

Several studies explored young people's opinions on co-creating policy. Young people described the "ideal facilitator" as using a "democratic approach" (Horwath et al., 2012). In an attempt to create a road map on how to involve young people in a community research project, Charles et al. (2019) collected a set of principles from young people deemed essential for an ethical collaboration. Young people perceived the research as a 'partnership' where 'each party can get their voices heard'. The authors defined key principles for an 'ethical framework to ensure basic protection during the research process' with a group of young people giving them agency of the process and ownership of the research output (Charles & Haines, 2019). In contrast, an unsatisfactory, unequal or superficial type of participation meant for young people that they would "feel used" (Faulkner, 2009) or be "tokenistic" (Horwath et al., 2012). .

Benefits and Skills Reported by Young People

Most studies stated that young people reported to have developed various skills, as a result of their participation: i.e. political literacy (Badham, 2004; Charles & Haines, 2019; Fyfe, 2004; Warwick, 2008), confidence (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Badham, 2004; Coad et al., 2008; Faulkner, 2009; Fyfe, 2004; Jackson, 2003; Kimberlee, 2008), communication and group skills (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008; Faulkner, 2009; Jackson, 2003; Kimberlee, 2008).

Young people in four studies reported to have gained greater self-confidence as a result of the participation process (Anderson et al., 2011; Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008; Jackson, 2003). They felt more comfortable expressing their views with adults (Anderson et al., 2011), they felt respected (Coad et al., 2008), and empowered to have gained perspective (Arches & Fleming, 2006). Also, they felt they had increased their knowledge of the political process, for example (Fyfe, 2004) or had developed a new interest in health (Jackson, 2003) or road safety (Kimberlee, 2008). They also mentioned having learnt skills that would help them in their lives going forward (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008). Among these were the ability to communicate (Arches & Fleming, 2006) and collaborate (Arches & Fleming, 2006;Jackson, 2003)

A range of studies reported on the insights young people gained during the process (Anderson et al., 2011; Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008; Fyfe, 2004). Young people understood that their opinion was valuable and that they had the ability to speak and be heard (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008). They increased their awareness of their rights as young citizens (Fyfe, 2004) and learnt about the importance of the group setting (Arches & Fleming, 2006). Young people felt they made a difference (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Coad et al., 2008; Jackson, 2003) and contributed to their community (Arches & Fleming, 2006). Young people also reflected on the barriers to participation: the lack of skills to express themselves or lack of confidence, for example. In a group of young

people affected by violence, some reported that shame was a barrier to participating in the project (Horwath et al., 2012). Others reported feeling constrained by time (Anderson et al., 2011; Percy-Smith, 2007).

Discussion

This scoping review examined research on t approaches and degrees of involvement of young people in policy and policy-related activity in the UK. Although the study has a UK focus, lessons learnt will be of international interest, given that countries all over the world are engaged in similar efforts to engage young people in policy processes (Wigleet al., 2020). Structuring our findings within the Jacquez et al (2013) framework of categories of youth involvement, we found that there is a diverse set of literature reporting various degrees of participation in addition to mixed and limited feedback from young people on the benefits of participation in the policy-making process. Given the increasing recognition of the importance of youth participation in policies that affect them (Patton et al., 2016), this review represents a useful summary of research on such participation to date.

The typology utilised to categorise our data by the phases of involvement (Jacquez et al., 2013) helped to concisely demonstrate how young people can be and have been included in policy and policy-related activity. This provides a useful framework for future research with and about young people, and complements evidence from previous scoping reviews that have used other youth engagement frameworks to categorise participation of children and young people in developing interventions in health and well-being (Larssonet al., 2018), and in obesity prevention research more specifically (Mandoh et al., 2021). It was not possible, however, to draw any definitive conclusions about whether one approach is more ‘successful’ in terms of policy outcome. Though there have been concerns that co-production with involvement of a range of stakeholders in research and policy-making is not always meaningful or effective (Oliver et al., 2019),the papers reviewed here report a range of

outcomes and demonstrate that there may be multiple pathways to meaningful participation. A recent framework for embedding young people's participation in decision-making processes, based on youth engagement examples within the NHS and other UK services, suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to 'optimal' youth engagement, and suggests a framework that places youth at the centre of participation whilst (Brady, 2021) considering various interconnected dimensions including process, structure, inclusion, power and control.

Several studies reported positive experience (sometimes phrased as 'successes') as a result of engaging young people in policy. Reported examples included improved services for young disabled children, long-term participation of young people in public decision-making, children and young people's rights scheme, improved local service provision and implemented action responses from young people regarding citizen issues (Badham, 2004; Charles & Haines, 2019; Faulkner, 2009; Jackson, 2003; Warwick, 2008). In one study by Badham (2004) young people were reported to have improved involvement and services for young disabled children and their families through a national consultation, which led to the government implementing specific changes, i.e. improved play resources locally and, through national policy development, accessible play provision across England (Badham, 2004). In another study in Swansea, Wales (Charles & Haines, 2019), young people were reported to have accomplished greater partnership working, developed a participation-policy alongside Swansea's Youth Offending Service, the first Welsh child-rights smartphone app, and influenced the development of a motion to Cabinet and Council, which incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into the authority's policy framework (Charles & Haines, 2019).

Other studies reported mixed findings, with ideas being generated, but without reporting concrete change e.g. on hospital services planning (Coad et al., 2008), on creation of physical spaces for young people (Kimberlee, 2008) on change in organisations that regularly engage with young people who have experienced violence (Horwath et al., 2011).

Some of the studies we reviewed demonstrated that despite participation of youth in the consultation process, their views were not represented in the design and delivery of services, such as in a study on school-based sexual health and school nursing (Aranda et al., 2018). Similarly, young people's involvement did not appear to inform specific changes in studies on ethical and social issues surrounding National DNA database (Anderson et al., 2011), governmental strategies for tackling multiple deprivations (Arches & Fleming, 2006) or local health service provision (Percy-Smith, 2007). Despite this, some young people participating in these studies reported feeling empowered as a result of their contribution (Arches & Fleming, 2006), and more able to understand complex political issues, through knowledge exchange with practitioners (Anderson et al., 2011). This is in line with broader reports of best practice which cite empowerment of, and trust in, young people, as crucial criteria for achieving meaningful youth participation. (Borkowska-Waszak et al., 2020; Horwath et al., 2012; Kataria & Fagan, 2019; Krenichyn et al., 2007; OECD, 2017). Likewise, researchers reported being able to uncover issues with the help of young people's input, such as inadequate sexual health provision in schools (Aranda et al., 2018). Again, these findings demonstrate that measures of 'success' are variable and contingent on contextual benchmarking. Indeed, the aims of participation in the reviewed literature were not always to achieve a specific outcome such as policy action; rather, some projects aimed to involve young people meaningfully. As such, the evaluation of any given project must be considered in relation to the terms and goals of participation and aims of the project. This review has several limitations, including the fact that young people's views as reported here

are restricted to what is reported in primary studies, often with missing context or explanations of why a certain action or initiative may have worked or not. A search of the grey literature may have revealed further relevant studies. Another key challenge has been how to compare, contrast and categorise the different modes of participation and the aims of such projects, and their differing contexts, especially in relation to the reported outcomes. A final limitation of our review is that the included studies contained incomplete feedback from young people themselves on the process of their participation and its value.

Conclusion

Participatory methods of engagement in policy-making are increasingly gaining traction in the United Kingdom and further afield; this is evident in the growing number of research publications on participation and co-creation. It has been useful to take stock of the ways in which young people have hitherto been involved in the policy-making process, and the value in doing so. As we have shown, how to define whether the engagement of young people has been successful or not is a moving target; it should therefore be defined prospectively and evaluated thoroughly throughout and after the participation process. Young people in the United Kingdom have been involved in policy-making processes in a variety of ways and at a range of stages in the process. The more stages of involvement, does not, however appear to translate to more ‘successful’ outcomes. Rather, the type of involvement, the nature of the facilitators and the integration of the young people into the process appear to provide better determinants of ‘success’.

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