



Liminal citizenship: Young people's perspectives on civic and political engagement in three European cities

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Liminal Citizenship: Young People's Perspectives on Civic and Political Engagement in Three European Cities

Concerns about the extent to which young people—especially young people at the margins—are disengaged from civic and political life have been prominent in contemporary discourse. This is particularly true in the context of debates about the current state of community and democracy and the challenges that globalization, economic restructuring, and increasing demographic diversity and inequality are generating. In addition, research has shown that successfully engaging young people in the institutions, communities, and contexts in which they live and building their capacity as social actors can be a critical factor in their positive development as individuals, enhance their future role as citizens, and promote their contribution to these same contexts and institutions (Flanagan, 2013; Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1999; McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994).

In response to both these concerns and the evidence regarding the benefits of youth engagement, a number of youth-oriented policy frameworks at the supranational (UN, EU), national, and local levels have identified youth civic and political engagement as important goals in themselves and have sought to promote youth engagement as a contributing factor to both youth development and broader societal change. But how do young people themselves see these efforts and their relationship to youths' place in the world and potential to contribute to civic and political action?

This paper focuses on young people's perspectives on citizenship and civic and political engagement and on the policies, opportunities, and barriers that shape their engagement in three cities—London, Belfast, and Dublin. Each of the countries in which these cities sit has generated national policies with a specific focus on youth engagement and citizenship in recent years. This

allows us to explore the relationship between policy ideas and provision, the dynamics of their implementation and influence on the ground, and how they align with the perspectives and experiences of marginalized young people in specific urban contexts.

While there is a substantial literature on young people's civic and political engagement, this paper joins a smaller but growing body of scholarship focusing specifically, directly, and qualitatively on young people's perspectives on civic and political participation (e.g., Collin, 2015; Flanagan, 2013; Marsh et al., 2007; Pickard, 2019; Sloam, 2007). It contributes to this literature by providing a nuanced and qualitative understanding of young people's ideas and experiences across a range of participatory opportunities, with a particular focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and neighborhoods, and with the goal of specifying some practical policy and front-line responses to better supporting and promoting meaningful, responsive, and effective youth engagement.

Rationale and Strategic Orientations: Scholarly and Policy Arguments

Policy interest in promoting youth engagement has been driven by concerns about decreasing levels of civic and political participation among young people (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Sloam, 2012). Young people are less likely to vote in elections than their older contemporaries and appear to be “deeply sceptical of governments and of the political classes” (Henn, Oldfield and Hart, 2018: 714). This is particularly true for young people from marginalized backgrounds, who may have fewer opportunities and be less likely to participate in political processes and engage in civic action than their more affluent peers and those from ethnic-majority backgrounds (Leonard, 2005; Levinson, 2010).

The framing of young people as politically disengaged, apathetic, and disconnected from civic life, however, has been widely challenged. Henn and Foard (2014), for example, found that

young people in the UK are interested in politics and have faith in the democratic process but are disillusioned with the political system and the established parties and politicians that dominate it (cf. Sloam, 2007; 2012). Pickard argues that claims of youth disengagement are in part a problem of method—a tendency to focus on what is easily measured, such as participation in elections and referenda, while “other forms of political participation that cannot be quantified so easily go unheeded” (2019: 48). Indeed, a substantial literature has evolved focusing on young people’s political engagement in more informal, less official domains, what Hadfield-Hill and Christensen (2019: 6) refer to as “everyday politics as experienced by young people” (see also Bartos 2012; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Nolas et al., 2017; Percy-Smith, 2010; Skelton, 2010; Wood, 2012). The youth disengagement paradigm is thus critiqued for failing to recognize that young people’s political engagement embraces a broader set of concerns and actions, including identity- and issue-based politics, protest, community action, consumer activism, and volunteering. Participation in these alternative modes of engagement—as well as decisions on the part of young people to *not* participate—“are a reflection of the ways youth experience and respond to the freedoms of a risk society” (Collin, 2015: 23; Bessant et al., 2017), as well as a reaction to the alienation of young people from politics given youth-unfriendly policies, broken pledges, and government’s failure to address youth needs (Pickard, 2019). These orientations suggest a need to reconsider young people’s participation in light of their particular orientations toward citizenship.

Ideas about citizenship are complex, dynamic, and contested. Narrow definitions based on legal status within a nation-state are insufficient in light of globalization, the experiences and contributions of residents without formal citizenship status (such as immigrants, refugees, and temporary workers), and of marginalized populations with formal citizenship but without equal

access to full citizenship rights by virtue of their subaltern status (such as ex-offenders, racioethnic minorities, internal migrants, and LGBTQ+ individuals) (e.g., Bloemraad, 2017; Menjívar, 2006; Menon, 2013; Miller & Alexander, 2016; Pallas, 2012; Zhang, 2010).

In his seminal essay “Citizenship and Social Class,” T.H. Marshall identified three elements of citizenship rights: civil (freedom of thought, speech, property, and justice under the law), political (participation in formal political processes), and social (economic well-being and social integration). Building on this framework (and subsequent critiques) and elaborating the dynamic evolution of ideas of citizenship in response to social conflicts and struggles over time, Bryan S. Turner (1990) adds an emphasis on the division between public and private realms and distinguishes between the existence of passive citizenship (determined from above through the state) versus active citizenship (constructed from below through participatory action at the local level). Citizenship is also often framed with regard to reciprocal rights and duties available to and expected of members of a political and civic community (B.S. Turner, 2017; Flanagan, 2013).

These characteristics are both challenged by and reflected in conceptual orientations to citizenship focusing specifically on young people. Scholars have questioned whether these established conceptions of citizenship are meaningful when considering children and young people’s status as citizens given some fundamental differences between young people and adults (Jans, 2004; Cockburn, 2012). Young people below a certain age do not have the right to vote, are in need of protection, and do not have the same responsibilities as adults. They thus tend to be viewed as “not yet citizens” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005: 370; Jans, 2004;). In light of this, Moosa-Mitha (2005: 369) argues for a difference-centered concept of children’s rights that acknowledges their rights to be “differently-equal” members of society in which they are full

participants. On this basis, adult-centric institutional practices can be seen as problematic to the extent that they “exclude and marginalize children’s citizenship rights on the basis of their difference (real and constructed) from an adult norm assumed of citizens” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005: 369). As a consequence of the fixation on adult conceptions of citizenship, it has been widely argued that there is a tendency to devalue or overlook everyday relational citizenship practices occurring in the context of young people’s environments and interactions (Cockburn, 2012; Jans, 2004; Nolas et al, 2017).

Of particular value for our purposes are the distinctions between citizen engagement through formal structures, processes, and institutions as opposed to those grounded in informal settings and social networks and driven more by personal motivations than normative expectations. Several scholars have explored these distinctions to examine the different modes of citizenship expectations and activities that young people value and embody, although they use somewhat different terminology. Bennett (2007), for example, distinguishes between “dutiful” and “actualizing” citizenship; Dalton (2009) between “duty-based” and “engaged citizenship,” and Bang (2005) between “expert citizen” and “everyday maker” orientations. (Building on Bang’s work, Li and Marsh (2008) distinguish two other “types” of participant, “political activists,” who participate in “conventional politics,” and “non-participants,” who are uninvolved in volunteering or any of the other three types of participation.)

The principal argument shared by these scholars is that, rather than embracing the normative expectations of “dutiful” citizenship grounded in obligations to participate in formal politics (primarily by voting) and to join civic organizations, younger generations favor an “actualizing” form of citizenship that allows them to identify their own political paths and embraces many forms of creative civic input, including consumer politics and global activism

often facilitated through peer content sharing and social media (Bennett, 2007; Collin, 2015; Jans, 2004).

Although there are differences in nuance among them, each of these frameworks reflect orientations toward engagement—in contrast to the disengagement paradigm discussed above—in which one model of citizenship favors institutionalized participation, formal structures, and established processes and another prioritizes action through informal networks, direct action, personal motivation, and a willingness to challenge (or elide) political elites. Regarding the former orientation, Bennett and Dalton emphasize the centrality of voting and conventional participation in civic organizations; Bang focuses on the emergence of “project oriented” participation by professionals in the voluntary sector who seek to influence policy through expertise and “gaining access to the bargaining processes that go on between public authorities and various experts from private and voluntary organizations” (2005: 165). In all cases, these authors note a generational divide, with younger citizens more inclined toward actualizing, quotidian, informal kinds of engagement.

These alternative ways of engaging in political and civic action notwithstanding, policy frameworks focused on promoting youth engagement in civic and political life tend to support particular participatory modalities and are guided by particular rationales regarding their importance. Policy frameworks focused on promoting youth engagement that have been promulgated by UN agencies and the European Union, as well as by governments in the three contexts that are the focus of our analysis, largely embrace a similar set of ideas.¹ They argue for the importance of young people’s civic and political engagement, their active participation in political processes, and the need for policies, services, and institutions to take young people’s perspectives into account in establishing priorities and shaping provision. The underlying

rationales for promoting youth engagement across contexts incorporate several principal arguments (see Authors, 2018, for review). One concerns the fundamental rights of young people to participation and democratic engagement, grounded in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and connected more broadly to an emphasis on the democratic citizen, in which the active involvement of young people is seen as important for society and for the survival and thriving of democracy. An important aspect of this is ensuring that policies and programs developed are responsive to, and take into account, the perspectives, preferences, and priorities of young people toward more effective policies and services, what Farthing (2010) labels an “efficiency” argument. Policies also emphasize duties as the flip-side of rights; through participation young people can carry out their responsibilities to contribute to the greater good (Collin, 2015). Another rationale focuses on the importance of youth participation in promoting positive youth development (Collin, 2015; Farthing, 2010; Shaw et al., 2014) and, more specifically, the ways in which civic and political participation contributes to both positive instrumental outcomes (such as educational attainment and employment) and to the prevention of negative behaviors and outcomes (such as antisocial behavior and substance abuse). Policies promoting youth engagement also stress the contribution participation can make to social integration and social cohesion, particularly in societies that are increasingly diverse and where social inequality is a concern. While for the most part these policy frameworks cast a wide net in outlining priorities, outcome expectations, and identifying target groups, the focus on youth participation and the rationale for their engagement is generally argued to be foundational to both the process toward and the likelihood of reaching other goals (Authors, 2018).

To promote youth engagement, policy frameworks outline a range of different strategies and mechanisms to be supported. Principal among these is an emphasis on establishing deliberative forums and consultation processes to engage young people around policy priorities. These include mechanisms such as youth advisory boards at the local level, youth parliaments or shadow councils at the national level, and engagement with supranational organizations and processes at the global level. Policy frameworks also emphasize, to varying degrees, the importance of fostering opportunities for volunteerism, supporting youth work in the voluntary sector, promoting young people's engagement in arts and sport, and bolstering opportunities for education, training, and workforce participation (Authors, 2020).

Youth engagement policies have also generated substantial critiques, including that participation opportunities tend to favor young people with good social, cultural, and economic capital; that participation opportunities tend to be adult-led, tokenistic, and inauthentic; and that they favor the production of "dutiful" forms of citizenship over more organic, youth-led approaches (Matthews & Limb, 2003; Pickard, 2019; Wood, 2012). Participation of "at risk" or marginalized groups is often underemphasized or is highly controlled, and many have questioned whether government-sponsored participation initiatives have the capacity to challenge the status quo or merely reinforce existing inequalities (Batsleer et al., 2020; Cockburn, 2012; Collin, 2015; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Lister, 2007; Turkie, 2010). Although several supranational frameworks reference promoting youth activism through mobilization, organizing, and social action and are somewhat more likely to be explicit about power differentials and the need for structural change, these are largely absent in the national frameworks we reviewed, which for the most part promote strategies focused on more normative, institutionally grounded, adult-facilitated, and controlled approaches. As we will see, young people have their own perspectives

on these issues, providing both acknowledgement of opportunities and critiques of their intent, reach, and likely impact.

In the analysis that follows, we find that young people’s perspectives on citizenship reflect an embrace of Marshall’s three dimensions as well as a recognition of the differences between more formal and prescribed (“dutiful”) citizenship, on the one hand, and more informal, personalized, and self-generated (“actualizing”) citizenship activities on the other—although they don’t necessarily see them as mutually exclusive. While reflecting these competing orientations, however, what young people fundamentally experience is a kind of *liminal* citizenship, neither fully incorporated nor fully excluded from civic and political life, whose voice and influence are ambiguous at best.

Building on earlier work by van Gennep (1960), Victor Turner’s influential explorations of liminality (1967; 1970) focused on ritual processes of transition—rites of passage—between one status and another, such as between childhood and adulthood, pregnancy and childbirth, life and death. Liminality is multidimensional and can relate to individuals or groups, to particular periods of time, or to specific places (Thomassen, 2009). Focusing on individuals, “liminal entities,” Turner writes, “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (1970: 359). For young people, this “structural invisibility” (Turner, 1967: 96) may contribute to their marginalization and exclusion, or provide a certain degree of freedom to leverage the ambiguity of their status to carve out opportunities for exploration, autonomy, and agency (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen, 2019; Matthews, 2003; Skelton, 2010; Wood, 2016). Indeed, some scholars have recently explored the generative potential of young people’s liminality for action in the context of their “everyday politics” (Wood, 2012: 337; Hadfield & Christensen, 2019), or argued for the ways in

which young people’s liminal status may allow them to “meld” what is often distinguished as big-P versus small-p politics (Skelton, 2010).

We frame the analysis that follows conceptually with reference to the distinction between “actualizing” and “dutiful” orientations to citizenship and civic and political action (Bennett et al., 2011) and to young people’s structural liminality—“betwixt and between” (V. Turner, 1967) childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy, subject and citizen—and its influence on their experience of citizenship and engagement. As we will see, young people’s liminality goes beyond their stage in the life course—no longer child nor fully adult²—to reflect a sense of their liminal position in the polity, society, and community. While this provides some opportunity to exercise agency, it also generates significant frustration on the part of young people, caught between being labeled as either problem or promise, occasionally solicited for their input but often without a sense of impact, and caught between promises of empowerment and experiences of social control.

Data and Methods

The analysis presented here is grounded in a multilevel contextual analysis and comparative case study design. Contextual analysis included a review of policy frameworks and mechanisms at the supranational, national, and subnational levels and focused on policies, organizational environments, and strategies to engage marginalized young people in each of our focal cities. While there are more similarities than differences in policy impetus and emphasis across the three contexts, policies in the Republic of Ireland have a more explicit rights orientation and a greater emphasis on cross-governmental alignment, a “whole child” focus, and significant emphasis on consultations to incorporate youth voice into policymaking processes. In England, the government policy emphasis is more centrally on promoting volunteerism and

social cohesion, preventing antisocial behavior, and incorporating youth perspectives in order to ensure “youth proofing” of policies (HM Government 2011: Ministerial Foreword). In Northern Ireland, there is a greater emphasis on supporting youth work in tandem with the education system, promoting engagement toward cross-community understanding and peace, and some state support for consultation through youth councils. Both England and Northern Ireland have a particular focus on so-called NEETs—those not in employment, education, or training—and promoting their engagement in the workforce. These differences have some bearing on the number and kinds of opportunities for participation that are available to young people but, as we will see, other aspects of context—local politics, community dynamics, economic stratification, ethnic identity and dynamics—have a more direct influence on young people’s perspectives and experiences.

Research also included extensive fieldwork conducted over a period of 18 months in 2016 and 2017 in the three cities, including 66 key informant interviews with public officials and practitioners (leaders of youth organizations, youth workers, and youth activists), observation in neighborhoods and youth programs, and a total of 28 focus groups with young people across the three cities. Focus groups were designed to elicit the perspectives and experiences of young people and their ideas about citizenship, civic and political action, young people’s role in society, and their perspectives on state and voluntary-sector efforts to promote their civic and political engagement.

While drawing on the range of data collected, the analysis presented here focuses in particular on conversations with young people in the focus group discussions. Each group comprised between about 6 and 12 young people, although a few groups were somewhat larger or smaller. Participants were all between 14 and 25 years of age, but the age range of any given

group was much narrower, with few participants under 16 and most between 16 and 21. All focus group participants were recruited by the organization or participatory body with which they had some association, and members of each group knew one another at least by virtue of their mutual involvement in that organization. All but seven focus groups were comprised entirely of young people from working-class and socially marginalized backgrounds. In Dublin, these included young people connected to community-based youth organizations in working-class neighborhoods (Ballymun, Blanchardstown, and the Canal Communities) and, in two cases, those engaged in programs targeted to specific marginalized youth, Travellers and young people aging out of care. In Belfast, focus groups included young people associated primarily with community-based organizations in West Belfast and Shankill (both working-class areas on either side of the sectarian divide) as well as young people participating in two separate ex-offender programs. In London, working-class participants were principally connected to community-based organizations in the city's East End and a couple of the city's other more ethnically diverse working-class areas (Waltham Forest and Brent). Groups participating in state-supported efforts like youth councils and some youth advisory groups (whether organized through state or voluntary sector efforts) included both working- and middle-class young people, and, in London, included some racioethnic diversity. The seven groups that reflected this composition included the Dublin City Youth Council (*Comhairle na nÓg*), the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, two groups connected with Young Mayors in London, and two youth advisory groups in London, one sponsored by a local authority and one voluntary-sector group focused on providing feedback and youth perspectives on a large development project.

This distribution reflects the kinds of young people that different organizations and strategies have been able to engage. This range, and the ways in which young people sorted into

different groups, provide what amounts in most cases to affinity groups of young people, allowing for the consideration of variation in perspective and experience based on young people's structural position (e.g., working or middle class, ethnicity, system involved) and relative nature of engagement. Participants in formal deliberative forums (youth councils, forums, and advisory groups) could be characterized overall as reflective of Bang's "expert citizens"—using their "knowledge, skills, and strategic judgement to influence others" (Li & Marsh, 2008: 250), but within the context of adult-sponsored, formally constituted participatory mechanisms. But they are not bound to this orientation and are also often engaged in more informal, relational, and unsupervised civic and political action. Members of youth clubs and participants in community organizations include young people actively engaged in more self-generated informal action (from consumer advocacy to petitioning to protest) or similar activities supported by their youth club, but they also include some young people who might be better described, in Li and Marsh's (2008) typology, as nonparticipants for the most part. For these youths, their affiliation with a youth club is not driven by (or at least was not initially driven by) an interest in civic and political action so much as by an interest in socializing, recreation, or receiving support in their schoolwork or search for employment. But their presence at and involvement in these organizations often led to more explicit interest and participation in civic and political (with a small "p") activities. A determining factor here seems to be the extent that youth workers at the organizations with which they were involved were intentional about engaging young people in critical discussion of civic and political issues and supported them in organizing community development or organizing activities.

Overall there was more commonality than variation across groups on major themes, but we point out particular variations in perspective that can be attributed to young people from

different backgrounds, places, and experiences where patterns of such variation are clear. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by the first author and were guided by open-ended instruments that invited respondents to share their perspectives on a range of topics. For the youth focus groups, this included how they view themselves as civic and political actors, how they engage with civic and political systems, how their circumstances (identity, community, socioeconomic status, etc.) shape their engagement, how effective they believe approaches to promoting their engagement are, and how they see the role of state and civil society organizations in their lives. Interviews and focus groups were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically using the NVivo software package for qualitative data analysis. Analytic memos were also constructed for each focus group discussion. Each memo distilled young people's perspectives on a set of issues discussed during the conversations, including their perspectives on the most important issues facing their communities, how they believe young people are viewed by people in power and society as a whole, the degree to which they believe that young people are listened to and heard by government and other decisionmakers in their lives, their views on citizenship and political and civic action, the opportunities and barriers they face to engagement, the sources of information they rely on, and what actions and strategies could better support youth engagement. Memos also accounted for the degree of agreement or divergence of stated opinion among members of the group.

Findings: Young People's Perspectives

We turn now to explore young people's perspectives, focusing in particular on three broad themes. The first concerns young people's orientations to citizenship and civic and political engagement, the extent to which they believe they have a "voice" and are taken seriously by decisionmakers, and the reasons they believe their participation is important. The

second theme focuses on young people’s perspectives on the opportunities that exist for them to engage civically and politically, including those provided through policy provisions. Finally, the third theme concerns young people’s perspectives on the barriers and challenges to promoting effective youth engagement.

Orientations towards citizenship and civic and political engagement

Young people had a range of ideas about the meaning of citizenship and the ways in which they could engage in civic and political life. When asked what citizenship means to them, young people tended to initially focus on a formal definition of citizenship as membership in a political and civic community grounded in one’s nationality, but even this definition is not completely straightforward. For some young people in Belfast, for example, claiming national identity was complicated by the complexity of the Northern Irish context—including its status as a subsidiary national jurisdiction within the United Kingdom and the enduring legacy of sectarian strife. This led to some discussion about whether young people saw themselves as Irish, or British, or Northern Irish, or whether the question of nationality was central to the idea at all. Similarly, some young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in London sought to balance their formal citizenship as members of a political community with recognition of a kind of dual identity that acknowledged membership in both British society and in their ethnic community. Ultimately, across cities, young people were inclined to view citizenship as fundamentally about identity and connection with civic, social, and political dimensions. Citizenship was seen as tied to belonging, to getting involved, to “being a part of society,” as a working-class young person in Belfast put it.

Enacting citizenship

Young people recognized several ways of enacting citizenship through both formal and informal means and reflecting both “dutiful” and “actualizing” dimensions, to use Bennett’s terminology. This includes simply “being aware” and contributing in “little ways,” as a young person in London phrased it, including signing e-petitions or participating in substantive discussion on important issues. It also includes more active engagement, through volunteering and community projects, for example, and through voting (for those of age) and participating in demonstrations and public protests. Young people sometimes made a distinction between civic and political action, noting that many community projects, for example, which often focus on service-oriented volunteering or, in Belfast in particular, engaging in cross-community sport as a way to promote “good relations,” should not be considered political acts. Most, however, took a much broader view of political action. As a working-class young man involved in the Northern Ireland Youth Forum put it, “Everything we do is political; everything we do in our eyes is defined by politics.”

But when discussing explicitly political action, young people most often emphasized the act of voting, while recognizing that young people under 18 do not have the right to vote (an issue to which we’ll return) and that many young people in their late teens and early twenties choose not to vote. As we will see, this is less a reflection of apathy than of alienation (cf. Collin, 2015; Farthing, 2010; Marsh et al., 2007). They also stressed, in contrast to the emphasis of many government officials, the importance of involvement in protest and direct action. Indeed, almost all of the groups of young people with whom we spoke stressed the importance of public demonstrations as a legitimate and useful avenue for political action. As a working-class young woman of Afro-Caribbean descent in London expressed it:

Being politically active is to stand out and speak about oppression and you advocate for your rights. . . . It's all about challenging the problems in your society or problems that we face.

Thus, while recognizing more “dutiful” forms of citizen engagement like voting, many had greater faith in direct, and sometimes contentious, forms of engagement.

Rights, status, and liminality

This broad orientation towards belonging and involvement was explicitly connected to the question of *rights*—the right to participate, to “be heard.” That said, young people were generally skeptical about the extent to which rights were equally available and equally protected for all members of society. This was a theme most explicitly explored by young people in London, particularly those from economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds. “Rights are an illusion,” as one young man put it.

Overall, young people expressed the belief that they were not seen as full and equal members of society or their communities (cf. Hart, 2009; Milbourne, 2009). As a young (white, middle-class, male) person in Dublin framed this liminal status: “We’re numbers in a grid to the government at the moment. We’re just an egg cooking; we haven’t reached our potential, so we’re useless.”

The idea that young people are not taken seriously by decisionmakers in government and school, for example, or by adults in society more broadly, was common across our discussions with young people and reflects prior scholarship critical of the disengagement paradigm. To some, this was seen to be rooted in a perception of young people as lacking knowledge, or experience, or seriousness. Other young people, however, particularly those from disadvantaged and (in London) ethnic minority backgrounds, expressed a view that they were not merely

dismissed because of their youth but because of stereotypes that labeled them as antisocial or even dangerous—problems to be addressed rather than citizens to be engaged. A young man from a working-class neighborhood in Belfast, for example, noted that youth like him “get the full brunt of ‘Aye, see them ones, just forget about them, them ones are all a waste of space.’”

These societal orientations towards young people contribute to the extent to which they believe they have a voice in decisions that affect them. Young people across the three cities consistently expressed the belief that they were generally not listened to or, when given the opportunity to provide input and make their perspectives and priorities known, their input was frequently not taken into account (cf. Collin, 2015). Young people who were engaged in formal deliberative forums like youth councils recognize that there have been some governmental and voluntary-sector efforts to change on this front, though many questioned whether these efforts were genuine or symbolic, or geared more toward social control than empowerment. This reflects the kind of perceived liminality outlined above; occasionally courted for their input but without a sense of efficacy. As a young working class male involved in the Northern Ireland Youth Forum in Belfast put it:

I think that, like decisionmakers and stuff are at least trying to make it look like they are [listening to us], but whether they actually are or whether it’s just sort of like the tokenistic thing, we don’t actually know.

Young people’s perspectives, several groups noted, are more likely to be heard and (perhaps) taken into account if they are from a middle-class background and if they are connected with a recognized group, whether a youth organization in their community or a formal deliberative forum like a youth council. The perspective that socioeconomic status contributes to influence was shared both by working-class youth and those active in more diverse (and middle-

class dominated) forums like youth councils. They also noted that not all young people have the opportunity to engage, a point emphasized by young people across groups and cities. As a (middle-class, white, female) member of a youth advisory group in London that included participants from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds pointed out:

Us sitting around this table right now are in a very fortunate position, because we are currently standing on a platform where we can voice our opinions and all our friends' and youth clubs' opinions. If we are still saying that we're not being heard enough, imagine those who aren't even given the opportunity to speak.

The importance of youth contribution

While generally of the belief that their perspectives are not taken seriously, young people across groups argued that their voice and perspectives are critical and should be taken more into account by decisionmakers in local institutions, like schools, and by government overall. Their stated rationale for the importance of their engagement falls largely into three sets of ideas. First, and most prevalent, is the notion that young people “are the future” and will be the most impacted by decisions made today. As a working-class young woman in Belfast noted:

It's our future. It's us that are going to have to deal with all the problems, and we deal with problems on a daily basis now, so we know what's going on and what needs to happen to stop it all or to help them to progress to better things in the future.

This comment includes both a rights orientation (“it's our future”) and an emphasis on instrumental impact. In their view, both their lived experience and relative proximity to many of the issues that need to be addressed (“we see what's going on,” as a working-class young man in Dublin put it), on the one hand, and their relative open-mindedness and connection to a changing world, on the other, lend them a particularly important perspective that decisionmakers need to

take into account. This is a clear rebuke to the notion of young people’s liminal status as “apprentice citizens” (Coleman, 2008: 191) or “political subjects ‘in-waiting’” (Skelton, 2010: 146); their knowledge and experience as citizens now, not just as citizens-in-the-making, needs to be embraced for both present and future impact. Older people, they claim, are often out of touch with current circumstance, mired in the routine of work and daily life, and distant from the issues that are most central to the concerns of young people and likely to affect them in the future. Different issues were presented by young people to illustrate this disjunction with reference to what was going on in their particular contexts at the time. For London youth it was Brexit, in Dublin the constitutional referendum on marriage equality, and in Belfast the enduring legacy of sectarian conflict.

Finally, some young people (particularly in Dublin) noted the developmental benefits of youth engagement. They suggested that engaging young people in deliberation, decision making, and civic and political action gives them a foundation for and a pathway to more effective engagement in the future, as well as important influence today—“a starting point to allow more young people to have a voice,” in the words of one working-class young man in Dublin.

Opportunities for civic and political engagement

In discussing the various ways in which they are able to engage in civic and political life, young people noted both specific opportunities for engagement and specific challenges and constraints. Regarding opportunity, young people focused primarily on four major avenues for engagement: youth clubs and community work, youth councils and forums, the use of social media, and public protests and demonstrations. Their knowledge of and orientations to these options largely reflect the nature of their own participation and the contexts in which it takes place. The first two of these are reflected in and supported by youth policies, though there is in

general a larger emphasis on deliberative forums and consultations with youth (reflecting a preference for activities that promote “dutiful” citizens and seek to leverage young people as, in effect, “expert citizens,” to use Bang’s [2005] term). Funding for youth clubs (and youth work more broadly) has been significantly cut across the three jurisdictions, a fact that runs afoul of most young people’s preferences. Indeed, youth clubs and community organizations were the most-often mentioned opportunity for engagement, and are the principal mechanism through which many of the young people we talked with became engaged in the first place. As a young female participant (white, working-class) in London noted:

I’m pretty sure that’s how every single one of us got started. . . . Without my youth club I probably wouldn’t have been this engaged in like society and in politics and in actually understanding and raising my voice.

Youth clubs and creative liminality

Youth clubs and community organizations were seen by young people to play a number of crucial roles. They provide safe space and access to both peers and supportive adults, and a place to discuss important topics in a context in which—in contrast to school, for example— young people are “treated more like an adult,” in the words of one working-class Belfast youth. In this way, youth clubs can to some extent address young people’s sense of liminality by placing them at the center and providing a flexible context for exploration. Much of what happens in many youth clubs and community centers is highly informal, providing a space to “hang out” and enjoy recreational activities, on the one hand, and to receive support for personal and social development and on pragmatic issues like job-search preparation and counselling, on the other. Given this, some young people were more dismissive of youth clubs’ role in promoting effective and substantive civic and political engagement as compared to youth councils and

forums, which provide an explicit opportunity for deliberation and decision making. But most credited youth clubs with providing an important foundation for broader engagement—getting young people “out of trouble,” as a working-class Muslim young man in London put it, and providing deliberative opportunities through discussion sessions and shaping social action projects in the community. As a working-class young woman in Dublin put it:

It’s a creative space as well, and the youth workers are trained to, like, listen to young people and treat them as equals and all that kind of thing.

In this way, youth clubs can act as a kind of generative, liminal space in much the same way that Hugh Matthews argues for the street as a liminal “thirdspace” for young people, “a place of separation and a domain of transition” (Matthews, 2003: 102).

Although engagement in voluntary associations such as youth clubs can certainly act as “political socialization agents” (Quintelier, 2015), for such organizations to provide effective support for active engagement in civic and political life requires intentionality. This includes providing opportunities for critical discussion, drawing on young people’s experiences and current concerns, cultivating analysis of the relationship between these circumstances and the social, economic, and political processes and structures that shape them, and providing opportunities for concrete action. These range from what are often referred to as “citizenship projects” or “community work,” to conducting action-oriented research to assess and shape responses to a particular community problem, to organizing and mobilizing direct actions and advocacy campaigns.

In addition to the more general role that youth clubs and community organizations play, specific programmatic interventions were also noted as of particular value for promoting engagement among specific youth populations. For example, young people involved in a

restorative justice program in Belfast, an organization supporting young people aging out of care in Dublin, and a youth advisory group for ex-offenders in London credit these programs with increasing their knowledge about and interest in civic and political action. Not all such interventions are likely to have this effect, and the success of these particular programs in this regard was grounded in the intentionality and proclivities of the youth workers running the programs to engage them in this way.

Deliberative forums and policy consultation

A second important opportunity recognized by many of the young people with whom we spoke are the kinds of deliberative forums provided by youth councils and the like. These kinds of structures were recognized as extant opportunities by young people across the three cities, though unsurprisingly most often noted by participants in them. Indeed, many young people in the groups we spoke with in disadvantaged communities were unaware of their existence, and those who were aware, while generally supportive, also raised the caution that they were more likely to engage young people from middle-class backgrounds or high achievers who are more likely to participate in any case. These were observations shared by forum participants and nonparticipants alike, and was a common critique among many professionals in both the voluntary and statutory sectors as well (cf. Collin, 2015; Turkie, 2010). A middle-class young woman participating in one such group in London, for example, argues that “if you utilize it properly then it can be an invaluable tool for the young to be heard on a proper big scale, make changes.” Others, however, were concerned about the extent to which deliberative forums and youth consultation procedures are essentially a “rubber stamp” or empty ritual.

Self-generated action and activism

Beyond the opportunities provided through policy efforts and organizational provision, young people noted opportunities available to them through their own actions in more informal ways. One such opportunity is through social media as a communication tool and potential mechanism for mobilizing social action among peers. This is much in line with recent scholarship focusing on digital technology as a mediating mechanism for youth participation and “e-citizenship” (Coleman, 2008; Collin, 2015). References to the potential of social media were made across cities, but most frequently by the young people we spoke with in London. As one (working class, white, male) put it:

I’d say social media is a very strong tool these days, and I’d say most young people express themselves that way. . . . I don’t think you have to make a strong argument, I just think you have to make a lot of noise, and then people will respond.

That said, young people were also aware of the double-edged nature of social media: a potentially potent tool for communicating and mobilizing others to action, but also a source of faulty information that can create barriers to effective engagement. “There’s more bad than good on it,” as a working-class young man in Belfast put it.

Finally, as noted above, many young people we spoke with invoked the possibility of engaging in public demonstrations as an important opportunity to make their voice heard and engage actively in political life, both “giving hope” and inspiring others to stand up and take action as well. As a working-class Muslim young woman in London put it:

When you’re collectively in those marches, it doesn’t matter what social background you come from, what your ethnic group is. It’s the fact that you’re all standing up for the same thing, and I think things like that give a sense of humanity and hope for everyone.

Mobilization around the marriage equality act in Dublin and in response to cuts to Youth Service funding in London and Belfast were important examples of this that young people invoked, clearly reflecting the ways in which they can make themselves heard as political actors and contribute to broader social causes as political equals in the world. But young people also cautioned that their engagement in public displays of political action such as protests can be misconstrued, reflecting their liminality and marginalization as citizens and leading the state to react by combatting “antisocial behavior” in response to dissent (Pickard, 2019). Young people in several groups we spoke with in London, in particular, referred to the (still relevant) aftermath of the 2011 disturbances in England and noted the importance of distinguishing between riots and protest. They debated whether what were largely described in the media as “youth riots” in 2011 were actually driven by bored youth causing trouble or should be seen as a form of political rebellion in response to austerity and frustration at the fact that young people aren’t being given “basic things that young people should have,” as one white, working class young man put it.

Barriers to engagement

While young people recognized specific opportunities available for engagement, they were also clear about a range of barriers and challenges. Four issues were among the most commonly identified: a lack of trust in decisionmakers and people in power, particularly politicians; alienation among young people and insufficient incentive to engage; insufficient knowledge and education to engage effectively; and differential opportunities for engagement, particularly for those from economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Politicians and the political system

In line with the findings of much recent research (e.g., Collin, 2015; Farthing, 2010; Marsh et al., 2008; Pickard, 2019; Sloam, 2007), a lack of trust in politicians was common

among young people across cities, and was especially strongly stated among working-class young people in Belfast and London. This dynamic is grounded both in the sense that politicians are out of touch and largely unconcerned with the priorities, challenges, and issues most salient to young people, and in the belief that when they do engage with young people they do so cynically and episodically, when it suits their political needs—to “tick their box on youth involvement” as one middle-class young man in London put it. But young people also noted the distance between people in power and the people they represent, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a working-class young woman of Afro-Caribbean descent in London observed:

I don't feel like there's anything you can specifically say to them to make them understand; sometimes you just need to get people to live these certain circumstances. You try living off fifty pounds a week, tell me how you do it, because you spend fifty pounds on bloody black cabs.

Alienation

Although it was recognized that some youths may simply not be interested because their attention was elsewhere—“they'd worry more about their social lives, stuff you normally do than, like, politics and all that,” as a middle-class Dublin youth noted—young people across cities connected the lack of engagement more to alienation and the absence of incentive to engage since it is likely to be futile, unlikely to change things, a waste of time. The fact that those under 18 years old are not entitled to vote was a significant issue for young people across cities and contributes, in their view, to young people's distancing from formal political processes, since without the vote what incentive is there for politicians to listen? As a working-class young man in Belfast put it:

I think when young people aren't even allowed to vote until they're eighteen, and yet they can work at sixteen, they can have sex at sixteen—you know, there's a lot of things they can do, but they're told, "Oh, but you're not allowed to vote till you're eighteen." I think that's where there's a conflict.

As Skelton (2010: 145) notes, "States perceive young people as competent, responsible and liable in some contexts (often in relation to criminal responsibility), but as incompetent, irresponsible and unreliable in others." This again reflects their liminality as citizens, provided with some rights and duties but not others. But even among young people eligible to vote, many expressed a lack of faith in its ultimate importance. As a middle-class young man in London noted, "I think there's a general consensus that your vote doesn't count, and I think that's just been accepted across young people."

Young people also discussed disincentives to engagement due to family, or community, or peer pressures. This was primarily articulated by more marginalized youth across the three cities. In Belfast, this was raised in the context of family or community dynamics and a kind of ossified political culture grounded in the legacy of the Troubles, especially in working-class neighborhoods. As a working-class young woman in Belfast noted:

Because especially in my area, I am going to join Belfast Youth Forum, and I was always very scared that if I give my views, my family and my people would disown me. I'm Protestant, and I used to support the Irish Language Act. But if I said that in my community, people would be at my door.

In Dublin and London, young people from working-class backgrounds were more likely to talk about peer pressure and fear of rejection, the fact that participation might lead to being "looked down upon" or "you could be slagged for it," as two young people in Dublin noted, or

that “young people find it hard to talk because people downgrade them,” in the words of a London youth.

Education

Beyond these issues, young people in the three cities also noted significant limitations in knowledge, information, and the quality of education to prepare them to be effective, engaged citizens. Much of the critique on this front focused on the education system and the ways in which schools address political and citizenship education. As a working-class young woman in Dublin noted:

There wasn't really enough education relating to current events, like actual politics that was going on and everything, like it was only one year for CSPE [Civic, Social, and Political Education], and like, we only learned a little bit and then after that it was gone, so we didn't care really about it.

In Dublin, several young people also complained of an outsized focus on religion in schools and, to some extent, on historical rather than contemporary political topics. In Belfast, young people noted the problems of a segregated school system and political bias in the curriculum in which, for example, students in Protestant schools “get taught about British history but they don't get taught about Irish or even Northern Irish history.” In London, young people critiqued the short shrift that political education receives in school, the lack of a focus on critical analysis in favor of teaching to the exam, and the stark differences in education in private versus public schools. In the words of one working-class London youth of Afro-Caribbean descent:

Rich people send their kids to private schools because they get taught to lead, and most of us working-class kids get sent to school and learn a routine, and so we get taught to be

led. . . . That makes such a huge difference to how we all grow up and leave school and what we think our role in society is, really.

Opportunity

Finally, young people across cities noted the relative paucity of opportunities for engagement, particularly given cuts to funding for the youth service, and especially the challenges of differential opportunity for engagement based on class, ethnicity, or other forms of disadvantage. As a London youth (white, female, middle class) explained, with specific reference to the Youth Parliament:

I think the whole point of it was to try get the young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get involved in politics, but when you look at Parliament, it's like . . . if you look at some of the young people that get elected, they're not your typical, like young people who are actually disadvantaged.

For those involved in these kinds of youth councils, government-sponsored forums, and consultative bodies, the challenge of representing the young people for whom they were selected or elected to speak is also notable. As a (white, middle-class, male) member of a youth advisory board connected with the Young Mayor in one London borough put it:

Look how many [of us] there are. There's a few of us and we are representing the whole of [this borough]. I think it's a stressful task, because we're only a small sample, and most of us are friends and things like that, so we use each other's experiences to help us, but then—I'm not gonna lie, I can't say that we do represent the whole of [the community].

In some sense this reflects another dimension of liminality, though of a different sort, with engaged young people in some contexts sitting “betwixt and between” the state and the

community of young people for whom they are presumed to speak, but with ambiguous connection and legitimacy.

Discussion and Implications

Young people's perspectives on their real and potential role as active citizens and on the opportunities and barriers to civic and political engagement they face—in light or in spite of the policies that seek to create or support such opportunities—are instructive for reflecting on, and reconsidering, policies and practice orientations with the aim of promoting their engagement. Young people's perspectives on these issues reflect, to a large extent, the kinds of justifications behind policies that seek to promote their civic and political engagement and the literature discussed above, but emphasize in particular belonging and inclusion, their right to participate as democratic citizens, and a focus on social justice over the more psychosocial arguments regarding the benefits to youth development and social support. They stressed that citizenship is grounded in a sense of belonging and identity and in a fundamental right to participation, although they were critical of the extent to which these rights are extended to youth, particularly those from more marginalized backgrounds. They expressed strong belief in the value of their participation and input—as representatives of “the future” who are also keyed into the problems of today in ways that are not mired in old problem definitions and solutions. This orientation champions a view that young people should be viewed as citizens today, not just citizens-in-the-making, and that efforts need to be made to counter societal perceptions of youth—especially working-class and minority youth—as problems rather than sources of strength (Kennelly, 2011; Hart, 2009). But they have little faith in the current structure of governance or that they're taken seriously when they are engaged. They recognize that opportunities to enact citizenship exist, both through participation in formal processes and organizations and through informal action,

including activism and protest. This latter focus is in contrast to the emphasis of most programs, particularly government-sponsored efforts, that seek to promote their engagement. They recognize the value of formal mechanisms of engagement like youth councils but also note their limitations as being too exclusive, controlled, and symbolic. They have faith in the potential of youth clubs and community voluntary organizations to provide a foundation for promoting critical thinking and meaningful engagement and believe that these organizations are too little supported, especially in the context of funding cuts to the youth services across the three cities. In this way, they recognize both “dutiful” and “actualizing” orientations to citizenship, reflecting Collin’s suggestion that these kinds of dichotomous conceptualizations of citizenship “may not be distinct political identities, but rather, different subject positions which individuals adopt according to the issue, context, resources at their disposal and strategic value of engagement” (2019: 127). They express a fundamental lack of trust in politicians and in the system—including the failure of schools to provide robust education contributing to their capacity to act as effective, active citizens—but see the possibility of reform through both curricular change and expanding the franchise by lowering the voting age (cf. Henn & Foard, 2014).

What are some of the implications of these perspectives? In conclusion, and in brief, we suggest four potential responses that are specifically informed by the lived experience and perspectives of young people. First, in response to their concerns that participatory opportunities were more likely taken advantage of by the relatively well-off and accomplished, we suggest the need for *expanded outreach efforts* to engage more marginalized youths. This includes support for detached youth work, in which youth workers are dispatched to, and spend significant time in, the informal spaces where vulnerable and marginalized young people spend their time—on the streets, in parks, at cafes, pubs, sporting venues, and the institutional settings in which some

are isolated, such as care homes, detention centers, and prisons. It also includes increased support for the kinds of open-access, youth-friendly spaces—youth clubs, community centers, youth cafes, and the like—that provide the opportunity for young people to connect with peers and supportive adults in their communities and to deliberate and engage around issues important to them, in their own time, and on their own terms.

Second, we suggest rethinking the role of and approach to citizenship education in schools through a partnership approach with young people (Bessant et al., 2016). Young people were virtually unanimous about the failures of the school system to educate them on basic information about the workings of government, the importance of civic and political engagement, the capacity to critically analyze and act independently as effective citizens, and basic engagement with current events and their importance—understanding “what’s going on in the world,” as a working-class young man of Afro-Caribbean descent in London put it. As Bessant et al. (2016) argue, civic education in schools should be co-designed with young people rather than starting from the standpoint that teachers and policy makers already know what kinds of knowledge and skills are needed to help students “become good citizens” (2016: 271). Such an approach could help address some the aspects of school functioning that alienate or constrain youth engagement, such as an outsized emphasis on formality and social control, particularly in schools that serve working-class and minority youth. And it would focus not just on seeking to create “dutiful” citizens who vote, but “engaged” citizens in the broader sense. Indeed, as Manning and Edwards (2014) found in their systematic review of the impact of civic education on young people’s political participation, little evidence exists that civic education increases actual voting or voting registration but it is more likely to foster “habits of political expression” (2014: 42). A co-designed, practicum-oriented curriculum in schools, for example, where

classroom learning is connected to workshops, projects, and campaigns, can help ground educational content in concrete action. Such an educational project should be grounded in critical pedagogy (e.g., Bessant et al., 2014)—allowing young people to question and shape what citizenship means in contemporary society—rather than simply seeking to have them embrace normative expectations of citizenship values and behavior (cf. Hart, 2009; Wallace, 2001). Voluntary-sector organizations may play an important role in shaping and supporting the action-end of this continuum.

Third, we need to further challenge normative assumptions that young people are disengaged from politics and attend to—and support—the many ways they can (and many do) effectively engage as citizens. This includes participating in public (and private) debates, disseminating information on key social issues, promulgating or signing online petitions, participating in local organizations and community projects, engaging in consumer advocacy, and taking part in social movement and advocacy campaigns—as well as voting in formal elections. Doing so can help make clear that civic and political engagement is multifaceted and normative, embedded in everyday life, and that young people are central—not liminal—participants. With regard to voting, we also believe it is worth considering extending the franchise to young people 16 years of age and older (cf. Hart and Atkins, 2011). While voting is but one important (if limited) way to engage as citizens, the bright line demarcating full citizenship as represented by the right to vote creates a false barrier between youth and citizenship, underscoring and reproducing their liminality as citizens. And, to the extent the determination of the age of enfranchisement is seen as arbitrary and disempowering, as the young people we spoke with suggest, it creates a disincentive for engagement in formal political processes among youth even as they reach the age of majority.

Finally, there are fundamental limitations to policies seeking to promote youth civic and political engagement that need to be addressed beyond the boundaries of participatory schemes that engage them. The day-to-day lives of marginalized youth and those living in disadvantaged circumstances, in particular, needs more attention. Young people today face significant challenges that need to be addressed if they are to have the opportunity to perform as, and receive the benefits of, full and equal members of society (Bessant et al., 2017). Beyond promulgating participatory opportunities for consultation, deliberation, volunteerism, and social action—all of which are important—attention needs to be paid to the structural inequalities that shape disadvantage and constrain participation among the most marginalized. This includes equity in the distribution of resources, access to high-quality education, opportunities for social and economic mobility, and addressing institutionalized discriminatory practices that put young people who are poor, from racioethnic minority backgrounds, living with disabilities, experiencing homelessness, in care, or involved in the justice system, for example, at significant disadvantage and close them off from the opportunities that do exist to be meaningfully engaged in civic and political life.

Notes

¹ This is based on a broad review of policy framework documents and reports from the United Nations, European Union, and national government sources in the three focal countries. Among the policy frameworks examined were the UN's *World Programme of Action for Youth*; *An EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering*; Ireland's *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*; Northern Ireland's *Priorities for Youth*; and the UK's *Positive for Youth* and *National Citizens Service* (Authors, 2018).

² To some extent this is true even of the older young people (over 18) in our sample, given the generally acknowledged extension of the transition to adulthood (Setterson et al., 2005).

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