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Exploring the Limits and Potentials of Youth Participation in Public Policy as Citizenship Learning: a Study in the State of Acre, Brazil

Keywords

youth, public policies, participation, citizenship

In the last decade, youth entered the agenda of public policies in Brazil, recognizing not only the problems that affect young people, but also the need for a proactive perspective that views youngsters as playing a central role in the design and implementation of policy. This is a tendency that is also noticeable in other countries, and there is clearly a “vogue of youth participation” (Bessant 2004, 401) in public policy across the world. Research in the field tends to show that these experiences can be effective in promoting young people’s civic and political knowledge, attitudes and competences and therefore can become a strategy of non-formal citizenship education. However, there are critiques that participation in these initiatives risks pamphleteering and tokenism. The goal of this paper is to enter this debate by considering the Brazilian experience in the State of Acre. It explores how opportunities for participation that youth public policies appear to stimulate are, in fact, perceived and experienced by groups involved in the process, from decision-makers to young people. Results suggest that youth public policy in the State of Acre seems to balance protectionism and recognition of youth agency and is undoubtedly influenced by the diverse and ambivalent perceptions about young people, ranging from irresponsibility and disinterest to consciousness and active engagement – on the whole, these tensions concur to make genuine participation unattainable. Therefore, as in other countries, policies are still not living up to expectations and much more systematic work is necessary to guarantee that participation in youth policies is, in fact, a relevant citizenship learning experience.

1 Introduction: Youth is “nothing more than just a word”

The passage to adulthood is marked by significant changes in different cultures and historical periods, but the path towards autonomy that used to imply leaving school, finding a job, establishing a new home away from parents, and having one’s own family is becoming progressively more complex in the last decades (Pais 2001). As Bourdieu proposed, back in 1984, “la ‘jeunesse’ n’est q’un mot”, and researchers must acknowledge that age divisions are arbitrary and strongly influenced by not only socio-historical factors, but also by class, gender, ethnicity

... and other social categories. Obviously, youth as a life stage has expanded to diverse social groups, and involves multiple dimensions of exploration and commitment in various life domains. In Brazil, following international classifications (e.g. UNESCO), youth is defined by federal policies as the period between 15 and 29 years, including young people with different legal statuses, with a recognition of the layers of identity crossed by gender, social class, race, etc. In fact, more and more, there is a recognition of the limits of a vision of young people as becoming (Castro & Abramoway 2002), and a recognition of youth as an inherently diverse social group with specific profiles that result from the intersection of not only gender, race and social class, but also vocational interests, economic situation and position towards work, to name just a few. It is therefore important to recognize that an abstract “young person” does not exist, and youth is a construct that exposes a deep and complex web of social representations that evolve through time and historical circumstances (Pais 2001).

In Brazil, youth have gained a particularly centrality in the social and political agenda, and many initiatives were developed at the local, regional, state and federal levels, both by state institutions and government bodies, churches and non-governmental organizations, ... (Novaes, Cara, Silva, Papa 2006). Young people are also frequently the issue in news media almost always in relation to violence, rebellion, the relationship with “galeras” (defiant cliques) and drug traffic – both as victims and perpetrators (Ramos & Brito 2005). But there are also increasing references to young people’s capacity for participation and engagement in innovative movements, including new forms of cultural expression, both in urban periphery and rural areas, throughout the country (Abramo 1997; Abramovay & Castro 2006).

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It is also important to take into account that more than 50% of humankind is less than 25 years and lives in Latin America, Africa and Asia, with the expectation that 95% of the demographic growth will occur in these countries (Barros et al. 2002). In Brazil, data from 2007 shows that young Brazilians between 15 and 29 years old amounted to 50.2 million people, corresponding to 26.4% of the total population – a number that is estimated to grow until 2010, with a progressive regression until 2050 (IBGE 2010) –; almost 30% of these young people were considered poor as the per capita income of their families was less than half minimum wage, and only 47.9% of those between 15 to 17 were attending the level of education expected for this age group, a percentage that was even lower in rural areas (30.6%) (IBGE 2010; PNAD 2007). The number of unemployed youth was impressive (4.8 millions), corresponding to more than 60% of the total unemployed population – and with a rate of unemployment that is three times higher than among adults (PNAD 2007). Besides unemployment and poverty, violence is also an important social concern as death by violent causes affects many young people, mainly those who are male, black, poor and live in deprived areas of large cities (IBGE 2007; Waiselfisz 2012). Given this general picture, it is therefore not surprising that youth has entered the agenda of public policies in Brazil, recognizing not only the problems that affect young people, but also the need for a proactive perspective that views youngsters as playing a central role in implementing these policies and programmes (Abramovay & Castro 2006).

2 Youth public policies and participation in Brazil

In fact, youth policies in Brazil tend to assume the creation of new social rights and aim towards the integral development and emancipation of young people (CONJUVE 2006) – following a tendency that has gradually evolved across the 20th century in Europe and North America, and that was stimulated in Latin America by international organizations, such as UN or CEPAL (Kerbauy 2007). The Ibero-American Youth Organization (OIJ) has played a central role in this process of development of specific youth policies – but the recognition of the role young people have played in the democratization of Latin American countries since the 1980s has also been decisive (Castro, Aquino, Andrade 2009). In Brazil, the reinforcement of children and youth rights was also pushed by the intense social concerns with the situation of street children during the same period, also in addition to episodes of youth violence that generated intense social rejection, such as the case of the killing of Galdino, an Indian from the Pataxó ethnic group, in 1997 (e.g., Ginwright, James 2002; Waiselfisz et al. 1997). Research with young people conducted afterwards suggested that there were problems related to community belonging, quality of education and opportunities for leisure, together with issues of access to resources that often generated deviant behaviours, such as theft (Diógenes 1998; Minayo 1999; Waiselfisz 1998). But

Sposito (2003) considers that many of these initiatives were directed towards at-risk youth, based on a perspective of prevention, social control or compensatory measures: for instance, there were many sports, cultural or work programmes that aimed to control the free time of youngsters living in deprived neighbourhoods. Therefore, these initial programmes were generally focused on vulnerable or at-risk young people (mainly urban, black and poor), and generated many short-term projects that aimed to promote inclusion in the world of work. Gradually, these policies were questioned and criticized by youth organisations and groups that demanded youth policies that conceive young people as more than just a problem (Rocha 2006; Dayrell, Carrano 2002). These claims for a new vision of young people as having rights and as being defined not by their deficits and problems but by their needs and resources should, many youth theorists argue, be recognized as legitimate citizenship claims (Abramo, Branco, Venturi 2005; Abramovay & Castro 2006; Bango 2003; Kerbauy 2007; Carrano & Sposito 2003). This resulted, since 2004, in a public discussion on the need for a revised youth policy that simultaneously would consider vulnerability and risk, but also granting young people opportunities for social inclusion and role experimentation in various life domains (Sposito 2005).

Since 2005 Brazil has hosted several meetings of international organizations related to youth policies. During this period many policy initiatives were implemented, always assuming a participatory design that involved thousands of young people, from diverse social and ethnic groups, in public discussions across the country (CONJUVE 2006) – a process that has strong similarities with the re-definition of youth policies in other countries both at regional and national levels (for instance, Australia see Bessant 2010; Canada see Haid, Marques, Brown 1999; USA see Checkoway, Tanene, Montoya 2005). These policies have contemplated diverse areas, from employment to environment, from sports to leisure, from agriculture to work rights, from education to arts and culture, from politics to sexual and reproductive health. They have recognized and targeted the immense diversity of young Brazilians, including ethnic groups and traditional communities (e.g., “quilombolas”, “caboclos”, “seringueiros”), but also groups who have been discriminated on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ... However, in an analysis of these diverse youth policy initiatives, at both federal and regional levels, Carrano and Sposito (2003) conclude that the relative novelty of these policies might explain problems of institutionalization and the tendency for fragmentation – a concern already expressed by Rua (1998) who considered that underlying these policies there was not a clear vision of the role of young people in the Brazilian society.

Youth citizenship clearly depends on experiences across the boundaries of formal and non-formal education (McCowan 2009): the lives of young, both within and outside schools, might provide opportunities for expressing opinions, debating,

exercising rights, ... and research has shown that participation in the definition of public policy can have important advantages in terms of civic and political knowledge, dispositions and competences (e.g., Camino & Zeldin 2002; Checkoway, Tanene, Montoya 2005; Zeldin, Camino, Calvert 2003). However, the International Association of Public Participation (2005 in Head 2011) presents a typology of goals of public participation that includes informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering, suggesting that diverse formats can generate different results in terms of youth citizenship. Additionally, many authors have emphasized the potential risks of such participatory approaches (e.g., Ferreira, Coimbra, Menezes 2012), as "mainstream attempts to 'involve youth' in public affairs may sometimes be top-down, patronizing, tokenistic or unappreciative of the real interests and voices of youth" (Head 2011, 546). The goal of this paper is precisely to consider the Brazilian experience in the State of Acre and to explore how the opportunities for participation that youth public policies appear to stimulate are, in fact, perceived and experienced by different groups involved in the process, from decision-makers to young people.

3 Goals and context of the study

The state of Acre is one of the 27 federal units of Brazil, named after the word uwakuru from the dialect of the indigenous Apurinãs. Acre is situated in the southwest of the northern region of Brazil with a total population of 733,559 inhabitants. According to IBGE (2010), the population belonging to the age group of the study (15-29 years) amounts to 66,955,000, with a balanced gender distribution. The city of Rio Branco, capital of the state, where the study was located, has 167 neighbourhoods divided into seven regional districts. Each neighbourhood has a board elected by the community and each region includes a council of 27 members, a consultative and deliberative body whose role is to debate and articulate the participation of their communities in the public policy of the city.

In this study we aimed to establish a comprehensive vision of the actual participation of young people in the development and implementation of youth policies in Rio Branco. More specifically, we aimed to consider the following research questions: what is the vision that different significant actors, from decision-makers to young people, have on the development, implementation and effectiveness of youth public policies in the State of Acre? Do they consider that young people were/are actually involved in this process? How do they envision the social, civic and political experiences of young people, including both the opportunities and the barriers for participation? What are the potential benefits of these experiences for the construction of youth citizenship?

We used a qualitative methodology and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected following contacts with the municipal

union of regional associations (UMARB) and the municipal government. The goal was to identify the local actors who might best represent the various profiles of participants in public policy definition and implementation: policymakers, leaders of the regional districts, young leaders from youth organizations and groups (such as youth political parties, students unions, and school principals), recognizing the centrality of schools in the life of young people. In some cases, the interviewees were very easily identified: for instance, the two policymakers responsible for management of municipal and state level policies in Rio Branco were both interviewed; in the case of the leaders of regional districts and schools principals, the criteria was to select the largest regional districts and the schools that served young people in these areas; young leaders were identified during meetings of youth organizations that the first author attended to gain a deeper understanding of youth activism in Rio Branco and Acre.

The final group of interviewees is therefore an intentional sample of 18 individuals: policymakers at the city and state level (2), leaders of regional districts (7), school principals located in these regions (4) and young leaders from various groups and organisations (5). As shown on Table 1, most are male and have a higher education degree; however, half of the leaders from regional districts and youth organizations have only completed secondary education. All names presented in this paper are fictional.

Table 1: Characterization of the participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Education
Policy makers			
Miguel	28	male	bachelor & post-graduation
Ari	25	male	bachelor
Regional leaders			
Pedro	36	Male	Secondary education
Jorge	37	Male	Level higher
Marta	39	Female	Secondary education
Gustavo	31	Male	University student
Rafael	38	Male	Bachelor
Aline	38	Female	Level higher
Patricia	38	female	Secondary education
School principals			
Maria	33	female	5 year university degree
Antonio	58	male	5 year university degree
Manoel	45	male	plus specialization
Milton	33	male	5 year university degree
Young leaders			
Margarete	25	female	university student
Josias	21	male	secondary education
Roberto	20	male	university student
Ricardo	21	male	university student
Artur	17	male	secondary education

Participants were contacted by the first author who conducted all the interviews in a context selected by the interviewees; interviews lasted from 20 to 60 minutes and were collected between April and May 2012. The interview scripts were specific to each group but included common topics related to (i) the knowledge of and degree of implementation of youth public policies at the state and municipal level, (ii) the social, civic and political experiences of youth (including motivations and barriers), (iii) the actual involvement of young

people in the development and implementation of youth policy, (iv) the importance of youth civic and political engagement and participation, and (v) other issues viewed as significant in terms of youth experiences. All interviews were recorded and ultimately transcribed. Data generated from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis (Bardin 1995; Braun & Clarke 2006). The main categories and sub-categories are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories and sub-categories emerging from thematic analysis

	Categories	Sub-categories
Policy makers	Importance and implementation of youth policies	development of public policies at state and municipal level, strong points and obstacles in the management of public policies, main initiatives
	Youth civic and political participation in Acre	the notion of youth, importance of youth citizenship and participation, the role of municipal leaders, the role of political parties
	Issues related with leisure and health	political initiatives in these domains, activities available for young people
Regional leaders	Importance and implementation of youth policies	degree of implementation, youth involvement
	Youth civic and political participation in Acre – experiences, significance, and obstacles The role of family and school in promoting participation	importance for the society/community, main obstacles, spaces and contexts the role and influence of family, the role and influence of school
School principals	Importance and implementation of youth policies	degree of implementation, youth involvement
	Youth civic and political participation in Acre – experiences, significance, and obstacles The role of family and school in promoting participation Youth participation in schools	importance for the society/community, main activities, main obstacles the role and influence of family, the role and influence of school in students' unions and the community, in decision making processes within the school, in the school council
Young leaders	Importance and implementation of youth policies	degree of implementation, effectiveness
	Youth civic and political participation in Acre Youth civic and political participation in Acre – experiences, significance, and obstacles Dispositions for participation	motivations, barriers, influences political interest and attentiveness, party identification

4 Results

The vision of policy makers assume that Acre does not yet have a structured specific youth policy but has tried to create a place for youth in the regional and local agenda in accordance with the state youth policy, that views young people as subject of rights and not carriers of problems. In fact, as regards the discussion of youth public policy, the State of Acre was intensively involved in a process that took more than two years and involved

more than 1500 people. However, this involved the discussion of documents that were developed by political actors, and not by young people themselves. There also appear to be efforts to develop a series of sectorial projects and programs, even if there is almost no tradition in this field:

“there are youth policies in the areas of education, health, safety, environment, sport and culture, that involve a series of actions for young people to assume. It is also a fact that the municipal policymaker in Brazil has nothing in the area ... in contrast to Europe where there are world congresses and many people are talking about these youth projects. ... in Brazil it is still not rooted in our practice ... but it is an important chance to make a difference especially with the youth of the Amazon, because the reality is totally different from other regions of the country” (Miguel, 28 years, male).

Besides the recognition of the specificities of youth in Acre, policy makers also stress that the implementation of policies must take into account the specific characteristics of different regional areas in Rio Branco, making distinctions between more central and more rural areas. Additionally, the need to articulate youth policy with issues such as gender, sexual orientation, disability or ethnicity is also stated by Miguel:

“we must articulate the evaluation of policies related with youth, women, black, LGBT groups”.

However, even if policymakers express a clear concern in developing policies and programs, youth citizenship does not emerge in their discourses; in fact they tend to emphasize the role of these programs in promoting “social inclusion”, but clearly assume a future-orientation: “we intend to”, “we are planning to”, “we have to” without specifying the type of actions that demonstrate the implementation of policies. There is a recognition that

“Brazil has an historical debt to the poorest, to the excluded, because the Brazilian state was built for elites and was directed to the maintenance of elites ... We need to treat young people as decision makers, we have to empower young people ... we must encourage young people to act as protagonists and to express themselves in relation to policy, whether in the educational process, whether at school, at the university, in the family relationships, ... they need to have a dialogue with other generations but they also need to know what they want and what they think, and for this to be taken into consideration you have to focus on youth empowerment and treat youth as agents of strategic development” (Ari, 25 years, male).

This is clearly assumed as a work-in-progress and the need to promote youth conscientization and empowerment is viewed as a priority for both interviewees, who recognize that youth have been an important “vehicle for social transformation” in the last decades. But none considers the possibility of a bottom-up approach to public policy, where young people could evolve from more passive roles – such as information and consultation – to a more proactive engagement in the definition and development of youth policies.

The vision of the leaders of regional districts

Assuming that participation of citizens in public life constitutes one of the requirements of proper governance, we investigated how the leaders of the regional districts felt about the participation of young members of their community: are public policies designed to foster youth participation? Is youth participation important?

On the whole, the leaders agree that the implementation of policies has not yet been realized: *"it is only in the letter of the law, unfortunately, we have noticed that the development of youth public policies is a bit dead"* (Pedro, 36 years, male) – in fact, only one of the seven leaders mentions a specific action (vocational training courses) for young people in his district. Even more striking is Pedro's view on the consequences of the lack of implementation of youth policies

"there are many young people involved with drugs, prostitution, I have seen this quite a lot in my district. There are many idle public spaces and I have the impression that youth public policy is not working".

This lack of structured public spaces for the development of cultural and leisure activities seems to be of particular significance, leaving young people with no alternative but to generate their own spaces; Jorge (37 years, male) describes how young people in this district, faced with the lack of public spaces, *"started to meet after mass in the church facilities to watch movies, discuss common problems ..."*. But young people also face other obstacles to participation:

"There are some activities [generated by youth public policies] but young people who live in the suburbs are not involved because they do not have transport or they come from a poor family and their parents can't take them, even more because there are security issues – it is sometimes not safe to let your kids go from your neighborhood to another one" (Marta, 39 years, female).

Aline (39 years, female) also emphasizes how public spaces that were created to promote the quality of life of local communities are frequently insecure places for drug trafficking. Concerns with drug addiction seem to be prominent and Patricia (38 years, female) views this problem as a sign of the failure of public policies that were unable to generate future perspectives in many young people across the State of Acre. And Rafael (38 years, male) points out how this generates a vicious cycle:

"in spite of the positive opportunities for participation generated by public policies, opportunities are not universal ... those who are more excluded are the ones who tend to be less invited and involved ... even if sometimes we manage to engage them and they come".

However, as Gustavo (31 years, male) recognizes, there is a tendency for youth public policies and

programs to favor formal and informative activities that have a low potential for generating an actual engagement of young people and do not view young people as co-citizens who should have the right to "voice, vote and veto" (Montero, 2006, 67) .

The vision of the school principals

Schools are obviously central spaces in the life of young people and education has been, as we have seen, a central concern of Brazilian youth policies. How do principals view young people participation in public policies? Do young people express interest and are they engaged in their communities' life?

Milton (36 years, male) expresses not only a negative vision of youth but also complains regarding what he views as perverse effects of public policies:

"today many young people do not have goals, they just 'are there', if they pass it's OK, if they fail, next year they will do it ... they are so used to receiving money from the State [referring to the minimum income for poor families] that when offered the possibility to do some vocational training they immediately asked if they are going to receive any payment ... even if they are getting a professional accreditation all they care about is the money they will get".

This speech is corroborated by another principal who is very critical of the current status of children and young people in Brazilian policy:

"the protectionism of public policies leaves [young people] too apathetic, because if you talk to a young person today, a young person in social risk, living in the periphery [the more deprived neighbourhoods are in the periphery of the cities], s/he knows more about law than many adults. And only about the rights, the duties they ignore, they know them but they disregard, because they know that if an adult violates a duty s/he will liable, but not young people, because they are young and have legal protection" (Antonio, 58 years, male).

However, Maria (33 years, female) considers that this apparent lack of interest in civic and political participation results from lack of experiences as citizens:

"if they could see themselves as true citizens, with an actual contribution to the improvement of the city, education, leisure, sports, public spaces ... they might truly become citizens. The simple fact of voting does not make them citizens – it is because they participate in real initiatives, in making decisions, that they develop the social political vision that makes them true citizens, active, participants in their society".

This vision is reinforced by another testimony where the principal points out that:

"even if the implementation of these policies is still deficient it is a big advantage that they exist ... but we need to consider what elements in the daily life of young people contribute to the increase in their political participation, in their citizenship in relation to these programs, because when young people are invited to show what they are doing, their satisfaction is impressive ... we have a student who has real

trouble in making class presentations, but in the courtyard he sings and dances ... for him it is a significant moment. So these policies are important as they open an opportunity for young people to see alternative pathways" (Manoel, 45 years, male).

However, Manoel stresses that *"today, public policies in Brazil do not value young people as real actors, their participation, their activism ... they assume a protectionist position"* that might generate difficulties in mobilizing young people to projects related to civic and political engagement such as the youth parliament.

On the whole, and perhaps not surprisingly, both the vision of youth and of public policies seems more clearly ambivalent: for some, young people are apathetic and diffused, expecting too much protection from public policies; for other, young people are citizens in their own right who should be more actively involved in the positive, but still incipient, public policy initiatives.

The vision of young people

The lack of implementation of youth policies is the most significant result from the interviews with young leaders, whether they are members of political parties, neighbourhood groups or regional district leaders. As a young woman from a regional district states *"policies are beautiful but only on paper ... I do not see any policy being implemented in my district"* (Margarete, 25 years, female).

In general they are also quite critical of the strategic options regarding youth policies, namely the decision to build facilities for leisure that do not guarantee that young people use them:

"the current government has done a lot, sports areas, cultural centres, ... but does not have a systematic work towards young people, guaranteeing that these leisure spaces function as they should. On a Saturday if you pass in front of a theatre or sports pavilion they are abandoned, no one has the initiative to bring young people in, to involve young people in specific activities in these facilities. Obviously, young people turn to bars, sadly to drug using, to the lack of job opportunities ..." (Josias, 21 years, male).

Our interviewees recognise that young people were involved in the discussion of public policies but they want more than that. They want to participate in the implementation of these policies, they want to be called to evaluate their impact and to help improve what is being done – or yet to be done, some of them say. This would generate opportunities for a more engaged participation that, to use the IAP2 typology, would imply moving from consultation to youth involvement, collaboration and eventually empowerment (Head, 2011). In fact, Josias goes further to describe the current situation as tokenistic:

"we are not invited to participate in any event related to youth policies because we have an open mind and want to engage in political discussions ... when they [the State government] invite us, everything is already decided and they just want us to sign. You are not supposed to participate and make any real proposal."

But what do young people feel about the complaints about apathy, deficits and lack of engagement mentioned by some of the other interviewees? Are young people really motivated to be participants in these activities? Are they willing to overcome barriers to participation, or is there also apathy and disinterest? Here, they clearly consider that current strategies used by decision makers and adult leaders are not effective as *"they do not rest on young people as mediators and multipliers of existing policies ... the active engagement of some young people in disseminating policies would be much more effective as there is an horizontal dialogue between young people"* (Roberto, 20 years, male).

Young leaders particularly complain about older politicians that tend to treat them unequally and defensively, so they feel discouraged to fight for space. They also feel that the dependence that a lot of their parents have in relation to employment, often linked to government, acts as a barrier for engagement – as they fear their opinions would have a negative impact. But a disabled young leader considers that the main reason for disinterest in participation has to do with how the adults react to the ideas of young people:

"it is not the young person who does not believe, but the adult that does not follow ... Young people feel excluded in all areas, and when they have an idea to revolutionize something, the first person who turn their back on them are the adults – who were once young and have experienced that same discouragement .. and should therefore do things differently. Adults keep saying 'that's not cool', they hinder instead of dreaming together with the young ... people say 'when I was young I could not do it, so you won't either' ... what really happened is that a similar adult did not know how to dream ... when it would be central to understand the dreams of young people ... it's really nice to come here and say that you want to engage young people, that you want to follow their ideas ... lies! Being really honest most do what they want, following their own aims and interests and 'oh, it looks nice to use young people!'" (Ricardo, 20 years, male).

Young leaders try, therefore, to implement some initiatives in connection with political youth organizations, such as a series of school forums to discuss youth needs and problems; but Artur (17 years, male) claims that raising youth consciousness should be a priority so that

"the consciousness of Brazil will also raise ... Let's fight! Let's reclaim! If you don't claim, if you are silent, no one will know what you need! What do you need today? Jobs? Let's claim for jobs, let's call the media, let's make a huge demonstration, let's go!"

5 Discussion

In the last decades, Brazil has witnessed a huge development in youth public policies that recognize young people as a diverse group, crossed by layers

of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social class, culture, disability, and that emphasise a vision of youth beyond a deficit model. Moreover, and in line with international tendencies, these policies assume a participatory framework that stresses the involvement of young people in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies. But, as we have seen, the issue of participation, even if benevolent and apparently consensual, frequently risks manipulation and pamphleteering (Ferreira, Coimbra, Menezes 2012). In fact, since the seminal work of Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992) we are clearly aware that discourses about participation, particularly in the case of potentially disempowered groups such as children and young people, can mean very different things and include "inauthentic participation" (Head 2011, 542). Our data reveals that this also appears to be the case in Acre, as some of the young leaders complain that young people are only involved when everything is already decided.

This apparent failure to achieve an actual involvement of young people seems like a lost opportunity in terms of citizenship learning as research abundantly shows how experiences of participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies can be a significant experience for young people, associated with relevant benefits in terms of civic and political knowledge, attitudes and competencies (e.g., Camino & Zeldin 2002; Checkoway 2011; Checkoway, Tanene, Montoya 2005; Flanagan & Levine 2010; Ginwright & James 2002; Watts & Flanagan 2007; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best 2002; Zeldin, Camino, Calvert 2003). In fact, experts recognize that "citizenship education is by no means confined to the school grounds" and "in fact, there are reasons to believe that experiences outside school may be more important than those within it" (McCowan 2009, 25). Still, as in other domains of civic and political participation, the quality of these experiences must be thoroughly scrutinized as some elements – challenge and support, action and reflection, pluralism and diversity, time and continuity – appear to be of fundamental importance to the effectiveness of these experiences (see Ferreira, Azevedo, Menezes 2012). However, our data suggests that the potential of youth public policies to generate an arena for youth citizenship learning is still weak.

Judy Bessant (2004) analyses "the current vogue of youth participation" and questions whether it is possible to have "bare presence without inclusion or representation" considering that not only there is "a failure to acknowledge the existing barriers to young people" but also "a failure to establish participatory mechanisms that give material effect to young people's voices" (pp 401-402). Perhaps not surprisingly, our analysis of the implementation of youth public policies in the State of Acre reveals how these ambivalences and contradictions cross the various actors in the field of youth policy, and concur to make genuine participation unattainable. This gap between policy and practice is obviously a classic phenomenon that is quite common in citizenship promotion initiatives (e.g., Ribeiro et al. 2012). In this case, it seems evident that every actor recognizes

that the "letter of the law" is challenged by practice and that the implementation of youth policies is either deficient or incipient. Moreover, it is worth noting that even if local policy-makers and leaders stress the specificity of the State of Acre, youth public policies only seem to follow the proposals by the Federal Government and there are no specific actions of the local government. A good example is the recognition that local diversities in terms of access to transport or public spaces or even education does not seem to determine specific actions for the various groups. This being said, the assertion of Rua (1998) that public policies in general, and specifically youth policies in Brazil, are fragmented, at the mercy of bureaucratic competition, suffer from administrative discontinuity and do not act in response specific demands of the target groups ... seems to be utterly confirmed in our study.

It is interesting to note that some actors, mainly those at the school context, express a high level of ambivalence towards young people themselves and their willingness and capacity for active involvement: a vision of young people in deficit – of knowledge, interest and responsibility – emerges together with a clear confidence in their capacity for commitment and innovation, as long as daily contexts promote opportunities for genuine and open participation. Young people themselves claim a genuine partnership in their interactions with adults, and are aware of the fact that they are frequently instrumentalised for the benefit of others. In fact, if the promotion of youth citizenship is a significant public priority, it is no doubt essential that groups, institutions and communities are themselves committed to this goal and assume their responsibility to foster a democratic living (Menezes 2010), as "young people learn continuously from the situations, practices, relationships and experiences that make up their lives" (Biesta 2008, 4).

The vision of young people is, naturally, different. Complaints about the lack of support for these experiences – more than the facilities that politicians around the globe always like to promote – are expressed in this study, as in previous research where the lack of a personnel structure to support and foster youth involvement was also essential (Marcellino 2001). But young people also complain about a general attitude adults appear to have towards the newcomers: discouraging innovation, turning our back to new ideas, invoking the past as the ultimate solution, ... in general not recognizing, as Hannah Arendt (1954, pp. 14-15) would say, that education is the balance between conservation and emancipation and that a genuine call for youth participation depends on this balanced vision:

"Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands

their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world".

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Endnote:

¹ These are Brazilian traditional communities: "quilombolas" are descendants of former African slaves who escaped the Portuguese and created free villages ("quilombos") in distant places; "caboclos" have a mixed Portuguese and indigenous origin; and "seringueiros" are migrants who went to the North of Brazil as rubber tappers.