

**Affirmative governmentality and the politics of youth inclusion:  
A critical analysis of youth voice and engagement in dominant political  
discourse in Ontario**

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**Abstract**

*While a robust literature tracks the ways in which racialized youth are excluded from dominant spaces, this article examines the effects of policies and programs that invite them in. The growing interest in youth inclusion and participation can be linked to key global influences such as the increasing shift towards asset-based and Positive Youth Development (PYD) models, that currently influences government policy and funding strategies in Canada and other countries. Using Foucault's governmentality framework, I engage in a brief examination of Ontario's document, *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed* (2013), to understand how youth inclusion, participation, and civic engagement are imagined. This article seeks to disturb current constructs of marginalized youth voice and inclusion within dominant discourse in Canada and argues that these discourses function as a form of affirmative governmentality. I discuss the conditions of meaningful youth inclusion and participation, which requires questioning normative constructs of youth, acknowledging the structural oppressions experienced by young people, and working with youth to understand their own notions of participation.*

**Keywords:** Youth inclusion and participation; affirmative governmentality; youth policies

**La gouvernementalité positive et les politiques d'inclusion des jeunes: Une analyse critique de la voix et l'engagement politique des jeunes dans le discours politique dominant en Ontario.**

**Résumé**

*Bien qu'il existe déjà beaucoup de données sur les manières dont les jeunes racialisés sont exclus des espaces dominants, cet article se penche sur les effets des politiques et programmes qui veulent les inclure. L'intérêt croissant pour la participation et l'inclusion des jeunes est peut-*

*être lié à des influences globales majeures, comme le virement vers des modèles tels le développement fondé sur les acquis et le développement positif des jeunes, qui présentement à beaucoup d'influence sur les politiques et le financement gouvernemental au Canada et ailleurs. Utilisant le concept de gouvernementalité de Foucault, j'examine le document de l'Ontario Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed (2013), afin de comprendre comment l'inclusion, la participation, et l'engagement civique des jeunes, sont imaginés. Cet article veut troubler les constructions courantes de la voix et de l'inclusion des jeunes marginalisés dans les discours dominants au Canada. Je propose que ces discours servent en tant que gouvernementalité positive. Je discute des conditions qui créent une inclusion et une participation véritables des jeunes, ce qui exige questionner les constructions normative de la jeunesse, tout en reconnaissant que les oppressions structurelles auxquelles les jeunes font face, et travailler à comprendre leurs propres notions de participation.*

**Mots clefs:** participation et inclusion des jeunes; gouvernementalité; politiques des jeunes

## Introduction

While a robust literature tracks the ways in which racialized and marginalized youth are excluded from dominant spaces, little attention has been paid to the effects of policies and programs that invite them. This article addresses this issue by examining the discourses on youth voice and civic engagement that have proliferated in recent years in various parts of the world. The saliency of children and youth participation discourse can be attributed to key global influences, such as Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that focuses on a child's right to be heard on issues related to them (UN, 1999), as well as "the sociology of childhood's emphasis on children as agentic beings" (Raby, 2014, p.77). Youth participation discourses, such as Positive Youth Development (PYD), involve a move away from deficit-based youth development models to an asset- and outcome-based model. The increase of youth participation discourse and the often well-intended youth policies and programs that have ensued, have ushered in a growing trend to include youth in varying degrees in public and non-profit institutional and decision-making spaces. The people most targeted for these programs are youth between the ages of 15 and 24, and it is this age group that is the focus of this paper. O'Toole (2003) states that there is only a rudimentary understanding of how young people perceive participation and civic engagement and that an adult-centered understanding dominates these spaces. This often results in disrespectful and tokenistic methods of youth inclusion that alienate and deter adult civic engagement. This article asserts that meaningful youth inclusion and participation requires the questioning of normative constructs of youth, acknowledging the structural oppressions experienced by young people, and working with youth to understand their own notions of participation.

Many of the studies on youth voice and participation focus on the UK, Australia and the US, although a recent few focus on the Canadian context (Kennelly, 2011, Janes, 2014). The critical literature tends to argue that the dominant discourse within institutionalized youth participation spaces is an illusion constructed by the powerful adult actors within these spaces institutionalized forms of youth participation (Bartos, 2012; Bessant, 2003; Sutton, 2007). According to this literature, these spaces function in highly tokenistic terms but are celebrated through neoliberal narratives on youth voice, empowerment, and participation that tend to eclipse deeper examinations of youth social exclusions and inclusions (Bessant, 2003; Kwon, 2013). Words such as, “youth voice” and “decision making” are problematized and other taken-for-granted concepts are deconstructed to unearth their underlying discourses and their role in governing particular conducts (Bragg, 2007; Kennelly, 2011; Raby, 2014; Tait, 1995). This article adds to the emerging critical scholarship on youth voice and participation in Canada by providing a distinctive focus on the participation of racialized youth. While the paper focuses on one particular government document, the analysis presented here is applicable to various public institutional settings that endeavour to include youth and other marginalized communities.

The next section of the paper presents a brief background to help situate the participation discourses within Ontario’s youth strategic framework. The paper then turns to a discussion of the theoretical framework utilized for this research. This is followed by a brief examination of Ontario’s current youth strategic framework, *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario’s Youth Succeed* (2013). Anecdotal evidence of youth experiences of institutional spaces of participation is also shared using my over seven years of experience working in Toronto with racialized youth from marginalized communities.

### **Situating participation discourses within Ontario's youth strategic framework**

In keeping with the principles of the UNCRC, there has been a slow shift in youth development philosophies from a deficit-based approach that focuses on youth needs, to an asset-based one that focuses on building the positive attributes of youth to help them reach adulthood. One framework that espouses this value and encourages youth engagement and is currently prominent in government youth policies and funding strategies in Canada and elsewhere, is the PYD model. According to Sukarieh and Tannock (2011), PYD aims to “identify the core competencies and characteristics that youth need to have to develop into healthy and ‘thriving’ adults in a ‘free’ and ‘productive’ society and economy; as well as the key factors and conditions that need to be created in order for such healthy development to occur” (p. 677). The influence of this model in Canada can be seen in the various recent strategic policy documents that have emerged. In Ontario, alone, there is the Ontario's Ministry of Child and Youth Services (MCYS)'s *Stepping Stones: Resource for Youth Development* (2012), *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed* (2013), the *Youth Action Plan* (2013, 2015), the City of Toronto's *Toronto Youth Equity Strategy* (2014). These documents either directly or indirectly adhere to the principles of an asset-based and positive youth development model, emphasizing core outcomes including youth participation, engagement, and voice as key foci.

The institutionalized spaces of youth participation that have risen in light of these policy influences take the form of meetings, roundtables, special projects, committees, events, taskforces, youth councils and secretariats. These spaces can be differentiated from the organic sites of youth participation in which youth come together in their communities, build strong networks, and mobilize around an issue and seek solutions for it. The latter tend to be found in more grassroots or small size neighbourhood or ethno-specific community settings. They are

often youth-led or youth-driven spaces wherein young people are more encouraged to strengthen their critical consciousness and develop their own voice on issues that concern them. Examples of such spaces are the Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD) and For Youth Initiative (FYI). I have held paid leadership roles in both these groups. Other groups in this category include Success Beyond Limits, Students Commission of Canada, Young Diplomats, and Eritrean Youth Coalition<sup>1</sup>. These groups have a history of cultivating strong relationships with young people in their community to address both personal and systemic issues. In contrast, institutional spaces of participation often do not have sustainable relationships with the young people, have minimal time allocated to provide context and support, and predominantly function within the confines of an adult-driven space.

**Theoretical framework: governmentality, neoliberalism and youth inclusion, voice, and participation**

Foucault's use of the term, government, refers to, "more or less systematized, regulated and reflected modes of power (a "technology") that go beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others, following a specific form of reasoning (a "rationality") which defines the telos of action or the adequate means to achieve it" (Lemke, 2002, p. 53). Foucault illustrates liberalism's art of government as privileging freedom but utilizing particular tactics and strategies in the aims of achieving certain results that align with the dominant logic. He argues that the current regime's rationality, neoliberalism, does not utilize coercion as a means of conformity but rather encourages freedom (Foucault, 2007). Neoliberalism promotes an entrepreneurial and rational individual, *homoeconomicus*, in support of the expansion of capitalist goals (Burchell, 1991; Gane, 2012). I utilize Foucault's concept of problematization as an analytical tool to disturb the naturalized and seemingly progressive discourses of youth

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<sup>1</sup> Kwon's (2013) work critically examines one such group in an American context and argues that these groups' empowerment efforts also tend to reaffirm dominant discourses.

inclusion, voice, and participation. Problematization allows for the examination of both the roots and conditions of a discourse or problem, and goes beyond this to consider different ways of understanding the issue and developing alternatives to it (Gilson, 2014).

Finn, Nybell and Shook (2010) urge social workers to pay greater attention to global neoliberal influences in the construction of children and youth policies, practices, and experiences. They offer five interconnected processes that influence young people and children: marketization, marginalization, medicalization, militarization, and mobilization. The growing focus on youth participation can be attributed to the neoliberal processes surrounding mobilization. However, the policies surrounding neoliberal logics require critical examination, as they do not always coincide with each other and can be contradictory in nature, for example, in the areas of youth criminalization and rehabilitation (Muncie, 2005).

Kwon (2013) identifies youth participation discourses as a form of affirmative governmentality, where control is exercised through positive interventions. In this context, young people, often marginalized racialized youth, participate in institutionalized spaces to legitimize the narratives and policies that seek to obtain their compliance in being governed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) piece, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," provides sharp criticism of the consumptive nature of the concept of decolonization, which enables the settler to move to innocence. They argue that, "those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all" (p.22) are practices that move the settler to innocence. This paper attempts to bring attention to the practices of moving to innocence enacted by institutional players in the area of youth inclusion. The manner in which the rhetoric of youth engagement, voice, and participation are marketed, allows dominant players to quickly move to innocence, but without



making concrete shifts in how young people are recognized and without sharing power to develop mutual spaces of respect and collaboration.

**Regimes of inclusion: Critical analysis of the *Stepping Up* strategic framework**

The document, *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed* (2013), performs an important role in defining discourses of youth policy and practices in Ontario. It employs an asset-based, outcomes-driven model. It identifies twenty outcomes and connected indicators across seven key themes that are deemed significant for young people in Ontario (MCYS, 2013, p.2). The strategy was informed by such key documents as the province's *Ontario's Youth Action Plan* (2012). The latter was launched in direct response to the violence that took place in Toronto in the summer of 2012 and that had set in motion the development of the *Stepping Up* provincial youth strategy. The document, *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development* (MCYS, 2012), was also produced to provide a clearer understanding of youth development and inform the subsequent policy and programming decisions. The *Stepping Up* strategy also leaned heavily on the report, *The Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008), commissioned by the province in response to the violence that incurred in Toronto in 2005 and known as the Summer of the Gun. Many youth non-profit stakeholders had a critical response to the latter report. They felt that while the report's recommendations highlighted issues of structural racism as a key factor underlying youth violence, the recommendations were not made actionable in a systematic manner, and were indeed overlooked until violence took center stage yet again. Due to the confines of this study, an in-depth analysis of these documents could not be undertaken. The present paper focuses solely on the *Stepping Up* youth strategic framework and its proposals on youth inclusion and civic engagement.

### **The focus on being heard rather than decision-making**

Initial observations concerning the *Stepping Up* strategy is that it asserts the importance of listening to young people's views. The word, "heard" appears numerous times in the section, "Listening to young people and adult allies" (MCYS, 2013, p.8). To illustrate its close adherence to an asset-based model and to assert its validity as a strategy that engages with youth participation, this document lists the various ways that it had "heard" from young people – for example, through the *Stepping Stones*' (2012) broad youth engagement process, and consultations with Aboriginal youth and various First Nation centres and organization, youth leaving care, organizations, and families and businesses.

The earlier *Stepping Stones* resource document played a central function in the building up of the validity of the *Stepping Up* strategy document. *Stepping Stones* had invested in a lengthy engagement process that brought together young people from across the province to form a youth development committee, in addition to ongoing youth consultations through surveys and other methods. However, the set of research papers that formed the core content of the *Stepping Stones* document were chosen prior to establishing the youth committee. The youth were invited to review the predetermined research papers and were involved in the subsequent steps that led to the formulation and dissemination of the document itself. However, critical elements, such as the selection of the research that would determine the direction of the youth development resource, appear to have been adult-driven and predetermined. The question remains: how different would the scope and focus of this guiding youth development framework have been if young people had been actively involved from the onset and central to designing the process itself?

The newly established Premier's Council is also said to have played a key role in informing the *Stepping Up* strategic framework. The Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities is described as having provided "a permanent voice for youth and young professionals on matters important to youth across Ontario" (2013, p. 8). The emphasis on the permanent nature of this space is particularly meaningful for youth inclusion. This contrasts the often temporary nature of institutional youth spaces that pop up on an as-needed basis that give little opportunities to build relationships with young people and support their voices. However, the Premier's Council space is dedicated for "youth and young professionals." The inclusion of the category of young professionals, usually those considered to be in white-collar jobs, throws into question the priorities behind this youth related space, especially the degree to which it accepts the dominant neoliberal market logic. The possibilities of deep dialogue on issues of systemic oppression and the need for structural changes within such an institutional space needs to be explored.

### **Narrow conceptualizations of civic engagement**

In *Stepping Up's* section on "Civic Engagement" outcomes, we once again see the resurgence of the word "heard," as in such headings as "support young people to be heard" (p.77). The document highlights its notion of civic engagement: "Giving young people more of a voice in government, policy and decision-making builds their capacity while providing platforms for youth to lead change and take action. Youth participation broadens the discussion and enhances decisions about civic policies and programs" (MCYS, 2013, p.76). This progressive statement uses key terminologies surrounding meaningful youth engagement, and yet, it encapsulates only a limited understanding of civic engagement. The document provides a snapshot of how youth are already engaged – for example, by providing statistics on youth volunteer and charitable donations. It also describes how youth are expanding into digital and

new forms of civic participation, and veering away from traditional means, “such as belonging to a political party, voting in an election or attending a town hall meeting” (MCYS, 2013, p.77). We are told that “Young Ontarians may feel the greatest engagement when they are directly involved in community events and have opportunities to connect with others” (MCYS, 2013, p.77). Youth civic engagement and politics within the realm of digital technology is often celebrated and promoted as innovative and possessing great potential, but the ability of youth to influence decision-making through these mechanisms is not questioned. Moreover, the section detailing the decreasing levels of youth participation in traditional methods of civic engagement does not seem to acknowledge that there remains a privileging of the formal capital “P” of politics that is usually relegated to adults who are voting citizens (Skelton, 2010; O’Toole, 2003). Meanwhile, volunteering, community participation, mentoring, consultation and online participation remain relegated to the smaller “p” politics that is attributed to youth and children (Bessant, 2003; Skelton, 2010). The language of participation, engagement, and being heard, do not correlate with the language of adult-centered decision-making and political power.

In addition, the *Stepping Up* document maintains that civic engagement and participation is strongly correlated to improving a young person’s personal core competencies. As it outlines, “Civically engaged young people enjoy higher self-esteem and grades, and tend to be more physically active and committed to their friends, families and communities” (p.76). However, as Van De Walle, Coussée and Bouverne-De Bie (2011) argue, the association between engagement and positive outcomes relates more closely to those who are already included in various social spheres, and is not as applicable to those who are already marginalized. Therefore, while this part of the document acknowledges that some youth face barriers to participation, it falsely correlates civic engagement and young people developing various assets. It also promotes a self-

disciplining narrative around youth engagement in which youth who are engaged, as opposed to those who are not, are understood as having positive and higher level of assets and therefore are potentially productive subjects.

While the *Stepping Up* document constructs youth participation and civic engagement around the notion that youth voices are being heard, it does not engage with deep forms of youth participation. Disruptive forms of youth participation, such as protests or civil disobedience, are not included in these constructions of civic engagement. It would appear that movements like Black Lives Matters' Toronto Chapter, with its strong youth leadership, would not fit within the document's notion of youth civic engagement. Furthermore, this document implicitly assumes that there is a relationship between being heard and influencing or making decisions. This is a false assumption. While official discourse may obligate institutional stakeholders to give a space for the youth to share their viewpoints and be heeded, there is no real expectation or accountability in ensuring this actually happens. As scholars such as Judith Bessant (2003) argue, policy documents promote youth voice in decision-making but the manner in which their voices influence change goes unquestioned.

### **Diluted notions of social inclusion**

In *Stepping Up*'s section on, "Diversity, Social Inclusion and Safety," the introductory page states, "Social inclusion and safety are central to creating a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure our future prosperity and growth" (MCYS, 2013, p. 66). Associating social inclusion and safety outcomes to strengthening social cohesion, and more importantly, to the province's economic prosperity, highlights the underlying market driven incentives behind promoting the discourse of social inclusion. Furthermore, the language of social cohesion has increasingly grown as an all-encompassing, often passive term, in official discourses to describe

the goals of social policy, and represents a move away from the more direct and critical language of anti-racism and anti-oppression (Thomas, 2007). This subtle shift from looking at issues of racism and marginalization to the focus on social cohesion, diversity and inclusions has been a concern for scholars. Some researchers have brought attention to the apparent erasure of the discourses of racism and other oppressions from the public sphere (Ahmed, 2012; Thomas, 2007; Ward & Rivera, 2015). As the *Stepping Up* document further states, “Systematic oppression and racism can impact a young person's self-identity and life choices. We can promote diversity and equity by providing opportunities for Ontario's young people to develop an appreciation of and respect for the differences of others” (MCYS, 2013, p.67). Use of the words “can impact” is but a feeble acknowledgment of the painful realities experienced by marginalized young people as a result of racial and structural oppressions. The document proposes addressing the “systematic oppression” by improving youth’s individual capacity to understand difference. Efforts to address systemic oppression are effectively diminished to the level of individual cultural competency development, by evoking the diluted and safe language of diversity and equity.

We see similar conceptualizations of systemic racism in relation to the theme of safety. The document states that some aboriginal, racialized and minority youth, “face challenges and barriers that may increase their risk of coming into conflict with the law. Supporting young people to avoid involvement with the justice system, make positive contributions to their communities, and get back on track if they face setbacks involves...” (MCYS, 2013, p.72). The document puts the emphasis on improving the assets of marginalized youth, while the “challenges and barriers” that put them at an increased risk in the first place, such as systemic racism within the justice and policing systems, are pushed to the background. The report clearly favours and promotes individualized solutions that fit within the PYD framework and the logic

of neoliberal governance. The references to systemic racism and oppressions within the document may be a reflection of the participation of some of the marginalized youth from the various consultation processes and the troubling events that surrounded the development of this strategic framework. However, the manner in which racism is managed and the kinds of solutions proposed are counter-productive to creating effective change for marginalized youth and their communities.

### **Youth experience of participation and self-surveillance: A personal story**

To understand the experiences of young people within these institutionalized youth spaces more closely, I share an encounter I had with a highly engaged fourteen-year-old black male while working at a community youth organization. The young man was invited to participate in an institutional youth participation space on improving the relations between marginalized youth and policing. Being new to the organization, I had asked the young man if he needed support in sharing his insights on this sensitive topic. He smiled and said that he knows what to say, he knows what *they* [representatives in institutionalized spaces] want to hear, and he also knows what not to say. His response troubled me and this experience has remained with me over the years. What I learned from him was that he had already had ample experience within institutionalized youth engagement sites to know what were acceptable forms of conduct, and more importantly, what discourses did not belong in this space. Through ongoing dialogue with this young man, it became evident that his negative experiences with local police in his neighbourhood had triggered a form of self-surveillance. He shared with me his disdain at being searched on his way home after soccer practice and the fear he experienced at having a gun pulled in his face for not showing his backpack when asked by the police. He stated that he knew what it meant to be a good youth in these youth participation spaces. This young man performed

that role with ease and in ways that meant he would not be stereotyped as the young, violent, black male.

The decision of who is included and excluded within these institutional spaces of participation remains with the non-profit organizations and its adult decision-makers. Non-profit organizations are usually called upon as the intermediary that acts almost as a gatekeeper wherein youth pass from community space to institutionalized space. Youth-related non-profit organizations are eager to support young people in their growth in civic engagement. However, as a result of the competitive nature of the non-profit sector, organizations are also seeking to promote their own brand through the presence of young people in these institutional spaces. Therefore, young people function in some ways as organizational brand ambassadors within these spaces. Although, if young people who have been deemed to be “safe” youth for representing an organization fail to comply with the parameters of safe conduct, they can be deemed “unsafe” and excluded from the sites of participation. Thus, young people engage in varying degrees of self-surveillance to negotiate their presence within these circuits of inclusion.

Foucault’s (1979) panopticon speaks of the constant gaze that subjects the inmates to good behavior. This can be understood as an economical form of power, for once the structures are in place, it allows for the subjects to self-discipline due to fear of being watched (Gane, 2012). The young man in this example had to be cautious about what he could say as a young black male within a predominantly white institutionalized space of youth participation. Although, there was no presence of the law within these spaces he did not trust the space and declined from sharing his fervent opinions on issues of youth and policing with the general audience. Over the months, the young man felt he could share some of his more personal perspectives, despite the ongoing fear of being watched. However, he remained steadfast in his



opinion that nothing would change within the system and that these are just ongoing dialogues that have to be circulated to create an impression of youth being heard.

The young man's cynicism is not unwarranted, and this opinion is shared by many young people in these supposed inclusion sites. Based on my experience working in non-profit and institutional youth engagement spaces, the decision to include youth is often done in an ad hoc manner. It often occurs almost in hindsight after the wheels of a particular project have already been set in motion by adult-driven objectives. There does exist an inherent hesitancy to invite young people at early stages of a project due to dominant narratives of young people's reduced capacity to handle complex ideas or issues. Skelton (2010) argues that the narrative of young people being immature is taken for granted and results in their political actions being relegated to politics with a small "p." Within the recent promotion of the youth voice, based on asset and PYD-type models, the cognitive psychology work of pioneering thinkers like Jean Piaget is still relevant. His research claimed that children and youth have only primitive cognition, while adults practiced higher order thinking (Bessant, 2003). Dean argues, "such forms of knowledge define the objects of such practise (the criminal, the unemployed, the mentally ill, etc.), codify appropriate ways of dealing with them, set the aims and objectives of practice, and define the professional and institutional locus of authoritative agents of expertise (1999, p. 22). Similarly, young people are also codified and defined by professional and scientific practices on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately, many of these truth-claims go unquestioned and help build a regime of practice that places young people as unequal to adults. Meaningful inclusion cannot occur within the existing regimes of knowledge on youth subjects, for the naturalized truth-claims of youth as citizens-in-waiting causes unequal distribution of power and patronizes youth voice (Savelsberg and Martin-Giles, 2008; Kennelly, 2011; Skelton, 2010).

### Conclusion

This paper problematizes a particular youth strategy's construction of youth inclusion and engagement and understands it as a technique of affirmative governmentality. Despite its seemingly progressive rhetoric and positive tone, the analysis here suggests that the *Stepping Up* strategic youth framework concentrates more on the promotion of youth responsabilization and self-discipline. Approaching youth as either deficits or assets in varied youth development models focuses the conversation on how youth can be changed, instead of changing the systemic oppressions that act as barriers to their well-being (Ginwright and James, 2002). While some scholars have promoted a critical structural lens in the practicing of asset-based and PYD frameworks (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002; Nichols, 2015), the existing understanding in policy and practice is from the perspective of enhancing the individual young person. Such formulations run the risk of harnessing youth assets in accordance with the logic of the capitalist economy, and, subsequently, move attention and resources away from the necessary structural transformations required to address deep-seated inequalities in society that are barriers to equal participation (Kwon, 2013; Savelsberg and Martin-Giles, 2008; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2011).

Youth participation, as constructed within current youth development models, is not associated with increased power for youth. It is constructed to focus on the proliferation of positive assets and to yield productive subjects. When embedded in official discourses, participation upholds and corresponds to the affirmative neo-liberal dogma of promoting the self-sufficient individual (Ginwright and James, 2002; Mackie and Tett, 2013; Kwon, 2013; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2011). The example of the young man that was shared earlier was a six-month project that I had helped shape in partnership with an institutional partner. We had heralded the project as being different and had repeatedly assured the youth that they would be able to create

real change by bringing their recommendations to decision-makers and engaging in ongoing dialogue with them. However, the final report, with its raw and controversial recommendations on youth and policing relations, got lost within the partner's institutional walls. As my own work and the partner's priorities shifted, the twenty marginalized young people who participated were simply forgotten. Their hard work and the emotional trauma they experienced in the course of the project in sharing their painful memories did not result in empowering them, but only reaffirmed their sense that no real change can occur. Tokenistic participation is, indeed, harmful.

Further in-depth analysis of existing institutional notions of youth participation and inclusion is urgently needed. The criteria of inclusion and the role of diverse players and processes that construct the dialogues within the youth spaces of participation are key aspects that need to be questioned. In addition, the comparison of grassroots organic youth participation sites and institutional youth spaces can highlight some valuable insights into inclusive youth participation practices. There is an ongoing need to question the current rigid categorizations of youth, based on age or core competencies, and envision alternative ways to partner with young people to address the challenges they face. This opens up an array of important questions for future exploration and initiates the re-conceptualization of the category of youth itself. Future research needs to engage in critical ethnographic examination of young people's own experiences and understandings of inclusion and participation. Adult allies also need to critically reflect on their own practices in supporting youth voice and better understand the potential harm that tokenistic participation can cause.

Including young people within spaces that continue to uphold existing regimes of inequality is not meaningful inclusion. Marginalized and racialized young people are often utilized in the promulgation and legitimization of solutions that are narrowly focused and often

contradictory to improving the lived realities of their communities. It is essential that further research be conducted on how issues of systemic oppression and racism are managed within these institutional youth spaces. Socially just forms of youth inclusion and its resulting spaces, require the open acknowledgement that systemic oppressions are upheld by dominant institutions themselves. In addition, dialogue with young people must be approached from the perspective of broad structural and institutional change, alongside the development of individual youth assets. Young people along with youth advocates need to create, redefine, and recapture powerful spaces where marginalized young people can strengthen their voice in order to transform the conditions of their society. Problematizing existing regimes of truth about youth, imagining spaces of youth participation from young people's perspective, and initiating dialogues that include a focus on the systemic oppressions that youth experience, are foundational steps to meaningful youth inclusion.

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