



Hearing the 'voice through the cracks': Reflections on voice and participation in youth mentoring

Dr Bernadine Brady

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway, Ireland

European Mentoring Summit

May 2022



Aim of the presentation

To introduce and unpack the concept of youth voice /participation

Reflect on 2 questions:

- What role does youth mentoring play in facilitating youth voice?
- What opportunities exist to further enhance youth voice in youth mentoring programmes?



Youth voice / participation

Opportunities for young people to speak, be heard and be listened to..

‘the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives’.

(National Strategy on Participation 2015-2020)



Why youth voice?

- Young people often constructed as vulnerable and incompetent
- Subject to a high degree of structure and control
- Can be denied agency and subjecthood in their own lives.






Construct of 'voice...'

Carries a connotation of struggle, a search for recognition and inclusion (Honneth, 1995)


Involves strengthening youth resources 'to debate, inquire, contest, and oppose the views of the powerful'

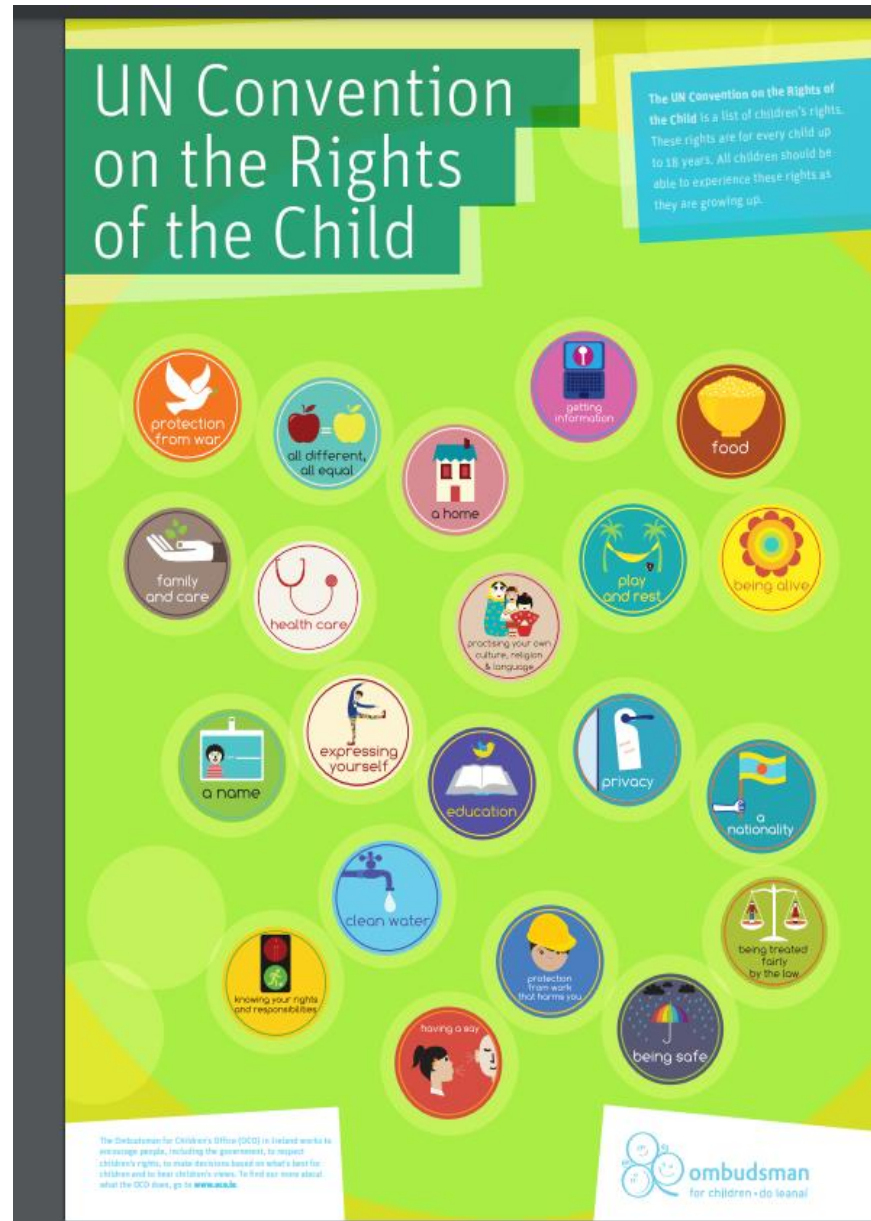
(Nybell, 2013, p.1230; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 2007; Thomas, 2009).





Contextual nature of youth voice

- Each institutional setting produces certain voices and suppresses others (Spyrou, 2011)
 - Young people may not feel free or have the confidence to speak in particular settings
 - It challenges us to ‘to try to hear both the spoken and the unsayable and to create new contexts where young people might speak “through the cracks.” (Nybell, 2013, p.1230)
- 



Overall aim:

‘to change the way children are viewed and treated, i.e. as human beings with a distinct set of rights instead of as passive objects of care and charity’

(www.unicef.org/crc)

ARTICLE 12:

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

You have the
right to
an opinion
and for it to be
listened to
and
taken
seriously.



Considered one of the most important and radical articles in the Convention

Gave children the right to be informed, the right to express their view & the right to have that view taken into account.

Personal issues



Public issues




A large orange circle is positioned on the left side of the slide, partially cut off by the edge. The text 'Benefits of Participation' is written in black, sans-serif font inside the circle.

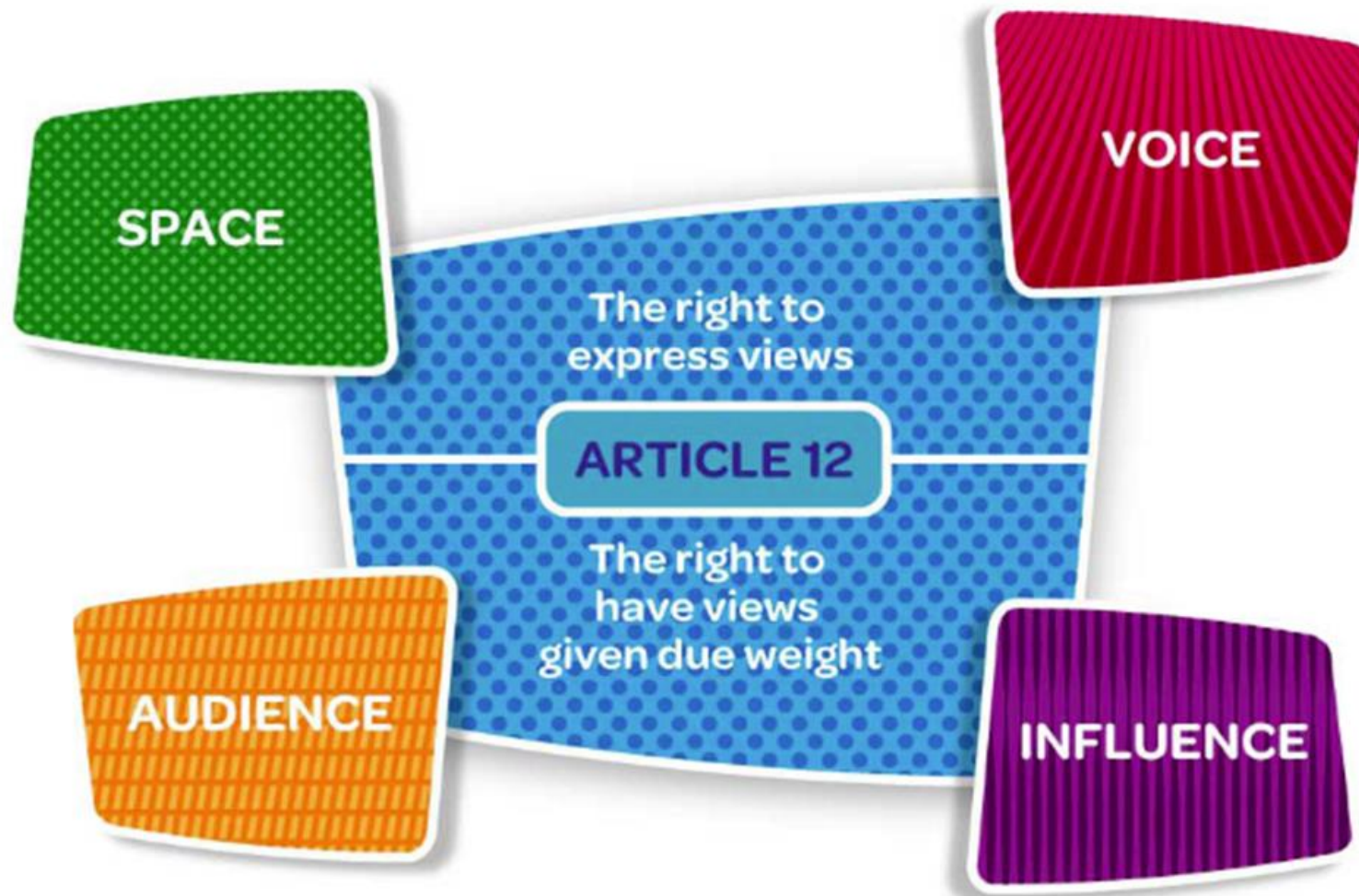
Benefits of Participation

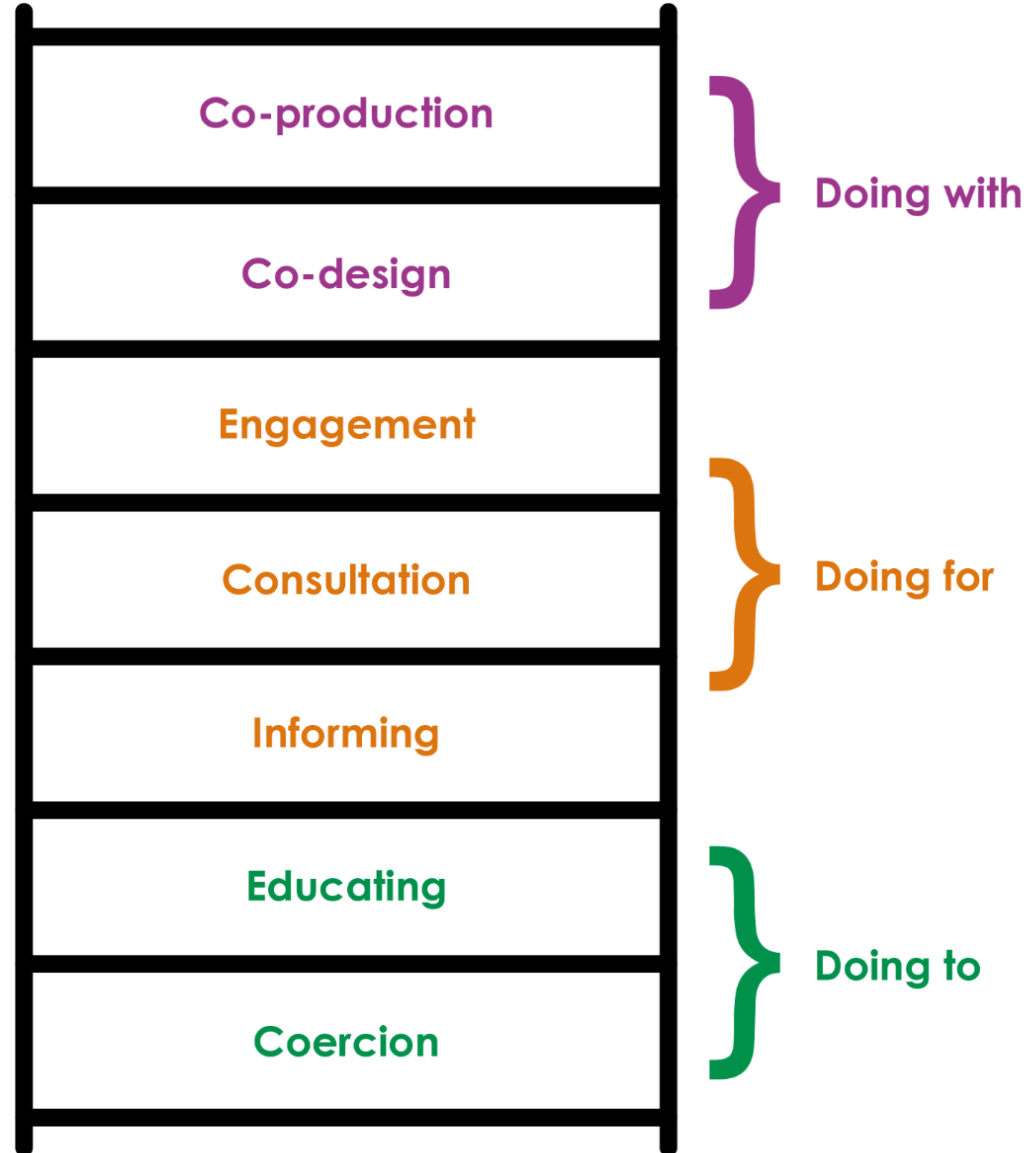
- Personal development, autonomy & well-being
- Social justice
- Improved service provision
- Greater sense of programme purpose

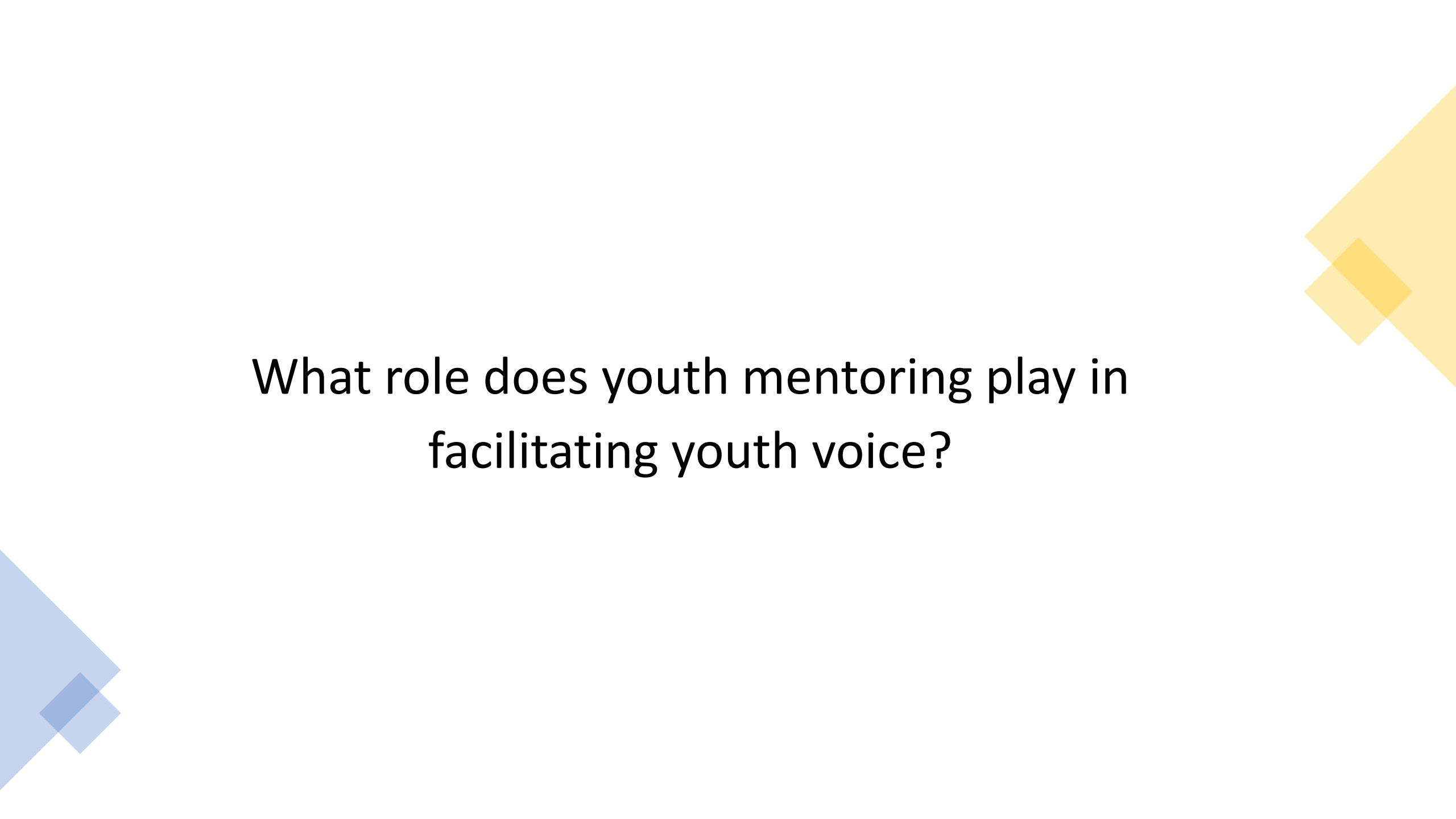


Critical factors in practice

- Ensuring power sharing is genuine and not tokenistic
 - A commitment to hearing the authentic voice of the child
 - Relationships
 - Attitudes and skills of adults
- 







What role does youth mentoring play in
facilitating youth voice?

Context

- Young people have complex lives
- Many have experienced socio-economic disadvantage, family transitions, family issues, racism, etc.
- Have many professionals in their lives

The institutional setting of youth mentoring relationships shapes the nature of youth voice in that setting.

- Voluntary
- Relational
- Time & space
- 'Removed' from normal life
- Fun / activity based



We see in youth narratives....

.. Reference to perception that their voices have been suppressed / not heard in other settings (e.g. family, school, social work)

Awareness of their role as a stakeholder in these settings and the implications of speaking truthfully


Mentoring relationship is valued as a space where voice can be heard without complication

Relationship nurtures confidence in and willingness to use own voice


I was really behind since day one because I never really went to primary school. So I was really behind but it was expected, 'well why can't you do this and why do we have to get you grinds in this? Why can't you just do it yourself and then I stopped asking for help'.

(Rachel, 21)






They have a way, they: don't give out to you for doing things, they try and listen, which as a child everyone just shouts their perspective at you but they actually sit you down, they just listen to you and your perspective and they don't discourage you just because you're' a child or just because you don't know what you're on about. (Rachel, 21)



I kind of use my match as someone just to talk to about everything that is going on at home and stuff. it's just that I feel like if I talk to someone outside of like, not the real world but like outside of that kind of world, that kind of space. ...it's like my own thing that I have to myself.
(Lily, 14)





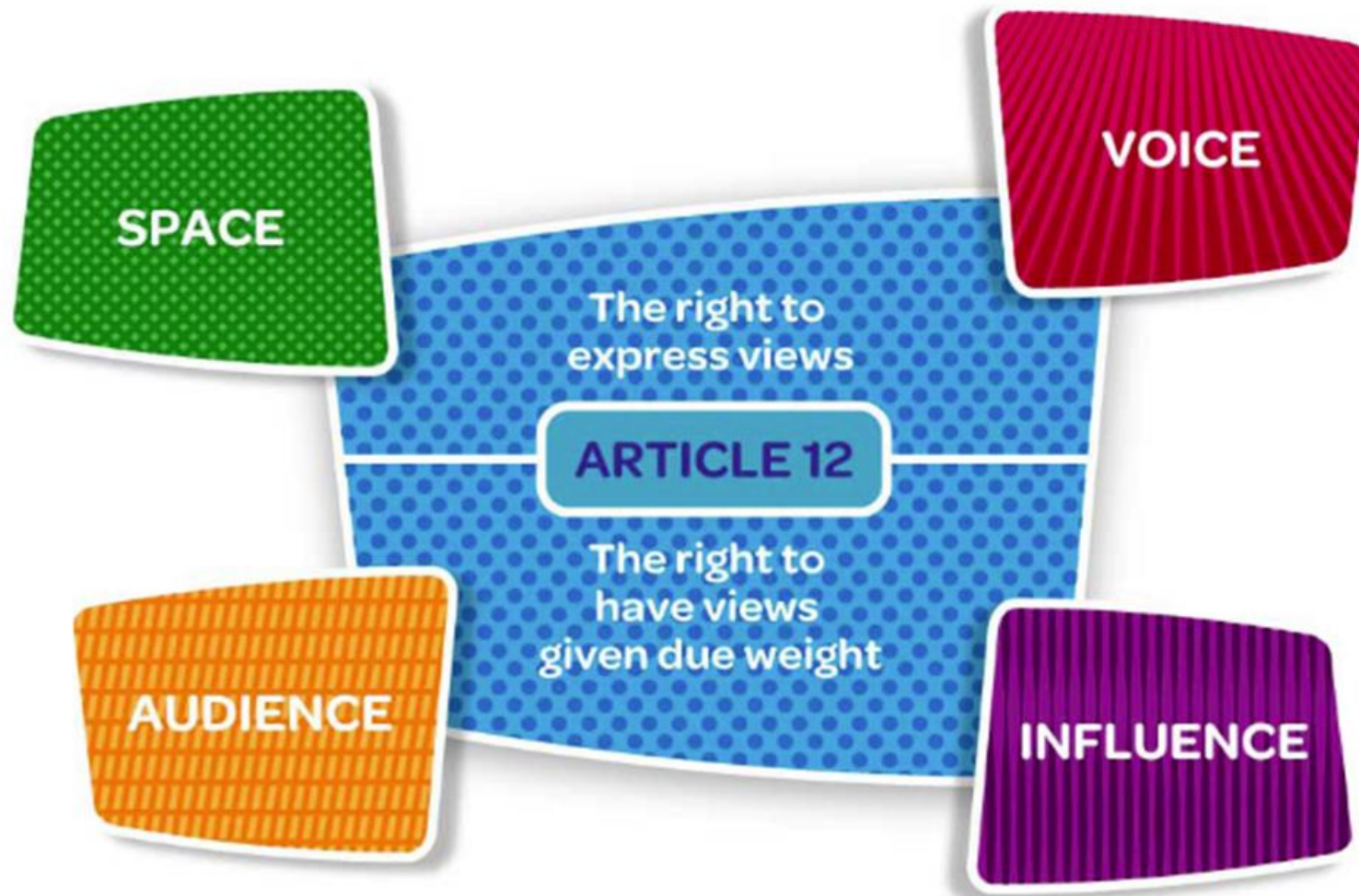
because 'when you're in care you're kind of, you're sticking to yourself ... because a lot has gone on in your life before you went into care and then it's easier to talk to someone you didn't know who doesn't know anything about it'.

(Robyn, 15)



I was a lot more shy because I just didn't really like talking to people ...if I'm asked a question I wouldn't be speaking into the desk or into my hands or anything like I would beforeit's helped me to get a lot of confidence which I'm glad about. (Sophie, 14)





Audience & influence

Evidence that mentors & caseworkers 'form an alliance' with young people to:


- Develop critical consciousness re: structural dimensions
- Connect to institutional agents / opportunities
- Advocate for young person

Mandate comes from youth voice – influence is co-produced

(Prieto-Flores et al, 2021; Weiston-Serdan, 2017)

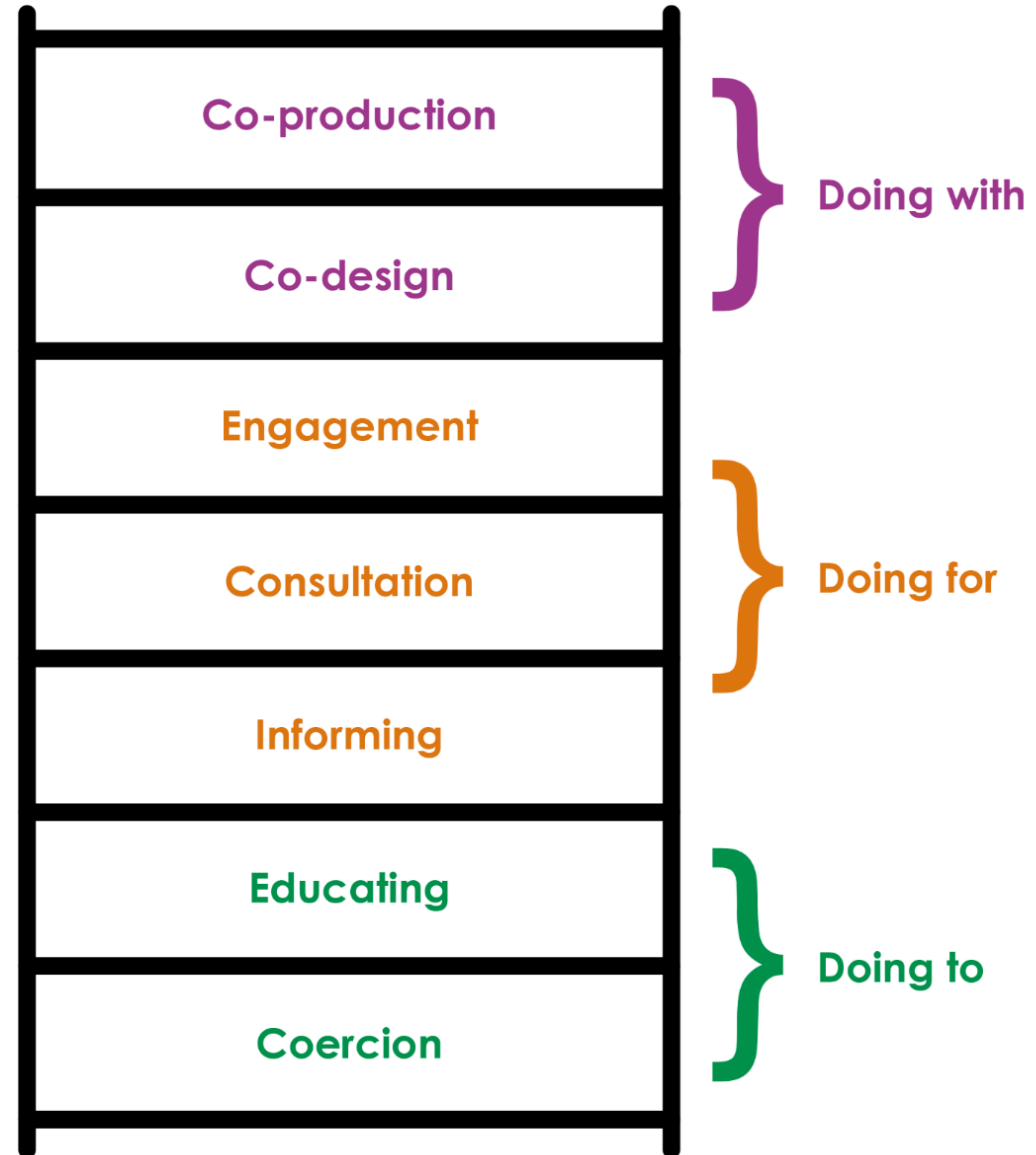


What mentoring style facilitates voice?

- Listening, non-judgemental, non-directive approach
 - ‘Presence approach’ (Baart, 2002; Brady & Dolan, 2021)
 - “Power with” rather than “power over” the mentee. (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007, p. 375)
 - Mentor does not ‘take control of the life, dreams and aspirations of the mentee’ (Freire, cited in Prieto-Flores et al, 2021)
- 



What opportunities exist for
mentoring organisations to enhance youth voice /
participation?



Reflect on organisational narrative

‘Doing to’

- Deficit view
- Young people in need / powerless
- Hierarchical / dyadic
- Mentor is a hero

‘Doing with’

- Strengths perspective
 - Youth centred
 - Collaborative / partnership approach
 - Opportunity brokering at Institutional level
- (Weistan-Serdan, 2017)

Consider collective participation structures

- Complements 1-1 relationship
- Opportunity to develop peer friendships and support
- Builds confidence & capacity
- Advise on service improvements
- Facilitate access to decision-makers
- Opportunities for co-production

(Jackson et al, 2022)



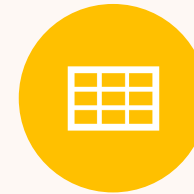
Other ways in which a commitment to participation be embedded at organisational level



Strategic Plan



Clear conceptual model to guide practice



Woven into practice guidelines



Feedback & complaints mechanism



Interview boards



Strong staff culture



Conclusion

Youth mentoring relationships can play a valuable role in creating space for youth voice and participation on an individual level

Opportunities exist to enhance youth voice at a collective and organisational levels in youth mentoring programmes

