

Empowering Youth for Participation in Civic Engagement

By Margrethe Seljenes, May 2019

“CISV educates and inspires action for a more just and peaceful world”: a mission statement which emphasizes children's place in peace building. Through different programmes, participants gain the attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to become active global citizens. This reflects a shift towards accepting children as active agents rather than passive recipients. Still, there is an ongoing debate in research regarding the extent to which we can expect children to participate. This relates both to the competency of children, as well as to their basic right to be protected. Are children capable of providing meaningful insights into complex issues? Should this burden be placed on their shoulders? At the same time, the documented benefits of child participation go well beyond democratic rights. Participation promotes personal development, enhances self-esteem, and helps the children develop knowledge and practical skills.

In order to ensure safe participation, adult facilitation plays a vital role. This type of facilitation is a key characteristic of the Step Up programme. However, the extent to which youth participation is achieved also depends on the power balance in decision-making and level of empowerment. Thus, the first aim for this research was to describe youth participation during camp and to what extent the adults facilitated or hindered this participation. Active global citizenship does not only require participation. Civic engagement is also an important aspect, and includes participation with the desire to improve conditions for others or to help shape a community's future. The second aim of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the development of civic engagement within the camp setting.

The findings are based on a field study done at a CISV Step Up Camp in 2017/18. Here, the researcher followed a group of thirty-six 14 year-olds and their leaders from nine different nations, in addition to the hosting staff. Using an ethnographic approach, direct observation as a participant in the life of the group was the main source of data. In addition to observations, the researcher also conducted informal interviews with participants in order to gain more insight. A field diary was kept to store the data, and was the source for the thematic analysis. The results indicate that five themes are seemingly all connected to youth participation and empowerment for future civic engagement:

Stepping Up: The embedded structure of the camp provided opportunities for the youth to participate, gain power, and practice their democratic skills.

Spokesperson: Leaders facilitated, and were recruited by youth, to ensure more opinions were included in decision-making processes.

Adult Power: Adults had the final say, and had to be aware of how to use this power in favour of the youth and their agency.

Safe Space: Over the course of the camp the youth become more aware of their social identity, found a place in the group, and in turn felt safer and wanted to share more of their feelings, opinions, and experiences.

Personal Expression: How CISV culture, personal style, and music choices gave an indicator of youth being engaged in a variety of public debates and issues.

In summary, the Step Up camp provided a sufficient platform for the youth to participate. However, the actual youth participation varied in terms of contributions and strategies in line with the diversity of the group. Some youth took advantage of the possibility to step up and used the democratic forum to get their opinions heard. Others found alternative ways of being heard, for example by involving the leaders. Further, adult facilitation played an important role in the youth empowerment, and was not unproblematic. On one hand, the adults guided the youth in a way that contributed to a safe and open atmosphere at camp, where everyone's opinion could be voiced and respected. On the other hand, adults always had the opportunity to override any decision. Even though it was agreed this should be avoided, the finding reveals it can have been used as a strategy by the adults - either based on self-interest (e.g. bedtime), or executive decisions that the adults knew best what the camp needed (e.g. not listening to explicit music).

In addition, the structure of the Step Up program provides a setting to stimulate civic engagement in youth (and adults). The bonding and trust within the group was the most prominent of the constructs to develop a sense of civic engagement. Another significant construct was the practice ground for democracy and civil society. However, observations revealed some individual differences in the youth's ability to apply these skills and their ability to generalize it to real world settings. The programme also opens up for civic action in a facilitating manner with a "local impact day", and additional research is needed to determine what happens after camp ends. At the same time, several of the youth displayed the desire and mind-set to contribute, as observed both in activities and personal

expression. This shows how the peace educational content of camp has the power to stimulate both civic action and civic commitment.

The researcher suggests that sufficient leader training is necessary to go beyond the “building global friendship” aspects of camp and move towards inspiring active global citizens. This training should focus on the ways to offer youth the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences needed to develop a sense of civic engagement. This includes finding the balance of adult power and understanding the value of true participation.

Margrethe Seljenes conducted the research as part of her bachelor's degree in Social Work at the University of Agder in Norway.