



Introduction: Placing youth at the forefront of active citizenship for social justice

Brennan, M., Dolan, P., & Smith, A. (2022). Introduction: Placing youth at the forefront of active citizenship for social justice. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 17(3), 205-209. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979221130844>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Education, Citizenship and Social Justice

Publication Status:
Published online: 16/10/2022

DOI:
[10.1177/17461979221130844](https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979221130844)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Education, Citizenship and
Social Justice
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/17461979221130844

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Abstract

Historically major social movements seeking change, equality, and social justice have been driven by youth. In more recent decades, youth have been at the forefront of challenging the social, political, and ethical blind spots of their age. Continuing the historical role of youth in facilitating social change, their relevance is particularly important today. Much like past movements, in recent years youth have continued to advance the human condition in existing and new, critical directions. Nonetheless, direct youth engagement in social change is far from encouraged, and has declined, especially in situations that question the prevailing social, political, economic, and other ideologies. Youth are also easily dismissed as being idealistic, ill-informed, and unrealistic in their calls for social justice. In most settings, youth are treated as adults in waiting with little voice or ownership over efforts that impact society. In this special issue, and in direct contrast to the scenario outlined above, we seek to present a series of theoretical, empirical, and policy/practice related articles surrounding youth citizenship and action in the context of advancing social justice. Such engagement places youth at the forefront of both grassroots youth lead change and adult led youth engagement as a mechanism for systemic change.

Keywords

civic engagement, social justice, youth, youth action, youth voice

Introduction to this special issue

Historically major social movements seeking change, equality, and social justice have been driven by youth (Earl et al., 2017; Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Farzanegan and Witthuhn, 2017; Giroux, 2013; Roberts, 2015). In more recent decades (the US and other civil rights, Anti-Apartheid in

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South Africa, Tiananmen Square, the Velvet Revolution, the Arab Spring), youth have been at the forefront of challenging the social, political, and ethical blind spots of their age (Earl et al., 2017; Giroux, 2013; Guzman-Concha, 2015; Roberts, 2015; Zamponi and Fernández González, 2017).

Continuing the historical role of youth in facilitating social change, their relevance is particularly important today. As has been widely documented, the demographic ‘youth bulge’ continues to grow, with more than half of the world’s population being under age 25, and more than a third under age 15 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). Much like past movements, in recent years youth have continued to advance the human condition in existing and new, critical directions.

Now, more than a decade on from the beginning of the Arab Spring (2010–2011), the Manchester riots (2011), global Occupy Movement protests (2011–2012), and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement (2013–present), US March for Our Lives/Never Again MSD gun violence movement (2018), and the climate change activism of Greta Thunberg (2019–present), youth driven change, and action endures.

Considering these movements and sustained change, we reflect on these and other youth driven attempts for positive social and political change. It is true that many examples exist of failed revolutions and movements. There are also certainly examples where youth, along with others, have been groomed and drawn into extremism, intolerance, and violence. The same can be documented for adults as well. While some see this youth population as vulnerable to extremism and exploitation, we see youth as keenly aware of the conditions shaping an ever changing world and transformational in their actions toward social justice. A clear historical trend exists and is supported by previous research: youth have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of profound social change efforts to advance the human condition.

Nonetheless, direct youth engagement in social change is far from encouraged, and has declined, especially in situations that question the prevailing social, political, economic, and other ideologies. Youth are also easily dismissed as being idealistic, ill-informed, and unrealistic in their calls for social justice. In most settings, youth are treated as adults in waiting with little voice or ownership over efforts that impact society. All these conditions lead to youth being relegated to a role as secondary players, deferring to adult driven efforts. Such efforts tend to maintain social systems but fail to infuse major challenges to inequality and injustice. Youth voice, engagement, and active citizenship therefor serve a critical role in social justice that must be expanded.

In this special issue, and in direct contrast to the scenario outlined above, we seek to present a series of theoretical, empirical, and policy/practice related articles surrounding youth citizenship and action in the context of advancing social justice. Such engagement places youth at the forefront of both grassroots youth led change and adult led youth engagement as a mechanism for systemic change. This is particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19, global racial inequality unrest, related crises, and more importantly for youth led rebuilding and change in the aftermath.

Youth voice, action, and citizenship: Contributions from the field

This special issue contains six articles and this brief introduction. All seek to bring light to the process, mechanisms, and conditions that can foster youth voice and active citizenship that ensures social justice. From these implications for program and policy development are provided.

The opening article by *From Regiments to Radicals: The Critical Need to Empower Youth as Radical Agents of Change* by Mark Brennan, Pat Dolan, and Erica Odera focuses on the critical need for, and validity of, youth led action in positive citizenship and efforts to achieve social justice. The authors argue that central need exists for both traditional youth engagement around

systems maintenance (regimented) and youth action in response to systemic injustice (radical). Similarly, the authors detail how these youth roles have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of radical positive social change that advances the human condition. Historically major social movements seeking change, equality, and social justice have been largely driven by youth. The role of youth in facilitating social change is particularly relevant today more than half of the world's population is considered youth (under age 25). While some see this 'youth bulge' demographic as uninformed and vulnerable to extremism and exploitation, the authors reject this deficit model and see them as a population capable of, and already engaging in, transformational social thought and action. This article argues that the broad field of youth engagement would benefit from examining youth contributions to upholding or challenging the social status quo through varying forms of civic engagement. It seeks to guide research and practice in ways to distinguish types of youth engagement to better reflect its potential for positive change. In doing so the authors, distinguish regimented and radical youth involvement from extremism, distinguish the contexts and environments where regimented and radical engagement operate; and provides a conceptual framework to study and apply the key aspects of both, radical and regimented, youth engagement.

The second article *Understanding Paths and Options for Youth Citizenship and Social Justice* presented by Erica Odera, John Davis, Mark Brennan, and Pat Dolan builds on the concepts and models explored in the first article, providing a model for understanding and planning options for positive youth action in 'regimented' and 'radical' settings. Brennan et al. (2022) present an argument for the importance of a new conceptual model to ensure researchers and practitioners consider paths for youth citizenship and social justice which are attenuated to the context, social support, visibility, and structure of the engagement opportunity. This companion article expands upon this initial argument by examining how the use of this conceptual model can be useful for both research and practice. Specifically, their model can help researchers and practitioners to remain aware of contextual factors affecting youth engagement, understand how different forms of youth engagement fit within the model, and consider strategies and research to encourage more radical forms of youth engagement.

The third article, *Youth, Citizenship and Political Literacy* by Matt Milliken and Alan Smith focuses on the intersection of youth, citizenship, and political literacy in the context of Northern Ireland. Twenty years ago, Northern Ireland's previously prominent presence in the headlines of the yellow press dwindled to virtual non-existence. As the region's three-decade long conflict went into abeyance and the daily death tally dropped, the vagaries of the region's little-understood, political tensions were assigned to little-read columns hidden deep inside broadsheets. Brexit has, however, re-exposed the deep scars and political acrimony that still blight Northern Ireland.

In response, Northern Irish schools have seen the introduction of a series of educational initiatives aimed at ameliorating enduring inter-community hostility, including the creation of a model of citizenship education designed to enhance pupils' political understanding and literacy. Drawing on recent survey data on the attitudes and perspectives of 16-year-olds, this article explores how citizenship is being delivered in schools in Northern Ireland and exposes young people's level of engagement with current political issues, including the possibility of a united Ireland. Although results are largely in line with expectations, there are some indications that this generation may not be simply marching in step with the same drumbeat that has been followed by generations of their forebearers.

In the fourth article *Social Support Empathy Social Capital and Civic Engagement: Intersecting Theories for Youth Development*, Pat Dolan focuses on the emerging body of theory, research, and practice literature that places empathy, social support, and social capital as intersectional and the cornerstone of sustained citizenship and youth action in general, but particularly around issues of

social justice. While there is now an acceptance of the importance of young people exercising their voice, participation, and agency as part of their positive and personal development, equally this also requires opportunities and avenues for them to do so. Also argued here is that the ongoing advancement of positive youth development theory to reflect voice and agency needs further elaboration and more in-depth research.

Similarly, the importance for youth of their informal social support networks, human and economic social capital systems and opportunities to be civically engaged is now well established as theoretical underpinnings which contribute to understanding their developmental process. However, the connection between social relationships and mechanisms for attaining support and the underpinning foundational role of reciprocal empathy and compassion in particular needs greater elaboration. In the interest of furthering scholarly debate, policy formation and applied practice in this field, a tentative intersecting model is forwarded with a view to connecting these components to youth development theory, moving from static concepts to an actionable and useable framework for youth development.

Finally, Dana Mitra and Eric McGinnis, in *Youth Voice and Active Citizenship*, explore the ways that youth make sense of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and how context informs the scope and nature of youth-led local civic action. Using an embedded case study approach, their research focuses on the Cultivating Pathways to Sustainability project, which engages scores of youth throughout the state of Vermont. Data for this study was drawn from observations and interviews of students and teachers from 18 participating schools. The study's findings show the value of intermediaries as catalysts for civic action, demonstrate ways of linking global policy with local civic action, and show how a youth-adult partnership model can deepen the meaning and implementation of civic action.

Conclusion

Through this special issue we seek to highlight the critical importance of youth voice and active engaged citizenship to the formation of more stable, civil, and just societies. The articles presented in this special issue provide an insight into the massive potential that youth voice and action can have on social justice. It also provides several scholastic and conceptual models, firmly based in the most recent research and theoretical literature. These models can serve as the basis for informed programs and policy that advance both youth development and social justice initiatives. This special issue also includes several research articles that show the impact and importance of active youth citizenship in practice settings.

Our intention is that as a collective, this special issue offers a fresh insight into our understanding of youth as key actors with strong agency, which we hope is to the benefit of youth themselves, their families, and communities, but not least of all for the betterment of civic society. We also hope that through these papers, we are not just adding to the body of knowledge, but opening a pathway for other interested scholars, youth work agencies, and others to discuss and engage further on the themes, theories, and topics covered.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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