

Youth activism – Alive and Kicking

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On 12th December 2022, young people from across North Belfast joined with youth workers and local residents to walk from their local centres to Girdwood Community Hub. This was not a festive vigil of celebration, but one of concern for local youth services, facing swathing funding cuts.

Prior to this, in February 2022, we saw a similar picture from the Irish-medium youth work sector, where young people who use these services marched into the city centre to protest against the funding cuts threatening these services.

Flashback then to 2017, to the Ormeau Road, where young people and local residents associated with Rosario Youth Centre brought traffic to a halt to protest against similar cuts to funding.

These dates are not intended as a full catalogue of youth service funding cuts; but are a snapshot in time. But to take a view of this activity from a wide angle, we see a core feature of youth work being played out and amplified – the active and activist role that young people take in shaping their own society. This flies in the face of and challenges some of the stereotypes about young people and activism.

There is a strong and persistent narrative of youth disengagement from community leadership, politics or democratic engagement. Furthermore, there is a distinct sense that young people are apathetic about having their say or in contributing to their own communities. Another narrative is of youth who are being provoked and driven by adults to add their public face to these campaigns; as tokenistic followers rather than thoughtful driven leaders.

These youth-led activities are reminders of how young people act. They generate activity and noise in their wake and remind us of the energy they bring to promote change. These are not new developments, as historically, youth activism has shaped up differently to adult iterations of civic engagement (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Woods, 2010; Pontes et al, 2018) They challenge the dominant narrative above by engaging in alternative forms of politics and activism that has greater connection to their worlds and greater meaning for them. In these marches and walks, the potential for youth engagement is borne out – notions of citizenship, ownership or political literacy and engagement are taught and learned by experience and the conversations that lead to and flow from this action.

We might ask ourselves who it serves to create and maintain a narrative that youth are apathetic, disinterested and disengaged. Does it feed into a very 'adult' concept of politics with a ballot box; assemblies and polite agreements and disagreements. Or does it allow for all youth activism to be undermined as 'tokenistic' in spaces where there is a risk to the status quo.

While the cuts to services have a detrimental impact on these organisations, what they inadvertently do for many young people is to sharpen their focus and understanding of protest as a means of being heard. Young people take to the streets to show solidarity, but it is also an action taken when they feel they are not being engaged with or listened to. The realization and evolution of the personal as political.

Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young people and social change: New perspectives*. (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Pontes, A., Henn, M., & Griffiths, M. D. (2018). Towards a conceptualisation of young people's political engagement: A qualitative focus group study. *Societies*, 8(1), 1–17.
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Woods, J. (2010) *Young people as activists: Ethical issues in promoting and supporting active citizenship*. In Woods, J, (2nd ed.). *Ethical Issues in Youth Work*. Routledge.