

# A Literature Review of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation: Lessons for contemporary student engagement

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic continues to deeply impact education and wider society, with consistent disruption to relationships between authorities and citizens. As higher education sees continuing turbulence overlap with a strengthening of student engagement, this systematic literature review reappraises how students as 'citizens' are enabled to shape their learning. It does so in a Scottish tertiary context and through the prism of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, a classic framework whose eight rungs present a spectrum of ways that stakeholders can be engaged in decisions. The article explores the use of the ladder over half a century in planning, housing, health, schools and, finally, higher education, analysing critiques and adaptations of the ladder, conducting meta-synthesis across the literature to extract conclusions for student engagement. It concludes that Arnstein's ladder has continuing value to conversations about partnership in tertiary education, and that the centrality of power to both the ladder and student engagement in a sector and wider world of increasing democratic citizenship presents a challenge to decision-makers. These conclusions, and the study's limitations, point to further research opportunities that could enhance the understanding of engagement and partnership at a time of change and uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** student engagement; Arnstein's ladder; higher education

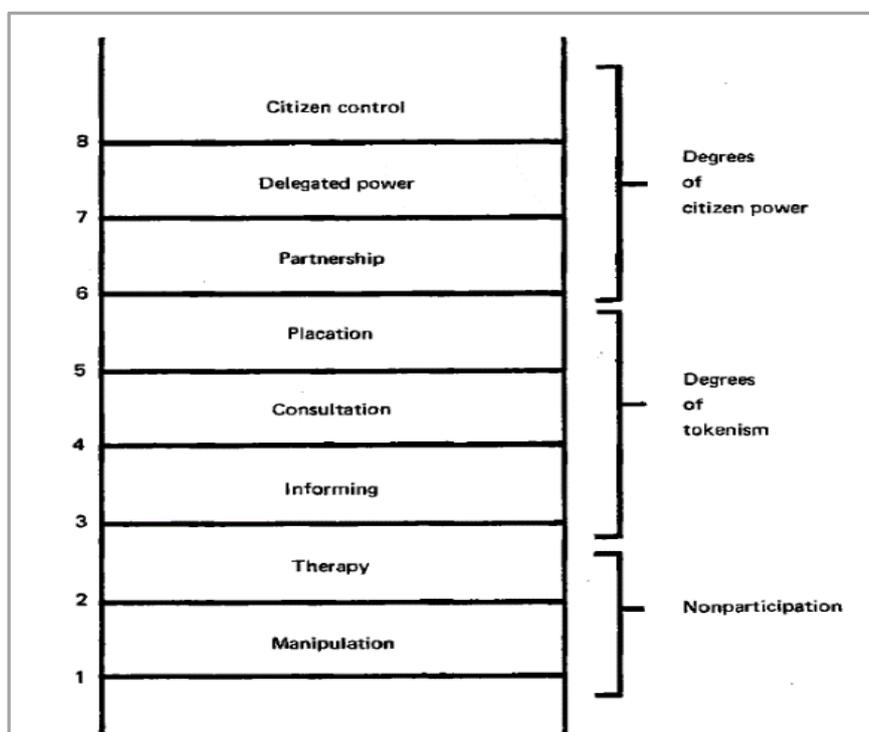
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## Introduction

Further and higher education in 2022 sees COVID-19 impacting on existing challenges such as funding (Ross, 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2021), students' wellbeing (Aristovnik et al., 2020), and Brexit (Amuedo-Dorantes & Romiti, 2021; Riedl & Staubmann, 2021). There are also pandemic perspectives on academic development (McAvinia et al., 2022), and social issues on campus such as racial equality (Islam & Valente, 2021) and climate change (Ono & Nosek, 2021), and indeed the nature of a post-pandemic university (Mahon, 2022).

Throughout, the disruption to learning has underlined the strength and value of the student voice (Natzler, 2021; Ntem et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2020; Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, 2021), and so as the sector recovers it is worth re-evaluating what the pandemic reveals for the idea of students as partners. This article aims to do so through a multi-disciplinary literature review examining one particular tool: Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) (Figure 1). Developed in urban planning over half a century ago, the ladder has been widely applied as one of many frameworks for measuring how citizens shape decisions that affect them (Hussey, 2020; nonformality.org, 2011; Burns et al., 2004).

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217)



Sherry Arnstein's work is explored by Gaber (2021), who charts her career from juvenile court casework, via administration of hospital desegregation, to her 1967 appointment as chief advisor on citizen participation in the Model Cities programme, an urban renewal scheme established by the US government (*Ibid: 17-20*). Gaber explains the evolution of the ladder (Figure 1) and highlights how Arnstein's earlier roles shaped the themes of disconnection and marginalisation (*Ibid: 20*) that feature in her own article (Arnstein, 1969) and have continuing value to a pandemic-era world.

## **Methodology**

My research aim was to synthesise literature about Arnstein's ladder across fifty years of practice in multiple sectors to gain new perspectives and lessons for practice in contemporary, post-pandemic student engagement. To achieve this, I undertook a systematic and 'general conceptual literature review' (Thomas & Hodges, 2010: 4) of Arnstein's ladder. Given I strived to bridge Arnstein's world of 1960s planning policy with today's pandemic-defined education sector, core to my research aim was my desire to 'place the research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments' (Randolph, 2009: 2).

### *Researcher's Position*

As a national agency practitioner in Scotland's tertiary sector with an interest in facilitative tools of partnership (Varwell, 2021) I embrace student engagement's inherent transformative potential for power dynamics, educational outcomes and society in general. I agree with Gravett et al., (2020: 13) that partnership is 'a dialogic and values-based approach to learning and teaching that has the potential to be transformative, developmental and fun,' and that shaping one's learning builds confidence to shape the wider world. I further believe that this requires 'an inclusive and democratic learning community' (Hassan, et al., 2020: 7), and that an empowering, Freirean pedagogy is 'a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy' (Giroux, 2010: 716).

I also derive inspiration from Arnstein's own manifesto for the participation of society's 'have-nots' as 'the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society' (Arnstein, 1969: 216). This echoes methodological literature where 'the ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm holds that socially constructed realities are influenced by power and privilege' (Cresswell & Clark, 2018: 374).

Similarly, Hatch's manifesto for qualitative analysis states that 'I do not want knowledge and how it is created to be in the hands of those who happen to hold political power' (Hatch, 2006: 406). Therefore, this article, Arnstein's ladder and indeed student engagement in in general all focus on the disruption of power and knowledge.

#### *Research Method*

A wide range of student engagement literature reviews were consulted (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Healey et al., 2014; Lester, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Bovill et al., 2009; Bryson, 2014; Lowe & Bols, 2020). Three offered particularly informative explanations of their methodologies. Mercer-Mapstone et al., (2017: 4) identified expert bibliographies from active researchers, supplemented by Google Scholar searches and trimmed using criteria developed by Kennedy (2007). Shaw et al., (2017) searched for keywords in various search engines and journals. Finally, Ní Bheoláin et al., (2020: 8) undertook a scoping search modelled on Arksey and O'Malley (2005).

Five fields of stakeholder engagement stood out for my comparison with student engagement, including environmental policy because of its political cogency and impact on today's debate about (especially young) citizen voices (Rogers, 2020), and planning, the field in which the ladder was developed. Early searches for references to Arnstein's ladder identified health, schools and housing as other fields with useful contributions.

Coming from student engagement, I approached these other sectors with care, so sector-specific literature reviews citing Arnstein (1969) were useful launchpads. A Google Scholar search revealed over twenty-three thousand citations of Arnstein's original article, and 'this type of search can easily spiral out of control' (Newby, 2014: 213), especially considering Arnstein's vintage model. Thus, a focus on quality and applicability over quantity was paramount. To narrow down on literature where the ladder had impacted on authors' content or methodologies, a further Google Scholar search for 'Arnstein literature review' was conducted, rendering results since Arnstein's original publication (1969) in environment and planning (Puskás et al., 2021; Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2011; Reed, 2008; Sieber, 2006), and health (Frankena et al., 2015; Nitsch et al., 2013; Marent et al., 2012). There was also a wave of publication in planning around the fiftieth anniversary of Arnstein's article (Lauria & Schively Slotterback, 2021; Schively Slotterback & Lauria, 2019; Natarajan, 2019a; 2019b). A scan of these springboard publications helped me to 'prize open the literature' (Newby, 2014: 213).

A review of tertiary education then followed, synthesising the diverse arguments in each sector, and allowing transferability for student engagement. A spread of literature and policy that referred to, critiqued, or built on Arnstein’s ladder was then gathered for further analysis, including several who proposed adaptations of the ladder for their various contexts. This totalled sixty-nine pieces: thirty-three from planning and environment, ten each from health, higher education, and housing, and six from schools and young people. The complexity and disagreement I found across these five sectors shaped my narrative. As Newby (2014: 213) argues, ‘we should identify contradictions in results, disagreements between authors, how work builds together to create an understanding and explanation’.

I extrapolated and coded references to Arnstein, ‘allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data’ (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, n.d.: 83). Among the codes I used, it became apparent that the approach, outcome and transferability of literature were most useful, and mapping the year and format provided little value. Figure 2 shows an example of my mapping in health.

*Figure 2: An Illustration of my Coding Approach in my Literature Review*

Publication	Sector	Year	Approach	Outcome	Reaction	Transferability	Format
de Leeuw	Health	2021	Observation of professionalised, but ineffective, consucrat	Adapted model	Neutral	Value of supporting representatives	Article
Tritter & McCallum	Health	2006	Criticism of ladder's lack of complexity	Adapted models	Negative	Professional development for providers	Article
Dukhanin et al	Health	2018	Systematic lit review of patient engagement lit	Adapted model: taxonomy of metrics for engagement	Positive	Tool of measuring types of engagement	Article
Stewart	Health	2012	Lit review	Combined map of typologies	Positive	Need to not exclude ladder extremes	PhD thesis
Stewart	Health	2013	Debate about purpose of engagement	Defence of Arnstein	Positive	Need to understand purpose of engagement	Article
Frankena et al	Health	2015	Lit review	Prominence of ladder within lit	Neutral	Recognition of its value	Article
Nitsch et al	Health	2013	Lit review	Prominence of ladder within lit	Neutral	Recognition of its value	Article
Marent et al	Health	2013	Lit review	Criticism	Negative	Little - brief mention	Article

## Literature Review

Of my five comparator sectors (planning and environment, housing, health, schools and young people, and higher education) the first of these was the largest in breadth of scope and quantity of literature; unsurprising given the ladder’s origins. There are, notably, some differences in findings between the literature from planning (especially urban planning) and that of the complex dynamics of climate change policy. I combined them as a

section however due to the shared experiences communities face in these fields (unlike, for instance, health, housing or education where user engagement often features individual engagements and one dominant service provider). Moreover, there is a significant interface between urban planning and responses to climate change (Araos et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2015; Hughes, 2015; Measham et al., 2011; Wamsler et al., 2013).

Schools and young people too are combined despite respectively concerning function and demography. Indeed, much literature explores the engagement of young people in shaping wider communities and not merely education (Hart, 1992; Badham & Davies, 2007; Davies, 2009), while some authors examine the engagement of parents, not pupils, in school governance (Stelmach, 2016; Mavuso & Duku, 2014). I combined them, however, to reflect considerable intersections of youth engagement and education, to avoid losing youth engagement within wider planning literature, and finally because of the important connection between shaping one's learning and shaping broader society, as demonstrated in the positioning of responsible citizenship as a fundamental capacity in Scotland's school curriculum (Education Scotland, n.d.-a).

These five sectors are diverse yet share an impact on citizens and their place in the world, and all have been impacted existentially by global factors such as climate change and the pandemic. They all also connect to tertiary education, for instance through students' places in wider society, and through the study of these fields as academic disciplines. Comparison can therefore be made between how these sectors engage their citizens and how students studying those subjects are engaged in their learning.

Across the five sectors, authors mention Arnstein either as one tool among many or as a prism through which to critically analyse literature. Many articles seek to discuss or apply the ladder, particularly in individual case studies. Others offer criticism of the ladder to argue for its inapplicability, to create space for other models, or as grounds for derivations. Throughout this chapter I present various adaptations to emphasise the value of Arnstein's ladder as a starting point for much modern literature on citizen engagement. These adaptations point to the different approaches to categorising and critiquing participation, and present lessons for student engagement.

### *Planning and Environment*

Literature about Arnstein's ladder in planning covers urban planning and rural development, developed and developing economies, the environment and climate change, community foundations, technology, and local government. In short, it demonstrates the diversity of citizen engagement practice.

Lauria & Schively Slotterback (2021) contain a wealth of perspectives on Arnstein, from countries such as Indonesia (Fahmi & Chandra-Putra, 2021), Australia (Houghton & McManus, 2021) and Serbia (Perić, 2021), addressing aspects of society from university civic engagement (Rabinowitz Bussell et al., 2021) and public art (Almanzar & Zitcer, 2021), to participatory budgeting (Falanga & Ferraz da Fonseca, 2021) and socially vulnerable groups in heritage policy (Gibson et al., 2021). There is even criticism of the ladder, with Laskey and Nicholls (2021) noting the limits of Arnstein's model where 'some residents, finding themselves caged by institutional participation, jump off the participatory ladder, which allows them to articulate an independent policy voice and disrupt the planning process' (Laskey & Nicholls, 2021: 203).

Schively Slotterback & Lauria (2019) argue that Arnstein sets a standard for public engagement and note that Arnstein's call for a redistribution of power can be undermined by a lack of trust in planning and policymaking or culturally inappropriate planning approaches (ibid: 184). They thus draw on Mandarano (2008) to recommend that 'social interaction among participants is essential because it builds social capital and trust' (Schively Slotterback & Lauria, 2019: 184). Yet the strength of the ladder lies, they argue, in that social capital, especially at the higher rungs where Arnstein 'presumes knowledge exists in communities' (ibid). This echoes arguments that disempowered citizens are not merely victims to be liberated, but experts with distinct perspectives who can enrich policymaking (Yosso, 2005). Natarajan (2019a; 2019b) explores similar themes, noting a 'continued agency of citizens and continual creativity in the search for influence' (Natarajan, 2019a: 6) and the premise that citizens are 'a rich source of agency, energy, and knowledge about environments' (Natarajan, 2019b: 141).

Choguill (1996), however, argues that in community participation and international development, there are external influences in engagement dynamics that challenge Arnstein's assumptions, suggests that the ladder and similar models 'provide misleading results within a development context' (Choguill, 1996: 431), and proposes an adaptation with eight similar but renamed rungs. Burns et al., (2004) also adapt the ladder for community development, outlining a nine-step process between lip-service and ownership (Figure 3) to illustrate what level of participation available in each decision-making space (Burns et al., 2004: 60).

Some references to Arnstein's ladder are passing, within wider scans of literature. Sieber (2006) argues that the higher rungs may be unachievable in certain non-Western power dynamics and that participation can be top-down or use an intermediary (Sieber, 2006: 500). Trzyna (2007: 37) highlights the value in talking about engagement with communities rather

than a potentially patronising ‘outreach’ (**ibid**). Coleman and Firmstone (2014: 827) present the ladder as their theoretical starting point in analysing UK local government’s public engagement. Ahmad and Abu Talib (2011) use the ladder to explore rural development; while for Reed (2008) it is one of many similar typologies of participation.

Figure 3: Burns et al.’s Participation Scale (Burns et al., 2004: 60)

Position on scale		Explanation
Ownership	9	Communities have ownership of all assets – there are no conditions which have to be met
Control	8	Communities have control over all activities, but only within conditions laid out in contractual arrangements
Substantial delegation	7	Partner organisations give substantial control over decision making to communities
Limited delegation	6	Partner organisations give limited control over decision making to communities
Advisory input	5	Communities have a formal advisory role
Genuine consultation	4	Communities are properly and genuinely consulted
High quality information	3	Communities are given high quality information
Consultation controlled by decision makers	2	Communities are consulted, but only on options which have been carefully constructed by those with the power
Lip-service only	1	Despite the rhetoric, participation amounts to nothing

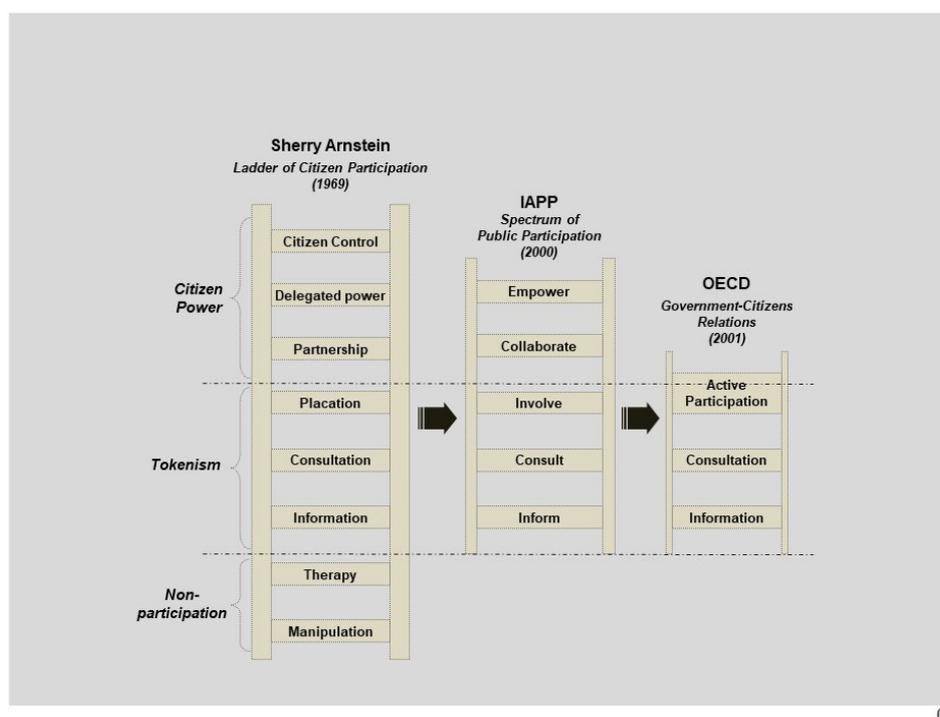
In contrast, Arnstein is central to the approach of Puskás et al., (2021), whose literature review uses the ladder as the basis for analysis against five criteria of participation in nature-based solutions, concluding that consultation and partnership are dominant. Their criteria (Puskás et al., 2021: 3) perhaps indicate the ladder’s resilience against criticisms of its binary nature, and they argue that Arnstein ‘continues to provide the basis for a robust classification of the different levels of citizen participation’ (**ibid**: 2).

Carver (2001) explores criticism of the ladder’s focus on power, citing Slocum and Thomas-Slayter (1995) in arguing that participation alone does

not guarantee social justice because of the motivations of those who hold power and the unequal access to information (Carver, 2001: 3). He draws on Wiedemann and Femers' (1993) adaptation of the ladder for decision-making about waste management (Carver, 2001: 3) plus a further version for digital engagement (Ibid: 4) which is also cited by Pétursdóttir (2011: 19) who in turn describes the ladder's value in highlighting non-participation in a Kenyan slum regeneration.

Prieto Martín (2010; 2014) (also in nonformality.org, 2011: 29) compares the ladder with two simpler scales (Figure 4) that he argues do not capture the detail of Arnstein's original. In another adaptation (Prieto Martín, 2014) he adds two new lower rungs, legitimate coercion and illegal duress. These are spaces of direct action and violence with 'negative levels of collaboration, characterized by mutual opposition and pressures' (Ibid: 5).

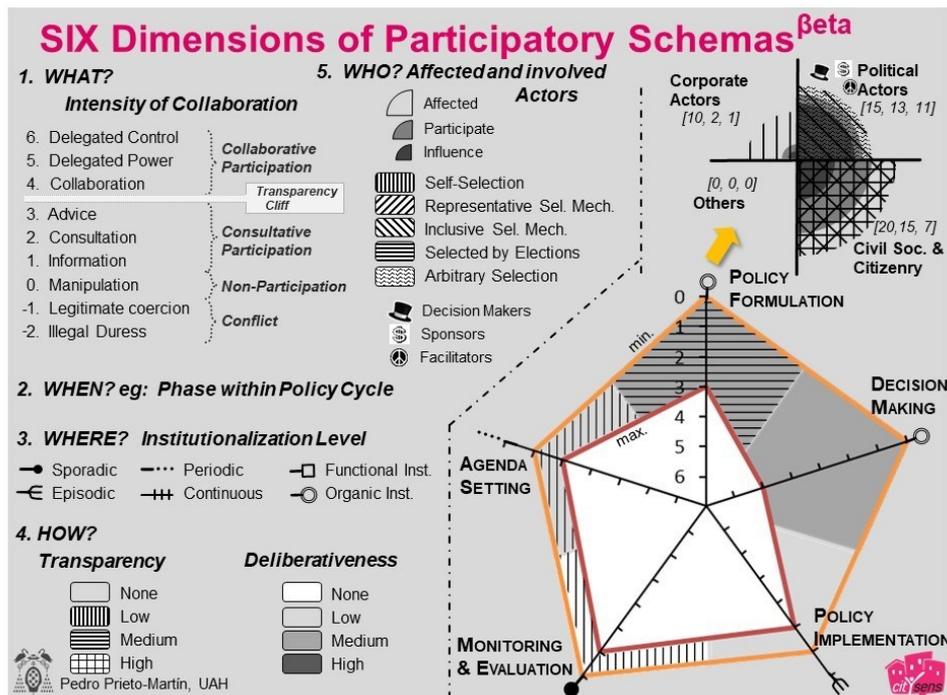
Figure 4: Prieto Martín's Comparison of Three Models (Prieto Martín, 2010: 47 included with author's permission)



Prieto Martín proposes this new nadir as 'autonomous participation' (Prieto Martín: 4), to distinguish it from the 'administrative participation' (Ibid) of Arnstein's original eight rungs (Figure 5).

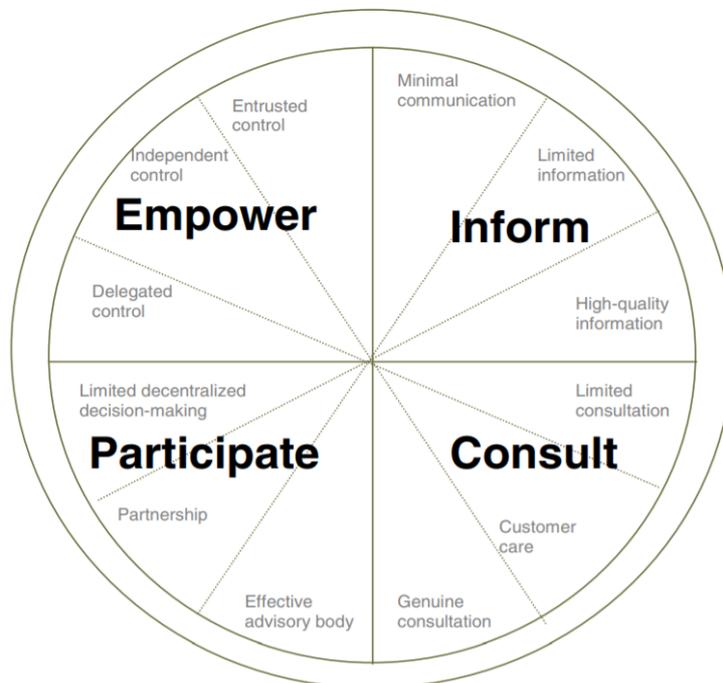
He concludes his study, however, by arguing that his schema still leaves unanswered two critical questions which, nonetheless, are difficult to display graphically: the 'why' and 'what for' of participation' (Ibid: 12). He suggests that the schema (and, arguably, Arnstein's original ladder or any such tool) should always be accompanied by reflections on the motivation and impact of any policy process.

Figure 5: Prieto Martín's Participatory Budgeting Schema (Prieto Martín, 2014: 11, included with author's permission)



From a local government perspective, Davidson (1998; Figure 6), also in Dooris and Heritage (2013), converts the ladder to a wheel, because ‘it may be helpful to view participation in a non-hierarchical way’ (Dooris & Heritage, 2013: 576).

Figure 6: Davidson's Wheel of Participation (Dooris & Heritage, 2013: 78)

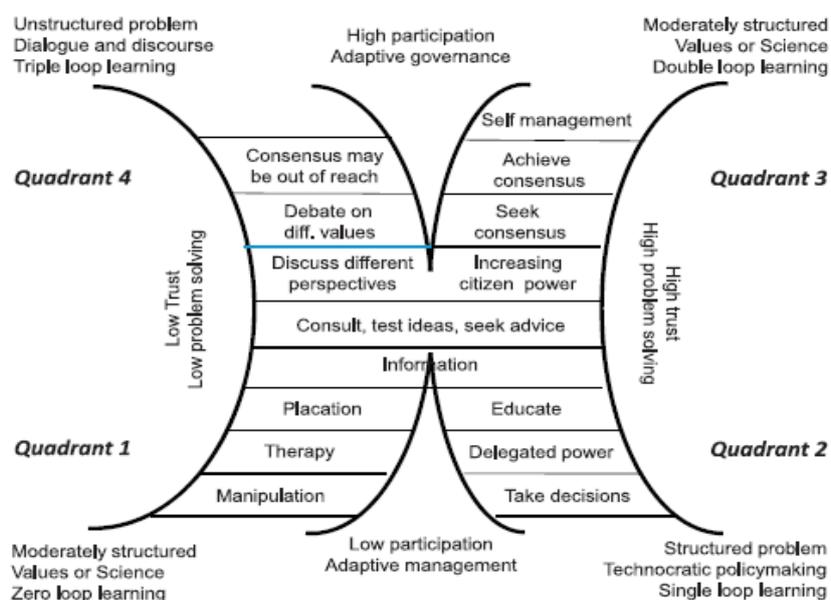


Ruesga and Knight (2013) use the ladder to examine community foundations. They highlight the risks and opportunities of such organisations, which combine elite trustees’ and leaders’ ‘personal wealth and power’ (Ruesga & Knight, 2013: 15) with less privileged residents’ lived experience. The authors suggest that in the world of community foundations, the kind of resident engagement that Arnstein holds up as the ideal—full citizen control—is rare or perhaps nonexistent, at least in the U.S. context (Ibid: 13). Nonetheless they highlight some examples of leaders and residents collaborating successfully (Ibid: 15-16).

Returning Arnstein to her roots in urban planning, Al Waer et al., (2021) explore citizen participation in design-led collaborative planning events. They argue that such events can, due to the pre-determined power dynamic, be at the tokenistic stage of the ladder, with the objective merely to engineer consent and tick boxes (Ibid: 3). They pessimistically report that ‘a half-century after Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (1969) set out the power structures inherent in techniques, current methods of community involvement are still seen as paying little more than lip service’ (Al Waer et al., 2021: 4).

Finally, literature in the climate change debate is especially critical of Arnstein’s simplicity given what Hurlbert and Gupta (2015: 100) refer to as ‘the complex environmental problems of the Anthropocene’. They argue that while stakeholder involvement is almost universally endorsed, ‘literature often romanticizes participation’ and participation is ‘an inadequately developed puzzle’ (Ibid: 101). Instead, they present an x-style split ladder with four quadrants that accommodate different levels of loop learning (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Hurlbert and Gupta’s Split Ladder of Participation (Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015: 104)



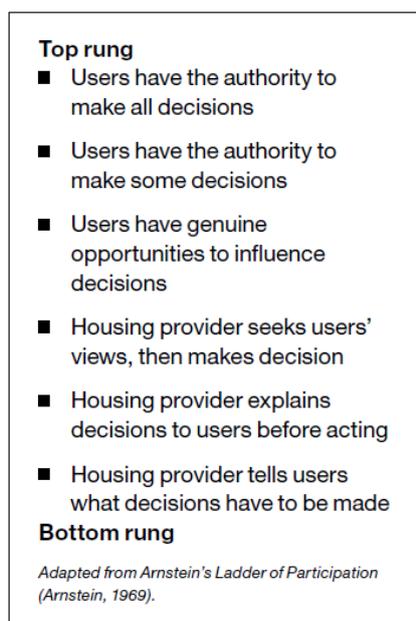
Similarly, Collins and Ison (2009) underline the importance of social learning and exhort readers in their title to 'jump off Arnstein's ladder'. They suggest that for Arnstein participation itself has become the goal, with a scale that does not reflect any wider context (Collins & Ison, 2009: 362), and which is too linear to reflect the diversity of knowledges and stakeholders in climate change (Ibid: 369). They concede the simplicity of the ladder forms part of its appeal (Ibid: 361). They conclude, however, that the ladder is insufficient for the task of management of the natural environment which is 'better characterized by complexity, uncertainty and multiple stakeholding' (Collins & Ison, 2009: 369). The authors do not explain, though, why Arnstein's definition of partnership cannot accommodate multiple stakeholders when her original article speaks of the diversity of citizenship (Arnstein, 1969: 217) and whose work was forged in a society defined by its racial inequalities (Gaber, 2021: 20). Nor do Collins and Ison recognise compatibility between their social learning model and what might be achieved in the shared planning spaces of Arnstein's partnership rung.

### *Housing*

Tenant and resident participation in housing policy feature easily identifiable authorities and users, presenting parallels with student engagement. In much of this literature, references to Arnstein are passing (Bradley, 2008; Simmons & Birchall, 2007; Suszyńska, 2015; Kalandides, 2018). Others delve deeper, such as Cairncross et al., (1994), for whom a ladder is one of many tools that frame research into British local authorities' tenant participation. Although the authors do not cite Arnstein, their eight-level scale of tenant participation strongly resembles her ladder, and ranges from information, through consultation and joint management to control (Cairncross et al., 1994: 183).

Another, directly attributed, ladder of participation (Cullen, 2005) presents an eight-rung model as part of a toolkit for user involvement strategies in housing, and while the attribution to Arnstein is stated (Figure 8), the rationale for choosing it is not. The report does, interestingly, endorse the fourth rung, where users have genuine opportunities to influence decisions, rather than either of the two above it (Cullen, 2005: 8). This aligns with other authors who do not unconditionally demand maximum engagement (Bovill & Bulley, 2011).

Figure 8: Cullen’s participation ladder (Cullen, 2005: 8)



Rich analysis is found in Romanin’s (2013) thesis on tenant participation in an Australian public housing renewal project in the context of market-driven initiatives in the public sector (Ibid: 33) and analysis of power structures by Clegg (1989). Neoliberal contexts for students and learning are discussed elsewhere (Avis, 2020; Matthews et al., 2019; Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2009; Buckley, 2018). Furthermore, Romanin’s outline of the barriers and potential for tenant participation, including skills requirements and issues of trust and power, are similar to those in student engagement (Bols, 2017; Carey, 2013). His adaptation of Arnstein (Romanin, 2013: 44) (Figure 9) broadly retains the original framework but adds processes identified by Cairncross et al., (1994) plus a second axis covering structures, organisation and tactics, three variables identified by Davies (2009). This model, Romanin argues (2013: 44), allows better mapping of data and clearer examination of each participatory variable.

Figure 9: Romanin’s Model For Tenant Participation (Romanin, 2013: 44, included with author’s permission)

	STRUCTURES		ORGANISATION		TACTICS		
	Indicator S1	Indicator S2	Indicator O1	Indicator O2	Indicator T1	Indicator T2	
CONTROL							DEGREES OF TENANT POWER
CHOICE							
JOINT MANAGEMENT							
DIALOGUE							DEGREES OF TOKENISM
CONSULTATION							
LISTENING							
SEEKING INFORMATION							NON-PARTICIPATION
PROVIDING INFORMATION							

Housing renewal is also the focus of Hall and Hickman (2011), who explores an apparent participation deficit in French housing regeneration. They choose Arnstein's ladder to assess this because she was 'the first author to develop thinking this area' (*ibid*: 834). While they acknowledge criticisms of the ladder, they argue that 'despite these flaws, Arnstein's model provides a valuable conceptual point of departure' (*ibid*: 835).

### *Health*

The breadth of health as a field for stakeholder engagement is evident in literature reviews, where studies citing Arnstein discuss engaging people with intellectual disabilities in health research (Frankena et al., 2015), stakeholder engagement in evaluation of health promotion (Nitsch et al., 2013; Marent et al., 2012), and patient engagement in policymaking (Dukhanin et al., 2018). The last of these explores five decades of research in healthcare engagement, creating a taxonomy of metrics based on the outcomes and processes of engagement (Dukhanin et al., 2018: 894). The authors develop this taxonomy using Arnstein's ladder. While they present no justification for choosing Arnstein, the authors note that a ladder approach can be a good general guide but fails to generate specific actions, a gap they claim is filled by their taxonomy (*ibid*: 895).

Frankena et al.'s (2015) review of how people with intellectual disabilities are involved in health research draws on Arnstein's ladder as a key theory in stakeholder engagement. They note that this field is challenging due to assumptions made about participants' capacity to understand the subject matter, 'well-intentioned family and carers', and researchers' own ethical concerns (Frankena et al., 2015: 272). While the authors place Arnstein's ladder among the most mentioned theories of engagement, they highlight various criticisms (*ibid*: 278) from Abma and Broerse (2010) and Beadle et al., (2012). One is that the ladder does not specify how each level should be achieved (albeit arguably the action described by Arnstein at each stage is itself part of the path). Another criticism is that a ladder model suggests the missing ingredient of a support structure. Finally, they add to arguments that higher levels are not, contrary to Arnstein's proposition, always the most desirable.

Nitsch et al., (2013) and Marent et al., (2012) highlight criticisms of the ladder's simplicity, its focus on power and its assumption of high levels as the optimum place for engagement. Both articles refer to Tritter and McCallum's (2006) invocation of snakes and ladders and a call to move beyond Arnstein. Those authors suggest a 'more nuanced model of user involvement' (Tritter & McCallum, 2006: 157), instead of Arnstein's stark framing of participation as a struggle between officials and activists (p. 157). They refer to various adaptations of the ladder across different sectors, including Choguill (1996), and call for engagement that is

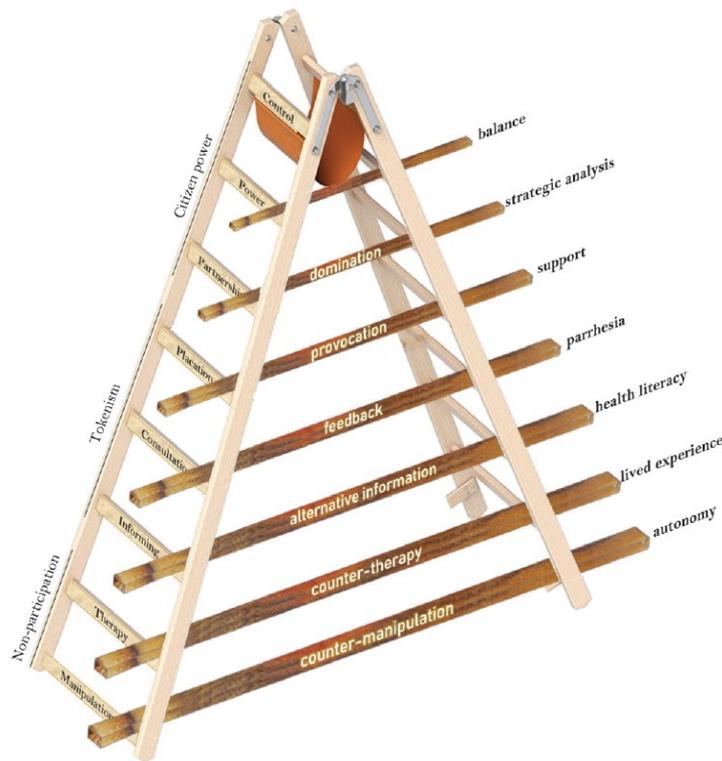
‘empowering and enabling at four levels: healthcare system, organisation, community, and individual’ (Tritter and McCallum, 2006: 157), echoing arenas in which students should be engaged (QAA Scotland et al., 2012).

Tritter and McCallum (2006) criticise the ladder on various grounds. Firstly, they identify missing aspects, such as its supposed failure to ‘differentiate between method, category of user and outcome’ (Tritter & McCallum, 2006: 161) and that it leaves ‘little opportunity to engage in evaluating the nature of involvement’ (Ibid: 161). They voice a common criticism in the ladder’s focus on empowerment as the sole aim, and also propose that Arnstein’s most important oversight relates to how users frame problems and not merely design solutions (Ibid: 162) – albeit that role is arguably inherent in the three citizen power levels of Arnstein’s ladder.

They further criticise Arnstein for ignoring ‘snakes’ that cause downward movement, including a lack of sustainability, the misguided priorities in delegated power, and a potential tyranny by certain stakeholders over others (Ibid: 163). To reflect this and acknowledging that there can be multiple authorities working together in healthcare, the authors argue for multiple ladders to reflect different types of users (Tritter & McCallum, 2006: Ibid: 165). They propose bridges between these ladders, creating a complexity that they describe as a mosaic. Sadly, the mosaic receives neither an illustration nor a methodology, ultimately validating the visual simplicity of Arnstein’s original ladder.

A key factor in health engagement is the organised voice of service users. De Leeuw (2021) describes the consucrat, the consumer bureaucrat, where the policy drive for service user representation mixes with authorities’ potential domination of such voices, to create ‘co-opted apparatchiks’ (De Leeuw, 2021: 178) as part of a ‘semi-elitist proto professionalization of career consumer representatives’ (Ibid: 177). Consequently, de Leeuw proposes an A-style adaptation of Arnstein (Ibid: 179) (Figure 10), which incorporates ‘pushback skills’ (Ibid: 179) required by the consucrat to respond to each level of the ladder. As de Leeuw points out, the consucrat is ‘mostly unremunerated’ and requires ‘sustained systems support’ (Ibid: 179), so the prospect of pushback succeeding without major policy change is unclear.

Figure 10: de Leeuw's Consucrat Model (de Leeuw, 2021: 179)



Health involvement is explored in a Scottish context by Stewart (2012; 2013), who describes a contradiction in that the public are inadequately empowered but do not actually aspire to citizen control (Stewart, 2012: 14). She views public involvement as 'an empty signifier, a label which is functionally underspecified, allowing the peaceful, though problematic, co-existence of multiple approaches to the topic' (Ibid: 13). She maps various typologies and notes that some of these have simplified Arnstein by removing upper and lower rungs (Stewart, 2012 & 2016: 10) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Stewart's Typologies of Involvement Models (Stewart, 2016: 10)

Author	Arnstein	Feingold	Charles & Di Maio	Rowe & Frewer	Martin
Year	1969	1977	1992	2005	2009
Concept	'citizen participation'	'citizen participation'	'lay participation'	'public engagement'	'public engagement'
Levels	manipulation				
	therapy				
	informing	informing		public communication	information
	consultation	consultation	consultation	public involvement	consultation
	placation				
	partnership	partnership	partnership	public participation	co-production
	delegated power	delegated power			
	citizen control	citizen control	lay domination		

Stewart further argues that such scales, even Arnstein's, 'have no awareness of practice, and assume that empowerment is a straightforward process on which we can all agree' (Stewart, 2012: 30). She nonetheless praises Arnstein for concern with society's 'have nots' and raises the need to question who is giving views and who might be excluded from such a process (Stewart, 2013: 125). She suggests that 'when next we cite [Arnstein's] ladder of participation, we should do so with awareness of the particular radical perspective which has made this work so widely known and so poorly understood' (Ibid: 125).

### Schools and young people

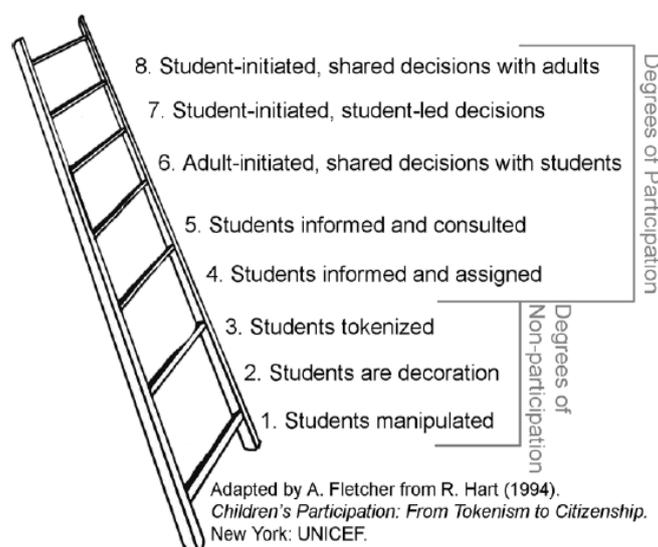
Similar questions about who is engaged (or not) arise in my final comparator sector, schools and young people. There is extensive literature relating to engaging young people in the learning experience and life and work of schools, and Ruddick and Flutter (2004) present a thorough starting point. Fielding (2001) presents a powerful manifesto for students as researchers and change agents, albeit in the shadow of a potential paradox of engagement as a stifling force (Ibid: 123). There is also policy development in Scotland, where there have been moves to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into law (Scottish Parliament, 2021; UNICEF UK, 2021), and where school pupils are increasingly involved in shaping quality (Education Scotland, n.d.-b).

This field also includes research into parent voices, a dynamic present in tertiary education (Bruner, 2017; Coburn, 2006; Lampert, 2009; Tierney, 2002). Stelmach (2016) explores parent councils in Canada. She applies Arnstein, which, 'with its focus on levels of citizen empowerment, was

appropriate because it allowed a look into decision-making from the perspective of parents who historically have been receivers of educational decisions' (*Ibid*: 276). Her conclusions about barriers and challenges to parent engagement point to a lack of professional capital and skills, role ambiguity, inertia and intimidation from management, staff deficit assumptions about parents, especially those who are underprivileged, and other barriers relating to power, culture and accessibility (*Ibid*: 273). These are familiar to debates about diversity in student engagement (*Marie et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2017*). In an echo of de Leeuw's consucrat (*de Leeuw, 2021*), Stelmach also highlights the risk of volunteer work turning into a job (*Stelmach, 2016: 280*), concludes that there is limited evidence of partnership or citizen control (*Ibid*: 282), and calls for leadership that enables participation and shifts power (*Ibid*: 284). Mavuso and Duku (*2014*) also explore parental involvement, using Arnstein's ladder as their theoretical framework in a South African context. They highlight similar dynamics to Stelmach (*2016*) with the addition of age (*Mavuso & Duku, 2014: 455*) and gender (*Ibid*: 459).

On pupils themselves, Fletcher (*2005*) imagines 'a place where all adults and students interact as co-learners and leaders' (*Ibid*: 4), linking this to Freirean ideas of learning rooted in students' experiences (*Fletcher, 2005: 4*). He cites an adapted version of the ladder developed by Hart (*Fletcher, 2005: 7; Hart, 1992: 8*) (Figure 12), and argues that when there is co-creation 'students become partners, allies, and companions in school improvement' (*Fletcher, 2005: 11*).

Figure 12: Hart's Ladder of Student Involvement (*Fletcher, 2005: 7* adapted from *Hart, 1992: 8*)



Hart's study takes an international perspective on young people's engagement in various developing economies. His premise, drawing on children's play, is that a sense of ownership is key, though he highlights

risks of manipulation or subversion of young people (Hart, 1992: 5). He does, however, observe that ‘in cultures where adults themselves have little opportunity to influence community decisions, young people can become the initiating force for change’ (Ibid: 5). This is a forerunner of contemporary discussions of ‘generational empowerment’ (Rogers, 2019: 74) and the ‘Greta Thunberg phenomenon’ (Suman et al., 2020: 75).

Badham and Davies,(2007: 90) build on Hart’s ladder, using a matrix to map its steps against various approaches to involvement such as complaints, surveys and governance. Their table (Figure 13), not unlike Romanin’s (2013) (Figure 9), allows organisations to ‘map particular approaches as well as how participative they are’ (Badham & Davies, 2007). The model is also cited by Davies (2009) who suggests social networks as one way of bridging the gap between those participating in different parts of the grid.

Figure 13: Badham & Davies’ Participation Matrix (Badham & Davies, 2007: 90)

	A Individual complaint and feedback	B Surveys and one-off events and consultations	C Practice initiatives: time limited, focused activity	D Peer activity: training, research, evaluation	E Young representatives on advisory groups and shadow boards	F Young people involved in governance – with or without adults
8 Youth initiated – shared decisions with adults						
7. Youth initiated and directed						
6. Adult initiated and shared decisions with cyp						
5. Consulted and informed						
4. Assigned and informed						
3. Tokenism						
2. Decoration						
1. Manipulation						

### Higher Education

Finally, there is a rich body of higher education research (though notably a dearth in further education) where the ladder has enabled reflection on the student experience. Noteworthy among them are three studies (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Carey, 2018; Buckley, 2018) each with a distinct motivation and focus. Bovill and Bulley’s adaptation (Figure 14) presents a model for active student participation in curriculum design, aiming to use the ladder ‘as a useful illustrative tool’ (Bovill & Bulley: 179) that is hoped to ‘contribute to debate, enhance understanding and raise new possibilities of ASP [active student participation] in curriculum design’ (Ibid: 183). Carey (2018: 14) maps the ladder on to his own nested hierarchy of student engagement, highlighting the nature of the institution

and the role of students at each of the eight rungs (Figure 15). Finally, Buckley (2018) compares Arnstein's original ladder with a model developed by Fielding (2012) that is in turn derived from Hart's adaptation of Arnstein (Figure 12). Buckley concludes that 'any literature on student participation in decision-making that substantially relies on the models of Arnstein or Fielding contains an ideological opposition to neoliberal approaches to higher education' (Buckley, 2018: 729).

Figure 14: Bovill and Bulley's Ladder of Student Participation in Curriculum Design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011: 180)

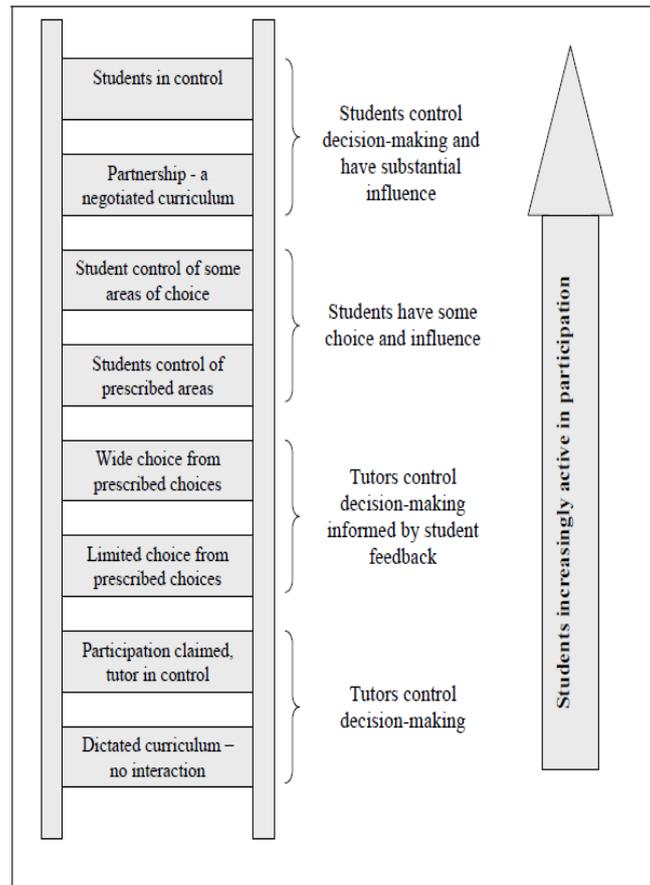
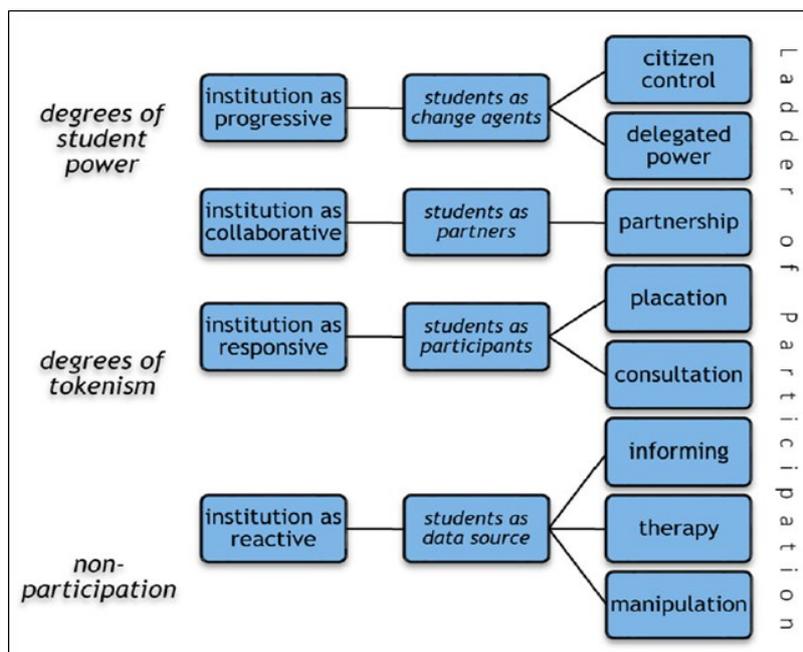
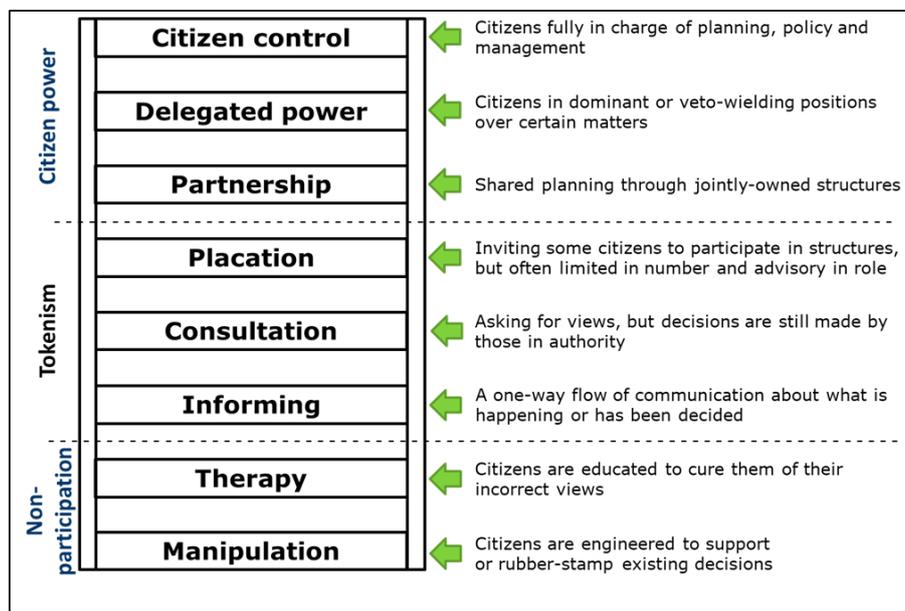


Figure 15: Carey's Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement with Arnstein's Ladder (Carey, 2018: 14)



A version of the ladder has been developed by sparqs (**Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, n.d.**) (Figure 16), paraphrasing Arnstein's description of each rung to offer a clearer illustration of how engagement changes during progression up (or down) the ladder.

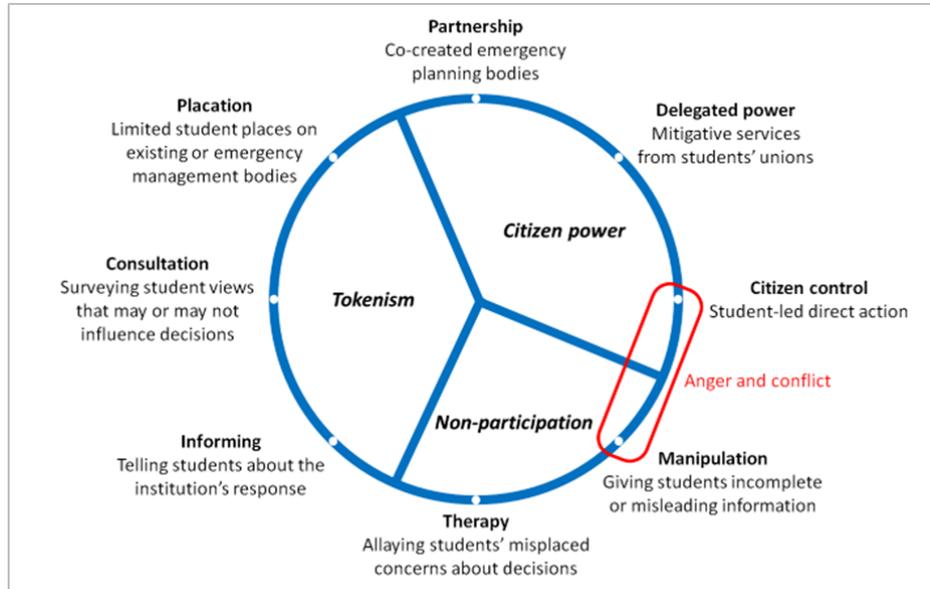
Figure 16: sparqs' Version of Arnstein's Ladder (sparqs, n.d.-c; Included under a CC-BY-NC 4.0 License)



The ladder is placed in the context of the pandemic by Woods and Botcherby (2021) and adapted for COVID-19 and other emergency decision-making by Varwell (2022a). The latter of these draws on Prieto Martín's new levels of direct and potentially violent 'autonomous participation' (Prieto Martín, 2014) to produce a circular version of the

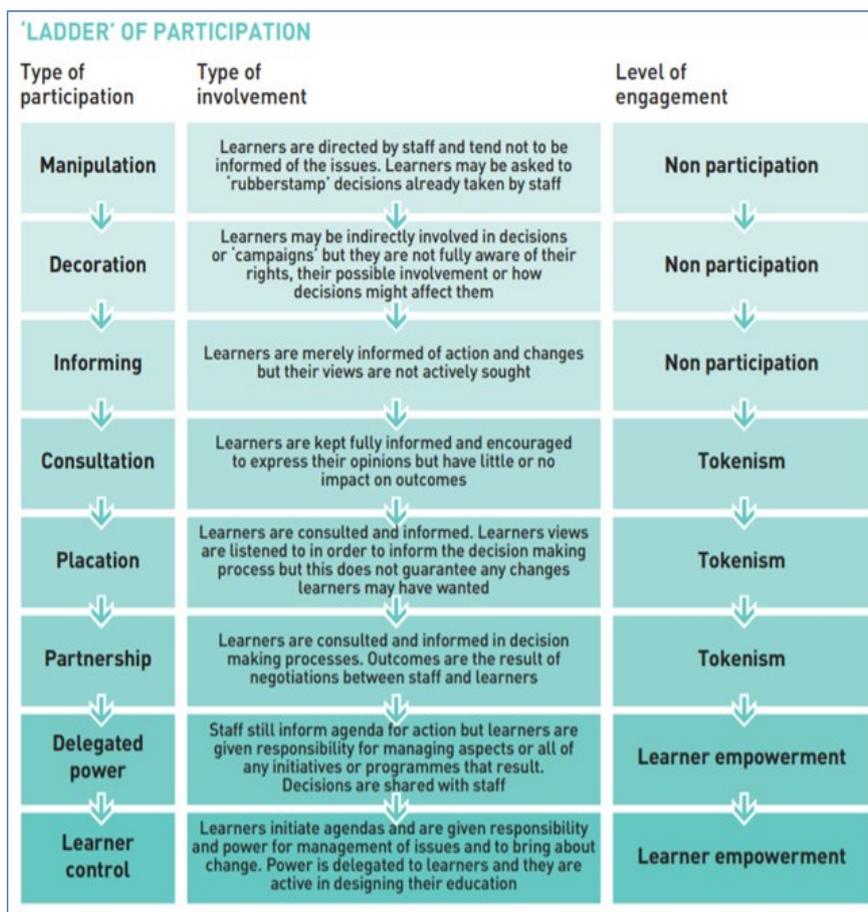
ladder (Figure 17). This illustrates an overlap of the lowest level of participation where students are manipulated, and the highest level where disillusioned students take direct action.

Figure 17: An emergency-era circle of student participation (Varwell, 2022a)



Arnstein's ladder has had notable impact in Ireland's changing sector. Collins et al., (2016), in framing national student engagement policy, cites Arnstein's ladder as a tool for exploring levels of involvement (Collins, et al., 2016: 12). The report highlights (ibid: 13) Rudd et al., (2006) whose adaptation is similar to sparqs' own adaptation (Figure 16) in populating each rung with relatable examples (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Rudd et al.'s Ladder of Participation (Rudd et al., 2006: 11, included with permission)



Feeney, et al., (2020) map student engagement in an institutional merger, arguing that all rungs of the ladder were evident throughout the process (Ibid: 8). Elsewhere in the literature, O'Rourke and Baldwin (2016: 103), studying student engagement in shaping an Australian campus from a design perspective, cite Arnstein's ladder as one brief example among many paradigms that show how participation can result in better outcomes. They observe that 'there is little evidence that students' views are regularly sought about what would make a good campus' (Ibid: p. 104) but that the central placing of a students' union facility on campuses will 'empower students through more visible representation' (Ibid: 113). From a Zimbabwean perspective Jingura et al., (2018) use Arnstein's ladder, as well as other tools, to call for student engagement that 'must be characterized by active participation and not tokenism' (Jingura et al., 2018: 131).

### Findings and Discussion

Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation is 'inspirational' (Haughton & McManus, 2021: 228), 'seminal' (Natarajan, 2019a: 5) and 'foundational' (Puskás et al., 2021: 3), as evidenced by more than half a century of analysis across many sectors during a history shaped by multiple crises

outwith COVID-19. Throughout this rich literature, two standout conclusions are proposed, which in turn inform some opportunities and limitations.

#### *Arnstein's Ladder as an Accessible Starting Point*

The first theme is a recurring debate about the ladder's simplicity, with authors commending Arnstein's easily understood framework (**Lauria & Schively Slotterback, 2021**), others suggesting it is inadequate for exploring complex power dynamics and decision-making contexts (**Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015; Collins & Ison, 2009; Tritter & McCallum, 2006**), and some doing both (**Stewart, 2013; Bovill & Bulley, 2011**). As such, various adaptations and improvements are suggested: Romanin (**2013**) (Figure 9) along with Badham and Davies (**2007**) (Figure 13) present tables, with further radical departures from linearity in de Leeuw (**2021**) (Figure 10) and Hurlbert and Gupta (**2015**) (Figure 7). Still others propose circles (**Davidson, 1998** (Figure 6); **Varwell, 2022a** (Figure 17)). Both Davidson (**1998**) and Arnstein (**1969**) in turn inspire double-axis models (**Levenda et al., 2020**). Arguments notwithstanding that we should 'jump off' the ladder entirely (**Laskey & Nicholls, 2021; Collins & Ison, 2009**), these numerous adaptations reinforce the value for student engagement practice of Arnstein's original model as a starting point for staff and students' discussion of who should shape learning and how.

#### *Arnstein's Ladder as a Reflection on Power*

Allied to this simplicity is a second theme of power. Arnstein herself argues that 'there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process' (**Arnstein, 1969: 216**). She suggests that her ladder 'juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful in order to highlight the fundamental divisions between them' (**Ibid: 217**). This underlines the question of the intentions of those who use the ladder to explore engagement, and how using the ladder itself is an exercise of power (**Buckley, 2018; Stewart, 2013; Prieto Martín, 2014**). As we continue to shape learning and teaching after the pandemic, and in an era of stronger citizen voices, reflection by senior leaders and other decision-makers about how they use, share or relinquish that power should deepen.

#### *Limitations and Further Research Opportunities*

The importance of power across multiple disciplines presents an opportunity for learning and teaching. The fields explored in this article all have corresponding areas of study, and those learning or teaching geography, planning, teacher training or healthcare may see benefit in comparing their discipline's literature on Arnstein and broader public participation with student engagement literature. Teaching staff may find

value in benchmarking their disciplines' stakeholder engagement practice against their course-level student engagement practice, in order to transfer approaches to partnership (**Varwell, 2022b**). In turn, students could reflect on how shaping their learning equips them to be more engaging practitioners, thus enhancing citizenship in the curriculum and reinforcing the link between student engagement and wider democratic participation (**Hassan, et al., 2020; Giroux, 2010**).

This points to limitations of this article, which explores only five sectors. There is scope to research Arnstein's application in other public services like social work (**Kuruvilla & Sathyamurthy, 2015; Schön, 2016**). Another focus could be stakeholder engagement in business, comparing Arnstein's influence on models of students as partners with notions of students as consumers in debates about marketisation and neoliberalism in higher education (**Matthews et al., 2019**). Furthermore, remedying the lack of further education literature about Arnstein's ladder could, as argued in Varwell (**2022b**), enrich conversations about tertiary integration in Scotland (**Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education, 2021**).

Finally, the world has changed considerably since much literature on Arnstein was published. While some literature about the ladder in higher education has emerged in the context of the pandemic (**Varwell, 2022a; Woods & Botcherby, 2021**) much emerged long before the upheaval of COVID-19. Therefore, further research could explore what Arnstein can reveal for the pandemic and for the many political, environmental, financial, or public health challenges that might lie ahead for student engagement and wider citizen participation.

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### **Caveat**

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## List of Figures

Figure 1: Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation ( <b>Arnstein, 1969, p. 217</b> ) .....	109
Figure 2: An Illustration of my Coding Approach in my Literature Review .....	112
Figure 3: Burns et al.’s Participation Scale ( <b>Burns et al., 2004: 60</b> ).....	115
Figure 4: Prieto Martín’s Comparison of Three Models ( <b>Prieto Martín, 2010: 47</b> included with author’s permission) .....	116
Figure 5: Prieto Martín’s Participatory Budgeting Schema ( <b>Prieto Martín, 2014: 11</b> , included with author’s permission) .....	117
Figure 6: Davidson’s Wheel of Participation ( <b>Dooris &amp; Heritage, 2013: 78</b> ) .....	117
Figure 7: Hurlbert and Gupta’s Split Ladder of Participation ( <b>Hurlbert &amp; Gupta, 2015: 104</b> ) .....	118
Figure 8: Cullen’s participation ladder ( <b>Cullen, 2005: 8</b> ) .....	120
Figure 9: Romanin’s Model For Tenant Participation ( <b>Romanin, 2013: 44</b> , included with author’s permission) .....	120
Figure 10: de Leeuw’s Consucrat Model ( <b>de Leeuw, 2021: 179</b> ) .....	123
Figure 11: Stewart’s Typologies of Involvement Models ( <b>Stewart, 2016: 10</b> ) .....	124
Figure 12: Hart’s Ladder of Student Involvement ( <b>Fletcher, 2005: 7</b> adapted from <b>Hart, 1992: 8</b> ) .....	125
Figure 13: Badham & Davies’ Participation Matrix ( <b>Badham &amp; Davies, 2007: 90</b> ) .....	126

Figure 14: Bovill and Bulley's Ladder of Student Participation in Curriculum Design ( <b>Bovill &amp; Bulley, 2011: 180</b> ) .....	127
Figure 15: Carey's Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement with Arnstein's Ladder ( <b>Carey, 2018: 14</b> ).....	128
Figure 16: sparqs' Version of Arnstein's Ladder ( <b>sparqs, n.d.-c</b> ; Included under a CC-BY-NC 4.0 License).....	128
Figure 17: An emergency-era circle of student participation ( <b>Varwell, 2022a</b> ).....	129
Figure 18: Rudd et al.'s Ladder of Participation ( <b>Rudd et al., 2006: 11</b> , included with permission).....	130

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