

Nurturing the political agency of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand

Amanda Hay, Vincent Wijesingha and Nicky Stanley-Clarke, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Young people's voices are often coloured by past experiences with significant others in their lives, such as parents, friends, peers, and teachers. These experiences can have long-lasting effects on their beliefs about their capabilities, place, value, and identity in society. This qualitative-exploratory research explored the development of young people's political agency through social and political activism to provide further understanding around how and why young people politically engage to better nurture their political agency.

METHOD: A small, qualitative-exploratory Master's research project explored young peoples' experiences of political participation and how these affected their political agency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with six politically active young people and analysed thematically to identify four key themes.

FINDINGS: The research found that young people's understandings of the political world were inconsistent with widespread beliefs about their ability to contribute. The participants in this study were actively engaged in activities within broad civic and political contexts around issues of significance to them. The research also found that social contexts, access to political experiences, and connection to social and political issues were critical in nurturing their political agency.

CONCLUSION: The findings suggest formal political institutions frame young people's participation differently. They also advocate a cultural shift in civic and political settings to consistently provide genuine space for young people's active participation.

KEYWORDS: Political participation; political agency; social and political activism; young people.

Support for young people's active participation in political arenas is often hindered by the adult-led political world, pre-existing discourses of their apathy and disengagement from formal politics, and views of their developmental capabilities (Breeze et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2019). This context shapes the experiences of young people in social and political activism, regulating their participatory rights and overlooking their contributions in wider contexts. Today, young people are

embracing new ways of communicating and expressing their agency through digital technology and global movements that are relevant to their everyday lives. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the role of social media in youth political socialisation can be seen through young people's engagement in protest for global climate change concerns and the Black Lives Matter movement (Nissen, 2019). These new ways of engaging challenge traditional understandings of political participation.

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Amanda Hay
amandapayne610@gmail.com

An individual's perception of their ability to influence political processes and government decisions is important for nurturing political agency (Beaumont, 2011). Political agency is not just about the individual, but concern the sociocultural and political settings that surround them, and it is these contexts that have the power to shape conditions for change (Allen, 2011). As the social construction of young people's political identity influences their understandings of their participatory rights in political settings, the way that adult-led civic and political contexts engage with, and involve, youth is crucial for them to feel that their voices matter in the political world. Discriminatory lines of exclusion such as adult-only powers in decision-making processes in these contexts decreases their beliefs that society is fair and government institutions trustworthy (Flanagan, 2013). This includes tokenistic attempts to involve young people and the use of divisive political policies and tools—for example, age restrictions, and youth roles in organisations where there are no genuine outcomes. Research highlights that it is important that participatory opportunities for young people are genuine and meaningful for them to feel heard and that their contributions matter in political decision making (Barbar, 2009; Beaumont, 2011; Boulianne, 2019; Finlay, 2010; Sotkasiira et al., 2010).

This research involved face-to-face, semi-structured interviews which were thematically analysed. It sought to explore how young people are developing their political agency through social and political activism such as volunteering for a community organisation, signing a petition or being a part of a youth group. In doing so, it offers further understanding for policymakers and people working with youth around how and why young people politically engage, and how these experiences serve as a learning platform for their growing political independence.

Literature

The literature highlights that adult-led discourses and political structures have marginalised young people's active participation in political arenas by creating barriers to their participatory opportunities (Breeze et al., 2017; Lister, 2007; Phillips et al., 2019). Undoubtedly, age is a significant identifier in restricting full participatory rights to youth within this context (Lister, 2007). The social and political constructs that shape the context in which young people are learning to become political focus on formal political participation such as voting as a measure of their engagement (Henn & Foard, 2014; Mycock & Tonge, 2012), and do not consider the ways in which they are engaging in informal settings such as civic-minded endeavours like volunteering for a community organisation (Harris et al., 2010; Wood, 2011). These pre-existing discourses and political structures are framed by adult knowledge, beliefs, and values around traditional understandings of young people's capacity to meaningfully contribute as "full citizens" within a political community (Lister, 2007).

There has been movement in international perceptions in neo-liberal and Western societies on the rights of children and young people to be heard that are supported by a growing body of literature and research supporting youthful agency and highlighting the barriers that adult-centric understandings of citizenship, youth, and political engagement have in the political socialisation of young people (Häkli & Kallio, 2018; Lister, 2007, 2008; Phillips et al., 2019; Quintelier, 2015). However, this movement in the acceptance of youthful agency is not always reflected through genuine opportunities for young people to participate in their communities and the political world (Phillips et al., 2019). As, although their rights to express an opinion are upheld, their positioning to enact political change is still frequently defined by the parameters set and led by adults (Bowman, 2019).

It is widely documented that young people are embedded within the settings and relational interactions in their everyday lives and it is through these settings that they are learning to be political and developing their own political agency (Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). These immediate contexts provide multiple factors of political socialisation and meaningful participatory experiences (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Nolas et al., 2017; Quintelier, 2015) such as political talk through everyday interactions at home, in school and in their communities around social and political issues of significance to them that they can connect with through social media or classroom-based activities (Pontes et al., 2019; Seider & Graves, 2020). Broader understandings of political engagement that include these contexts offer accessible opportunities for young people to engage in social and political activism in their everyday lives (Harris et al., 2010; Henn & Foard, 2014; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012).

Civic learning opportunities provide a key role in nurturing the political agency of young people (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Wray-Lake, 2019), and therefore such opportunities among diverse groups need to be identified and socioeconomic disparities reduced (Wray-Lake, 2019). Longitudinal research has documented age-related increases in young people's political efficacy, knowledge, behaviours, and that informal political learning experiences and social relationships with significant others that build up over time provide an important mechanism for more complex political actions (Eckstein et al., 2012; Quintelier, 2015; Zaff et al., 2011). However, these political learning experiences, and opportunities to access them, are not equally distributed and vary across social and cultural groups in society (Wray-Lake, 2019). This affects the political development of marginalised groups who do not hold the power and privilege in society (Flanagan, 2013; Kahne & Maddaugh, 2008). Although this marginalisation creates a barrier for

some young people, for others, experiences of inequality, such as racism, can take on greater meaning to them providing motivation to be involved in making change (Diemer & Rapa, 2016).

The role of social media in young people's political socialisation is an area of growing interest. Recent global student protest around issues of pertinence to young people such as environmental, social, and political concerns both in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas have been facilitated through online platforms, for example, Facebook (Nissen, 2019; Valenzeula., 2014; Xenos et al., 2014). These platforms are having a globalising effect on young people by engaging them in everyday politics within their immediate contexts (Loader et al., 2014; Nissen, 2019). Embracing social media as a tool and broadening traditional adult-led understandings of political engagement to include informal political participation may reduce political inequalities and increase young people's political agency.

The research reported in this article explores young people's perspectives in Aotearoa New Zealand of their experiences in social and political activism. In doing this it aims to provide greater understanding of the context in which youth are learning to engage with and navigate the political world today to better provide them with an environment that will nurture their political agency.

Method

Data for this article were collected as part of a Master of Arts (Social Policy) research project. The research explored the development of young people's political agency through social and political activism. It aimed to do this by:

1. Examining definitions of political agency and political participation.
2. Identifying the ways that young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are engaging through social and political activism.

3. Exploring the ways in which these experiences serve as a learning platform for increasing their political agency.

This was a qualitative-exploratory study involving face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with six young people aged between 16 to 20 years. The six participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach. Young people who had been involved in some form of political participation, formally or informally, were asked to volunteer through an advertisement in local youth community organisations and spaces. All participants were living in a South Island urban community in Aotearoa New Zealand, of which four were residing there for tertiary studies. Although the participants were operating in a regional context and the sample size was small, the findings from this study have proximal similarity, meaning that they may be transferable across similar populations contributing to knowledge building in the area (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Patton, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. This form of interview was chosen to ensure that the complexities of participants' individual experiences and understandings of their political experiences could be explored in depth. Open-ended interview questions were organised around key ideas to guide participants' narration of their political worlds and to enable any unexpected data to be explored in an organic way (O'Leary, 2017). Throughout the interview process, consideration was given to ensuring a supportive and inclusive environment for the participants. The interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient to the participants, and time was given to building rapport with the participants at the beginning of the interview process. Following the interviews, participants were provided with a meal voucher to thank them for their contribution to the research.

Data were also collected through a field journal (alongside the interviews) which

has been retained by the researcher in line with ethical recommendations. This was used to record observations, reflections, and any other information pertinent to the study. It was also an important reflexive tool, enabling the researcher to adopt a conscious position in managing subjectivities by making explicit their worldview to reduce its impact on the research process (O'Leary, 2017).

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and all the participants were given the opportunity to review and correct their transcript. The data were thematically analysed. This involved a manual process of identifying, analysing, recording, and categorising patterns to provide a synthesis of the meanings from the qualitative data (O'Leary, 2017). The first stage in the analysis process involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data by reflecting on the transcribed interview dialogue alongside the field journal's written recordings. Common themes and patterns were then identified in the data using an inductive process that drew out the data from the interview questions within the context of the participants' experiences to organise and identify core themes that could be mapped and verified (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). As the research focused on the understandings of individual participants in social and political activism, this process involved the interpretation of multiple realities and a critical analysis of and management of potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants (O'Leary, 2017). Referring to the field journal through this process provided the researcher with a conscious viewpoint for continuing to manage these subjectivities and for keeping an open mind to alternative explanations from unexpected data.

The study was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Ethical approval number—HEC 21/23). Several steps were taken in the research to authentically gather and accurately represent participants' views to ensure its

trustworthiness (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). It involved a transparent process where the participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, what information was being sought and how it would be used. The participants were given an informed consent form to sign prior to the interview commencing, which included consent being given to the audio-recording and digital transcription of the interview. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained using pseudonyms and by anonymising all identifiable elements from the details and findings of the research.

Findings

This research sought to understand young people's perspectives of their political experiences. There was a clear consensus from participants that political frameworks are not always genuinely engaging with young people and that they do not feel that their contributions are consistently valued. The findings consider the sociocultural and political constructions that young people's understandings of the political world are based on and the impacts of this on the context in which they are learning to navigate the political world. The key findings discussed in this article are:

- Participating young people were involved in social and political activism, formally and informally, around issues of significance to them.
- The social construction of young people's political identity is shaped by adult-led conceptualisations of their ability to meaningfully contribute to society.
- Social contexts play a critical role in the development of young people's political agency.
- Young people's cumulative political experiences in social and political activism in their immediate contexts play a critical role in nurturing their political agency.

The findings are explored in the following four sections.

Participating young people were involved in social and political activism

The first two aims of this research were to examine definitions of *political agency* and *political participation*, and to identify the ways in which young people are participating in social and political activism within Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants' narratives of their engagement with politics reflected a wide range of diverse experiences in different settings. All participants had been involved in the climate change protests either during their time at school or as tertiary students, or both. Two participants had also been involved in Extinction Rebellion's direct action using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on environmental issues in their communities. Three participants had contributed to submissions and been involved in consultation processes for local and central government issues, ranging from local council policy and planning to environmental concerns. Ethan shared his contribution to local council:

I've submitted on the [local council] 10-year plan, both through like a tech submission and in a hearing.

In addition to personally engaging face-to-face, writing submissions, and petitioning, a common vehicle for engagement used by participants was social media platforms such as Facebook groups and petitions and Instagram posting. Anna noted that many of her experiences had been:

Social media driven ... like Instagram sharing posts ... and signing petitions.

The results of this research illustrate that the participants were participating in diverse ways, and that they recognised broader contexts in their communities and educational settings as meaningful and legitimate ways of engaging. This can also be seen illustrated by Isla's understanding of political agency and participation, as being about:

Getting involved in the pressing issues that we have in society, and raising awareness about that, just like being involved in the community.

Participants unanimously agreed that political engagement did not just involve voting in the General Election but:

An engagement with process more so than just voting ... working with groups that influence the process in one way or another, volunteering for a political organisation, even just sharing political views with others, maybe social media, or something. (Peter)

These findings are consistent with contemporary understandings of political engagement which acknowledge the many ways that young people are contributing within their communities (Breeze et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). As research highlights, it is within these informal settings that they are learning to be political, developing increased knowledge, skills, and confidence to articulate their political ideas and develop their own political agency (Breeze et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012).

The social construction of young people's political identity

Young people's understandings of the political world and their place within it are shaped by the social and political constructs surrounding them (Allen, 2011). As adults hold the dominant political views and exercise the most power in civic and political settings, they shape the context in which young people's political agency is developing (Allen, 2011; Lister, 2007). It was evident through participants' narratives of their political experiences that they had a heightened awareness of their participatory rights in the adult-led political world.

Being like a young person, it's kind of like, can I come into this? Do I have

almost like the right to feel like I'm allowed to be in here interacting with these people who have probably got years of experience behind them? (Anna)

Participants expressed a feeling of not really belonging in political spaces due to their experiences of interaction within these settings where they did not feel listened to or equally valued. Isla recalled a comment she had heard that led her to believe that they were not being taken seriously:

Things are different in the real world [and] you guys are snowflakes getting pressed about every issue that's raised.

Peter also recollected an interaction that left him feeling that his voice was not valued where on leaving a local council consultation meeting in which he and a friend had spoken at, they were:

Followed out by this lady [who] came and told us all about how everything we did was wrong and how we should have said it better.

These understandings of their place within the political community clearly illustrate that historical understandings of young people's capacity to meaningfully contribute, and the dominant neo-liberal construction of youth participatory rights in formal political arenas continues to implicitly shape their interactions with adults in political settings. This therefore reinforces their feelings that their contributions are not equally valued.

In addition, this dominant adult-centric culture has implications for how they see their voice as valued and whether they see their engagement as worthwhile in civic and political settings. As Flanagan (2013) highlighted, discriminatory lines of exclusion in civic and political cultures decrease young people's beliefs that society and government institutions are trustworthy. To foster their political agency, the context in which they are learning to be political needs to change to genuinely acknowledge the contribution

that young people can make to society (Häkli & Kallio, 2018; Lister, 2007, 2008; Phillips et al., 2019; Wood, 2011). This can be achieved through a youth-centric approach in which the power and responsibility for decision-making is shared, and that provides a space for young people's active participation and voice in decision-making processes (Barbar, 2009; Finlay, 2010; Sotkasiira et al., 2010).

This study confirms that an important factor in providing a meaningful context for young people's political engagement is the relevance of it to their everyday lives and futures (Beaumont, 2011; Breeze et al., 2017; Häkli & Kallio, 2018; Wray-Lake, 2019). In this study, the Schools Strike for Climate movement provided an opportunity for the participants to become involved in political activism around an environmental concern that was relevant to them and to their futures, and provided conditions where they felt that their contributions had meaning and that their voices were being heard. As stated by Peter, the movement was so successful in mobilising young people by reducing:

... almost all those barriers by just building a movement and having the people come, and that inherently got people along, engaged and interested.

Lived experiences of ethnic and cultural inequalities also provided connection and motivation to social action for two of the participants. Eve shared that some members of her family choose not to vote, and the community environment surrounding her family and childhood influenced her motivations today, giving greater meaning to her engagement:

I come as a Māori person. I've seen injustices, especially in [town]... I do want to go back to [town] and see what we could work on.

Isla's immigrant parents' lack of community and political engagement had also influenced her motivation to connect with likeminded people and to be active in social and political

issues. She reflected on her experience of racism in school:

With racism in my school, where I was the only Chinese person there apart from the international students, it was like I would voice my experiences of racism and people wouldn't understand because they had never been through it.

Research highlights that marginalised experiences of societal inequalities may take on a greater meaning to young people personally and therefore increase the significance of it to them motivating political engagement (Diemer & Rapa, 2016). As these structural barriers were part of the sociocultural context in which the participants' political socialisation developed, they are part of their lived experience providing connection and heightened relevance for them.

A common barrier to political participation identified in the research was the lack of resources and inconsistent support provided within educational facilities. Participants identified whether they had found their schools supportive or not, and in some cases which social and political issues that they were happy for their students to support and those they were not.

For those major issues, yes, my school loved it ... they're like yes get involved in it, be a part of it. But they [were] very conservative when it comes to the LGBTQ community. We wanted to hold a pride day and it was turned down immediately. We were just like really confused and were like why? But they just believed that it wasn't necessary. (Eve)

Participants also identified that there was a lack of classroom experience in civic-related processes and opportunities to practice skills that may be useful for effecting social change and making politics more accessible. Sarah's reflection illustrated those of others when she said that she had not learnt:

... about political aspects of anything ... I wouldn't even know how to vote.

Although Eve shared this sentiment about her high school as well, she did share the experience of being involved in a social action project about a human rights issue through a couple of her classes which had given her knowledge about the political system.

As a context where young people spend a significant amount of time, educational facilities play a huge part in shaping the knowledge of youth in our political system and in how they can interact with it (Pontes et al., 2019). Seider and Graves (2020) emphasised the importance of facilitating real-life experiences of the political system to effect social change in the development of young people's political agency. Eve's positive learning experience at her school involving a social action project illustrates this role that educational facilities can play in providing knowledge of political processes to young people through classroom projects and initiatives such as the youth voting programme, Ngā Pōti ā-Taiohi.

Online social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are increasingly being used by young people to engage with and access social and political activism opportunities such as online petitions (Nissen, 2019; Valenzeula, 2014; Xenos et al., 2014). Although the young people in this study believed social media was a valuable tool in mobilising their engagement and that of others, they also identified that it may be a barrier for marginalised youth groups without access to technology and smartphones.

Social media definitely reaches people like me and educated students and people who have the ability to pay for a phone and such. There's actually a large proportion of youth who work or might not have a smartphone or don't have access to that social media. So, it certainly works well to engage with youth that

they're probably already engaging well with, like myself it easily reaches me no stress but the people to be honest they need to engage with the most are people who don't have social media. (Peter)

Isla and Eve cautioned the influence that social media can have over what issues we are hearing about and are therefore being called to act on. Isla referred to this as "selective activism" whereby social media platforms were promoting some causes over others, identifying the example of the Black Lives Matter movement as having far more coverage than Free Palestine. Eve's concern around this was about the coverage of social and political issues from America over local issues in Aotearoa New Zealand which should be prioritised.

Unique contexts of political development have different cultural strengths and resources available that affect the social construction of young people's political identity (Flanagan, 2013; Wray-Lake, 2019). It is important that strategies to inform the political engagement of young people consider the diverse social and cultural groups in society that they come from and the resources available to them in these contexts. Even though online platforms provide a readily accessible and instant way to communicate with young people, the concern shown by the participants in this study for other young people in the community without access to this resource suggests that it needs to be seen as a tool alongside others to ensure that participatory opportunities are not marginalising some youth groups.

Participants highlighted other barriers to young people's political participation such as time, travel, and access to resources. They identified resources that they had and did not have and how this affected their ability to engage in political activities. For some, time, and the cost of travel on top of their other commitments and expenses created a barrier to their participation. The recurring idea throughout this discussion was that

not all resources are available in the same way to all young people. Research has shown that socioeconomically advantaged young people are more likely to have access to civic learning opportunities than those from lower socioeconomic groups (Kahne & Maddaugh, 2008). Participants' concern for the social and political issues affecting other young people's agency reflected an ability to meaningfully contribute as active members of society inconsistent with adult-led conceptualisations of their ability which have formed the context in which they are learning to navigate the political world, affecting their political agency within this setting, and shaping their political identity.

The critical role of social interactions

It is well documented that social connections and relationships play a crucial role in the development of young people's political agency (Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). The participants identified everyday interactions within their familial, social, educational, and community contexts as playing an important part in facilitating their political engagement and nurturing their political agency.

I feel like friends and family have a large influence on you and your choices ... the way you grow up shapes your philosophies. (Anna)

Individually, these experiences varied due to the unique cultural context that had shaped participants' political development, highlighting the importance of multiple factors of political socialisation that occur in young people's surrounding contexts (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Nolas et al., 2017; Quintelier, 2015).

It was interesting that, although these social connections and relationships were important to the participants in this study, the key contributing factor in their willingness to engage was about the relevance of the social and political issue

to themselves directly. Anna spoke of gravitating towards likeminded people but that her political engagement was not entirely dependent on theirs:

If it affects me or feels like it's going to affect me in the future, then I'm probably going to be more inclined to get involved, even without the influence of other people.

This finding suggests that, although they all identified social connections and relationships as significant, these relationships were not the key contributing factor in their willingness to engage and to do so independently of others in their social contexts, illustrating the agency that they were capable of when the social or political issue had meaning to them (Beaumont, 2011; Breeze et al., 2017; Häkli & Kallio, 2018). This finding challenges traditional understandings of young people's political agency as dependent on their families for support and direction, and pre-existing discourses of their apathy and disengagement which are potentially marginalising and overlooking their agency within broader contexts (Breeze et al., 2017). Civic and political contexts need to provide young people with meaningful opportunities to enter and contribute to political life (Boulianne, 2019). This involves the processes that shape youth political engagement considering young people's perspectives in the development of policy that directly affects them and their futures (Beaumont, 2011; Boulianne, 2019; Wray-Lake, 2019). The knowledge that young people's everyday lived experiences can provide for policymakers, educators and significant others in their lives is integral for collaborating with them to nurture their political agency across political arenas.

Nurturing political agency

The final aim of this research was to explore the ways in which young people's experiences of social and political activism serve as a learning platform for increasing

their political agency. The study found that the participants' political learning experiences in their immediate everyday contexts provided them with increased knowledge, skills, and confidence. Sarah noted that her community engagement had increased her confidence:

To become further involved and take on leadership roles.

Anna explained that her experiences in high school have enabled her to have the confidence to participate today by providing her with knowledge of the political world, and social connections and relationships within it:

I feel like if I wasn't involved in high school, I don't think I would want to be involved in uni or further on ... I feel like if you've already experienced being in that kind of situation then you wouldn't feel that kind of fear of actually being involved.

This finding supports research that informal political learning experiences in young people's surrounding environments provide an important mechanism for more complex political actions in the future (Breeze et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). Integral to this are young people's relational interactions in their social and cultural contexts in providing support, guidance, and access to participatory opportunities. In this study, although each participant's pathway was unique, the context in which they came from was one with rich civic learning resources through multiple factors of political socialisation occurring throughout their development, allowing them to accumulate experiences in social and political activism that have provided them with the confidence to express the agency that they do today. As acknowledged by Peter:

I grew up in a privileged position ... well aware of those interaction opportunities early on.

However, as access to these opportunities is not equally shared across social and cultural groups in society, this research is not representative of the political development of broader groups of youth. It is important that strategies to reduce disparities in young people's access to participatory opportunities are explored.

Discussion

This research set out to explore the development of young people's political agency through social and political activism to offer further understanding for policymakers and people who work with youth around how and why young people politically engage, and how these experiences serve as a learning platform for their growing political independence. The findings highlight the significant role that adult-led spaces had in shaping the participants' experiences of social and political activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. As emphasised by Allen (2011), political agency is not just about the individual but about the sociocultural and political settings that surround them, and it is these contexts that have the power to shape conditions for change. There was a clear consensus from participants that civic and political frameworks are not always genuinely engaging with young people and that they do not feel that their contributions are consistently valued. Participants identified their experiences of formal and informal political participation in civic and political settings. Whilst all shared some positive experiences of feeling empowered, they also identified occasions where they felt restricted and unsupported in their contributions. These experiences affected participants' perceptions of how they see their voice as valued in the political world indicating continued regulation of young people's participatory rights in civic and political cultures, where youth advisory or consultative roles often do not provide space for their active participation and voice in decision-making processes. This

culture continues to implicitly shape their interactions with adults in these settings, reinforcing the perception that their contributions are not equally valued in these spaces. It highlights the power that sociocultural and political constructs have on how young people frame their identity within the political world, and the important role that adults in these settings have in providing an environment that nurtures their political agency.

Adult-led cultures in civic and political structures need to embrace young people's active participation and voice in decision-making processes and involve youth in processes that directly affect them (Beaumont, 2011; Boulianne, 2019; Finlay, 2010). For this to happen, adult perceptions of young people need to change to acknowledge their capacity to meaningfully contribute to society (Häkli & Kallio, 2018; Lister, 2007, 2008; Phillips et al., 2019; Wood, 2011). This change involves a cultural shift in the way that adult-led civic and political contexts engage with and involve youth in processes to one where the autonomy of young people is respected, meaningful opportunities are provided, and their contributions are equally valued through shared power and responsibility for decision-making (Boulianne, 2019). This can be achieved by providing space for young people's active participation and voice in decision-making processes for them to feel that their voice matters in the political world (Barbar, 2009; Sotkasiira et al., 2010).

These findings also have important implications for how adults view and measure young people's political participation. The way in which formal political institutions frame young people's political participation needs to change to reflect the broader contexts within which young people are engaging in informal settings (Harris et al., 2010; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). This involves a more contextual approach that is flexible and offers accessible opportunities for young people to engage in social and political activism in

their immediate everyday lives (Harris et al., 2010; Henn & Foard, 2014; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). By broadening the contexts within which their participation is measured, common misconceptions of their apathy and disengagement from political engagement may be dispelled. Furthermore, they may legitimise the context that young people are learning to be political in by acknowledging the many ways that they are contributing to society within civic-minded contexts around social and political issues of significance to them. As political participatory opportunities for young people are not fairly distributed in society, the findings also highlight the need for processes and strategies to be developed which support youth political engagement across different social and cultural groups in society (Flanagan, 2013; Wray-Lake, 2019).

Recommendations for future research

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this study and will support ongoing knowledge building in this area. Further research into young people's everyday lived experiences in civic and political settings may provide valuable insight into how best to nurture youth political agency by providing them with the tools they need to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to politically engage. In addition, research into different patterns of youth political engagement across various social and cultural groups in society may inform strategies for reducing disparities in access to political participatory opportunities (Flanagan, 2013; Wray-Lake, 2019).

Conclusion

Understanding young people's perspectives of their political experiences in social and political activism, and the social and political context surrounding them, provides valuable insight for informing future policy around working with young people towards greater politicisation. Although there is increasing acknowledgement of young people's capacity

to contribute to society, consistent with international research, this study found that adult-centric views continue to dominate the political world in Aotearoa New Zealand and overlook youthful agency in broader contexts (Häkli & Kallio, 2018; Lister, 2007, 2008; Phillips et al., 2019; Quintelier, 2015). By broadening the contexts within which their participation is measured, common misconceptions of their apathy and disengagement from political engagement may be dispelled, and for young people, legitimise the context in which they are learning to be political. Young people need to be provided with access to political learning experiences that are relevant to them around social and political issues that they can connect with, and in contexts where they feel that their opinions are valued and that their participation matters in decision-making processes and could produce change. This involves the processes that shape youth political engagement, in which policymakers and people working with youth play a key role, identifying strategies to support their participation and genuinely considering young people's perspectives in the development of policy that directly affects them and their futures.

Amanda Hay

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0096-9016>

Vincent Wijesingha

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5432-1251>

Nicky Stanley-Clarke

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2491-4056>

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