

International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies (2013) 3: 320–327

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON TRANSFORMING PRACTICES: EMANCIPATORY APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, Warren Linds, Varda Mann-Feder, and Felice Yuen

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Centre for Human Relations and Community Studies, the Department of Applied Human Sciences, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Concordia University for their support. We also wish to express our appreciation to Peggy Herring, our copy editor for the special issue.

Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, Ph.D. (the corresponding author) is an Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, Quebec, H4B 1R6. E-mail: natasha.blanchet-cohen@concordia.ca

Warren Linds, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor with the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke West, Montreal, Quebec, H4B 1R6. E-mail: w.linds@sympatico.ca

Varda Mann-Feder, D.Ed. is a Professor in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke West, Room VE 227-3, Montreal, Quebec, H4B 1R6. E-mail: varda.mann-feder@concordia.ca

Felice Yuen, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H4B 1R6. E-mail: felice.yuen@concordia.ca

This Special Issue of the *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* focuses on emancipatory approaches to youth engagement. Evoking ideas of freedom, release, and liberation, we explore youth engagement as a means to facilitate social change, to improve organizations, and to build healthier communities. Broadening and deepening youth engagement beyond a shift from youth as objects to subjects necessarily entails youth workers and educators grappling with the significance of engaging in respectful and transformative youth-adult relationships. In taking up this agenda, youth and adults collaboratively explore opportunities and obstacles, and make recommendations for extending youth engagement beyond a mere trend or project, to constitute a value system that underlies practice.

The 12 articles appearing in this issue result from a two-day workshop hosted by the Applied Human Sciences Department at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec in June 2012. The workshop brought together youth, practitioners, and educators who work with youth in Australia, Finland, the United States, and Canada (including Montreal and other Canadian urban centres) in order to connect around promising practices. Presenters ignited interactive dialogue that built on an earlier collaboration that had emerged in an edited book: *Emancipatory Practices: Adult/Youth Engagement for Social and Environmental Justice* (Linds, Goulet, & Sammel, 2010).

The workshop itself was planned to maximize the sharing of knowledge, to critically dialogue on application, and to illuminate underlying assumptions involved in adopting emancipatory approaches to youth engagement. In experiential games during the workshop, adults and youth were placed in relationship with each other and invited to question their positionality and the power dynamics in adult-youth relationships. Illustrative of the type of reframing was an activity called “Colombian Hypnosis” (Boal, 1992, p. 63) which involves one partner’s “hands” guiding the “eyes” of another around the room. The game was introduced in order to explore issues of leaders and followers, but also to emphasize the concept of collaborative leadership that involves mutual respect and responsibility in the leader and follower roles. Beyond experiential exercises and games, youth and adult participants met in mixed groupings throughout the event to process thoughts and reactions to presentations on the uses, challenges, and benefits of emancipatory practices with youth in different contexts.

In inviting contributions to the special issue, we asked authors to address particular topics in youth-adult collaboration from within their own contexts. We encouraged authors to:

- examine effective approaches to working with youth in a collaborative leadership model. This included work being undertaken by a variety of informal, non-formal, and formal youth-serving organizations which practice youth engagement and the development of youth leadership as a form of pedagogy.

- share the changes individuals and organizations need to make in order to adopt emancipatory practice in working with youth. This meant identifying effective actions that facilitate collaborative leadership in emancipatory practices for and with youth.
- explore the transformations involved, both in the work and the personal framework of practice. This involved examining youth participation in decision-making processes and the extent to which youth are given space and power to explore democratic and dialogic partnerships.

Features and Strategies

While each article focuses on a specific topic and context, emerging from them is a better understanding of the significance and implications of emancipatory approaches to youth engagement. Linds, Goulet, and Sammel (2010) initially defined emancipatory approaches broadly “as those that enable youth to develop agency as active participants working in partnership with adults in the development of youth leadership and community change” (p. xiv). Their primary focus was on the adult’s role in enabling equitable relationships and building democratic leadership among adults and youth. This focus remains fundamental because of adults’ considerable role in fostering conditions and opportunities for youth to have influence in institutions.

Based on the workshop and the articles, we identify several features of emancipatory approaches: (a) collaboration, (b) shared power, (c) the presence of co-learning, and (d) transparency in youth-adult relationships. Strategies for implementation involve: (a) mentoring, (b) creativity, (c) creating a sense of belonging, and (d) reflection.

Collaboration in emancipatory approaches means youth and adults co-determining the best ways to move forward. Collaboration involves deliberately working together “in the quest for meaningful solutions to problems and answers to questions that emerge in particular contexts” (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1993, p. 393). Thus, it is not necessarily about working the same way or doing the same things, but drawing on each person’s strengths to work towards reaching a common goal.

Shared power implies that youth and adults have an equal say in what and how decisions are made about necessary changes or ways of functioning. It often entails youth acting on the power that they have, and adults relinquishing some of their power in providing for more balanced decision-making. It can include exploring the multidimensional aspect of power including power over, power under, and power with, and identifying different forms of leadership. It is about seeking to establish dialogue that is guided by principles of mutual respect and commitment.

Co-learning means adults and youth come together, remain open to hearing and listening to each other, and are convinced of the benefit of finding solutions together. New knowledge collaboratively produced by both adults and youth has the potential to change dominant practices and ideologies. As discussed in the articles that follow (see

Cooper, Nazzari, King, & Pettigrew; Shaw-Raudoy & McGregor), creating co-learning opportunities involves focusing on adult and youth skills, as opposed to overtly trying to involve youth. Such a process can develop into a social movement in which youth and adults are brought into an action-oriented environment (see Blanchet-Cohen, Warner, Di Mambro, & Bedeaux; Evans & Lund; Nabavi & Mahboub). As emphasized by Linds and his colleagues (also in this special issue), co-learning can happen even in the most hierarchical institutions.

Transparency in youth-adult relationships conveys the need for honesty in the place and voice given to youth, bringing to the forefront the values attached to emancipatory approaches. As articles in this special issue document (see Dupuis & Mann-Feder; Roach, Wureta, & Ross; Snow et al.), systems aimed at providing for youth's well-being that enforce the dichotomous labelling of youth and adults are disempowering and marginalizing. Youth inclusion requires an ongoing process that develops trusting and respectful relationships between youth and adults. Transparency in youth-adult relationships helps reduce risks of tokenism and increases opportunities for meaningful participation that is foregrounded in culture and contextually responsive (Liebel, 2012).

Strategies to implement emancipatory approaches include peer-to-peer and youth-adult *mentoring*. Providing guidance and sharing experiences help other youth and adults to realize the potential of youth engagement, to overcome fears, to imagine possibilities, and to take action. Considering that youth often bring different perspectives, *creativity* is also needed to discover different forms of knowledge. Creativity ultimately opens up the possibility of finding much needed answers to the social and environmental challenges of our time. In taking on an emancipatory approach, several articles – including Snow et al., and Yuen and Context(e) – emphasize nurturing a *sense of belonging* for youth and adults to feel safe and to develop. Ungar's article in this issue points to the importance of the quality of the youth-adult interaction. These essential needs have often been crushed by systems that negate the humanity of people, as is shown in Yuen and Context(e).

Emancipatory approaches also require providing space for *reflection* so that adults and youth can pause and question themselves and the systems within which they operate. Both internal and external dialogues are important because change can be destabilizing; so it is necessary to be grounded, which in turn can help in working through the challenges that will arise when things are neither clear nor certain (see Blanchet-Cohen, Warner, Di Mambro, & Bedeaux; Evans & Lund; Nabavi & Mahboub). This is integral to undo, remake, and relearn.

Given the prevalent notion of youth as undeveloped beings, in need of protection and not able to fully participate as citizens in institutions, organizations, and society (Myers & Bourdillon, 2012), making these noble concepts a reality is difficult. Historically, funding systems and structures have been founded on hierarchical, deficit-based ways of operating that pigeonhole youth and adults in specific roles. When adults are not open to exploring emancipatory practices, it is difficult for youth to break away from them (see Roach, Wureta, & Ross). The good news is that, as conveyed throughout

the articles making up this special issue, rich and innovative ideas and examples exist of how emancipatory work involving youth and adults in co-construction can contribute to social justice.

Overview of the Special Issue

The special issue brings together youth and adult practitioners and educators from a range of interdisciplinary fields including education, community development, child welfare, youth work, and public policy. Most articles result from collaboration between authors with different lived experiences and of various ages; the process of writing itself is an illustration of the complexity, creativity, and negotiation involved in youth-adult collaboration.

There are two parts to this special issue. Part One opens with conceptual articles that explore core features of emancipatory practice. Michael Ungar (*The Impact of Youth-Adult Relationships on Resilience*), the invited keynote presenter at the workshop, demonstrates that engaging and transformative youth-adult relationships exert the greatest impact on youth who are most marginalized. Adults act as resilience-promoting resources when they build quality relationships in ways that young people value, and where they are engaged in decision-making. Warren Linds, Ali Sammel, and Linda Goulet (*Dancing Together: A Conversation about Youth and Adult Relational Authority in the Context of Education*) discuss situational authority through a three-part choreography. Drawing on their experiences as university educators in different geographical contexts, they identify sharing of authority between adults and youth as essential to negotiating power and to supporting emancipatory approaches.

This part of the special issue continues with three contextual articles that focus on the implications of emancipatory practices when working with marginalized youth; all three articles result from co-authorships between academics and youth who have experienced the system. Felice Yuen and Gabriell Context(e) in *A Bridge to Alien-Nation: Connecting through Humanity, Diversity, and Relationships*, reflect on the oppressive nature of mainstream systems. Social commitment, knowledge, aspirations, and openness are seen as necessary to build bridges and deal with the broken communication between adults and youth. Jennifer Dupuis and Varda Mann-Feder (*Moving Towards Emancipatory Practice: Conditions for Meaningful Youth Empowerment in Child Welfare*) grapple with the conditions that would facilitate youth empowerment in the child welfare system, a historically deficit-based and expert-driven institution. Kim Snow and members of the Voyager Project (*Aspirations and Belonging: Touchstones for the Journey*), a peer-to-peer support group for young people in and from care, explore the importance of belonging, and point to how the system works against its role in developing collective agency and social capital.

Part Two of this special issue also opens with two conceptual articles. Kathryn Shaw-Raudoy and Catherine McGregor (*Co-Learning in Youth Adult Emancipatory Partnerships: The Way Forward?*) explore the histories and possibilities of shared adult-youth civic learning outcomes. They contend that iterative forms of reciprocal co-

learning with youth and adults as collaborators are necessary to actualize emancipatory goals. Denise Bulling, Lyn Carson, Mark DeKraai, Alexis Garcia, and Harri Raisio (*Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation*) focus on deliberative democracy as a model to build bridges between youth and decision makers. They explore the role of relationships, collaboration, and leadership in generating democratic spaces for the inclusion of youth in policy formation and reform in Australia, Finland, Canada, and the United States.

The contextual articles in this part use versions of duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), a collaborative research methodology, to discuss activism involving youth and adults in three Canadian provinces. Rachel Evans and Darren Lund (*Forging Ethical Adult-Youth Relationships Within Emancipatory Activism*) focus on their recollections of the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance at a secondary school in a small city in Alberta, dialoguing on effective adult-youth collaborations in the context of notions of power and privilege, and the role of adults in protecting students from hostile community backlash. Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, Alan Warner, Giulietta Di Mambro, and Christophe Bedeaux (*'Du carré rouge aux casseroles': A Context for Youth-Adult Partnership in the Québec Student Movement*) examine the divergent experiences of students and professors in the 2012 Québec student movement through in-depth personal narratives. They provide structures and spaces for youth-led processes essential to counter powerful youth stereotypes, especially those delivered through mainstream media. Maryam Nabavi and Romina Mahboub (*A Movement to Belong: The Green Movement as a Site of Citizenship*) dialogue on their involvement as immigrant youth in the global movement of dissent in response to the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. Straddling national and cultural identities, they consider emancipatory practice insofar as providing space to be a citizen, to belong, and to explore a sense of identity.

The special issue concludes with two articles on community development and educational programming. Jeanette Roach, Esayas Wureta, and Laurie Ross (*Dilemmas of Practice in the Ecology of Emancipatory Youth-Adult Partnerships*) use two case studies in applying an ecological analysis to explain the dilemmas and challenges faced in forging youth-adult partnerships. They demonstrate that young people will embrace adult-provided structures when adults and young people are not ready to work in emancipatory youth-adult partnerships, and that structural changes are needed in many organizations that deal with youth. Amy Cooper, Vincenza Nazzari, Julie Kon Kam King, and Annie Pettigrew (*Speaking Rights: Youth Empowerment through a Participatory Approach*) present a curriculum that fosters youth empowerment in communities. As practitioners, they reflect on the need for training youth workers to motivate youth towards meaningful and effective participation.

Concluding Thoughts

As we explore the frameworks, strategies, and opportunities in implementing a new approach to working with youth, we are struck by the possibilities for bringing about social change. Youth and adults coming together to collaborate and share power on respectful terms opens up possibilities for personal, organizational, and societal changes.

As in an *ecotone* (the place where two ecological regions overlap and transition into one another), the meeting is fertile even though rough, uncertain, and contentious at times. This is an “ethical space” (Ermine, 2007) which is formed when two different world views encounter one another. Where they meet becomes a place where something can be developed together. But as workshop participants concluded in their reflections on our time together: “Be prepared for a few bumps, quick turns, and good luck,” and “We can leave with more questions than answers, and that’s okay.” We invite you to read these articles in the hope that you may be inspired to join us in making our world that much better for all.

References

- Boal, A. (1992). *Games for actors and non-actors* (A. Jackson, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Ermine, W. (2007). The ethical space of engagement. *Indigenous Law Journal* 6(1), 193–203.
- Liebel, M. (Ed.). (2012). *Children's rights from below. Cross-cultural perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Linds, W., Goulet, L., & Sammel, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Emancipatory practices: Adult/youth engagement in social and environmental justice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Myers, W., & Bourdillon, M. (2012). Concluding reflections: How might we really protect children? *Development in Practice*, 22(4), 613–620. doi: 10.1080/09614524.2012.673558
- Sawyer, R., & Norris, J. (2013). *Duoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sumara, D. J., & Luce-Kapler, R. (1993). Action research as a writerly text: Locating co-labouring in collaboration. *Educational Action Research*, 1(3), 387–395.