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## Youth activism and education across contexts: towards a framework of critical engagements

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**Youth activism and education across contexts:  
towards a framework of critical engagements**

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## Abstract

In this paper, we discuss core ideas arising from research undertaken in a Leverhulme Trust (IN2016-002) funded international network project. The project examined youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces within and across six countries (Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Lebanon and Singapore). Arising from interactions with activists and educators and by reviewing literature, we argue that four areas are important for assisting a critical analysis of the fundamental complexities that researchers, teachers, youth workers and youth themselves, are grappling with within and through their activism. These areas that address ways of characterizing and developing the relationship between education and activism focus on: engagement with context; engagement with meaning; engagement with diversity; and engagement in reflexivity. We do not present these areas as a simplistic typology; each involves complexities that cannot be easily or readily resolved.

## Key words

Youth, education, activism, critical engagement, comparative.

**Introduction**

We draw on our work on a Leverhulme Trust (IN2016-002) funded international network project that examined youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces within and across six countries (Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Lebanon, Singapore). Our aim here, which was a key motivation for - and result of - the network project, is to present a framework of *areas of critical engagement* central to meaningful conceptualisations and analyses of youth activism and education: engagement with context; engagement with meaning and identity; engagement with groups; and, engagement with reflexivity.

These areas of critical engagement are useful for examining youth activism *within* particular contexts, and provide a frame for examining essential similarities and differences in meanings of, approaches to and experiences of education for youth activism *across* contexts. As such, and as we hope to share through this analysis, they proved useful for the sort of comparative project on which we have been working. While the four areas of critical engagement emerged through our international network activities across the six countries, in setting them out here we are treading a fine line between our desire to seek a basis for commonality between countries and our commitment to appreciating important contextual differences. The real learning from the project has been achieved through identifying the similarities in the concepts that are used across sites, together with variations in their application and contextual meanings. These variations are revealed in and through the expressions of youth engagement in each country and also in the ways learning experiences are designed in their formal and informal settings.

Our data consist of reviews of existing literature bases driven by the question of what existing research in each country tells us about ways of framing and conceiving youth activism and education. We make references to issues and practices within each of the six countries to justify and illustrate the capacities identified. We do not attempt to give full detailed accounts of the six countries and their contexts. That

sort of geographically framed approach has been undertaken in other publications arising from our project (e.g., Davies et al 2019).

The paper comprises three main sections. In the first, we outline the focus of the project and our working definitions of foundational concepts. We say something necessarily brief about the contexts of the six countries involved in the project. In the second, we offer a critique of some existing typologies that are widely cited in existing literature on civic education and youth political participation. We argue that none of these existing typologies permitted the sort of cross-cultural comparison and examination we intended. In the third section, we outline a tentative framework of areas of critical engagement. We argue that through our engagement with existing literature, our networking events and our project discussions, four areas provided fertile grounds for focusing our analyses. The framework we offer, contra the typologies critiqued in section two, does not seek to idealise or characterise forms of citizenship/political engagement and/or education. Rather, the framework focuses on key critical engagements – each open to complex and dynamic contextual understandings and enactments – that act as lenses for opening up the core issues and questions at hand, whether for young people or their educators.

### **Our focus, foundational concepts and contexts**

#### *Our focus*

The aim of the project was to explore the meanings of youth activism and engagement and how education may and does promote forms of civic activism and engagement congruent with democratic pluralism in a range of different socio-political contexts. The project sought to identify whether and how youth civic activism is changing, why and with what implications for education. The project's research questions were as follows:

- How do young people, their educators and policy makers understand and construct their civic activism, including different forms, spaces, expectations, aims, and learning and teaching processes?
- What are the mobilizing factors and inhibitors of such engagement?

- What are the educational benefits and drawbacks of young people’s civic activism principally regarding identity, capacity and efficacy for individual and social benefit from the local to the global?
- What educational processes are apt for optimising the educational benefits of young people’s civic activism?

These aims and questions provided the background for the literature reviews undertaken in each of the six countries upon which the analysis offered here is based. In particular, and informed by the working definitions set out below, we were interested in what existing literature and practices could tell us in respect of these overarching research questions. We focus on the areas of critical engagement that are central to meaningful conceptualisations and analyses of youth activism and education. As a team of researchers working in varied contexts, we were constantly seeking to work with and within clear, meaningful and shared conceptualisations and boundaries while allowing important contextual differences to manifest and be recognised. In bringing together and focusing upon these six countries in the conceiving of the project, we wish to allow for a variety of experience and contexts in which notable differing historical and political approaches – both societal and educational – were manifest and were understood to impact upon youth activism and engagement.

*Working definition of foundational concepts*

Recognising that the concepts of ‘youth’, ‘activism’, ‘engagement’ and ‘education’ are contested and open to a range of interpretations, the project commenced with certain working assumptions. Our intention was to seek some level of consistency of shared meanings on behalf of the project team and those with whom we engaged during the project while allowing different interpretations to surface and be explored. We sought to avoid simplistic assertions that ‘activism’, for example, must *necessarily* be more political and controversial than ‘participation’. Broadly, we conceived youth activism as referring ‘to behaviour performed by adolescents and young adults with a political intent’ (Hart and Linkin Gullan, 2010: p.67), thus making connections with issues of power and justice (Horowitz, 2017). Important to our understanding of youth activism is how youth are (or indeed are not)

“engaged” agents and actors in their communities, involved that is in shaping their own responses and actions towards social and political change. While activism is commonly construed as *challenging* the status quo within a progressive framework, we were mindful that activism can just as well be used to attack the weak or take on more illiberal forms. We were interested in how education about, for and through youth activism was being framed, enacted and experienced in relation to the public area, our working definition of which was taken from Marquand:

...a dimension of social life, with its own norms and decision rules... a set of activities, which can be (and historically has been) carried out by private individuals, private charities and even private firms as well as public agencies. It is symbiotically linked to the notion of public interest, in principle distinct from private interests; central to it are the values of citizenship, equity and service...It is ... a space for forms of human flourishing which cannot be bought in the market place or found in the tight-knit community of the clan or family. (Marquand, 2004: 27)

In relation to ‘education’, we are interested in formal government policies and formal programmes in settings where youth learn about, through and for activism and we recognised that a strong feature of existing literature bases across the six countries was the importance and prevalence of youth activism activities within non-formal and informal education.

Regarding ‘youth’, we employed the definition given by UNESCO (2016):

“Youth” is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community. Youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age-group.

We also recognised the need to be aware of other approaches to characterizing ‘youth’ including, for example, experiencing compulsory education and the period prior to getting a full time job. We were alert to regionally based definitions (e.g., the African Youth Charter



uses 15-35 years (African Union Commission 2006); in some cultures the period before marriage may be seen as ‘youth’ or ‘wait time’).

*Contexts*

None of the countries from which members of the project team are drawn is representative of a type. Australia, Canada and England share an imperial and, more recent, Commonwealth connection. Colonisations impact on indigenous youth including how their activism is framed, enacted and interpreted. In Australia around 500,000 identify as Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islanders and in Canada 1.6million identify as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit. Hungary is post-socialist, and, following elections in 2010, 2014 and 2018, governed by a national conservative, populist government with 94% identifying as Hungarian and 3% as Roma. Since 2012, Lebanon has experienced the influx of approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees and youth under the age of 18 make up over 40% of the population. Singapore gained independence in 1965, is a multiracial society (Chinese (75%), Malay (14%) and Indian (10%)). All countries in our sample are parliamentary democracies but with different degrees of liberality.

Engagement in and for education for youth activism as an intended policy goal is weighted differently within each of the countries. There are perhaps more similarities across Australia, Canada and England than across the other countries (Hungary, Lebanon and Singapore). The importance of young Australians’ active participation forms a key goal of Australian schooling (MCEETYA, 2008). The current Australian Curriculum is predicated explicitly on helping ‘all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens’ (ACARA, 2018; see also Peterson and Tudball, 2017). In Canada there has been increasing attention to inquiry-oriented, interactive, inclusive teaching and learning strategies focusing on everyday civic issues and questions of social justice (Bickmore, 2014) to assist students to become better informed about current civic themes and issues and to build their capacities for inquiry and engagement. Research studies have identified a variety of issues and challenges, signaling uneven and fragmented learning experiences and limited implementation (Evans, Evans, & Vemic, 2019). In England between 1997 and 2010 Labour governments were committed to communitarianism, making significant investments in public services and introducing a form of citizenship education into the National Curriculum which emphasized young people’s participation in society. There is

now in 2020, a rather complex set of semi-autonomous schools, the National Curriculum need not be followed by a majority of schools, and the official version of citizenship education emphasizes knowledge (civics) and personal engagement (e.g., money management). Although not part of the National Curriculum, character education (largely focusing on individual morally based engagement within existing norms) is supported by the government.

After the 1989 transition from socialism to a democratic political system and a market economy, Hungarian education changed significantly. A major goal of the 1993 Educational Act was to depoliticize the curricula. Citizenship was a separate secondary school subject before the changes but this had been abandoned by 1993. Civic studies became cross-curricula and focused on knowledge transmission distributed among school subjects, primarily history. The National Core Curricula of 1995, 2003, 2007 and 2012 emphasized to some extent the notion of an active citizen. In the latest NCC (2012, introduced in 2013) (NAT\_2012\_EN\_final\_2014march14.pdf) education for citizenship and democracy is among the primary educational goals of school. Students should become creative, autonomous, critical citizens who are able to think analytically and to endorse a debate culture. In spite of this, the present practice of the Hungarian school fails to promote active citizenship. A compulsory 50 hours community service for secondary school students which was introduced as a requirement of civic studies and a necessary condition of graduation from secondary school in 2012, however, won the general agreement of the Hungarian public and also teachers and parents.

Formal education for citizenship in Lebanon tends to be delivered didactically and has low status in the curriculum, with an emphasis on knowledge of political institutions and the inculcation of patriotism. There is little opportunity for learner-directed civic engagement. Two thirds of schools in Lebanon are private and of varying quality. Government schools are of poor quality and lacking in resources. Palestinian children are typically educated by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) through the Lebanese school curriculum, in a context where there is no route to legal citizenship, or expectation of achieving integration or equal rights. It has been estimated that at least 300,000 Syrian children in Lebanon are out of school (Watkins, 2013). Non-formal civic learning and participation in the form of international and Western initiatives has been framed in terms of democracy promotion, with funding for youth engagement prioritized to local NGOs.

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UNRWA has been the main education provider for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, operating 69 schools in 12 camps across the country (UNRWA 2013). Fincham (2013) has examined constructions of citizenship for Palestinian youth living in the UNRWA refugee camps in Southern Lebanon, highlighting how Palestinians are typically educated through the Lebanese curriculum. The mosque, the local community and social media are non-formal sites for citizenship learning and activism. Youth encounter the contradictions between formal education for citizenship with an emphasis on peace-building and promoting unity and informal learning within divided communities.

In Singapore, the education system was centralized under government control soon after independence in 1965. Schooling became the main source of formal citizenship education, where co-ordinated and sustained effort is made to transmit the salient knowledge and values and develop attitudes to help students become believers in the particular truths deemed necessary for the survival of Singapore. The government has been single-minded in the pursuit of citizenship education. Young Singaporeans, growing up amidst relative cosmopolitan affluence are well-educated, widely travelled, and technologically savvy. But the culture in Singapore still largely encourages acceptance of authoritarianism. While past citizenship education curricula were programmatic or subject-based, the latest two initiatives, National Education (NE) and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), took on a total curriculum approach. National Education (NE) sought to educate a generation of youths to be cognizant of ‘the Singapore Story’, a state-endorsed version of Singapore’s history. Integral to NE was youth participation through the Community Involvement Programme (CIP). Launched in 1997, the CIP involved a mandatory programme for all students from primary school to pre-university, making it compulsory for students to fulfill a minimum of six hours of community service as part of their graduation requirements. In 2014, Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) was introduced. It is comparatively more student-centric and values-driven, focusing on developing students holistically in five core values - Respect, Responsibility, Resilience, Integrity, Care and Harmony (Ministry of Education, 2014). The practical aspect of CCE is applied through Values in Action (VIA), a reframing of the former Community Involvement Programme (CIP) to give greater focus on acquiring values through volunteering.

This brief overview of formal curricular policy approaches in the six countries, obviously does not provide complete coverage, nor do we suggest that official content and curriculum

are commensurate with how youth activism is interpreted, enacted and experienced by educators and young people. Rather, our intention has been to give a sense of the commonalities and differences – through the case of official curricular content – within each country. In each of the six countries the existence of, need for, and educational concerns about youth activism and engagement have received sustained policy attention in recent years, though this has not always necessarily transferred into clear and consistent educational provision. This said, and noting similarities between Australia, Canada and England in approaches as somewhat comparable western liberal democracies, it is the case that official approaches in Hungary, Lebanon and Singapore had their own distinctive trajectories shaped by political and cultural imperatives (which we touch upon later in this paper). Through a closer analysis of the literature we offer below a framework of relational capacities as a way of understanding youth activism and how this activism has and is changing. Before doing so, in order to locate our contribution more clearly, we say something about existing typologies of engagement and citizenship education.

### **Existing typologies of engagement and citizenship education**

We have developed a framework for thinking through youth activism and education within and across countries. Our contention is that the framework (i) provides a valuable tool for examining both the nature and potential educational outcomes of education about, for and through youth activism and (ii) helps to explore the ways in which such activism and education is changing. Our purpose in this section is to examine existing typologies of education for activism and democratic citizenship in order to underpin the need for, and value of, the framework we offer in the third section.

Almond and Verba (1963) were one of the first to focus on participation as a key element of democratic citizenship. They distinguish between the parochial (low levels of political knowledge, no participation), the subject (some political knowledge, but no participation) and the participant (high levels of knowledge and strong will to participate). More recently, Ekman and Amnå (2012) have argued that contexts characterized by reflexive modernity have led to a wide, and potentially new, variety of styles of engagement. There are many characterizations: ‘political consumerism’ (Micheletti, 2003), ‘mundane citizenship’ (Bakardjieva, 2012), ‘self-actualizing citizen’ (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011), ‘critical

citizen' (Norris, 2002), 'everyday-maker' (Bang and Sorensen, 1999), 'engaged citizen' (Dalton, 2008), the 'networking citizen' (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2014).

We cannot hope to cover all typologies in detail (Cohen, 2019 alone presents 12 typologies). However, four typologies appear to have been particularly influential (not least in terms of citations) in academic theorisations of youth democratic citizenship and education. First, McLaughlin (1992) categorises citizenship on a minimal-maximal continuum. The location of differing conceptions of citizenship within the continuum are based on the nature of its appeal to the values of *identity*, *virtues*, *political involvement* and *social prerequisites*. Second, Andreotti (2006) explores 'soft' and 'critical' approaches which are particularly relevant to postcolonial, global and cosmopolitan perspectives on the choice between charitable, individually framed conservative approaches and the collective and structurally positioned inclusive and democratic stances. Third, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have argued for the three categories of the personally responsible; participatory; and, justice-oriented citizen. Fourth, Oxley and Morris (2013) present their ideas about global citizenship in two broad areas: cosmopolitan based (political, moral, economic and cultural) and advocacy based (social, critical, environmental and spiritual).

Each of the above typologies provides a useful analytical tool for conceiving and analysing forms of democratic participation and education. However, in our current project none provided the necessary conceptual resource for making sense of youth activism and education within and across the six countries. As we evidence in the next section, each typology seemed to be overly abstract from the actual practices and experiences portrayed in existing literature within each country, with oftentimes a blend of the various "types" in play. In other words, in terms of how literature reports actual existing practices, educators are often working with multiple types at the same time, mediating and adapting these as appropriate to their own contexts. Crucially, in exploring the possibility of identifying commonalities between the six countries while appreciating fundamental differences, we were mindful of Cohen's (2019:2) reflection that 'ideal types should not be seen as an external goal, but rather as an internal heuristic tool for practitioners, offering them a starting point for a process of self-reflection'. We were looking for a way of drawing out core principles that could be identified as common to all six countries but in a way which avoided the classification of practices, goals and outcomes according to general, idealised types.

## **Towards a framework of critical engagement**

We explicate four areas of critical engagement: engagement with context; engagement with meaning and identity; engagement with groups; and, engagement with reflexivity. Driven by our continued interrogation of the project's aims and research questions, and informed by the shared but flexible conceptualisation of key terms, these four areas derived from the individual country literature reviews, our discussions with activists and educators during project events, and our conversations as a programme team. Through these various activities and discussions it became clear that these areas of critical engagement provided us with a way of thinking through the rather challenging perspectives about education and activism. Policy makers and many others in all our six countries, and elsewhere, assert the need for young people to be involved in society. But what sort of engagement is needed/sought by young people and their educators? What became clear was the centrality of certain areas of critical engagement which structured, informed and were developed (whether to a greater or lesser extent) within and through forms of civic activism that could potentially be educational. In referring to 'areas' we do not have in mind geographical areas or areas of political life. Rather, we use the term 'area' to refer to particular areas of activity that combine the cognitive, affective, volitional and active.

We conceive of education here in a wide sense, to involve the formal, non-formal and informal. The areas of critical engagement we delineate cut across these types of education. Our argument is not that these capacities should be idealised. Nor is it that in any given situation youth exhibit and express them in totality; nor are they absent in totality. As Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan (2010) argue, it is necessary to understand civic engagement as being conceptualized in multifaceted ways, that there is developmental discontinuity rather than smooth and consistent patterns of activity across the life span and that there are multiple developmental influences including cognition, the emotions and the impact of social contexts. It is these areas of critical engagement which are consistently referenced, implicitly or explicitly, in existing literature and practice, and which help us to get towards a deeper analysis of the current, dynamic nature of youth activism and education. These areas capture and characterise the (changing) nature of youth activism and provide a useful prism for examining key educational processes and questions.

### *Engagement with context*



A repeated concern in existing literature and in our conversations within and across the six countries is that youth activism, and educational efforts towards youth activism, are both sensitive to and guided by context. If engagement with context is to occur in ways that have educational potential then it is necessary to grasp the essential nature of the relationships (1) between citizens and the state and (2) between citizens as social and political actors. Clearly, and not overlooking the theoretical basis of each of them, these relationships are constituted (both historically and today) by and within particular forms of political, cultural and religious practices that variously operate in inclusive and/or exclusive ways, delimiting the boundaries of youth activism.

A crucial determinant in the relationship between education and engagement relevant to engaging with context is knowledge, and we would argue that it is only with certain types of knowledge that meaningful and situated educational practice can materialise. Three types of knowledge have often been promoted that *reduce* educational potential in this area. First, many countries have emphasized simple political or moral messages. Scholars have painted a vivid picture of how the cultural, political and economic context has shaped particular understandings of, and resultant approaches to educating, the active citizen in Singapore (e.g., Sim, 2015). 'From the 1990s onward, youth activism tended toward government-sanctioned activities, retaining a depoliticized texture; in this sense, civic participation encouraged by the state focused heavily on servicing the prevailing structures in the community while simultaneously diminishing the importance for political dissent and democratic opposition among the citizenry' (Sim and Chow, 2018:8). Some have argued that education has played a role in Singapore in shaping a dominant narrative of participation that acts as:

a disciplinary strategy whose aim is to 'nurture' responsible citizens via regimented participation in socially charitable and morally upright behaviour. But engagement itself needs to be understood as a regulatory mechanism deployed by the state to control political participation. In other words, the new political rationality of consensus that has supplanted a purely economic pragmatism has necessitated the regulation of the range of legitimate activities that make up participatory politics. (Weninger and Kho, 2014: 621).

The example of Singapore indicates the intentional and direct development of a political message. It is possible that these political messages are hidden rather than overt. In Lebanon, Khalaf's (2014) work has suggested that increases in youth activism aimed at reforming the political structures following the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005 have since dissipated owing to the corruption and intransigence of formal politics.

The second type of educational approach that fails to make the most of the engagement with context is a focus on remembering information about constitutions and institutions. This approach is in some countries known as civics (although that title is used in other ways in certain locations, such as in Ontario). Critiques of this approach have been published on many occasions. Crick (2000) argued that learning about political structures was not only boring and demotivating for young learners but it was also misleading. Political life does not always follow the 'rules'. There is something curiously lifeless about this approach to political education. The adherence to Politics courses was at one time seen as essential for those who would gain employment in senior positions in public life and of course this sort of knowledge may be meaningful and valuable. But, mostly, it has failed to provide a way forward in the development of a relationship between education and engagement. It is ironic given the critiques developed within the UK of this approach that the current national curriculum in citizenship education in England relies on it so heavily. The third approach to knowledge that reduces the potential of youth engaging with context work is the commitment to issue based approaches. This has, at points, (e.g., England in the 1970s) formed a key part of educational programmes (Crick, 2000). However, instead of energising learners, such issue-based approaches typically led to a sense of disempowerment given that they concentrated on a seemingly never ending stream of major crises (about the environment, the economy, democracy and so on) which were often presented to young people who could do little to effect positive change.

But meaningful democratic participation does rest on the possession of knowledge, and a key feature of this knowledge is to understand (so far as that may be possible) the social, cultural, economic and political context within which activism occurs. Contextual understanding moves beyond factual knowledge, simplistic political messages and issue based crises and requires an appreciation and appraisal of key salient features of a given situation, on the basis of which young people decide whether to act (or indeed decide not to act), in which ways to act, and why. In addition to knowledge of political processes, central elements of contextual



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understanding include an awareness of key historical and socio-political factors, the presence of ongoing and new social injustices (including the varied means of redressing these), understanding one’s own contexts and appreciating the contexts of others. This requires a conceptual approach. There have been a few elaborations of this approach. The Programme for Political Literacy (Crick and Porter 1978) included strong emphasis on a conceptual framework. The national curriculum for citizenship in England that was in place between 2008 and 2013 rested on 3 pairs of substantive concepts (democracy and justice; rights and responsibilities; identities and diversity).

A core starting point for much literature on youth civic activism is the need to adopt a situational approach. This call often comes within a policy context that increasingly denies the importance of context and fails to take account of young peoples’ aspirations and knowledge, from where young people are, their lives, their interests and their possibilities (Head, 2011; Arvanitakis and Sidoti, 2011). The literature uses social, cultural, economic and political contexts to explain patterns of youth activism within the specific nations. Illustrative here is Hungary in which the low levels of youth activism are congruent with the limited opportunities during the socialist era for people to express their political beliefs and when public education was fundamental in spreading the socialist ideology and maintaining its practices. The cases of Hungary and Singapore also highlight, furthermore, that patterns may be changing. In Hungary young people are so called “rational rebels” (Szabó, 2014), meaning that they are not passive but politically active in case their life is directly influenced by a political decision (e.g. the government’s plan in 2014 to introduce internet tax). In case of other issues which have no perceived immediate relevance to their everyday life (e.g. issues of democracy) they are mostly alienated and indifferent. In Singapore, recent patterns of youth activism suggest that participation is ‘more likely to focus on social activism and advocacy, such as LGBT causes or environmental issues, rather than political issues’ that seek to challenge structural power relations (Sim and Chow, 2018: 14). In England in the version of the national curriculum in place between 2008 and 2013 procedural concepts (critical thinking; advocacy and representation; responsible participation) were emphasised. Content was referred to last as a means of developing understanding and reflective action. This approach was thoroughly researched and heavily inspected (see Ofsted 2013)

Clearly then, how youth activism – and by extension education for youth activism – is framed, enacted and experienced is heavily shaped by context. Educationally, of course, the

relevance and impact of context can be engaged with to different extents, but it is through recognising and interrogating the key features and impact of context that education for youth activism can be properly analysed and understood.

### *Engagement with meaning and identity*

A large and diverse body of literature exists across and beyond the six countries of this study to suggest that youth are making meaning and developing their activist identities in multiple, fluid and complex ways. This includes how their activism and in-activism connects with and/or challenges other discourses of citizenship. Although still often measured in terms of engagement in the formal political system, youth activism is much more diverse and has increasingly shifted towards informal, issue-based political action. Drawing on International Social Survey Programme Citizenship data with regard to Australia in 2006, and supporting previous evidence from Vromen (2003), Martin (2012) found that young Australians are engaging less in non-electoral forms of participation than older Australians (see also Arvanitakis and Sidoti, 2011). However, Tranter (2010) reports that young Australians are increasingly viewing protests as *passé* and as a result are moving to forms of activism focusing on online forums and the giving of donations. Similarly in Canada, a range of studies report concerns about and shifts in how and why young Canadians express and experience activism (Turcotte, 2015a, 2015b; Llewellyn et al., 2007; Llewellyn et al., 2010). These studies point to a fall in formal political engagement (e.g. voting, party membership) among young people and declining levels of efficacy that their action will have an impact on party politics. Also like Australia, the studies also suggest an increase in activism in informal and non-electoral political activities.

In Hungary, the picture is also complex. Ridley and Fülöp (2014) found that when describing a good citizen, secondary school students used examples of activism that included voting and building a community and reported that they viewed certain forms of activism, such as demonstrations, to be negative. This finding is congruent with the European Social Survey (ESS) (2001, 2008), which shows that young Hungarians' intentions to demonstrate are amongst the lowest in Europe (Gáti, 2010). According to Csizik (2012), the majority of Hungarian children within the family tend to distance themselves from politics, meaning that young people believe that politicians are uninterested in the opinions of youth and that youth

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have little voice in the influence of country affairs (Magyar Ifjúság, 2008; Szabó and Bauer, 2009; Szabó, 2014).

New paradigms of ‘citizenship after orientalism’ offer innovative ways of thinking about how citizenship is understood outside of Western contexts. Isin (2008, 2009) challenges traditional constructions of citizenship in purely legalistic terms, through his concept of ‘acts’ of citizenship, whereby those who are socially and legally excluded, such as maginalized youth, refugees or illegal immigrants, ‘act’ in the public area whereby they constitute themselves as political actors (Kiwani, 2016). In their studies on youth in Lebanon, Khalaf and Khalaf (2011: 12) suggest that youth identity often acquires ‘a defiant posture’.

These challenges to traditional constructions of citizenship cannot be disentangled from wider narratives and tensions about the possibility and desirability of “national” or “shared” forms of identity. For similar reasons, such narratives have played out in particular ways within Australia, Canada and England. In these countries, education has been identified as playing a crucial role in fostering a sense of common identity alongside the recognition of plural identities. Frequently critiqued for their exclusionary language, such narratives have extolled the importance of building a sense of common belonging.

The contextualized examples of youth activism in Lebanon also challenge dominant approaches to the study of politics, political action and activism. It is being argued that a new political subjectivity is emerging, characterized as ‘reflexive individualism’ (Hanafi 2012), distinct from neoliberal conceptualizations of individualism ‘predicated on anti-patriarchal, anti-tribe, anti-community or anti-party sentiments’ (p.198). Both Khalaf’s (2014) and Bray-Collins’ (2016) work illustrate this reflexive individualism. Connected with the ideas above about the significance of the conceptual and situational we can argue that this reflexive approach allows for considerations of western and non-western approaches that are dynamic and flexible. Perhaps the educational debates most obviously connected with these issues of political subjectivity are connected with social media. It is necessary to be alert to the fundamental negative potential of social media (Morozov 2013) which allows space to the powerful anti-democratic forces as well as being hard to use in the real world of hard pressed schools, especially when the professional barriers between teachers and young people are at times necessary. But there is clear educational potential. Work by Bennett and colleagues (2011) indicate the potential of interactive project based work in which there is participatory

information sharing, media creation and collaborative assessments of credibility. Similarly, Kahne, Hodgin & Eidman-Aadahl (2016) argue that opportunities to engage in participatory politics, characterized by peer-based, interactive, and not guided by deference to traditional elites and institutions, have expanded significantly.

Crucial, too, in appreciating and seeking to understand the changing nature of youth activism as it relates to meaning and identity is to engage with the various intersectionalities that are distinctive (though not necessarily unique) to each country. 'Intersectionality' as we use it here posits that individuals are shaped by the multiple categories to which they are perceived to belong as well as the social structures that undergird systems of categorization. Recognising intersectionalities involves forms of engagement that take into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices faced, and action/inaction.

### *Engagement with groups*

Across the six countries, but of course in different ways, literature recognises that youth activism is a relational act. While some literature critiques the (real or perceived) ways that youth activism is becoming individualised, even individual action involves a (conscious or otherwise) choice whether to be part of a larger community. An appreciation of social connectedness, the unequal distribution of power between groups and the recognition of structural inequalities is now a ubiquitous feature of educational literature on youth activism, and certainly within the six countries involved in this project. Usefully, Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 13) highlight that different *forms* of collective activism exist:

- organisationally brokered collective action (lots of well organised people focusing on few objectives),
- organisationally enabled connective action (loosely tied networks sponsoring multiple actions and people join in as they wish),
- crowd enabled connective action ('dense fine grained networks of individuals in which digital media platforms are the most visible and integrative organisational mechanisms').

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Drawing on data from the 2013 Statistics Canada General Social Survey, Turcotte’s (2015b: 7) study found that young people’s activism had shifted towards ‘participation in social groups or movements that are less hierarchical and less officially organized (for example, interest groups) as opposed to involvement in traditional political organizations, such as political parties or unions’. There is a preference by many young people for groups that are perceived as operating on an equitable, reciprocal and social basis and to involvement in informal or non-electoral political activities (e.g., community service, work with civil society organizations) in areas of personal interest connected to themes of social justice (e.g., anti-racist initiatives, environment, Indigenous peoples’ concerns, LGBTQ rights).

From Australia there is literature about the ways in which (dis)connections with communities are experienced and redressed by disadvantaged and marginalised youth. Black (2010) points to the complex relationship between communities as they act as spaces for youth activism but also as places which youth may distrust. Correa-Valez et al. (2010) have explicated an intervention with refugee youth that linked them with their communities. The work of Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) on immigrant youth brings out the ways in which participation occurs in order to build connections with their communities.

There are challenging issues to be addressed in the establishment of forms of engagement characterized by positive regard for others and communities. Davies and Szczepk Reed (2019) have written about toleration that involves self-awareness, the public private interface, levels or degrees of toleration, and the limits to acceptance. Evidence exists, particularly in Australia, Canada and England, that some approaches to education for youth activism remain tokenistic, limited and pseudo-critical, serving to reinforce stereotypes of the Other and social injustices (Peterson and Bentley, 2016). In England, for example, some have critiqued policy discourses of citizenship education, character education and Fundamental British Values for the extent to which they prioritise individualised and exclusionary forms of participation and activism (Kisby, 2017).

There are concerns across the six countries that, whether consciously or not, youth may serve to further inequalities and/or maintain the status quo through their activism. In Canada, England and Australia, this concern largely plays out through practices through which youth present themselves, or indeed are presented by their educators, as saviours of those whom

they seek to help, or “save”, through their activism (see, for example, Andreotti, 2008; Land, 2011). In Hungary, concerns have been expressed about the rise of youth activism among far-right groups (Hunyadi et al, 2013). Anxiety has also been expressed that in the Lebanese context youth activism does not necessarily challenge power inequalities, but in fact has contributed to the ‘reproduction and renewal of sectarianism’ (Kiwan, 2016:6; see also Bray-Collins, 2016). In Singapore, the politics of gratitude, has been the driving force for youth civic participation. Given that gratitude is tied to the government’s ability to provide materially, participation of this nature would maintain the status quo (Sim, 2015).

The form of critical engagement with groups we have in mind, therefore, is not one characterised by blind affiliation or the unthinking performance of group rituals, though it may involve recognising and critiquing these. Rather, it is an appreciation that education for youth activism is fundamentally concerned with how power and activities are distributed within and between collective associations. Youth activism (and education for, about and through youth activism) needs to engage critically with differences between groups, including the (historical and continued) conflicts involved, how to engage and deliberate *with* these differences, and how differences might be mediated in productive ways. The area of critical engagement with groups allows us to interrogate how power relations exist in a way that necessarily involves questioning which groups are involved, why, and how power is assigned and (ab)used.

This emphasis on working with young people indicates the need to recognise the (existing or potential) capacities youth hold that can enable them to handle, mediate and cross inter-group barriers (and here we use the concept of “group” broadly). For example, at the level of schools, young people may feel that school is not a place that respects them and that the interest of teachers ends at the close of the last lesson of the day (Davies et al, 2014). This may be a harsh and unfair judgment if applied to many or most teachers, but it is extremely difficult to cross the boundary between school and home, between the closed world of the school and the hard to enter world of the supposedly private realm in which many groups “exist”. We cannot present a fully developed argument here about the ways in which teachers and non-teachers could work together. Yet, our literature reviews and conversations do highlight both that there is a rich vein of community based educational work being undertaking within the six countries and that there remains a need for further exploration as



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to how engagement with different groups available to, and impacting upon, youth operates in everyday life.

*Engagement in reflexivity*

A fundamental and recurring aspect of our activities has been the importance placed on reflexivity. Whether focused on cultivating reflexivity, youths evidencing reflexivity, or the (real or perceived) lack of reflexivity, the term was commonly mentioned and seems to be both important and useful. Broadly, reflexivity refers to the examination of one’s own feelings, motivations, actions and how these can and do influence actions and others around us. It makes sense to speak of reflexive individuals, groups and communities.

Reflexivity comes in different forms. The focus on individual forms of political action runs the risk of presenting social and political injustices as resulting from individual factors (character, will etc.) thereby side-lining and obfuscating structural power issues. When narratives – whether political and/or educational – lack reflexivity about how power arbitrarily dominates the lives of particular, marginalized groups within a given community, values are promoted that, as Buire and Staeheli (2017: 176) suggest, become the prevailing ‘common sense’ and hence become ‘unarticulated and often unchallenged’. Furthermore, the focus on reflexivity increases the chances that forms of, and approaches to, youth activism take appropriate account of highly pertinent local knowledges and understandings. For example, contextualized examples of youth activism in Lebanon challenge dominant approaches to the study of politics, political action and activism in the Arab world that view such engagement as representative of a movement from authoritarian rule towards democratisation (Kiwan, 2016). It is being argued that a new political subjectivity is emerging, characterized as ‘reflexive individualism’ (Hanafi 2012), distinct from neoliberal conceptualizations of individualism. The work of both Khalaf (2014) and Bray-Collins (2016) illustrates this reflexive individualism.

An important aspect of engaging in reflexivity, therefore, is developing a sense of what is possible within a given context and with one’s particular knowledge, skills and networks (Cremin et al., 2009), which in itself involves the learner in opening themselves to the world and their relation to it. This self-understanding is a common theme identified as crucial to

effective education for youth activism, and is fostered or constrained by policy discourses and associated political and educational practices. This said, recognising the necessity of youths' agency and reflexivity is risky, and may not be enacted in ways intended by policy or educators. It is important to recognise that 'attempts to pedagogically "govern" citizens do not necessarily go to plan' and that 'young people use the skills gained... and are self-directed in applying this learning to domains of concern for themselves' (Kiwan, 2016:12). We argue that there is a need for a conceptually and reflexively based educational approach in relation to dynamic and fluid and reflexive types of engagement. The crossing of boundaries that we referred to above regarding professionals and non-professionals needs to be developed also in relation to the dynamic between the cognitive and the affective.

## Conclusion

We have drawn upon and explicated our work on a six country international networking project that examined youth activism, engagement and education. A core challenge of this project, one which we hope to have brought to the fore here, was finding a way as researchers to identify commonalities across the six countries without neglecting crucial, distinctive features within the countries involved. In short, we needed to find a framework through which we (and - by presenting this framework here - hopefully, others with an interest in this area) could make meaning of and concentrate our discussions. Through our work, and as presented above, we identified four key areas of critical engagement around which our conversations and thinking coalesced: engagement with context; engagement with meaning and identity; engagement with groups; and, engagement with reflexivity. This tentative framework proved useful in getting to grips with core ideas and issues without rendering these in fixed, static or dichotomous ways.

In identifying and explicating the areas of critical engagement in the previous section, we are cognisant that across each of the six countries involved in the project significant gaps exist between policy rhetoric/intentions and actual practices and experiences. Our contention is that by concentrating on the areas of engagement set out here our attention is focused on core, pressing questions and issues that arose from our work and through which we have sought to make sense of the similarities and differences between the countries involved. The areas we have set out are not intended as a simplistic typology; each involves complexities that cannot



be easily or readily resolved. The areas permit, however, a critical analysis of the fundamental complexities that researchers, teachers, youth workers and, indeed, youth themselves, are grappling with within and through their activism. In offering the areas here, and as our title suggests, our intention is to move somewhat “towards” a framework of critical engagements – a framework that is open to substantiation, revision and extension through further critical investigation, whether by ourselves or others.

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