

Youth and Citizenship: Identity, Belonging and Independence

Based on Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay, Adam Seddon,
A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship (CPRN, 2001).

Identity and Belonging

Identifying with and feeling a sense of belonging to one's community are central elements of youth citizenship. However, there are a number of areas in which young people feel excluded and do not fully participate in the community.

How, then, do young people form a sense of identity? What is the reason for the low rate of youth involvement in politics? If they are in fact uninterested in political matters, is this due to their belief that they have little voice in influencing public debate and public policy? Or do young people express their political views in ways other than voting?

Researchers conclude that, despite the popular notion of the "global village," most young people continue to identify primarily with the environment in which they were socialized. Conflicts of identity may therefore arise in trying to reconcile different feelings of belonging.

For instance, non-White youth may struggle with conflicts between their feelings of belonging to their family identity and to the identity of the dominant white culture in which they now reside. A study of Aboriginal youth who had left their family homes on a reserve and moved to urban areas found that those who were successful in maintaining their cultural views tended to have higher self-esteem and were able to adjust better psychologically than those who had become disconnected from their heritage.

If young people continue to identify with their culture, what is the explanation for their apparent lack of interest in politics?

Youth Independence and Political Participation

According to researchers, young people are quite respectful of political institutions and tend to accept the values and ideals of adult Canadian society. And as they become economically independent, they tend to adopt the political views of older members of society. However, as economic independence is increasingly delayed, the corresponding acceptance by youth of the concerns shared by other adults is also occurring later in life.

Access to quality employment has an important effect on young people's feelings of belonging and, therefore, their ability to participate in the community. Political participation is associated with social inclusion. By contrast, youth who are unemployed and living in poverty experience a sense of exclusion. Street youth, in particular, are marginalized by their lack of access to adequate social services or health care, food, education and money, resulting in little or no access to participation in mainstream politics. Although provisions have recently been made to allow the homeless to vote in elections, where participation requires money (for membership fees to belong to political organizations, for example), homeless youth are less able and less likely to participate.

Marginal work, unemployment and poverty can also lead to feelings of alienation and ultimately cause young people to withdraw from community affairs. Blaming the community for their feelings of hopelessness, they choose *not* to participate. A sense of control is therefore important to political participation. When young people experience a real or perceived lack of rights, they are less inclined to participate in the community or take on social responsibilities. Lack of participation may also reflect dissatisfaction with the world that they are inheriting. This sense of alienation and exclusion may result in the formation of alternative identities, or subcultures, such as the punk rock movement.

Young people do not believe that the political system responds or is capable of responding to their interests or representing their concerns. Research indicates that today's youth do *not* have less interest in politics than previous generations. The major reason for the relative disengagement of young people from political affairs is the failure of mainstream politics to address issues of importance to youth, such as the environment, poverty and racial discrimination. Researchers point out that young people can be knowledgeable about political issues and politically involved while not voting or expressing a strong party affiliation.

The low rate of youth participation may also reflect a lack of confidence in the ability of governments to bring about social change, a view shared by many older adults as well. As a result, increasing numbers of youth are expressing their political views in different ways – in social movements and in political protests. Young people have been active in the recent protests against globalization, rising tuition rates and genetically modified foods. All of these issues are related to the rise in power of corporations which is seen as a threat to the areas of life in which youth have a vested interest, such as democracy, accessible education and the environment. While the protests involved people of all ages, the visible presence of youth in such demonstrations refutes the view that young people are not interested in political issues.

In response to concern over the lack of youth involvement in formal politics, it is now being recognized that, in order to ensure a healthy and vibrant democracy, young people must be provided with more opportunities for participation. A number of organizations are moving in this direction, promoting the involvement of youth in decisions that have an effect on their lives. Youth empowerment is increasingly regarded as important, not only as a matter of right, but also a means of fostering the development of youth as citizens.

Conclusions

- ❖ Citizenship involves a relationship between the individual and the state. Feelings of alienation from one's community can often result in people having a corresponding lack of interest in or desire to improve and better the community in which they live.
- ❖ It is necessary to consider what the community can do to support the movement of young people into independence.
- ❖ While access to the labour market is extremely important, the family and community also have important roles to play in facilitating the transition to independent citizenship.
- ❖ The willingness of youth to become involved in formal politics may depend on addressing the root causes of their lack of participation.
- ❖ Whether youth participation in mainstream politics requires specifically targeted programs or could simply be achieved by the inclusion of youth issues on the political agenda remains open to question.