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Title: Understanding Youth Civic Engagement:  
*Debates, discourses and lessons from practice*

**Abstract**

While civic engagement provides a rich rationale for intervention, the array of discourses urging a focus on youth engagement or action means that the concept can be confusing, cluttered, and lacking consistent operationalization. From the perspective of policy makers and program managers, it can be challenging to disentangle the competing messages and assumptions about young people that underpin the rhetoric in relation to youth engagement. Using a wide range of international research, the purpose of this paper is to provide clarity regarding the key multiple concepts and issues pertinent to the concept of youth civic engagement. In particular, the paper answers the following questions: what are the definitions, typologies and discourses in which the concept of youth civic engagement operates?; and what are the putative beneficial outcomes of youth engagement identified? We also discuss some of the broader considerations on the positioning of young people in society, which impact the trajectory of civic engagement effort. As a means for reflecting on their own practices, programs and approaches, our intent is to provide those involved in the application and research of youth engagement with a more coherent roadmap of the diversity residing in this field.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the concept of youth citizenship and civic engagement has acquired prominence in research, policy and practice (Amná 2012). Interest in the concept has been spurred by a range of factors, including concern regarding a perceived decline in levels of civic and political engagement among young people throughout the western world (Flanagan and Christens 2011; Ekman & Amná 2009). Given that the participation of citizens is important in the functioning of a healthy democracy, there is a concern that a disengagement of young people from the political system will negatively impact on the governance of society. Additionally, the potential for youth civic engagement activity to contribute to the personal development of young people, to promote their welfare and to challenge injustice in society also provides an impetus for greater focus on civic engagement as a component of youth work and youth action.<sup>1</sup>

While civic engagement provides a rich rationale for intervention, the array of discourses urging a focus on youth engagement or action means that the concept can be confusing, cluttered, and lacking consistent operationalization. From the perspective of policy makers and program managers, it can be challenging to disentangle the competing messages and assumptions about young people that underpin the rhetoric in relation to youth engagement. The purpose of this paper is to provide clarity regarding the key multiple concepts and issues pertinent to the concept of youth civic engagement. In particular, the paper answers the following questions: what are the definitions, typologies and discourses in which the concept of youth civic engagement operates?; and what are the putative beneficial outcomes of youth engagement identified? We also discuss some of the broader considerations on the positioning of young people in society, which impact the trajectory of civic engagement effort. As a means for reflecting on their own practices, programs and approaches, our intent is to provide those involved in the application and research of youth engagement with a more coherent roadmap of the diversity residing in this field.

## DEFINITIONS AND TYPOLOGIES OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The concept of civic engagement is closely related to that of active citizenship and/or participation and has been defined as ‘individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general, and which provide opportunities for reflection’ (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010, p. vi). Lister (2007) views civic

engagement as an expression of young people as social actors, and the contributions they already make in society or in their ‘practices as citizens’. For others, civic engagement is a ‘bedrock value of democracy’ defined as being able to influence choices in collective action (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 214). Zaff et al. (2010) highlight that civic engagement includes the exercise of rights and responsibilities and some concern for the state and shared fate with one’s fellow citizens.

As defined by Amn (2012), civic engagement, in essence, has to do with a person being ‘outward looking’, and can be summed up as the ‘values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, knowledge, skills and behaviours concerned with conditions outside of the immediate environment of family and friends’ (p. 613). It finds expression, the author suggests, in various spheres including the public, market, civil, and personal. Current perspectives on civic engagement reflect ‘new social movements’ innovative ways of questioning and transforming conventional forms of politics and political participation’ (ibid.), making the point that one does not need to be actively involved in political participation to be engaged civically.

Classifications or models of youth civic engagement demonstrate that it can take place in a range of contexts and take a variety of forms. Classifications of youth civic engagement tend to categorise activities around a broad spectrum in both formal and non-formal settings, with an equally diverse series of expected outcomes. For instance, the approach adopted by Innovations in Civic Participation (2010) in asset-mapping for youth civic engagement activities provides a useful grouping:

- a. **Community Service and Volunteering**
- b. **Mutual Aid:** support to others within the same community or social group
- c. **Advocacy and Campaigning:** raising public consciousness, working to change legislation and representation to government consultation bodies
- d. **Youth Media:** forms of media production by young people
- e. **Social Entrepreneurship:** creating innovative solutions to social problems
- f. **Leadership Training and Practice:** mechanisms for learning and exercising leadership skills.

These activities can be employed in a range of settings, from the local grassroots level to the

international level. Definitions and characteristics of each setting can be found in the following table (Table 1).

--- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE ---

For the purposes of this paper, we are most interested in forms of youth civic engagement that take place within the youth sector involving organisations working with young people at local, regional and national levels. One of the key issues of relevance to this sector is gaining clarity regarding the constituent components of youth civic engagement activity and how it differs from other areas of youth development. A useful classification has been developed by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organising (2003) to illustrate how youth civic engagement can be distinguished from other forms of youth activity (Table 2).

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As this typology shows, youth civic engagement can be conceptualised as part of a continuum. It is important to recognise how other forms of youth activity can complement it and build skills and confidence. At its core, however, civic engagement activity is characterised by agency on the part of young people, as well as collective action towards social change that is youth-led and directed.

## DISCOURSES

Civic engagement is not a neutral concept, but rather encodes a variety of perspectives surrounding relationships between the individual, community and broader society. There are varying discourses regarding the concept of civic engagement, which reflect general assumptions about youth in society and the nature of young people themselves. These discourses carry particular messages and understanding about the nature of youth as citizens. To fully understand the significance of civic engagement to youth, it is necessary to examine how particular forms of civic engagement relate to the experiences and social positioning of young people and how they envisage the underlying 'problem' to be addressed. This section, therefore, introduces five key discourses that invoke youth civic engagement/action as desirable activity and analyses their underlying assumptions about youth and the purpose of their engagement. While these discourses are not mutually exclusive, they each contain dominant strands demonstrating their

distinctiveness. An overview of the five discourses discussed is provided in Table 3.

----- INSERT TABLE 3 HERE -----

The first discourse, that of the Democratic Citizen, views citizenship primarily in terms of how political and civic identity is activated through engagement and influence in the public sphere.

### **Democratic Citizen**

The fundamental premise of this discourse is that the active involvement of individuals is important for society as it enhances the vibrancy of democracy. In fact, for a democracy to survive, its citizens must participate. From a societal point of view, it is argued that the participation of young people is important to ensure that the democratic process is inclusive, energised and renewed. Flanagan & Levine (2010, p. 160) point out that during adolescence, young people ‘chart a course for their future and take stock of the values they live by and the world they want to be part of’. According to Finlay et al. (2010), there is considerable evidence that if civic engagement begins in adolescence, it can continue throughout the lifecourse. Because of this, it is argued that civic attitudes, beliefs and skills should be nurtured among young people.

The rights of children and young people to participate in society are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Because under 18s are unable to vote, attention is focused on how young people can be encouraged and supported to exercise their democratic rights. The youth participation literature, therefore, revolves largely around finding opportunities for youth to demonstrate their capacities to participate as political and social actors in society (Lister, 2007). It is widely recognized that there are different forms that participation can take and various ladders and spectra of participation are used to gauge how meaningful participation really is (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001).

In addition to a concern with the realisation of the participation rights of young people, the focus on youth civic engagement has also stemmed from a broader societal concern with declining levels of civic engagement. It is argued that citizens [of all ages](#) are less engaged with politics due to changing values and lifestyles and a perceived lack of trust in political institutions to

effectively address issues affecting them (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). While this concern relates to a perceived decline in civic engagement among all citizens, there is a particular fear that decline in participation among young people will have consequences for the future of democracy. For example, empirical studies have highlighted that young people are less likely to vote than older people. A ~~recent~~ Irish survey (~~National Economic and Social Forum, 2003~~) showed that ~~55~~62% of those aged under 25 had not voted in ~~any the 2011~~ election ~~since they became eligible to do so~~ compared with 82% for the general population (Central Statistics Office 2011). Similarly, just 39 and 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2001 and 2005 elections in the UK (Tonge & Mycock, 2010). With reference to the United States, Flanagan and Levine (2010) highlight that young adults today are less likely than their counterparts in the 1970s to exhibit nine out of ten characteristics of citizenship: belonging to at least one group, attending religious services at least monthly, belonging to a union, reading newspapers at least once a week, voting, being contacted by a political party, working on a community project, attending club meetings and believing that people are trustworthy. Volunteering is the only indicator that has seen an increase since the 1970s. These trends illustrate the need for policies to encourage political and civil engagement among young people.

Some have argued that the perceived decline in youth civic engagement may be just a symptom of the fact that forms of civic engagement change from generation to generation (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). For example, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the USA, young people were more likely to be concerned with issues such as terrorism, defence and the economy. It may also be the case that civic engagement declines for all people as they get older and are faced with a host of social, personal, and economic demands. They are also more likely to engage with online communities than to read newspapers, join political parties or join unions (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Harris et al. (2011, p. 27) note that youth engage in many issues in more ordinary and sometimes individualised ways. The increased usage of social networking sites on the internet are recognised as forms of engagement for many youth who feel they do not have a public space to engage with others. They have been described as ‘intimate, social, unregulated youth space’ where ‘ordinary youth’ can express themselves and have a say in the public sphere (ibid). Likewise, Banaji (2008) illustrates that there are a wide variety of online spaces that youth engage with to varying degrees. The impact of online engagement on young people’s civic engagement, particularly those aged 15 years and under, is far from definitive (Media Awareness Network 2011). There is some evidence to suggest that social networking

[sites are being woven into existing forms of engagement and have a positive impact on civic and political action for adults and older youth \(over 18 years of age\) \(Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Valenzuela 2013\). It also appears that youth are well versed at using this technology and have effectively deployed social media in mobilizing social change \(e.g. the Arab Spring revolutions; see Lim 2012\). Those already engaged in civic life prefer a blended approach of on-line and face-to-face interaction \(Media Awareness Network 2011\).](#)

### **Positive Youth Development**

Within this discursive position, civic engagement activities are widely seen as a means of strengthening the development and capacities of young people. Skill and asset building approaches to working with young people stress the importance of encouraging the overall development of the young person rather than merely trying to ‘fix’ their problems. The most high profile theoretical model is ‘positive youth development (PYD)’ which promotes the development of the young person through emphasis on five key personality characteristics, described as the five Cs: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner et al. 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). ~~The~~<sup>A</sup> sixth, ‘contribution’, emerges from the first five and is more likely to be seen in young people who contribute to their communities (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010). It is argued that positive youth development can promote civic engagement, which in turn further promotes positive youth development. The main unit of analysis is the individual young person whose behaviour and mindset can be strengthened and made more resourceful through involvement in community activities. Much has also been written about how youth programmes can act as ecological assets to more effectively generate or promote these positive characteristics, behaviours and ways of thinking within individual youth.

The PYD approach was influential in the funding of youth programmes among philanthropic organizations in the USA. For example, from the mid 1990s, the Ford Foundation began a deliberate move from programmes focused on prevention of problems to those embracing instead the promotion of positive development and preparation for adulthood among youth. In this the Foundation ‘relied heavily on the guiding principles of positive youth development which is based on an asset rather than a deficit model to inform the selection of projects and the development of initiatives’ (Mohamad & Wheeler, 2001, p. 4). Positive youth development proved attractive to funders as it offered a theory that found practical expression in programming that addressed skills development and the active engagement of young people

in their communities.

### **Belonging / Community Connectedness**

Against the backdrop of what is viewed as an increasingly individualised society (Beck, 1992), we can find a discourse which perhaps sees civic engagement as a means to forge a sense of belonging among young people to something wider than their individual selves. This discourse stems from a desire to create stronger connections for youth towards others in the places they live and the spaces they interact in.

There are two key theoretical positions supporting this discourse: social capital and interactionist theory. The concept of social capital refers to fact that social connections and trust between people are beneficial to individuals and to society (Field, 2008; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Research has shown that community is important to adolescent well-being by virtue of broadening networks and providing opportunities for interaction with others, often through local groups and activities. Furthermore, being known (by adults) matters to children for their sense of safety and being cared for. Studies of child neglect, for instance, suggest that it is quite often the poor social capital base of neighbourhoods that constitute a vital ingredient in accounting for its incidence (Jack & Jordan, 1999). Leonard's (2005) research in Northern Ireland shows that young people can be civically active within local communities, providing favours to older neighbours. One fifth of youth studied were engaged in some form of voluntary activity locally, very often at an everyday, ordinary level. Civic engagement is thus viewed as the mechanism which develops trust, safety, support networks and information - as constitutive ingredients of social capital – from which young people derive a greater sense of belonging or stake within society.

Bridger, Brennan & Luloff (2009) view community from an interactional perspective, where the emergence of community is a dynamic process of bringing people together. This perspective is particularly useful in explaining the process leading to civic engagement. All localities are composed of numerous distinct social fields or groups whose members act to achieve diverse individual interests and goals. Connecting these individual fields is the “community field” which serves to coordinate and unite individual groups into purposive community wide efforts. It cuts across class lines, organized groups, and other entities within a local population by focusing on the general and common needs of all residents. Through this interactive process, an entity can

emerge that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

The key component to this process is found in the creation and maintenance of channels of interaction and communication among the diverse local groups which would otherwise be directed toward their more individual interests. Through these relationships, individuals interact with one another, and begin to mutually understand general common needs. As residents and groups interact over issues important to all of them, what has come to be known as community agency, or the capacity for local action and resiliency, emerges (Brennan & Luloff, 2007). Agency reflects the building of local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people within a common territory. Agency can therefore be seen as the capacity of people to manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing locality wide issues (Brennan, Luloff & Ricketts, 2007). The application of agency can be seen in civic engagement at all levels.

While the attention given to building local capacities is often focused toward aggregates of adult residents, youth are increasingly visible and active contributors towards community development efforts. Such involvement assists with both the development of community and with the social and psychological development of the youth within it. These active youth represent the future leaders and activists that will help shape local life and well-being in the years to come. The merging of such community and youth development theory can help us to better conceptualize how both might mutually contribute to their sustainability (Barnett & Brennan, 2006).

### **Care**

A fourth discourse might see civic engagement as a means of addressing the needs of young people, particularly those who are vulnerable. Whereas the positive youth development discourse applies to all young people, the care discourse is of relevance to young people who experience challenges, such as poverty, health issues, disability and exploitation. Proponents of this approach believe that all youth need to be challenged as well as cared for and that civic engagement offers the means to do both simultaneously (Pittman et al., 2003, p.14; Dolan, 2010).

Dolan (2010) argues that civic engagement and democratic participation can represent a means by which young people can enhance their resilience and social support. The study of resilience focuses on how some individuals, in spite of exposure to a series of adverse experiences

in the early years, manage to escape any serious harm (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Longitudinal studies of risk and resilience have shown that many young people, who despite being exposed to serious risks during childhood, cope well and demonstrate positive outcomes in adulthood. These studies have attributed resilience to the presence of protective factors that help to mitigate against the effects of early disadvantage. Significant protective factors include intelligence and problem-solving skills, external interests or attachments, support from non-familial adults and a defined purpose in life and sense of self-efficacy (Ungar, 2008). Similarly, studies in the social support tradition found that those who participated in their community and the larger society had better mental health status than more isolated people (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Dolan (2010) argues that youth civic engagement provides opportunities for young people to develop mutually supportive relationships with others and to experience how it feels to make a difference to society. In this way, he contends, social or political civic activity by youth has the potential to buffer them from the adverse effects of difficult life circumstances – in other words, to help them to become resilient (Dolan, 2010).

### **Social Justice**

While the focus on youth as assets is core to the positive youth development field, emerging work takes into account the need for civic orientation of groups who have been marginalised from society. Flanagan & Christens (2011, p.3) argue that class and racial divides in the civic opportunities available to young people is evident in realities such as the lack of opportunities to practice civic skills, disassociation from school and time constraints of living in economically disadvantaged communities. In addition, the authors point out, traits such as confidence and optimism can predispose some young people to become engaged in civic action, factors that can be impacted by social class and background.

Social justice youth development is a form of engaging young people that incorporates a distinct political or social change objective. It is distinct from other kinds of youth development in that it calls for an explicit acknowledgement of the seriousness of the socioeconomic challenges facing young people. Social justice models include elements of youth development frameworks such as emotional and social support, positive adult-relationships and so on, yet encompass socio-political elements based on critical understanding about the root causes of social and community problems. According to Ginwright & Cammarota (2002, p. 86), as an intervention for youth, justice-informed frameworks ‘go beyond assets-based and prosocial development to

foster youth as active agents of change in their own environment based on understanding of socio-political conditions and injustice'. The fostering of 'critical consciousness' that develops young people through the provision of specific socio-political competencies is reflected in developing capacity to articulate social and community problems as well as propose solutions. Ginwright & Cammarota propose a social justice model for youth development based on two underlying principles of self-awareness/identity and social awareness. *Self-awareness* includes practices and programmes that foster a positive sense of self and explorations of racial, ethnic and sexual identity. *Social awareness* encourages people to think critically about issues in their own communities. It incorporates heightened knowledge of social issues coupled with skills that promote inquiry, analysis and problem solving.

### **BENEFITS OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

The five discourses ~~just~~ discussed [above](#), while each bringing a distinct rationale for the existence of civic engagement programmes, can be seen to contribute to a set of commonly perceived benefits to individuals, and benefits to communities, which are now outlined (Table 4).

**---INSERT TABLE 4 HERE ---**

#### ***Benefits to Individuals***

At the micro-individual level, the literature points to a broad range of psycho-social and physical benefits to young people from civic engagement including: positive identity and development; enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem; improved social, communication and critical thinking skills; greater educational/academic achievements and career aspirations; lower risk of addiction and problematic behaviours; good physical health; and heightened civic and service interest. There is an extensive body of literature published on the outcomes of youth involvement in community based activities [in](#) terms of positive identity development and sense of identity (Pancer and Pratt, 1999; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer & Alisat, 2003; Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Youniss et al., 2001). This involvement has been linked to thriving during adolescence (Lerner, et al., 2005; Theokas, et al., 2005). More generally, such benefits are in line with the "six Cs" framework for positive youth development comprising growth in and positive levels of: competence, connection, character, confidence, caring, and contribution which have been associated with pro-social involvement by youth (Busseri et al., 2006).

Aiding others can bring great satisfaction and helps people to feel part of something bigger than themselves (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Young people may enjoy increased independence and capacity to be altruistic, enabling them to direct their focus from their own problems to the needs of others, thereby being perceived as “civic actors” concerned with and taking responsibility for the health and wellbeing of all citizens (Flanagan et al., 1999). Involvement in service can engender feelings of self-efficacy (Kendrick, 1996) and being able to make a difference in the lives of others, from having some form of responsibility or leadership through working in a coordinated fashion in a community based organisation (Henderson et al, 2007). Young people can also benefit from better enlisted social support to and from others which has a known connection to better wellbeing and mental health (Dolan, 2010). Moreover, the participation of youth in community life is particularly timely as it is at this stage in one’s life that a sense of community and social responsibility is first formed (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). This involves developing an interest in the common good and support for the rights and needs of others. Also important is the role of identity formation in volunteering (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Lee, Piliavin & Call, 1999) whereby a volunteer identity is formed and developed as individuals engage in service work which in turn influences their attitudes and intentions with respect to the amount of time they will spend volunteering and their commitment to future voluntary service work (Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007).

Furthermore, there is much discussion in the literature in relation to the broad range of skills which young people may develop and/or enhance through civic engagement activity ranging from personal and social skills (Rubin et al, 2002; Lewis, 1991; Roker, Player & Coleman, 1998), to leadership (Kuh, 1995), communication (Tucker & McCarthy, 2001) and critical thinking skills (Gellin, 2003). Civic participation in service and voluntary work has also been associated with lower rates of drop-out from the educational system (Mahoney, 2000), higher academic achievement levels (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Reeb, Sammon, & Isackson, 1999), and a greater sense of career direction and progression Johnson et al., 1998; Primavera, 1999; Taylor & Pancer, 2002). Another positive outcome of youth engagement is a reduction in problem behaviours (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Youniss & Yates & Su, 1997) including alcohol consumption and criminal involvement.

### **Benefits to Communities**

As well as having benefits for the individuals involved, youth civic engagement can bring benefits to communities. Collaborative civic action can help to create connectedness between community members, and promote collaboration through the identification of common local issues and the bringing of solutions to these issues. It can emphasise the importance of young people as civic actors. As a consequence, young people have a sense of contributing to shared norms or values so that 'one feels at home rather than out of place' in their communities (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002, p. 267). According to Brennan (2008, p.1), the contribution of young people to community development activities has often been overlooked or under-estimated but there is a growing recognition that community and youth resiliency are 'part of the same cohesive whole that reflects local wellbeing and adaptive capacities'. In other words, strong communities are needed to promote youth resiliency and vice versa. Flanagan & Levine (2010) point out that engaging with fellow members of community-based groups also helps young people form social networks, build social capital and connect to opportunities. In practice terms, the benefits of community participation have been associated with improved programs and services (Pancer & Nelson, 1990) and a better match between the community needs and services provided (Iscoe, 1974). Zeldin, et al. (2000) studied the impact of youth involvement on organisations. They found that the whole organisational culture changes as the principles and practices of youth involvement are adopted through the involvement of youth in organisational decision-making. The organisations began to be more inclusive and representative in their structure, and were able to reach out to the community in more diverse ways (ibid). Youth civic engagement can also enhance the democratic process by bringing new energy, ideas and perspectives.

Finally, it should be noted that such beneficial outcomes do not automatically arise from youth participation in community based service and voluntary work. Rather such engagement requires the existence of an environment comprising of supportive groups, organisations and communities that provide opportunities for young people to connect with others, engage in meaningful activities, develop skills, feel safe, secure and valued. Engagement is unique in that it results in dual benefits to youth and communities. Through citizen engagement strong communities emerge, which are characterized by the ability of local societies to manage the resources available to them in meeting local needs. This capacity also allows for increased quality of life, community attractiveness and a wider level of interdependence among local citizens. Through engagement by all citizens, but especially where a clear role is defined for youth, an

[environment is created where youth may be more likely to become/remain civically engaged.](#)  
~~This will be discussed in the next section of the paper.~~

## DISCUSSION

Having outlined the nature of the discourses and the putative benefits, we now finish with a brief discussion of the wider economic, cultural and political issues that are likely to impact the shape of civic engagement: inequality; societal attitudes to young people; and the normative assumptions underpinning discourses about youth behaviour.

The first issue concerns socio-economic inequality and the evidence that suggests young people from families with lower incomes are less likely to vote or take part in civic organisations. The uneven burden of poverty and inequality between families depends not only on the availability of financial resources but the interplay with other forms of capital, namely human capital (i.e. qualifications, work history), family and community social capital (supportive ties and networks at home and locally) (Leonard, 2005; Forrest & Kearns, 2005) and local infrastructure (transport, work, etc.) (Cass, et al. 2005). Such combined assets or resources will influence levels of vulnerability and capacity to participate in other aspects of social life. Furthermore, young people who do not attend school, college or employment are also less likely to engage in citizenship activities (Hart & Atkins, 2002). While ~~as we saw earlier,~~ much emphasis is placed on forging social capital ~~as the solution to the woes of poorer/in disadvantaged~~ communities, we cannot detach social capital from the importance of other forms of capital, namely economic and cultural (education credentials, the 'right' school, etc.) as critical currencies of success. There is a need to acknowledge the extent to which costs are associated with civic engagement activity and whether they are prohibitive for groups of young people (Leonard 2008).

Second, how might wider attitudes about teenagers – through media, schools, political processes, etc - impact their willingness to participate? It is argued that because portrayals of young people, particularly adolescents, in the popular media can be negative, young people themselves can have low expectations regarding their ability to contribute to society in a positive way (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). A body of research also highlights that young people are attuned to these negative perspectives and believe that their participation is not valued and, as a result, they do

not feel that their engagement in relation to social issues will be welcomed (Stoneman, 2002; Hart, 2009; Millbourne, 2009).

Third, and related to our last point, while this paper has highlighted a set of diverse discourses underpinning arguments in favour of civic engagement programmes, aspects of these discourses have been criticised for the normative understandings of what constitutes ‘appropriate’ behaviour by young people. With regard to the democratic citizen discourse, Wallace (2001), Hart (2009), and Bynner (2001) argue for a move away from a normative citizenship agenda, whereby young people are taught what constitutes appropriate citizenship values and behaviour, towards a citizenship informed by a cultural or difference-centred approach. In this way, normative assumptions of citizenship would be replaced by an approach which takes the views of citizens seriously and allows them to input regarding what citizenship should or could mean in contemporary society. Similarly, it has been argued that the PYD approach of Lerner et al. (2005, p. 25) is primarily interested in “what leads youth toward an *idealized adulthood*, one marked by effective contributions to self, family, community, and civil society”. Youth are therefore explicitly adult becomings and it is a discourse largely concerned with future competency – of learner citizens, citizens in waiting or apprentice citizens (Lister, 2007, p. 696). Stoneman (2002), Watts & Flanagan (2007) and others make the point that the literature on civic engagement focuses on the maintenance of the status quo rather than action for social justice. Benaji (2008) argues that we should not be surprised about the apparent unwillingness of youth to civically engage in conventional political formats or to turn to right-wing civic activism against the backdrop of unresponsive political machinery and in some countries, highly corrupt, regimes of governance. Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan (2010, p. 265) and Wallace (2001) believe that there is a need for models that facilitate young people to exercise informed judgement and criticise the status quo where necessary. Related to this point, civic engagement of young people can be challenged by ‘adultism’, the tendency of adults to control the nature and content of ‘safe’ notions of civic engagement activity. In other words, forms of engagement for young people are often designed to replicate adult democratic institutions and are based on adult notions of how young people should participate.

## CONCLUSION

Youth civic engagement can take place in a range of settings, and is generally characterized by

collective action by young people to achieve social change. This paper has sought to provide an overview of the significant body of literature on the topic, with the aim of providing clarity regarding how youth civic engagement can be conceptualized in the youth development sector. Five discourses that emphasise youth civic engagement as a desirable activity have been identified, while the benefits for individuals and communities arising from civic engagement activity have been summarized. Finally, this paper has pointed out that the concept of youth civic engagement is not without its critiques and challenges. Participation is not equal, rather is it directly linked to various forms of capital including economic, social, and cultural. As a result, youth from marginalised backgrounds/families are less likely to engage in forms of civic action than their counterparts from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds and those with higher levels of educational attainment; and those in employment and able-bodied are more likely to participate than the unemployed and the disabled. Societal attitudes towards young people and normative assumptions on citizenship also have important determining impacts on youth civic engagement, with negative stereotypical perceptions and 'adultism' hampering young people's tendency to become civically active.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the terms 'youth' and 'young people' interchangeably and in an inclusive sense. However, we recognize that these should not be taken-for-granted categories. The terms are far more culturally nuanced and variable, and layered with complexities of gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity that shape identities and life chances in critical ways (see Bucholtz 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2006).

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